

Jerusalem's first light rail line draws big crowds

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The system has been five years in the making and beset by countless delays, creating havoc on the roads and with the city's bus system.

But on Friday the long-awaited opening arrived, with people flocking to the track for a ride.

At Mount Herzl in southwest Jerusalem, around 30 people stepped onto

the train, which quickly set off and sailed smoothly down the road towards the city centre.

It's an exciting start to the weekend for one old woman and her grandson.

"We are going to the market. I am very excited," beams 14-year-old Maor Biton sitting next to his elderly grandmother, both of them smiling broadly.

"It's very special," she grins. "My grandson has been driving me crazy for months to ride on the train."

Inside the carriages, which were built by France's Alstom, the interior is pale blue, the upholstery in pristine condition. It's very spacious and airy. And very quiet.

Within a mile or two, the train fills up with curious passengers, most of them wearing irrepressible smiles.

The 250-million euro (\$360 million) project was supposed to be finished in 2008, but completion was repeatedly pushed back for reasons ranging from construction errors to the unexpected discovery of historical artefacts.

Work to widen roads and build the track has taken five long years, causing countless [traffic jams](#) in a city whose streets are notoriously congested, leaving locals and shopkeepers frustrated and fed-up with the dirt, the din and the disruption.



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But on Friday morning, the people looked rather more pleased. And no one is complaining about the fact that, for now, it's free -- thanks to a last-minute glitch in the ticketing system.

"We have lived here for years and suffered with all this upheaval to the traffic, but this is very nice," said Tehila Ganor, beaming with the excitement, her two young daughters squealing as a second train passes in the opposite direction.

The light rail project has also come under political attack because it runs through mostly Arab east Jerusalem, an area of the city which was occupied by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War and which the Palestinians want as capital of their future state.

Beginning at Mount Herzl, the route follows a 14-kilometre (nine-mile) stretch which takes in Jaffa Street, west Jerusalem's main artery, and skirts the Old City before heading into east Jerusalem and ending at the settlement suburb of Pisgat Zeev.

City officials are relying the new system to cut the number of cars in the

Holy City, which has a population of 790,000 and is constantly choked with noisy traffic.



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"Do you know how far it's going?" asks a young woman, slightly embarrassed, while another woman stares blankly at the closed door in front of her before walking off, not realising she needs to push a button to open it.

As the train approaches the Bridge of Strings, an eye-catching suspension bridge built especially so that the rail system could navigate a problematic right turn onto Jaffa Street, everyone peers expectantly out of the window.

The view down the valley is all-too-familiar but nonetheless quite exciting when viewed from the train as it glides over the bridge.

"The adults are enjoying themselves more than the kids," chuckles one passenger in his 50s, admitting it was his first ride on public transport in

a long time.

"I haven't been on a bus in years."

"I've been on a tram before, back in Russia, but I've been in Israel for 20 years and it feels like it's the first time again," smiles Galina, a blonde woman in her 50s.

"I'm really excited. It's nice that it's finally ready after years of traffic jams and craziness -- 12 years we have waited for it and finally it's here.

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