

S.African high-speed train link takes off

August 2 2011, by Jean Liou



Passengers applauded as the first trains left their stations at 5:25 am (0325 GMT) on Tuesday, from the university district of Hatfield in Pretoria and the Rosebank commercial centre in Johannesburg.

The main link on Africa's fastest railway opened Tuesday to thousands of commuters who shuttled at 160 kilometres (100 miles) per hour between Johannesburg and the South African capital Pretoria.

Passengers applauded as the first trains left their stations at 5:25 am (0325 GMT), from the university district of Hatfield in Pretoria and the

Rosebank commercial centre in Johannesburg.

"We are now running at 160km/h. Please sit back, relax and enjoy the ride," the conductor said.

About 11,000 passengers had taken the new line by mid-day, with security guards in full view to ease worries about security in a nation with one of the world's highest rates of violent crime.

"Everything is running perfectly smoothly, the trains are on time," said Alain Esteve, director general of the Bombela Operating Company, a subsidiary of the French firm RATP.

He expects more passengers at the weekend as people come out to try out the \$3.8-billion Gautrain, which is meant to ease traffic in the tiny but wealthy province of Gauteng.

The first line running from Johannesburg's Sandton business district opened three days before the football World Cup last year.

The new line runs 56 kilometres (35 miles), with one final station in downtown Johannesburg expected to open by the end of the year, after engineers deal with water seeping into the final stretch of tunnel.

"The system is designed to accommodate 100,000 passengers a day at the start. It will be probably somewhat less at the beginning, but it should go up when people realise that the train is efficient and cost-effective," Bombela spokesman Errol Braithwaite said.

Bombela includes French construction giant Bouygues and Canada's Bombardier, the world's railway leader.

Although the first day had a quiet start, some braved the chilly morning

and took the train for the experience.

"It was a smooth and exciting journey and we are very pleased," said Grahame Gertsch from Pretoria.

"We came to Joburg for coffee, but it's too early, so we brought our own."

Another Pretoria resident, Marie van Hoof joined her husband for breakfast in Rosebank, near his office at petrochemical giant Sasol.

"He commutes every day to Rosebank, where he works at Sasol. He usually has to wake up at 4:15 am, but now he can get up at 6:00 am. It makes a big difference," she said.

At the Midrand station, halfway down the line, student Victoria Seipati said she would take the train every day to Pretoria.

"I think the train is convenient for me. It will save me time and money, compared to the (minibus) taxis. I won't be stuck in traffic," she said, adding that she expected the train to cut her transport costs by 40 percent.

The Gautrain makes the trip between the cities in 38 minutes, compared to more than two hours on the highway at rush hour, and less than half the time of the journey on the ageing Metrorail system, which connects the region's townships to the cities.

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