



1 TIGHT SQUEEZE On the train to Mombasa, Kenya, 'upper-class' accommodations include Pullman beds for the overnight ride. A first-class cabin (two beds) costs US\$50 per person. Dinner and breakfast are included.



2 VACATION British tourists wait at the station in Nairobi for the train. First-class passengers board their cars from the platform, while third-class passengers jump onto the tracks to scramble aboard. The green bags hold bedding for first-class cabins.



RICH CLABAUGH/STAFF



5 CHEAP SEATS Most Kenyans ride in third-class cars at the front of the train. They sit or sleep on iron-framed bench seats. Some stick their heads out the window for fresh air as the train rolls through Tsavo East National Park.



3 ARRIVAL A conductor rides at the front of the locomotive as it pulls into Nairobi at sunset.

4 OLD LINE, NEWER TRAIN Law student Kevin Mutua and Linda Mwijali, who studies nursing, ride a commuter train that runs on the same tracks as the colonial-era railway. They are on their way home, on the outskirts of Nairobi.



6 TRACKSIDE SCENE Women, seen from the train, walk along the tracks toward the Nairobi station. They carry bundles of clothing they plan to sell in Mombasa. Small-time merchants pack third-class cars with bags of charcoal, vegetables, and other goods to sell at either destination.

PHOTOS AND STORY BY JACOB KUSHNER / CONTRIBUTOR

Rolling history

NAIROBI, KENYA – At the end of the workday, businessmen in suits join schoolboys in uniform as they rush toward the station to board commuter trains. Tourists, small-time merchants, and others join them on the platform for a different kind of trip: the ancient line that connects Kenya's capital to the Port of Mombasa.

Construction of the railway began in 1896 to carry freight and passengers to the coast and back. The journey has changed little in the century since. Normally 15 hours long, the 330-mile overnight trip often stretches to 24 hours, as passenger trains must pull onto sidings and wait for freight trains to pass. The rail gauge is so narrow that the cars bobble from side to side, and up and down, as the train crawls down the track. It was once known as the "lunatic line" for all its derailments and mishaps.

Most Kenyans sit on benches in decrepit "lower-class" cars at the front. In the "upper-class" cars, tourists sleep on Pullman beds. Their children run up and down aisles so narrow that adults must traverse them sideways. Uniformed waiters serve Kenyan and British dishes on white tablecloths in a midcentury dining car.

These will be among the last passengers. Last April, Kenya's government announced that a Chinese company will replace the historical railway with a faster, wider, modern one. The \$3.8 billion venture will be one of the largest infrastructure projects in Kenya's history and will eventually run all the way to Kampala, Uganda. Across the continent, Chinese companies are modernizing old roads and railways using loans from state banks that African governments must repay. The huge projects are helping to sustain the rapid growth of nations such as Kenya.

It may be a small price to pay for progress, but the replacement of this historical line will mean the end of a charming train trip.