

Black beauties fire up India's railway tourism

REUTERS, New Delhi

The pounding of pistons, the rhythmic chuff of a locomotive and storybook names such as "Fairy Queen" are all part of the allure of India's old-fashioned steam railways, which once tied together this vast nation.

Now, heritage train aficionados are turning their passion towards the foreign tourist market, hoping for even more attention -- and preservation -- for the "Iron Ladies" they love.

"Steam heritage tourism is a potential tourism sector for the country," said Ashwani Lohani, Divisional Railway Manager, Delhi, Indian Railways.

"The presence of raw fire that fires raw power in the belly of steam locomotives attracts tourists, and the unique sound, the rocking gait, the shrill whistle, the throbbing body and an open design... are features that impart an irresistible charm to these black beauties," he added.

Lohani, once director of India's National Rail Museum and who piloted the historic run of the Fairy Queen, an 1855 steam locomotive recognised by Guinness World Records as the world's oldest working locomotive, is hardly alone in this passion.

There are several fan clubs on social networking websites, as well as magazines and blogs about travel to unusual places.

Others pour their hearts into fashioning model trains or dreaming about doing so. A museum dedicated to train

miniatures in the western city of Pune has over 400 working model trains which draw more than 500 people every week.

"There are people who come to purchase these models and stock them in their drawing rooms and there are those who just admire them but can't afford to buy them because of their price, which vary from \$100 to \$300," said Ravi Joshi, who runs the museum.

Now, with a growing number of foreign visitors coming for vacations and even weddings in India, tour operators are hoping to cash in on increasingly broad interest.

"There was a time when foreign travellers will be interested to travel only by luxury tourist trains of India such as Palace on Wheels," said Ashok Sharma at travel firm Real India Journeys.

"Now there are hard-line steam railway travellers and photographers who come in huge groups every week. We refer to them as 'narrow-gauged' or 'single-tracked'."

Some 80 foreign tourists rode the Fairy Queen during its last season of roughly 12 to 14 runs, while more than 1,200 visited the National Rail Museum from October to December last year.

Yet despite growing interest, train enthusiasts feel efforts towards preservation have been few and far between after a noticeable decline in the number of steam trains two decades ago.



REUTERS

The Fairy Queen engine, the world's oldest working locomotive, is pictured at a railway platform in Rajasthan March 28, 2010.

"Many countries, especially the UK, retained a sizable number of steam locomotives, primarily for the twin causes of heritage and tourism. India also could have retained more of steam than what it has," said Lohani from Indian Railways.

Looking to the future, the Indian Steam Railway Society,

established in 1999, has earmarked 53 routes for steam heritage train journeys in India. Many of the journeys include scenic train routes such as Darjeeling, Nilgiri and India's erstwhile hill capital of Shimla, all likely to be popular with tourists.

Enthusiasts notched one

victory last year when the sprawling Rewari Steam Locomotive Shed, India's only remaining locomotive shed, was transformed into a tourist spot with attractions that include nine working locomotives.

Fans, of course, are thrilled. "We were surprised when an

engineer in the shed came to us and said, 'let me fire up a steam loco for you guys.' The placard on the train said 'Rewari Queen'."

There was a feeling of awe that rocked me as I watched the Iron Lady take her mighty steps."



AFP

President of Nippon Steel Shoji Muneoka (L) shakes hands with President of rival steelmaker Sumitomo Metal Industries' Hiroshi Tomono (R) during a press conference in Tokyo yesterday. The two steelmakers said they would work towards a merger that would create the world's second-largest steel firm.

Unilever 4th quarter profit rises 15pc

AP, Amsterdam

Unilever NV, maker of consumer products such as Dove soaps, Lipton teas and Ben & Jerry's ice cream, said Thursday its fourth quarter earnings rose 15 percent on strong sales growth in emerging markets -- though margins suffered slightly from rising commodity costs.

Net profit was \$955 million (\$1.32 billion), up from \$831 million. Sales rose 12 percent to \$10.8 billion.

The world's third-largest consumer products maker said underlying margins slipped by 0.2 percent, as it was unable to fully pass on rising commodities costs to consumers. With sales prices flat, increased raw materials costs outweighed savings from restructuring and cuts on advertising.

The company's earnings gains came "despite the intense competition and the return of commodity cost volatility," said Chief Executive Paul Polman. He noted consumer confidence remains low in "many markets."

Shares rose 0.7 percent to euro22.255

in early Amsterdam trading.

"Unilever's Q4 results saw sales growth come in above the top of the range of expectations," said analyst Graham Jones at Panmure Gordon & Co. in a note on the earnings.

He said the fall in margins "will be an issue for skeptics" but the most important thing was Polman's statement that the company can win market share and improve its margins in the medium term.

"While the trading environment is undoubtedly tough...we believe Unilever is well placed to withstand the pressures, and as such believe the shares present an excellent buying opportunity," he said.

In a less upbeat comment, Britain's Investec Bank said it will likely adjust its forecasts for the company's shares performance downward.

"With Unilever struggling for margin in the face of what we think are only the foothills of input cost inflation, we expect even bigger challenges when it faces the peaks to come" later this year, the bank's analysts said in a post-earnings note.

Welcome to BURK

AFP, Moscow

You may not have heard of it and the acronym may sound a touch odd, but analysts at Russia's largest bank are convinced a new economic power is rising in Europe -- BURK.

Russia's Sberbank has coined the acronym for Belarus, Ukraine, Russia and Kazakhstan (BURK) to put the most dynamic ex-Soviet economies into a group similar to the BRIC union of Brazil, Russia, India and China.

BURK's combined markets may account for little more than three percent of the world's gross domestic product.

But analysts at the state-run institution have officially adopted the term to describe a region that shares similar problems and could follow the same prescriptions to achieve growth on a par with China and Brazil.

The vast savings bank this week issued a novel report entitled "The BURK Countries. 2010 Results and 2011 Prospects."

The report's authors -- including the bank's Macroeconomic Research Centre Director Ksenya Yudayeva -- conceded that their term may not have the same ring as the BRIC acronym coined a decade ago by an analyst at Goldman Sachs.

But they brushed aside snickering comments and argued that the English word actually means "a very firm lump of solid ore."

"By this, we mean to say that we do not expect the necessary reforms in these four countries to follow a smooth course," said the study.

Murdoch launches iPad newspaper The Daily

AFP, New York

News Corp.'s Rupert Murdoch on Wednesday launched "The Daily," a digital newspaper created for Apple's iPad, in the latest move in his drive to get consumers to pay for news online.

"New times demand new journalism," the 79-year-old News Corp. chairman and chief executive said as he took the wraps off the hotly awaited publication at a press event at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Murdoch, an enthusiastic fan of the iPad, said there will be no print version of The Daily and it will only be available on Apple's touchscreen tablet computer for at least this year.

The Daily will be sold through Apple's App Store and iTunes and cost 99 cents a week or \$39.99 a year. News Corp. will get 70 cents from each weekly subscription with Apple pocketing the rest.

Murdoch, who was joined on stage by Eddy Cue, vice president of Internet Services at iPad maker Apple, praised the iPad as an "incredible new platform" and said The Daily would provide a "fresh new voice."

The Daily would combine the latest technology with "shoe leather reporting, good editing and a skeptical eye," he said. "The Daily will be the model of how stories are told and consumed in this digital age."

Asked later by his Fox Business Network about The Daily's editorial stance, Murdoch said it will be a "very patriotic American newspaper that believes in free thinking and free markets and freedom for everybody."

He said he would consider it a success "when we sell millions." "Our ambitions are very big, but our costs are very low," he said, adding that News Corp. had spent around \$30 million developing the publication.

Without the need for news print,



AFP

The new online newspaper for the Apple iPad called The Daily is launched by the editor Jesse Angelo (R) and Jon Miller, chairman of Digital Media Group on Wednesday at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.

printing presses or trucks, Murdoch said operating costs for The Daily would run about half a million dollars a week.

He said the publication will eventually be available on other tablets.

"We expect to be on all major tablets. But we believe that this year and maybe next year really belong to Apple," he said.

In the Fox interview, Murdoch said "everybody in America who can afford one is going to buy a tablet" and "there will be well over a billion around the world" eventually.

The Daily, which has hired a staff of about 100 people from the New Yorker, Forbes, the New York Post and other publications, will arrive on a subscriber's iPad every morning and be updated during the day.

"This is not a once-a-day static product," editor-in-chief Jesse Angelo said. "We can drop in a new page any time."

The Daily's first edition featured a front page picture of a demonstrator in Egypt and the headline "Falling Pharaoh," an interview with former White House budget director

Google plays catch-up with Apple in tablets

REUTERS, Mountain View

Google Inc has fixed some shortcomings in its tablet computer strategy, as the Internet search giant steps up efforts to break into a nascent market dominated by Apple.

Google showcased on Wednesday the first version of its Android software designed to run on tablets with larger screens and greater computing horsepower, allowing for a sleeker and theoretically faster interface with built-in video conferencing.

The company also introduced a new way for developers to make money by building applications that run on Android.

The changes ratchet up the competition in the fast-growing tablet PC market, for which Hewlett-Packard and Microsoft are also developing rival software.

Analysts said "Honeycomb", while addressing a couple perceived flaws in the operating system when used for tablets as opposed to smartphones, was unlikely to immediately shift the balance of power.

"It closed the gap quite a bit," said BGC analyst Colin Gillis. But, he said "there was nothing there that was going to make me wait in line overnight," referring to the lines of customers who waited outside retail stores when Apple introduced the iPad in April.