



A R S E N A L E

PRESS COVERAGE

January – February 2026

## 6 new sleeper train routes coming in 2026

LINK: <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/inspiration/new-sleeper-train-routes-2026-b2907669.html>



The Independent's journalism is supported by our readers. When you purchase through links on our site, we may earn commission. Travel Inspiration 6 new sleeper train routes coming in 2026 Roll across Spain, chug between European capitals or travel the Silk Road on trains leaving the station this year Natalie Wilson Monday 26 January 2026 12:56 GMT Bookmark Comments Go to comments Bookmark pop over Removed from bookmarks It's all aboard the sleeper train in 2026 (European Sleeper ) Sign up to Simon Calder's free travel email for expert advice and money-saving discounts Get Simon Calder's Travel email Get Simon Calder's Travel email If the rollout of new sleeper train services is any indication, it's all aboard the night carriage in 2026. Anticipated new routes are popping up in several corners of the UK, as well as direct sleeper trains connecting capitals across Europe for some

shut-eye as you ride. As railroads forge new paths, travellers looking for a more sustainable option than short-haul flights are going full steam ahead to book both budget and luxury journeys. Scotland's iconic Caledonian Sleeper will now pick up passengers in Birmingham, and another new decadent rail route will spend 22 days traversing the ancient Silk Road. From a roll across Spain to a chug between Amsterdam and Milan, here are some of the most exciting new night routes taking to the tracks this year. Read more: Why the Caledonian Sleeper train is Britain's contender for world's greatest rail journey Best new sleeper train routes for 2026 1. Caledonian Sleeper - London to Scotland via Birmingham The Caledonian Sleeper will now pick up Birmingham passengers en route to the Highlands (Caledonian Sleeper) As of last week (15 January), the Caledonian Sleeper will leave London to pick up passengers in Birmingham

en route to the Scottish Highlands. The sleeper train currently runs every night apart from Saturday, with guests being transported from London Euston to some of Scotland's largest cities, including Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness, and more rural locations, such as Fort William. Birmingham International will join the train's 'Highlander' route, the first stop after London, before it heads to Crewe, Preston and then up to the Highlands. The sleeper train intends to bridge the travel gap between the West Midlands and the Scottish Highlands. Read more: Caledonian Sleeper sees 'most significant change to network in three decades' 2. European Sleeper - Amsterdam to Milan via Switzerland A direct connection from Amsterdam and Brussels to Milan will run from 18 June 2026 (European Sleeper) European Sleeper plans to run a direct night train connection from Amsterdam and Brussels to Milan city

centre from 18 June 2026. Departures from Amsterdam and Brussels will be scheduled for Monday, Thursday and Saturday, with the return service from Milan operational on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. Stops on the sleeper service will include Berne, Switzerland and Stresa on Lago Maggiore, and ticket sales will open to travellers in January or February. Read more: The best boutique hotels in Amsterdam, reviewed 3. Venice Simplon-**Orient-Express** - Paris to Amalfi Coast The Venice Simplon-**Orient-Express** passes along both the French and Italian Rivas from May (Belmond) The Belmond-operated Venice Simplon-**Orient-Express** will wind along both the French and Italian Rivas on its inaugural four-day journey from Paris on 4 May 2026. While not on the rails, passengers will partake in a scenic boat tour, a private guided visit to Pompeii and cooking classes with local experts. The experience doesn't come cheap. Tickets start from around EUR10,000 (£8,700) per person, including all meals, excursions and transfers. Read more: This luxury sleeper train will launch a new route to the Amalfi Coast 4. **Golden Eagle Luxury Trains** - Beijing to

Tashkent Travel the Silk Road with **Golden Eagle Luxury Trains (Golden Eagle Luxury Trains) Golden Eagle Luxury Trains** will offer travellers an exclusive itinerary on a brand new luxury train along the 'storied path' of the Silk Road from September 2026. The 22-day 'The Grand Silk Road' journey will feature two private trains with stops in Unesco-listed sites and ancient cities across central Asia from Beijing to Tashkent. The train's luxurious superior cabins and Han Dynasty suites with fine dining and opulent bar cars are on offer from \$53,200 (£39,748) on 2027 departure dates. Read more: Mandarin Oriental Qianmen, Beijing hotel review 5. The Luxury Train Company 'Le Grand Tour' - Paris to Puy du Fou Take a six-day rail journey through France (Getty Images) Also on the uber-luxury sleeper scene, The Luxury Train Travel Company's 'Le Grand Tour' is expected to leave the station this year. The 4,000km six-day French rail journey on an 18-cabin 'Belle Époque styled train' promises passengers 'history, culture, architecture, art and magnificent French cuisine' from £6,210 per person. Travellers will depart Paris Gare de l'Est, with stops including Épernay, Reims,

Annecy and Saint-Emilion before finishing at the renowned French historical theme park Puy du Fou. Read more: Famous French theme park submits plans for £600m Oxfordshire site 6. Al Andalus - Seville to Madrid The Al Ándalus train service will run a new itinerary for the 2026 season (Renfe/Al Andalus) Spain's luxury Al Ándalus train service has announced a new itinerary for the 2026 season. The opulent 1930s train will now begin and end its journey in the Spanish capital of Madrid, with a new seven-day, six-night voyage available from April to October. As well as travelling on one of the world's most deluxe rail journeys, passengers can look forward to stopping at some of Spain's most magnificent cities and attractions, including Seville, Córdoba and the Royal Palace of Aranjuez, a Unesco World Heritage Site. New destinations on the 2026 tour, which focuses on Spanish heritage, gastronomy and landscapes, include Extremadura, Castilla-La Mancha and Madrid. For a Grand Class room, expect to pay EUR6,600 (£5,700) per person based on two sharing, while a Deluxe Suite costs EUR7,900 (£6,840). Read more: Luxury Spanish train announces new 2026

itinerary

## A LOUNGE THAT'S WORTH THE WAIT

ENGLISH TEXT

157

it directly impacts the usability of spaces, quality of life, and access to resources... With 'Prison Times,' we addressed a sensitive — and often overlooked — subject through a unique and widely accessible lens: objects. What we presented is a form of design governed by principles of security and punishment, which are fundamentally at odds with conventional design thinking. Following the exhibition, a number of exchanges and new synergies were set in motion, including opportunities to explore these same issues in schools and universities.” ■

pag. 80

### A LOUNGE THAT'S WORTH THE WAIT

In Rome's Ostiense neighborhood, a signature lounge designed by Hugo Toro welcomes passengers of the new La Dolce Vita Orient Express. All aboard

words by **Laura Maggi** — photos by **Mr. Tripper**

**THE PRELUDE TO A JOURNEY THAT DEFIES TIME**, the La Dolce Vita Lounge welcomes passengers “embarking on ‘rail cruises’ into a space that is more of a threshold than a destination. Sunny, joyful, and cinematic. That’s why the ceiling is entirely finished in yellow lacquer: it sets the tone from the very first moment,” says architect Hugo Toro, describing his vision for the waiting lounge inside Rome’s Ostiense station. From here, the La Dolce Vita Orient Express departs for destinations ranging from Venice to Portofino, Siena to the Sassi di Matera, the vineyards of Montalcino, the truffle trails of Nizza Monferrato, and onward to Sicily with stops in Catania, Palermo, and Taormina. The travel experience begins here, well before departure, within a 600 m2 lounge designed as an elegant reception room, where guests can enjoy local tastings and drinks, relax in convivial seating areas, or browse the in-house boutique, which offers a refined selection of accessories, books, and home decor. Depending on the time of departure, the kitchen led by German chef Heinz Beck serves up lunch or dinner alongside a cocktail bar, while live piano music fills the lounge, creating a relaxed and social atmosphere in the moments before boarding. The experience is completed with exclusive services like private showers and a concierge to handle your luggage — already placed in the cabins ahead of boarding — while guests are presented with traditional paper tickets detailing their itinerary and cabin assignment. “The project required an extremely meticulous and respectful approach, driven by a desire to enhance the station’s

architectural identity and artistic heritage,” notes Marco Girotto, General Manager of La Dolce Vita Orient Express. “Under the creative direction of Hugo Toro, master artisans and artists painstakingly restored the original mosaics by Giulio Rosso and Maria Zaffuto, returning them to their rightful place within the space... Artworks inspired by the spirit of travel — from urban vistas to distant, exotic landscapes — further enrich the experience, transforming the lounge into a space that blends historic grandeur with contemporary refinement, capturing the romance of the Italian journey while remaining fully aligned with the architectural language of Roma Ostiense,” explains Girotto. “The lounge fuses the legacy of the iconic train with a bold ‘70s influence, filtered through a contemporary lens,” adds Toro, who also designed the interiors for the Orient Express La Minerva in Rome. “The existing architecture, with its stark travertine structure, provided a powerful backdrop. Rather than soften it, I chose to create a contrast through warmth, color, and rhythm. Unfolding in a carefully choreographed sequence, the space offers atmospheres for solo travelers, couples, and groups alike, creating an environment that feels both intimate and dynamic.” Every piece of furniture is custom-designed, from the lighting to the central banquette and the armchairs. “The lounge is conceived as a seamless ensemble, where architecture, furnishings, and lighting converge to create memorable moments,” says the architect. Art Deco references — “its geometry, sense of symmetry, and distinct craftsmanship” — were combined to create a nomadic patchwork of inspirations. The goal was not nostalgia, but a modern reinterpretation of a waiting lounge from a bygone era,” notes Toro. “Housing the La Dolce Vita Lounge within Roma Ostiense was a conscious decision, tied to the station’s strategic role and its significant historical and architectural heritage. We wanted a location that served as the natural gateway to the experience: a welcoming, scenographic space capable of evoking the elegance of the journey from the very first moment, weaving together experiential depth with a cultural narrative,” adds Girotto. “With La Dolce Vita Orient Express, we have introduced a new model to the global tourism landscape, leading the emerging trend of ‘rail cruises,’ which are gaining momentum around the world,” concludes Paolo Barletta, CEO of Arsenale Group — a leader in luxury tourism — and of Orient Express. “These trains therefore become a symbol of an Italy that aims to promote its territories, local entrepreneurship, and national railway production, contributing to a more integrated tourism system. It is a vital step in relaunching the Made in Italy brand, particularly within the industrial and tourism sectors.” ■

ELLE DECOR ITALIA

Saudi Arabia Joins Spain, Central Asia, and Canada in Unveiling Groundbreaking Luxury Trains in 2026: Dream of the Desert, Al Andalus, Golden Eagle, and Rocky Mountaineer Set to Redefine Travel!



In an exciting move for the future of luxury rail [travel](#), **Saudi Arabia** joins **Spain**, **Central Asia**, and **Canada** in unveiling a series of groundbreaking **luxury trains** in **2026**.

## Saudi Arabia's Dream of the Desert: Luxury Train Travel Connecting Riyadh, AIUla, and Qurayyat Redefines Tourism in the Kingdom

Published on January 3, 2026



Saudi Arabia is making an ambitious leap towards rebranding its tourism landscape with the unveiling of *Dream of the Desert*, a luxury train service designed to cater to high-end travelers. This innovative project is set to transform the way tourists experience the Kingdom, offering a unique blend of culture, comfort, and scenic beauty. With its sleek interiors and top-tier services, this luxury rail experience promises to be a key pillar in Saudi Arabia's broader Vision 2030 strategy, which aims to bolster the nation's tourism sector while showcasing its rich cultural heritage.

Running on the Kingdom's extensive rail network, *Dream of the Desert* will connect major destinations including **Riyadh**, **AIUla**, and **Qurayyat**, offering an exclusive and immersive journey across Saudi Arabia's northern regions. With only 40 luxury cabins available, each journey will host just 80 to 90 passengers, ensuring a personalized and intimate experience that emphasizes scarcity over volume. This limited capacity is part of the broader business strategy aimed at attracting travelers seeking both comfort and exclusivity, aligning perfectly with Saudi Arabia's efforts to develop a high-value tourism sector.

### A Luxury Train for the Discerning Traveler: What to Expect on Board

*Dream of the Desert* is not your average train journey. Designed to be a mobile luxury hotel, this exclusive train brings world-class comfort directly into the heart of Saudi Arabia's vast desert landscapes. Inspired by traditional Saudi architecture, the interiors feature contemporary designs coupled with bespoke furnishings, creating a warm yet sophisticated atmosphere. The train boasts panoramic windows that allow guests to fully appreciate the stark beauty of the desert scenery as they glide between iconic locations like **Riyadh** and **AIUla**.

Onboard, passengers will enjoy five-star services, including gourmet dining inspired by Saudi cuisine, curated cultural programming, and guided excursions at various stops. One of the highlights of the journey will be the stop in **AIUla**, one of the Kingdom's most significant and rapidly growing tourism hubs, known for its historical significance and awe-inspiring landscapes. The train's design and operations will position Saudi Arabia as a refined and experiential tourism destination.

### Tourism Meets Sustainability: The Environmental Benefits of Luxury Rail Travel

In addition to the luxurious elements of the train experience, the *Dream of the Desert* project offers a more sustainable mode of travel compared to air travel. With a smaller carbon footprint per passenger, rail travel is becoming an increasingly popular option for environmentally-conscious travelers looking to reduce their impact on the planet. Given Saudi Arabia's ambition to position itself as a leader in sustainability, this luxury rail service is a strategic move towards eco-friendly tourism that does not sacrifice luxury.

With rising global interest in slow tourism, *Dream of the Desert* taps into this growing demand for relaxed, scenic, and sustainable travel experiences. By offering a more leisurely mode of transport, the train aligns with global trends in eco-conscious and culturally rich tourism.

### A Symbol of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: Redefining Tourism in the Kingdom

The launch of this luxury train is not just about introducing a new mode of transport; it is a symbolic move that reflects Saudi Arabia's larger ambitions for its tourism industry. As part of the *Vision 2030* plan, which aims to diversify the Kingdom's economy and reduce its dependence on oil, tourism is set to play a pivotal role. By introducing a high-end rail experience, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a global luxury destination—one that combines history, culture, and modernity.

With an ambitious goal to attract 150 million visitors annually by 2030, Saudi Arabia is working to increase tourism's contribution to its GDP from 3% to 10%. While the *Dream of the Desert* will cater to a relatively small number of tourists, its role in reinforcing Saudi Arabia's reputation as a high-end destination cannot be overstated. It will serve as a prestigious entry point for affluent travelers and provide a glimpse into the future of luxury travel in the Kingdom.

### Is Luxury Rail Travel in Saudi Arabia Sustainable?

While the *Dream of the Desert* train aims to make waves in the luxury tourism industry, it has also sparked debates regarding its environmental impact and long-term sustainability. The project relies heavily on Saudi Arabia's existing rail infrastructure, which reduces initial capital expenditure and allows for optimization of assets. However, questions persist about whether the luxury model will succeed in the harsh desert climate. Some analysts have raised concerns about whether enough repeat visitors will flock to the service to justify long-term operating costs.

Furthermore, critics argue that the focus on ultra-luxury tourism in a region where resources like water are scarce may place additional strain on local environments. This has prompted calls for further exploration of how such projects can balance luxury with sustainability, ensuring that they contribute positively to both the local economy and the environment.

### The Future of Saudi Arabia's Luxury Train: A Strategic Asset

Looking ahead, *Dream of the Desert* represents more than just an exclusive way to travel across Saudi Arabia. It is a strategic asset that helps to frame the Kingdom's broader ambitions within the global tourism industry. By combining **luxury hospitality**, **cultural storytelling**, and a focus on environmental sustainability, Saudi Arabia's first luxury train aligns with global tourism trends while providing an experience that cannot be found elsewhere.

For travelers, it offers a rare opportunity to experience Saudi Arabia in unparalleled comfort, exploring the Kingdom's vast desert landscapes in a way that is both exclusive and environmentally conscious. As Saudi Arabia continues to enhance its tourism offerings, the *Dream of the Desert* is a key step toward achieving its goal of becoming a leading luxury tourism destination by 2030.

## Saudi Arabia's luxury train in desert to redefine tourism



### Saudi Arabia's luxury train to introduce a new way of exploring the kingdom

Saudi Arabia is taking a bold step toward reshaping its tourism identity with the launch of **Dream of the Desert**, an ultra-luxury train experience created for discerning travelers. This ambitious initiative introduces a new way to explore the Kingdom—blending heritage, comfort, and dramatic desert scenery. Designed as a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's **Vision 2030**, the project reflects the nation's commitment to expanding tourism while celebrating its cultural legacy through world-class experiences.

Operating along the Kingdom's growing rail network, Dream of the Desert will connect major destinations including Riyadh, AlUla, and Qurayyat, offering an immersive journey through Saudi Arabia's northern regions. With just 40 luxury cabins and a maximum of 80 to 90 guests per journey, the train emphasizes exclusivity and personalization over mass tourism. This carefully curated capacity aligns with Saudi Arabia's strategy to develop a high-value, premium tourism market.

### An elevated rail experience: Luxury on the move

*Dream of the Desert* reimagines rail travel as a moving five-star retreat. Inspired by traditional Saudi architectural elements and refined with contemporary design, the train's interiors combine handcrafted details, bespoke furnishings, and warm, elegant finishes. Expansive panoramic windows frame sweeping desert landscapes, allowing travelers to fully absorb the beauty of Saudi Arabia's natural environment as they travel between iconic destinations.

Onboard services rival those of the world's finest luxury hotels. Guests can expect gourmet dining inspired by Saudi cuisine, immersive cultural programming, and guided excursions at key stops. A highlight of the journey is AlUla, one of the Kingdom's most important and rapidly developing tourism destinations, renowned for its ancient heritage sites and striking rock formations. Through design and service, the train positions Saudi Arabia as a refined, experience-driven destination.

### Where luxury meets sustainability

Beyond its opulence, *Dream of the Desert* represents a more environmentally responsible approach to luxury travel. Rail transport produces a lower carbon footprint per passenger than air travel, making it an appealing option for eco-conscious travelers. As Saudi Arabia works to integrate sustainability into its tourism growth, this luxury rail service offers a balance between environmental awareness and premium comfort.

The project also aligns with the global rise of slow tourism, which prioritizes meaningful, scenic, and culturally immersive journeys. By encouraging travelers to experience the landscape at a relaxed pace, *Dream of the Desert* taps into a growing demand for sustainable travel without compromising exclusivity.

### A Vision 2030 milestone: Transforming Saudi tourism

The introduction of Dream of the Desert is more than a transportation upgrade—it is a powerful symbol of Saudi Arabia's evolving tourism vision. Under Vision 2030, the Kingdom aims to diversify its economy and significantly reduce its reliance on oil, with tourism playing a central role in that transformation.

Saudi Arabia has set an ambitious target of attracting 150 million visitors annually by 2030, increasing tourism's contribution to GDP from 3% to 10%. While the luxury train will serve a limited number of travelers, its influence extends far beyond passenger numbers. It strengthens Saudi Arabia's global image as a sophisticated, high-end destination and serves as a flagship experience for affluent travelers seeking exclusivity and authenticity.

### Balancing luxury and long-term sustainability

Despite its promise, *Dream of the Desert* has sparked discussion about the sustainability of ultra-luxury tourism in a desert environment. While the project leverages existing rail infrastructure—reducing development costs and maximizing efficiency—questions remain about long-term viability, operating expenses, and repeat demand in extreme climate conditions.

Environmental concerns have also been raised regarding resource usage, particularly water consumption, in a region where sustainability is critical. These discussions underscore the importance of balancing luxury development with responsible environmental stewardship to ensure long-term benefits for both the local economy and ecosystems.

### Looking ahead: A strategic asset for the kingdom

*Dream of the Desert* stands as a strategic tourism asset that reflects Saudi Arabia's broader ambitions on the global stage. By combining luxury hospitality, cultural storytelling, and sustainability-focused travel, the Kingdom's first luxury train aligns seamlessly with global tourism trends while offering an experience unique to Saudi Arabia.

## Going Places: 26 Extraordinary Experiences to Try in 2026



© CREDIT: ETIHAD RAIL

### 8. Travel by rail

Etihad Rail is set to enter its passenger era in 2026. The 900km network connecting all seven emirates will begin carrying passengers from the Saudi border to Fujairah, initially linking 11 cities across the country, operated by Keolis International (which also runs Dubai Metro).

Saudi Arabia's first ultra-luxury train, Dream of the Desert, will also launch in 2026. Designed by Arsenale Group – the force behind the Orient Express revival – the train will operate five curated routes across the kingdom, complete with fine dining.

# fact.

## On The Move In 2026



### OF ROADS AND RAILWAYS

According to Hilton's 2026 Trends Report, more of us will be taking to the highways in 2026 – it's no surprise that the hashtag #RoadTrip has racked up more than 5.9 million tags globally!

And explore.co.uk says more travellers are choosing epic rail journeys over short-haul flights – making the journey part of the holiday – in fact, the company has seen a 25% increase in rail bookings over the last year.

While Hilton's report finds some travellers are taking to the roads to save cash, others are seeking out the more luxe option with specialist companies turning the road trip into a curated journey built around Michelin-starred dining and one-off experiences.

In rail too there are dual purpose journeys. The appetite for slow, scenic travel is on the rise but rail with its student and multi-journey perks can also prove a cost-effective option. While luxury rail travel too is experiencing an upsurge with the likes of Saudi Arabia's soon to be launched ultraluxe train, Dream of the Desert, due to offer various routes reminiscent of the golden age of rail travel

# GLÖBETRENDER®

## Slow travel: Saudi Arabia unveils 'Dream of the Desert' sleeper train

January 14, 2026

Saudi Arabia is preparing to launch its first ultra-luxury train, Dream of the Desert, designed to showcase the country's landscapes and heritage through slow travel experiences on rail. Jenny Southan reports

Saudi Arabia has revealed plans for its first ultra-luxury sleeper train, *Dream of the Desert*, a new rail experience coming in late 2026 that has been developed by Italy-based Arsenale Group, in partnership with Saudi Arabia Railways and national tourism bodies.

Dream of the Desert is designed to carry just 66 passengers across a 1,300km network through Saudi Arabia. The train consists of 14 carriages, including 33 suite cabins, two restaurant cars and a majlis-inspired lounge. Prices start from SAR 30,000 (about £6,000) per cabin per night.



The project marks a significant step in the Kingdom's efforts to expand high-end tourism beyond hotels and resorts, and into experiential travel. It has been conceived as a "slow travel" experience, with journeys that place as much emphasis on time spent onboard as on guided excursions off the train.

The interiors of Dream of the Desert have been designed by architect and interior designer Aline Asmar d'Amman, founder of Culture in Architecture. The carriages are Italian-built but have been refitted rather than replaced, a decision that reflects a focus on reuse and long-term value.

Materials and design references draw on Saudi traditions, including carved wood, woven textiles and colour palettes inspired by desert landscapes and oasis greenery.



Asmar d'Amman says: "Slow travel is about surrendering to the moment. My aim is to induce this feeling by translating it into a tactile and visual language: velvety textiles that invite touch, warm woods that recall traditional craft, sculptural lighting that creates intimacy.

"The desert's palette of earthy tones, and sandy browns are balanced with a zest of lavender, oasis green and burnt oranges, infusing each space with a sense of culture and serenity. From the reception lounge to the restaurant, the interiors become a continuous meditation on presence and place in motion."



Dining plays a central role in the experience. The two restaurant cars will serve rotating menus created by local and international chefs. One focuses on Saudi flavours and regional produce, while the other blends Italian techniques with global influences. Meals are included as part of the journey, alongside curated on-board programming



Paolo Barietta, chief executive of Arsenale Group, says Dream of the Desert builds on the company's experience in luxury rail, following the launch of La Dolce Vita Orient Express in Italy. He describes the Saudi project as the company's first overseas luxury train and a foundation for further expansion in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.

Pre-reservations for Dream of the Desert are now open, with pricing varying by itinerary and including accommodation, meals and experiences. A refundable pre-booking fee of SAR 2,500 per suite (about £500) provides priority access once full reservations open, as well as an invitation to the inaugural launch event.

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Five itineraries have been announced, each running between October and May, except for two seasonal routes. These range from a two-day return journey from Riyadh to Jubah, centred on prehistoric rock art sites, to longer routes that continue north to Al Jouf and AlUla.

One itinerary, "Ramadan Nights", operates during February and March and includes overnight travel with suhoor and iftar served onboard, alongside a stargazing stop in Qassim. Another, "Summer Mirage", is designed for warmer months and takes place entirely onboard, departing from and returning to Riyadh.

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The introduction of Dream of the Desert reflects a broader shift in Saudi Arabia's tourism strategy towards immersive, place-led experiences that encourage longer stays and deeper engagement with the country's culture and geography. For the luxury travel sector, it signals growing demand for rail-based journeys that combine comfort, storytelling and low-paced exploration.



Each itinerary combines rail travel with cultural and natural experiences such as visits to Diriyah, desert camps, guided heritage tours and hosted meals in outdoor settings. Accommodation off the train is included on selected routes, particularly those ending in AlUla.

The project has been developed in collaboration with Saudi Arabia Railways, the Ministry of Culture, the Saudi Tourism Authority and the Tourism Development Fund. Saudi Arabia Railways operates a 5,000km network across the country and plays a central role in the Kingdom's Vision 2030 strategy to improve connectivity and diversify the economy through tourism and logistics.

## The Dream of the Desert Sleeper Train: A Luxury Tour Through Saudi Arabia's Breathtaking Scenery

Published on January 16, 2026



In a groundbreaking move for luxury travel, Saudi Arabia has announced the debut of its Dream of the Desert sleeper train, set to launch in late 2026. Developed in collaboration with the Italy-based Arsenale Group, Saudi Arabia Railways, and national tourism authorities, this ultra-luxury train experience promises to offer travelers a unique way to explore the kingdom's vast landscapes, rich heritage, and cultural sites.

The Dream of the Desert sleeper train is designed for those seeking a truly exclusive and immersive travel experience. With a 1,300km rail network running through some of the country's most iconic and scenic regions, this innovative rail journey will cater to just 66 passengers at a time, ensuring an intimate and personalized experience. The announcement has generated excitement among those interested in exploring Saudi Arabia's natural beauty and heritage in style and comfort.

### Luxury and Comfort on Rails

The Dream of the Desert train is built to be a mobile luxury hotel, consisting of 14 carriages that include 33 suite cabins, two restaurant cars, and a majlis-inspired lounge. Passengers will have the opportunity to relax and enjoy the picturesque views from their private suite, or socialize in the lounge area, designed with elements of traditional Saudi culture.

Each suite will offer a level of comfort typically found in five-star hotels, providing an unmatched level of privacy and relaxation for passengers. The train's design reflects a fusion of traditional Arabic architecture with modern amenities, ensuring that the journey is both culturally enriching and incredibly luxurious.

For those with an appetite for fine dining, the two restaurant cars aboard the Dream of the Desert will serve gourmet meals, showcasing Saudi Arabia's rich culinary traditions and local ingredients. Guests can expect a curated menu that highlights the diversity of Saudi cuisine, from traditional Middle Eastern dishes to contemporary interpretations of regional flavors.

### Exploring Saudi Arabia's Landscapes and Heritage

The Dream of the Desert is not just a journey; it is an immersive experience that brings travelers face-to-face with Saudi Arabia's stunning and diverse landscapes. The route is designed to take passengers through the country's vast deserts, mountain ranges, and historic sites, offering a rare opportunity to witness the beauty of Saudi Arabia from the comfort of a luxurious train.

Key highlights of the journey will include views of Saudi Arabia's rugged Red Sea coastline, the mystical Empty Quarter Desert, and the ancient city of Al-Ula, known for its rock formations and Nabataean tombs. The train will also pass through regions that are home to UNESCO World Heritage Sites, such as Diriyah, the historical heart of Riyadh, and Madain Saleh, one of the kingdom's most famous archaeological sites.

In addition to the breathtaking landscapes, passengers will also have the chance to experience Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage through on-board activities, including traditional music performances, storytelling sessions, and guided tours of the destinations visited during the journey. These experiences aim to offer passengers a deeper understanding of the history and culture of the region.

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### Pricing and Accessibility

The Dream of the Desert train is positioned as an exclusive luxury offering, with prices starting from SAR 30,000 (approximately £6,000) per cabin per night. This high-end pricing reflects the elite nature of the experience, with the train catering to affluent travelers seeking a distinctive way to explore Saudi Arabia. Given the exclusivity of the service, bookings will likely be limited, adding to the train's appeal as a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

While the price may seem steep for some, it includes all onboard services, from luxurious accommodations and gourmet meals to exclusive excursions and entertainment, ensuring that passengers receive exceptional value for their investment.

The introduction of the Dream of the Desert sleeper train is a direct response to the growing demand for high-end travel experiences in Saudi Arabia. As the country continues to position itself as a global tourism destination, with ambitious plans under the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative, the launch of this ultra-luxury train is part of a broader effort to diversify the kingdom's tourism offerings and attract international visitors.

### The Future of Travel in Saudi Arabia

The Dream of the Desert train marks the beginning of a new chapter in Saudi Arabia's tourism development, highlighting the kingdom's commitment to combining modern infrastructure with traditional hospitality. With the continued investment in tourism infrastructure and unique travel experiences like this, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself as a destination that offers something truly special for discerning travelers.

In the future, the train could serve as a model for other luxury rail experiences in the Middle East, providing a new way to explore the region's rich history, diverse landscapes, and cultural heritage. As interest in slow travel continues to rise globally, the Dream of the Desert is set to become a leading example of how luxury trains can offer unforgettable journeys that prioritize comfort, culture, and adventure.

### Conclusion: A Journey Like No Other

Set to launch in late 2026, the Dream of the Desert sleeper train offers a transformative way to explore the wonders of Saudi Arabia. With its unparalleled luxury, cultural immersion, and scenic views, this rail experience promises to attract travelers looking to experience Saudi Arabia in a way few ever have. Whether you're a history buff, a nature enthusiast, or someone seeking a unique travel experience, the Dream of the Desert offers a journey that's sure to leave lasting memories.

## 26 Reasons Our Editors Are Excited to Travel in 2026

From faces to watch and books to read, to must-see destinations and events, here are 26 things we're excited about in 2026.



*Dream of the Desert* will bring ultra luxury train travel to Saudi Arabia. [Stephan Julliard](#)

### Well trained

The United Arab Emirates's first passenger train services are on track to launch in 2026. Once complete, the [Etihad Rail](#) network will run over 900 kilometers, connecting 11 cities across all seven emirates, traversing desert and mountains, and connecting coasts. Then, in late 2026, the new *Dream of the Desert* will bring ultra luxury train travel to Saudi Arabia, with 33 suites, and majlis and dining cars in 14 redesigned vintage Italian carriages. Interiors by Lebanese architect and interior designer Aline Asmar d'Amman take inspiration from Saudi's craft heritage, traditional motifs and the beauty of the kingdom's deserts. One- and two-night journeys will begin in [Riyadh](#) and travel to destinations such as Al Jouf and Jubbah. —[Nicola Chilton](#)

## 6 Luxury Train-Sleepers and Yachts To Book in 2026

Why fly when you can board Saudi's Dream of the Desert in a gown and wake up to desert canyons, crisp white sheets and a butler on hand?



**Luxury train travel is having its moment. We're here to give you six of the best luxury train sleepers and yachts for a trip that oozes 1930s glamour.**

Flying is not what it used to be. Somewhere along the way, the romance of the journey began to fade away; in place of experience, modern air travel began to promise efficiency above all else. Pair that with a growing consciousness of our environmental footprint, and a shift feels inevitable. Switching from a domestic flight to rail can cut carbon emissions by as much as 86 per cent, according to analysis by Our World in Data on travel's carbon footprint, and since the term was coined in 2018, "flight shame" has slowly evolved from niche Scandinavian slogan to widespread cultural sentiment.

Slow is the operative word. It is slower travel, by rail and increasingly by sea, that is rising in its place. Specialist operators such as Railbookers, who curate independent rail holidays across Europe and North America, report a noticeable surge in travellers choosing panoramic windows over departure gates, trading the so-called efficiency of a middle seat for a journey that feels like part of the holiday. And while ships are hardly without environmental scrutiny, their impact on oceans and emissions is the subject of growing debate, a new generation of smaller-scale, design-led vessels is positioning the voyage itself as something more considered and intentional.



Photo: Stephan Julliard

It harkens to a time gone by. In the 1930s, the world marvelled at the Blue Train and the Orient Express, at ocean liners where a crossing could unfold as both social theatre and cinematic spectacle. Nostalgia for that "golden age" has never completely vanished; what's new in 2026 is the reasoning behind its revival. A recent trend report by design studio JPA Design calls it "The Golden Age Reimagined", a return to rail, sea and slow travel driven not only by retro glamour, but by a desire for immersion, narrative and more mindful movement. This shift is already visible in how travel is being captured online. On social media, the appetite for slower, more intentional journeys has become unmistakable: content tagged #slowtravel on TikTok grew nearly 330 per cent in 2025, while #wellnesstravel surged 150 per cent.

The message is clear: a second golden age of travel is taking shape, and the industry is designing for it. Hotel groups, rail operators and luxury hospitality brands are expanding beyond static destinations, investing in long-form journeys shaped around narrative, craftsmanship and immersion. From Saudi Arabia's Dream of the Desert to Italy's cinematic La Dolce Vita, from the Britannic Explorer to a new wave of hotel-branded yachts, the following projects are redefining the art of the journey.

### Dream of the Desert



Saudi Arabia's Dream of the Desert is more than the region's first luxury sleeper train. Running from Riyadh through 1,300 kilometres of shifting terrain, the 14-carriage experience carries just 66 guests at a time, making it intimate in scale as well as in design. The project, developed by Italy's Arsenale Group in partnership with Saudi Arabia Railways and designed by Aline Asmar d'Amman, layers Saudi craft traditions onto refurbished Italian carriages. Carved wood panels, woven textiles and brass detailing nod to regional heritage without slipping into pastiche, while a palette drawn from sand, sage and burnt terracotta feels instinctively grounded.

Light filters through geometric screens; lounges echo the convivial rhythm of a majlis. It's plush but composed, perhaps even a touch less ostentatious than expected, which somehow makes it all the more powerful. The interiors are luxurious, but more so is the quality of time: the unhurried hours spent watching desert light shift from amber to indigo. It arrives at a moment when the Kingdom is shifting toward experiential tourism.

## Aline Asmar d'Amman on designing meaningful journeys

© January 28, 2026 Rita Ghantous



**Aline Asmar d'Amman is renowned for crafting spaces where heritage, culture and contemporary design meet with purpose. From palaces to trains, her work explores luxury rooted in emotion, context and timeless cultural relevance worldwide.**

### **You have worked on iconic projects worldwide. How do you balance heritage and modernity when redesigning historically rich spaces?**

My work is rooted in transmitting heritage through dialogue between past and future, therefore guided by stories of cultural connection. For me, craftsmanship and artistry represent ultimate luxury, honoring millennial gestures while capturing the spirit of our times today. This philosophy fuels every project, as I constantly seek purpose, emotional intelligence and cultural relevance through meaningful architectural narratives. Although designing a train interior was a first, the philosophy mirrors my work on patrimonial hospitality landmarks worldwide. Furthermore, projects like Hôtel de Crillon or Orient Express Venezia begin with context, stories and poetic materiality while resolving construction constraints carefully. Moreover, for Dream of the Desert, I studied Saudi architecture, crafts, textiles, wood carvings and nomadic elements through a contemporary lens. Ultimately, capturing spirit of place and time remains artistry at its finest, where culture and craft build meaningful futures.

### **As an architect inspired by history, what essential architectural lessons should contemporary cities learn from the past?**

Design must tell virtuous stories that elevate the soul, therefore inducing joy, wonderment and purpose through thoughtful material choices. Therefore, every material carries memory and authenticity, so architecture should respect cultural narratives while creating spaces built to endure. Consequently, I strive for balance, connecting raw and precious past and future, while grounding every project in its local culture.

### **You founded Culture in Architecture to foster dialogue. How do you see this initiative shaping future global design collaboration?**

Culture in Architecture thrives on abundance of ideas, layering stories across architecture, interiors, décor, art and curated objects. Thus, in a fast-moving world, creativity rooted in emotional intelligence and truthful narratives will always remain deeply valued. Moreover, this freedom to invent allows modernity to emerge from tradition, creating what I call the concrete poetry of architects.

### **What has been your most meaningful project so far, and what made it especially significant personally?**

Choosing a favorite project is impossible, because every creative journey carries its own purpose, place and emotional responsibility. At Hôtel de Crillon, I imagined Marie Antoinette awakening today, designing a contemporary stage balancing heritage and bold modernity. Working alongside Karl Lagerfeld was a lifelong gift, as his erudition, generosity and humor deeply shaped my creative vision. Renovating Le Jules Verne within the Eiffel Tower united engineering audacity, gastronomy and symbolism into a powerful architectural narrative. Dream of the Desert was envisioned as an emotional passage, where each space becomes a poetic chapter rooted in Saudi heritage.

### **Which architectural or design direction are you most excited to explore in your upcoming work?**

My work stands beyond trends, instead pursuing timeless elegance that bridges past and future with sustainable relevance. Architecture holds a moral duty to seek contextual truth, beauty and responsible material use through lasting meaningful projects. From buildings to objects and trains to boats, diverse scales inspire me, while poetic materiality and storytelling remain constant.

## Luxury, in motion: Discover the design story behind Dream of the Desert

In this exclusive Q&A, Aline Asmar d'Amman unpacks the design philosophy behind the Dream of the Desert project

By Pranati Yekula

January 29, 2026



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As travellers increasingly seek depth over speed, slow travel is redefining luxury, shifting the focus from constant documentation to meaningful immersion in culture. Rail journeys, in particular, are emerging as a new frontier for this movement.

*Dream of the Desert* is one such journey. Much like the rhythm of the train itself, interior architect Aline Asmar d'Amman translates Saudi Arabia's Najdi architectural language into a contemporary, ultra-luxury hospitality experience, seamlessly blended with Italian savoir-faire. In this Q&A, she unpacks the design philosophy behind the project, the nuances of designing for movement, and how heritage and modernity coexist on board.

### How does the project design respond to its Saudi Arabian context?

In my recent realisation for the Dream of the Desert train interiors, I passionately studied the details of Saudi architecture and artisanal traditions – from the monolithic remains at Madain Saleh, alUla, to the intricate textile weavings of regional artisans, the wood carvings on Jeddah's facades with their distinctive green colour, and the nomadic oil lamps that cast a cinematic glow in the desert, translating these elements through a refined contemporary lens with the gesture of today's artisans. Capturing the spirit of place and time is artistry at its finest. Everywhere, spaces capture the shades and textures of the desert poetic sandy hues and darker tones of the roc formations, while deep oasis green and burnt oranges complete its wonder palette.

I loved discovering the profound love and symbol of the purple colour adopted since 2021 by Saudi Arabia as the kingdom's royal colour. Inspired by the purple-pink flowers that bloom across the Saudi deserts in spring, mainly in the Asir region, the specific hue of the renowned *"Roses of Tail"* that bloom in unexpected and truly magnificent ways punctuates discreet elements of design, in unusual noble touches. Such as delicate stitching of pink thread on camel tinted leather in the restaurant banquettes, a nod to the equestrian saddler language.



Dream of the Desert's elegant reception lounges are inspired by traditional majlis settings, adorned with intricately hand-carved wooden elements, patterns and woven textiles that embody the distinctive signature and warmth of Saudi hospitality. The glass texture of Murano handmade luminaries evoke drops of water on the sand, while others reminisce the Arabian lanterns we call 'na'ous'. The glass shimmering tops are born from sand cast that recalls rock textures. Inspired by the delicate trimmings that adorn abayas and traditional garments, the fabric lampshades seem to have dressed up with

### How did the overall interior concept for the Dream of the Desert take shape?

My vision for Dream of the Desert emerged as a cinematic reverie, an immersive journey unfolding like a poem across the vast Saudi landscape. From the outset, I wanted the interiors to feel in motion, as though composed of shifting scenes, textures and colours infused with the mystique of the desert.

Saudi heritage has been familiar to me since early childhood. Growing up in Lebanon, I was exposed to this layered and refined culture through neighbours' homes in Beirut and dear friends' houses in Riyadh. Alongside this, the writings of Arabian poets – from Rumi to Ibn Arabi – deeply shaped my imagination. Ibn Arabi's belief that "a desert may be dry, but it is rich in spirit" became my guiding principle: the idea that apparent emptiness allows beauty and meaning to unfold.



Aline Asmar d'Amman

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In the lounge, duo seats induce a more intimate moment of conversation while a strong cultural connection impregnates the design, infusing a unique sense of belonging with a modern reinterpretation of the rich country's heritage.

The bar design is inspired by the ancient architecture of Hegra, the archaeological mountain of Hijaz, in a modern reinterpretation of patterns and design. Cultural immersion and true connection with the natural surroundings elevate the art of travelling.

### How did durability, movement, and environmental conditions influence material choices?

Durability and movement were fundamental considerations. Every material had to withstand vibration, temperature variations and continuous use, while maintaining refinement. Italian engineering excellence provided a robust foundation, onto which Saudi-inspired artistry could be layered.

Bespoke metal panels, tinted and patinated, were developed to ensure stability while creating intimacy in the lounge spaces. These elements are deeply anchored, balancing technical performance with aesthetic depth. In the restaurant car, a raised ceiling and bespoke Murano glass sconces introduce lightness without compromising structural integrity.

Textiles and finishes were selected not only for beauty, but for longevity and ease of maintenance. Many details conceal complex engineering, allowing craftsmanship to remain visible while function remains seamless.

This fusion of performance and poetry is essential to the project. Materials are not decorative; they are emotional carriers of memory, culture and purpose – designed to endure both physically and culturally.

I studied the proportions and architectural language of Saudi landmarks, from AlUla and Madain Saleh to Hail, drawing from Najdi and Hijazi details. These references were translated subtly, through craftsmanship rather than literal quotation: sculpted wood panels, earthy tones, luxurious textiles and a sense of quiet monumentality.

Each space was conceived as part of a continuous narrative, bridging past and future. Close collaboration with the Saudi Ministry of Culture, its Fashion Department, and the Ministry of Transport enriched the project with deep insight into regional crafts and traditions. Ultimately, Dream of the Desert became a dialogue between Italian craftsmanship and Saudi heritage – a design rooted in cultural relevance, comfort and emotional resonance.



### How do you define luxury in the context of this project?

Luxury, in this project, is defined by intention rather than excess. It lies in transformation, craftsmanship and meaning. Working with existing Italian wagons, we embraced upcycling as an act of creative reinvention – layering them with Saudi soul rather than starting anew.

For me, this approach reflects the future of ultra-luxury: respectful of history, sustainable, and emotionally intelligent. Rather than erasing what existed, we chose to elevate it. Italian savoir-faire meets Saudi artistry through a careful balance of materials, techniques and cultural references. This cross-cultural dialogue, developed in collaboration with Arsenalte and the Saudi Ministry of Culture, became a defining element of the project.



### What did the planning process look like with physical constraints of a train in mind?

From the earliest stages, the planning process was shaped by the reality that a train is not a static architecture, but a moving body. This required a fundamental shift in perspective. Every decision had to anticipate motion, vibration, weight distribution and technical limitations, while preserving the emotional and narrative depth of the project.

The work began with an intensive dialogue between concept and constraint. Volumes were studied meticulously, circulation refined to avoid rigidity, and proportions adjusted to ensure comfort without excess. The challenge was to create a sense of generosity within finite dimensions – spaces that feel expansive emotionally, even when physically compact.



Materials, too, were considered early in the planning process. Their thickness, anchoring systems and resistance to movement informed the design language. Nothing could be purely decorative; every element had to serve both a poetic and a functional role.

Rather than perceiving these constraints as limitations, I embraced them as a creative framework. They encouraged clarity, precision and restraint. The train became a disciplined canvas – one that demanded coherence and intention. In many ways, this rigour sharpened the project's identity, allowing the interiors to feel composed, fluid and deeply considered.

### What lessons from this project might inform your approach to future transport or hospitality design?

Dream of the Desert reaffirmed a belief that has long guided my work: that the most meaningful projects emerge from listening – to context, to culture, and to constraint. Designing for movement sharpened my understanding of rhythm, sequencing and emotional pacing within space.

The project reinforced the importance of restraint. When space is limited and conditions are demanding, every gesture must be intentional. This discipline enhances clarity and strengthens narrative coherence – principles that are equally relevant in hospitality, residential and transport design.



Luxury is also expressed through time. Dream of the Desert is about slow travel, surrendering to the rhythm of the journey. That philosophy informed every design choice: velvety textiles that invite touch, warm woods reminiscent of traditional dwellings, and sculptural lighting that creates intimacy rather than spectacle.

The palette draws directly from the desert: sand, earthy browns, lavender hues and oasis greens – establishing a sense of grounded serenity. Each space, from the reception lounge to the restaurant, encourages presence and contemplation. Here, luxury is not loud; it is tactile, cultural and deeply considered.

### What considerations shaped the interior experience for passengers spending time onboard?

Design, to me, is a form of storytelling – a way of conveying humanistic values through materials and space. When conceiving interiors for extended journeys, comfort alone is not enough; emotional rhythm becomes essential. I wanted passengers to feel a sense of belonging and suspension, where time slows, and the experience unfolds gradually.

Rather than recreating tradition as pastiche, the interiors reinterpret Saudi heritage in a contemporary, respectful manner. Each space acts as a chapter in a continuous narrative: the welcoming majlis-inspired lounge, the contemplative private suites, and the refined restaurant. Together, they form a journey not only through landscape, but through atmosphere and emotion.



Material choices play a crucial role in sustaining comfort over time. Soft textiles, warm surfaces and carefully modulated lighting reduce sensory fatigue, while subtle variations in colour and texture maintain visual interest throughout the day. Movement is embraced rather than hidden – the gentle rhythm of the train becomes part of the experience.

Passengers are invited to inhabit the train as they would a living space, not a transient one. Spaces encourage both social interaction and solitude, allowing individuals to choose their own pace. Ultimately, the design seeks to create a sensorial crescendo – where culture, comfort and beauty coexist effortlessly.

### What aspects of train design required a completely different way of thinking compared to homes or hotels?

While this is the first time I work on the design of a train interior, the philosophy remains the same as with working on large-scale hospitality projects steeped in patrimonial buildings (like Palazzo Dona Giovannelli, the Orient-Express Hotel to come in Venice or Hotel de Crillon, a Rosewood Paris, place de la Concorde). The creative journey starts with context and stories – taking us to unexpected yet fertile horizons. I like to think that challenges make the best projects. Dream of the Desert is therefore not only about luxury hospitality on rails and slow travel, but also a remarkable opportunity to pay homage to a highly sought-after culture – one with so much to share with the world.

My architectural work is rooted in the transmission of past to future, elevated by cultural connection stories. For me, craftsmanship is the ultimate bridge between past and present, a form of luxury passed down through generations, from one skilled hand to another. I spent hours studying the details of a Saudi architecture – the intricate textile weavings, delicate wood carvings, and oil lamps that cast a cinematic glow – translating these elements through a refined contemporary lens, thoughtfully adapted to the unique spatial and technical constraints of a train.

The future I imagine is one of thoughtful modernity, where innovation honours memory, and where cultural dialogue becomes the new definition of luxury.

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Another key lesson lies in the power of cultural immersion. True luxury today is rooted in relevance and respect. Engaging deeply with local heritage, craftsmanship and symbolism allows design to transcend aesthetics and become an experience of belonging.

Finally, the project highlighted the value of collaboration across disciplines. When design, engineering and craftsmanship evolve together, the result is not a compromise but an elevation. These lessons will continue to inform my approach: creating spaces that are emotionally generous, culturally anchored and designed to endure – both materially and meaningfully.

## Year-End Review: The Leaders-Mena Website's most-read Stories of 2025

### 11 – Riyadh Metro, Desert Dream Train Emerge among Most Anticipated Projects in 2025

The Riyadh Metro Project and the Dream of the Desert Train have emerged among the world's highly-anticipated transportation projects in 2025, according to CNN. These two projects have gained global prominence owing to their unique designs and outstanding nature.

[Read more..](#)



### Riyadh Metro, Desert Dream Train Emerge among Most Anticipated Projects in 2025

The Riyadh Metro Project and the Dream of the Desert Train have emerged among the world's highly-anticipated transportation projects in 2025, according to CNN. These two projects have gained global prominence owing to their unique designs and outstanding nature. The two projects are part of Saudi Arabia's developmental infrastructure projects, further underscoring the Kingdom's commitment ... [Continue reading](#)

# GOING 26 EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES TO TRY IN 2026 PLACES

WORDS YI-HWA HANNA



IMAGES DIRIYAH

## COVER STORY

### 5 Take a thrill ride

High-adrenaline environments are studies in risk management, safety systems, and human response under pressure – key lessons in the boardroom and life. With an opening date of 31 December 2025, Six Flags in Saudi Arabia's Qiddiya is an immense new tourism attraction that represents the kingdom's push to anchor entertainment within large-scale economic diversification. The park has six themed lands, 28 rides and the world's fastest, tallest, and longest roller coaster.

### 6 Soothe your soul

The quest for well-being has pervaded almost every industry across the world – including travel. Wellness travel increasingly focuses on ways to regulate our stress, sleep, attention, and nervous systems, rather than indulgence. For busy professionals, it can offer a chance at recalibration. Taking place amidst the natural wonders of the ancient landscape, AlUla Wellness Festival – which typically runs for about two weeks – offers holistic experiences like yoga, meditation, music, and desert adventures alongside fitness classes. While the 2026 edition's dates have yet to be announced, the festival is typically held from late October to early November.

### 7 Immerse into nature

Spending time in nature can help to improve cognitive function and emotional resilience. From late June to September each year, the usually dry terrain of Salalah in Oman's Dhofar region transforms into a lush landscape of waterfalls, greenery, and cool breezes that shroud its mountains with an atmospheric mist. In Saudi, the UNESCO-recognised rose Festival closes its rose-picking season each April, offering a chance to learn how its fragrant Damask rose is used in food, perfume, and more. In Jordan, Yarmouk Eco Lodge – a new sustainable tourism project by Jordan's Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature and EcoHotels in the Yarmouk Biosphere Forest Reserve – is set to open in 2026.



### 8 Travel by rail

Etihaad Rail is set to enter its passenger era in 2026. The 900km network connecting all seven emirates will begin carrying passengers from the Saudi border to Fujairah, initially linking 11 cities across the country, operated by Keolis International (which also runs Dubai Metro). Saudi Arabia's first ultra-luxury train, Dream of the Desert, will also launch in 2026. Designed by Arsenale Group – the force behind the Orient Express revival – the train will operate five curated routes across the kingdom, complete with with fine dining.

### 9 Take a flying taxi

Dubai will be launching its first commercial air taxi services, using JOB Y aircraft, in early 2026. The service will be bookable via an app, with rides priced akin to premium ride-hailing services. There are four vertiports scheduled within the initial network, at Dubai International Airport (DXB), Palm Jumeirah, Downtown Dubai, and Dubai Marina.

### 10 Up your style quotient

Good style is a visual language that signals taste, confidence, and attention to detail. While we'll have to wait until 2027 for the next edition of Dubai Watch Week, in 2026, you can catch the brand-new Dubai Mall Festival of Fashion from 29-30 January, and Dubai Fashion Week from 1-6 February.



ABOVE  
Six Flags  
Saudi Arabia

LEFT  
Dream of  
the Desert

BOTTOM  
Red Sea  
Film Festival

### 11 Be well-read

Literature can expose us to new ideas that strengthen how we think, help us gain new perspectives, build empathy, and expand our imagination. The Emirates Airline Festival of Literature – the Arab World's largest celebration of the written and spoken word – has evolved into a major cultural anchor in the region, and the 2026 edition will be held at the InterContinental Dubai Festival City from 21 to 27 January.

### 12 Walk the red carpet

Events such as the Red Sea International Film Festival, Istanbul Film Festival, and El Gouna Film Festival place the Middle East firmly within the global cinematic circuit, spotlighting regional talent alongside international premieres. Dates for their 2026 editions have yet to all be announced, but for professionals across various industries, these festivals can offer insight into storytelling, soft power, and creative economies, while reminding us how art often leads social change long before policy follows.

### 13 Travel by water

Cruises can give us a sense of efficiency by offering the chance to visit multiple destinations without having to deal with constant packing, airport transfers, or logistics. New itineraries entering Middle Eastern ports include those by Celestyal, MSC Cruises, and Saudi Arabia's homegrown AROYA Cruises.

### 14 Experience the tech of the future

The Middle East is fast emerging as one of the most tech-forward corners of the world, and the region's innovation hubs – such as the upcoming Jaddaf Urban Tech District, a net-zero carbon innovation hub set to be the world's largest urban tech district – provide insight into where industries – and careers – are heading. Events such as LEAP and DeepFest in Saudi Arabia,



Dubai Esports and Games Festival, and the Dubai Future Foundation's annual Dubai Future Forum bring together technologists, pioneers, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and investors shaping tomorrow's systems. Attending one will keep you on the pulse of the cutting edge, helping contextualise the disruption that's emerging across markets, and reinforcing the importance of adaptability in a shifting global landscape.

### 15 Indulge in fine food

The Middle East's dining scene continues to mature, with chef-driven concepts, hyper-local sourcing, and experimental formats

IMAGES SUPPLIED



ON THE MOVE IN 2026

From chasing the upcoming total solar eclipse to bagging tickets for major sporting events and from going solo and quiet to seeking ultra-personalised experiences, there's loads to look forward to on the travel calendar over the coming year. If you're looking for inspiration for your next big trip, we take a look at some of the top trends to bear in mind when you make that all-important booking.

● TRAVEL

saying 45% of its clients are adjusting plans due to climate change. Respondents also said they wanted to reduce pressure on local communities and preserve the authenticity of experiences.

This change in mindset has led to the rise in popularity of destinations outside major tourism hubs with online travel platform Agoda experiencing a significant rise in the number of searches for non-traditional locations.

The company's 2026 Travel Outlook Report noted that governments and tourism authorities are very aware of the trend with countries such as Indonesia and Japan adopting strategies to drive visitors to alternative destinations, aside from Bali and Tokyo.

**Check Out:** Notjusttravel.com and net-a-porter.com for alternative travel ideas.

OF ROADS AND RAILWAYS

According to Hilton's 2026 Trends Report, more of us will be taking to the highways in 2026 – it's no surprise that the hashtag #RoadTrip has racked up more than 5.9 million tags globally!

And explore.co.uk says more travellers are choosing epic rail journeys over short-haul flights – making the journey part of the holiday – in fact, the company has seen a 25% increase in rail bookings over the last year.

While Hilton's report finds some travellers are taking to the roads to save cash, others are seeking out the more luxe option with specialist companies turning the road trip into a curated journey built around Michelin-starred dining and one-off experiences.

In rail too there are dual purpose journeys. The appetite for slow, scenic travel is on the rise but rail with its student and multi-journey perks can also prove a cost-effective option. While luxury rail travel too is experiencing an upsurge with the likes of Saudi Arabia's soon to be launched ultra-luxe train, Dream of the Desert, due to offer various routes reminiscent of the golden age of rail travel.

**Check Out:** The Society of International Railway Travelers irtsociety.com for information on the world's top luxury trains.

OFF-SEASON BREAKS

ABTA – The Travel Association says a major emerging trend is September Travel. In terms of both favourable weather and good value, booking a break outside the regular school holidays is growing in popularity. In fact, ABTA's most recent report found one in four people (24%) said they planned to holiday in September, up seven percent on previous years.

While older people aged 55-64-years (29%), and 65+ year olds (35%), said they were most likely to travel in September, there was also an increase in intention to travel during this month across all ages. In particular, the biggest increases were for 18-24-year-olds from 11% to 17% and 35-44-year-olds from 12% to 20%.

September is not the only time proving popular – other

