

## CONSERVING AND INTERPRETING THE HIJAZ RAILWAY IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

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### **Introduction**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a rich and diverse cultural heritage dating back to prehistoric times; evidence of the numerous civilisations that have settled or traded in the Arabian peninsula. The birth of Islam from these lands and the two holy cities of Madinah and Makkah today place Saudi Arabia at the heart of the Islamic world. Alongside the millions of pilgrims that visit the Kingdom each year, there is an interest in opening up the country's natural and cultural wealth to a wider spectrum of visitors all year round. The development of the Kingdom's cultural heritage for tourism has included pre-Islamic archaeological sites, Islamic period forts, castles and mosques, historic cities and the rich vernacular traditions of the different regions. Along the Red Sea coast, the region known as the Hijaz, the focus has been on the two holy cities, sites relating to the life of the Prophet Mohammed and the pilgrim routes leading to the holy lands. The Hijaz Railway is a late addition to these routes, an early 20th century railway built to connect the holy lands with Damascus (Syria). Today the remnants of the railway line, desert stations and the ancient forts to which it was linked provide the opportunities for tourism.

There is a tendency in cultural heritage management to view monuments and sites as singular destinations. For tourism the development of linear attractions can provide added value, but also present new challenges in organisation, access, interpretation and marketing. There is a growing recognition that not only places but lines or a group of features can be promoted as heritage and cultural routes are being designated as World Heritage Sites. In some cases it is the route or road that is significant, such as Santiago del Compostela, in other cases it is a series of buildings or sites that are linked by type or association that are grouped. Some routes are short and regional while others, such as the Silk Road, are trans-national.

In this classification, the Hijaz Railway is also

trans-national<sup>1</sup>. The focus of this paper, however, is the development of the railway heritage in the Hijaz provinces of Saudi Arabia as part of a cultural heritage assessment and tourism generation initiative. The paper will discuss approaches to interpreting the Hijaz Railway as a linear attraction crossing two major provinces that will also link into other aspects of the linear heritage and create visitor focus points in several centres and at key junctions.

### **History and Background**

The Hijaz Railway was built under Ottoman patronage at the start of the 20th century to connect Damascus with the holy cities of Madinah and Mekkah, thus extending the already established railway link between the capital Istanbul and Baghdad and Damascus. The Hijaz Railway was billed as a religious project, since it would link the three holy cities of Jerusalem, Madinah and Mekkah, and ensure the safe passage of pilgrims to the holy lands, particularly during the annual pilgrimage of the Hajj. Nonetheless the railway had political and military implications coming at a critical time for the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. This may also explain the rapid speed of construction and the employment of military personnel to support the construction works. Indeed the railway played an important role in the movement of troupes to the Hijaz. Construction on the railway commenced in 1901, much of it funded by public subscription.

The Hijaz Railway was officially opened for operation in 1908, with the station in Damascus, in present day Syria, being its designated headquarters. The railway enabled pilgrims to reach the holy lands from the Middle East in a matter of 2-3 days, which was a major improvement on the speed of caravans used until then and impacted significantly on the Muslim world.

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<sup>1</sup> The line of the railway today passes through Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and Saudi Arabia, while much of the papers and archives pertaining to the railway are held in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire at the time the railway was constructed.

The construction of the railway was nonetheless problematic, built over difficult terrain under taxing conditions, including Bedouin raids and guerrilla warfare. The provision of water was vital for the operation of the railway and wells had to be dug at most stations to provide the necessary supplies to the stations. Where routes coincided, the Hijaz Railway stations were placed in close proximity to existing pilgrim route castles and forts with their established infrastructure. Much of the operation was overseen by German engineers and many of the stations along the route are clearly influenced by German railway buildings of the time, neat masonry structures with pitched roofs. Turkish and Egyptian engineers took over on the section of the line after Mada'in Saleh as the line gained proximity to the holy lands.

The 1.05m wide narrow gauge railway ran from Damascus south towards Amman (Jordan), originally with a branch line to Haifa, thus also connecting the railway to the coast. The length of the railway line from Damascus to Madinah is 1303kms. The railway enters the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through Tabuk province in the north, Tabuk City being the first major oasis on the line in Arabia. The line of the railway continues through Mada'in Saleh and Al Ula before reaching Madinah. There was strong local opposition between 1909 and 1914 to the building of the final segment of the line to Makkah and once the war had intervened this section was never completed. Madinah station, officially opened in 1908, is an elegant structure built in Ottoman style on Ambariya Square. The site also includes the Ottoman style Ambariya Mosque, a substantial workshop, sheds, canteen and hamam (bath).

The significance of the 'route', is not only the railway itself but the parallel routes that lie in close proximity to it, including the south to north route through which Frankincense traders moved from Oman to the Eastern Mediterranean ports, at one time controlled by the Nabathians; and the main pilgrim routes from the north, in particular, Egypt (land route), Turkey and the province of Sham (present day Syria and Jordan). Although a much larger proportion of pilgrims today travel by air, there are still large convoys that arrive by bus travelling down the main motorways that pass close to and sometimes through some of the old pilgrim towns and the route of the Hijaz Railway.

### **Current condition of the railway**

Not long after it was completed, the railway was seriously damaged during World War I and the line was abandoned south of Amman through Tabuk province to Madinah. This

part of the line is also strongly associated with T.E. Laurence (Laurence of Arabia) as he led the Arab revolt during World War I.

In Saudi Arabia virtually all the railway track and ties have been removed although the raised track bed still exists in some places as do some culverts. Although the track has been removed, sections of the track bed and the many stations, placed about 20 kms apart, remain. In this context the railway also has a landscape value, in the way that the line, abandoned stations and even carriages can still be seen in the landscape. Furthermore, all along the line local buildings can be found with 'railway line' beams. In some cases the line may be more important than the authenticity of the remains.

Some of the stations are in a poor condition, but the Mada'in Saleh and central Madinah City stations have been restored to be used as museums. Recently some of the railway buildings in Tabuk have been restored as a railway park. The restored buildings, however, are not being properly maintained and the hard landscaping work carried out around the former station buildings is insensitive to the buildings and their setting. With the exception of major centres like Tabuk City and Al Ula, most of the other station buildings and features of the railway are not near tarmac roads and are difficult to access. One of the unique features of the railway line is the still intact tunnel located some distance south of Tabuk City.

Of the whole railway, the section of lines between Beirut and Damascus, and Jerusalem and Haifa, including the two stations were also damaged during the war. The section of railway between Damascus and Amman still survives and a double arched bridge south of Amman has become a symbol of the railway. In Damascus the workshops are still in use preserving and maintaining the trains and a private venture, named the Hijaz Railway Company, has been set up to operate a touristic venture using the 95 year old trains. In Amman in Jordan, the old Hijaz Railway station is open to the public as a small railway museum. Although the railway link to Haifa (Israel) has been lost, the Hijaz Railway depot is used as a railway museum, including an original Hijaz Railway train.

The present condition of the railway in Saudi Arabia thus presents the following challenges for tourism development:

- Limited access to parts of the railway due to private ownership of land and forbidding terrain;
- Difficulties of managing remote buildings and structures;
- Prohibitive cost of rebuilding railway lines in order to re-active operational sections of railway.

Despite the constraints identified above, from a tourism point of view the Hijaz Railway presents the following strengths:

- An interesting and unique attraction for the region
- Recognised historic value and associations
- Impressive setting and landscape value
- Links to other heritage attractions and cultural routes
- Trans-national links to other Hijaz Railway attractions in the Middle East

### **Historic railways and tourism**

Historic railways are increasingly becoming a tourist attraction. For many years, the famous Venice Simplon-Orient Express, immortalised by Agatha Christie, has been running exclusive packages with various itineraries across Europe. In Britain the railway heritage is well preserved, much of it supported by railway enthusiasts. Attractions range from a National Railway Museum (York), to smaller museums, workshops and sections of line running historic steam trains through, often scenic, routes across the country. In India the railway heritage is also well preserved and is being adapted for tourism purposes. The famous Darjeeling Himalayan railway has now been designated a World Heritage Site, while the railway museum is one of the major museums open to visitors in Delhi.

The main attractions that can be offered by railways include:

- A ride or even journey undertaken on an old train and/or on a historic route.
- Railway museums where a collection of historic locomotives and tenders can be seen and their workings demonstrated. Many major railway museums have developed substantial linked activities and educational programmes for children and family visits.
- Stations or other railway buildings that are redundant, still in use or used for other purposes and are interpreted for the benefit of visitors.

### **Markets**

The Hijaz Railway played a prominent role in the early 20th century history of this area and is associated with a sense of adventure, especially the exploits of T. E. Laurence. It was the only railway ever developed in the Kingdom, and represents a popular form of technology of the early 20th century. Thus, the railway is of much potential interest to Saudis and foreign visitors. There are several key markets for the Hijaz Railway:

- Saudi residents, on day trips from home or on vacation

in the Madinah, Al Ula and Tabuk areas. The opportunity to spend time with ones family in privacy, which can be provided in early railway coaches with several compartments, is one that is very important to Saudis when planning their leisure time.

- International visitors traveling to Madinah and/ or Al Ula with their families on holiday, and seeking a combination of entertainment and cultural experience that is rarely available anywhere else in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup>
- The international, specialist railway enthusiast market. The Hijaz Railway is known across the world and niche tour operators have confirmed that there is considerable latent demand for escorted tours of the railway's route.

This final segment will not just focus on the various projects proposed in the main centres, but on the whole length of the railway throughout the Kingdom. Several guidebooks popular with expatriates in the Kingdom contain guidance on how to follow the route in 4x4 vehicles between Al Ula and Madinah, and a good opportunity exists for building on this knowledge by offering escorted 4x4 safaris along the railway. At the present time visa restrictions and security considerations make this a longer-term opportunity.

### **Tourism development objectives**

The Hijaz Railway will only become a unique tourism attraction in the region if the buildings, structures and its landscape setting can be adequately protected. From a heritage protection point of view, the following priorities have been identified:

- Safeguarding buildings and structures belonging to the Hijaz Railway;
- Safeguarding and ensuring safe and appropriate storage of memorabilia and other moveable objects (including railway carriages) belonging to the Hijaz Railway or associated with it;
- Preserving the landscape setting of the line, including the raised track bed;
- Maintaining the integrity of the railway through development control measures along the line.

In respect of the identified visitor markets, the following visitor needs arise:

- Safe access to various sections of the railway;
- Interpretation and education facilities;
- 'Experience' of the railway through segments that might become operational.

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<sup>2</sup> There is very little international tourism in Tabuk other than pilgrims on transit to the Holy Cities.

These needs can also be spread out onto the geographic expanse of the line and development focused on various types of activity and levels of access to the various visitor groups. A strategy for the development of the Hijaz Railway as a tourism attraction in the Kingdom is therefore:

- A major Hijaz Railway Museum (of national significance)
- Major nodes where visitor and interpretation centres are provided
- Secondary nodes that link the railway to other cultural heritage sites
- Segments of railway that might become operational
- Interpretation and information provision for the entire length of the railway

### **National Museum**

Museums are the best vehicle for conveying the history and technology of the railway. A

The Provincial Tourism Masterplan for Al Madinah Al Munawwarah identifies the development of a National Museum of Transportation at Al Makheet station on the outskirts of Madinah. Madinah is a significant urban centre and a major destination for Saudi and Muslim visitors.

### **Nodes**

Three major nodes where smaller museums or visitor centres can be located have been identified as:

- Tabuk railway park
- Mada'in Saleh railway station and sheds
- The terminus station in Madinah

In Tabuk, the railway buildings are contained in park where there is opportunity to develop a visitor centre alongside railway related activities, such as a miniature railway. The park will serve local residents and also tourists passing through the city. Its development would focus on interactive exhibits that would appeal particularly to young people and families.

Mada'in Saleh has already been identified as being one of the major cultural heritage destinations in the Kingdom of global significance. The rock cut tombs of the Nabatean settlement, a second Petra., with its stunning setting is a 'must see' attraction. The ancient Nabatean settlement is also supported by several other attractions, including the old village of Al Ula, other archaeological sites including rock art sites and a pilgrim fort. The Hijaz Railway sheds and workshop at Mada'in Saleh and two stations (Mada'in Saleh and Al Ula) are valuable additional attractions to this cultural tourism destination.

In addition to the above, the restored terminus station at Madinah will continue to function as a leisure destination offering short steam-hauled rides through the station yard, interpretive displays and walks through parkland created around the terminus building.

Alongside the Museum in Madinah, these centres provide an opportunity to provide focused interpretation and activity around the railway.

### **Operational segments**

There are several sections of railway that could be rebuilt to enable visitors to 'experience' a journey on the Hijaz Railway. The restoration of the line between Al Makheet and Al Hafeera stations in Madinah to support steam-hauled journeys could be linked to the Railway Museum. A small visitor centre would be created at Al Hafeera, providing basic tourism services so that visitors could break their trip before journeying back towards Madinah.

A more ambitious project would be the restoration of a section of the line between Mada'in Saleh and Al Ula, to transport tourists from the resort hotels in Al Ula out to the Nabatean ruins at Mada'in Saleh and to the desert landscape of Jebel Ethrib.

A further and longer term option might be to develop the section of railway between Tabuk City and the tunnel that is located to the south from it.

All of the above projects require considerable capital investment including land acquisition (much of the original track bed around Al Ula, for instance, has been incorporated into private landholdings), restoring the station buildings, consolidating track beds and relaying track and installing coal drops and water towers. One early steam locomotive is already in full working order in Madinah, having been restored by Pakistani engineers, whilst several original Hijaz Railway coaches are also in the process of restoration.

### **Interpretation and information**

Visitor interpretation at protected areas and cultural heritage sites is virtually non-existent at the present time in the Kingdom. Interpretation is essential so that visitors can appreciate and understand what they are seeing. If attraction sites are not made interesting to visitors through effective interpretation, they will not want to visit the sites. A system of directional signs is needed so that tourists can easily find the sites. At all sites, at least one interpretive

sign is essential and sites that are complicated or have many visitors should have several interpretive signs.

The Hijaz Railway has a very distinctive identity and within a national framework of directional, presentation and interpretation signage there is the opportunity to create a distinct set of signs and boards that clearly signal the railway. It is recommended that the signs are used at the Museums, railway park and sheds as well as means of interpretation at stations, including those in remote locations. Interpretation signs would include a map of the railway, placing the given point into context as well as links to close by railway and other cultural heritage attractions (e.g. forts or old caravan routes).

## **Conclusion**

The Hijaz Railway is a unique cultural asset for Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, especially with its associations to the holy sites as well as political situations. The railway also has rarity and landscape value. The position of the route though remote terrain and the loss of a substantial amount of structure may be seen as a major constraint in its development for tourism purposes. Nevertheless there are sufficient accessible centres with enough to see in them to create major nodes as well as a series of smaller attractions that will enable the railway line to be interpreted in its entirety. In the longer term there may also be opportunities to develop cross border co-operations, that are not possible in the present political climate of the Middle East.

### Abstract

The Hijaz Railway was constructed in the early part of the twentieth century to link the Levant with Islam's Holy cities of Madinah and Mekkah. The railway was never completed beyond Madinah and its operational life was cut short by the First World War, never to be revived again. Today only a few sections in Syria and Jordan still function.

The significance of the 'route' as it passes through the Hijaz, however, lies not just in the railway but in the many other activities that it has supported.. Prior to the emergence of Islam the same artery was used by Frankincense traders moving from Oman to the Eastern Mediterranean ports. Later the same route was used by pilgrims travelling from Egypt, Turkey, Syria and Jordan, a function it continues to fulfil.

Today in Saudi Arabia, the track bed remains a palimpsest in the desert landscape. Most of the railway buildings lie abandoned, with the exception of Tabuk station, a depot near Al Ula and the terminus building in Madinah, recently converted into a Railway Museum.

This paper considers the potential role of the Hijaz Railway as a 'cultural route' in stimulating heritage tourism in Saudi Arabia. In doing so the paper considers how the wider Islamic and pre-Islamic cultural heritage of the route can be better preserved, interpreted and developed.

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