

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Society

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Good news from Darjeeling, but with a small cloud on the horizon

Opened fully in 1881 the 2ft gauge Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in West Bengal is 55 miles long, linking New Jalpaiguri and Siliguri with Darjeeling. It rises almost 7,000ft using a series of loops and zigzag reverses to do so. Uniquely almost the entire route of the track is shared with National Highway NH55. In 1999 the DHR was granted UNESCO World Heritage Site listing. Its fleet of British-built B Class steam locomotives dating from 1892 are still in daily service.

Reinstated service

COVID numbers in India have reduced to a level where the UK government has now listed India as an 'amber' destination, allowing tourism from the UK to resume.(of course, with restrictions and conditions). The COVID figures for West Bengal are at a reasonably low level: the main Indian Hotspots are Mumbai, the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala and Kashmir.

For the first time in eighteen months, services resumed over the whole distance of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway on August 25th. The timetable remains the same as existed when services were summarily withdrawn due to COVID on 22 March last year, with daily departures from New Jalpaiguri at 1000 and from Darjeeling at 0800. The train consists of one first class saloon, one 'vistadome' coach and a van. First class fares vary between Rs1,000 and 1,200 (£10 to £12) depending on the season.

The Northeast Frontier Railway is also introducing an afternoon 'tea special' between Siliguri Junction and Rangtong which is a 'lite' version of the unique and popular full dining train offered by Darjeeling Tours Ltd.

There was great concern when it was reported that services were again suspended on 29 August due to a heavy monsoon landslide near Tindharia, but rapid action by both rail and road authorities had the line reopened by 31 August, a remarkable achievement. As the monsoon will continue through September, further minor disruptions are inevitable, but it is hoped that no major slips will occur.

'Joy trains' covering the 6km run from Darjeeling to Ghum and back have also recently resumed. There can be up to ten journeys a day, but the actual number of trains run is being tailored to demand. Train numbers will increase as tourists return to Darjeeling.

On the broad gauge, Indian Railways are also introducing 'vistadome' coaches on the service between New Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar Junction, 169km to the east in an effort to boost tourism to this attractive area.

Most local companies have welcomed these moves by Indian Railways, and Darjeeling Tours is expecting to resume its tours to the area in January.

Privatisation

India's government has unveiled a wide-ranging National Monetisation Plan to 'monetise' (with private sector participation) the infrastructure assets of its highways, power supply and railways sectors. For Indian Railways this asset monetisation plan encompasses 400 railway stations (many in prime sites), 90 private passenger trains, 265 railway goods sheds, the Konkan Railway, the dedicated freight corridor and the four narrow gauge Indian Hill Railways (the Darjeeling

Himalayan Railway, the Kalka-Shimla Railway, the Nilgiri Mountain Railway and the Matheran Light Railway). The plan is to be executed in phases and due to be completed in the Financial Year 2025.

The Hill Railways

As three of the four hill railways are now basically tourist railways (the fourth, Kalka-Shimla still has a little local custom), it seems logical to remove them from Indian Railways ownership, much as British Rail allowed the Vale of Rheidol to be transferred to a new operator. Indian Railways has enough problems maintaining a country-wide efficient transport system without needing to invest its hard-pressed management's time.

The problem with these hill railways, especially the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, is that the terrain through which they run is notoriously unstable, with landslips and washouts being commonplace during the summer monsoon season. Occasionally, these are really serious: the 14th mile slip on the DHR took out about a kilometre of hillside ledge: there was no through service for five years whilst this was repaired, with a new ledge having to be carved out for rail and road. No sane commercial organisation would even think of taking over responsibility for having to maintain the trackbed for this very reason.

However, it may be possible for another organisation to take over operation of trains, maybe along the same lines as the current BR private companies operate on Network Rail's infrastructure.

The DHRS View

Although the precise proposals are awaited, it is clear that there would be both opportunities and challenges for potential private operators. The world-famous DHR has a very powerful 'brand image' and there is undoubted potential for increasing the volume and quality of the services on offer in this most scenic part of north-east India.

In addition, the large DHR work force will seek reassurances about any future changes to their terms and conditions of service. The discretion of the private operator to decide the level of fares would also need to be carefully determined. Finally, any revised organisational structure would need to be considered by and agreed with UNESCO so that the DHR's invaluable World Heritage Site listing is maintained.

Against this background the DHRS is keen to bring its long and deep involvement with the DHR to bear as the specific proposals are developed. Indian Railways is fully aware of our wish to be part of the dialogue with other key stakeholders, such as Indian Tourism and local organisations which will determine the future of the DHR.

Further Information

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Formed in 1997 the DHRS has over 600 members worldwide. It publishes a wide range of books, DVDs and publications about the DHR and has a uniquely comprehensive and rapidly expanding photo archive. Its long-established associated travel company Darjeeling Tours Ltd (www.darjeelingtours.co.uk) offers a wide range of rail-based tours to India and other destinations.