

In the beginning was the train

Shortly after Belgium became independent, its young constitutional monarchy was compared with a gold coin.

On one side, democratic freedoms were symbolised by the Congress Column topped with the protective figure of King Leopold I.

On the other side, freedom of enterprise and movement were represented by a steam engine, a means of transport revolutionary for its time and that brought progress to the citizens. Leopold I was the first Head of State in the world to travel by train. He worked hard to ensure that Belgium developed a rail network which would place it among the world's premier industrial nations of the 19th and 20th centuries.

From its inception to the present day, the Belgian Royal Family has always maintained a close connection with the railways.

For this reason, Train World and NMBS/SNCB have organised a temporary exhibition and published a reference book to highlight the exciting and largely unknown history of our Royal Family's relationship with the railways.

This exhibition could not have come into being without the indispensable support of His Majesty King Philippe as well as the various departments of the Royal Palace and the Royal Organisation Dynasty and Cultural Heritage. Our most heartfelt thanks.

The Louise-Marie, the royal berline with seven windows, 1855

The design and shape of the first railway berlines were inspired by horse-drawn carriages.

This gala carriage is mounted on eight springs and was made in 1855 at the Jones Brothers workshop in Laeken. It was given the first name of the first Queen of Belgium, Louise-Marie. Together with the Marie-Henriette, it was the only Belgian Court berline with seven windows and eight finials.

This vehicle was used on many official occasions, for instance the wedding of Princess Astrid with Prince Leopold on 10 November 1926.

TALKING HEADS 1 & 2

Leopold I promoter of the railways

Ever mindful of the importance of exports for the young Belgian nation, Leopold I became an ardent proponent of the project to link Antwerp and Cologne by rail. To ensure the shortest possible rail connection between the Scheldt and the Rhine, the king sought, in vain, to use his influence to keep what is now the Dutch province of Limburg under Belgian sovereignty. The Antwerp – Cologne line was in the end to run through Liège and Verviers.

On 5 May 1835, Leopold I in attendance for the inauguration of the first public railway line built on the European continent, between Brussels and Mechlin. He wrote to his niece, who was later to become Queen Victoria: I have seldom been witness to something more grandiose or more striking. The king was to become the world's first head of state to make a journey by train on 16 April 1836.

Leopold I inaugurated most of the nineteen stations and the lines forming the network built by the Belgian state during his reign. This network comprised two routes: a north-south route from Antwerp to the French border and a second, east-west route from Ostend to the German border. The king was an avid train user. He was the world's first sovereign to have his own carriage, as early as 1836, and to cross a border by train when he travelled to Lille, France, in 1842.

Robert Stephenson and his father George, the inventor of the modern day train, were hired as advisers during the building of the first lines in Belgium. They attended the inauguration of the Brussels – Mechlin line on 5 May 1835. The first five locomotives that ran in Belgium came from Robert's English engine works. The latter was often to return to Belgium, especially in 1837 to operate the royal train belonging to Leopold I for the inauguration of the line to Ghent.

The Belgian example

Leopold I was Queen Victoria's uncle, she reigned over Great Britain from 1837 to 1901. He maintained a regular correspondence with his niece throughout his life. The king played an important part in the meeting between Victoria and her husband to be, Albert of Saxe-Cobourg and Gotha.

Albert, the nephew of the King of the Belgians, discovered the comfort of travel by rail aboard the royal train belonging to Leopold I. It was thanks to Albert that Victoria in turn discovered the train.

Leopold's wife, Louise-Marie, is the daughter of the King of the French, Louis-Philippe. His mother, Queen Maria Amalia, discovered train travel in Belgium when Leopold I first travelled by rail in 1836. The Belgian sovereigns were then to serve as go betweens in reconciling the two enemies that were France and England. Hence, Leopold I was the instigator of Victoria's visit to France. Her meeting with Louis-Philippe, in the presence of the Belgian sovereigns, led to Franco-British reconciliation.

In September 1843, Queen Victoria visited Belgium. She discovered the comfort of the new train belonging to Leopold I complete with a carriage equipped with toilets since 1841. This same carriage so impressed the King of Prussia that Frederick William asked the King for a set of drawings for this carriage so that he could have an identical one built in his own country. Queen Victoria travelled on-board this train during her entire visit to Belgium, from Ostend to Bruges, Ghent, Brussels and Antwerp. In all, an impressive 800 km journey by train.

Victoria is delighted with her travels, so deliciously made by railway, so quickly and easily, and by the enthusiastic welcome from the Belgian population. The railway protocol for her official visit set a standard. Stations that the royal train passes are decorated with flags and standards. At the stops, the troops provide full military honours complete with gun shots followed by music played by the band. Receptions, official dinners and popular celebrations are also part of the schedule during these travels.

Leopold II's attraction for trains

Right from childhood, Leopold II was used to travelling by train. Prior to his accession to the throne in 1865, he travelled through Europe by rail and even beyond, to Turkey and Egypt. The future king used the excuse of an invitation to inaugurate the first rail line in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to justify a long trip taking him to India and China. He showed a special interest in the railway's role in driving economic development.

Once on the throne, Leopold II was obliged to limit his travel to Europe. He often travelled to France using his personal train and made a habit of working while aboard. In Belgium, he inaugurated train stations and took many initiatives in favour of the Belgian railway industry. His intervention was a decisive one in the negotiations with the representative of the Empress of China when Belgium was seeking to secure the contract to build the first major railway line in the Middle Kingdom, between Peking and Hankou (now known as Beijing and Wuhan respectively).

In 1876, Leopold II became one of the major investors in Compagnie Internationales des Wagons-Lits, the sleeper car company founded by Georges Nagelmackers from Liege. The king was an enthusiastic visitor of the international exhibitions, held amongst other locations, in Belgium. He invited foreign visitors and initiated projects to transform his palaces and castles so that international conferences could be held there. In this context, he planned to link his royal residences to the railway network.

Technological progress in trains brought Leopold II to renew his royal coaches on a number of occasions. At the end of the nineteenth century, Compagnie Internationales des Wagons-Lits et Grands Express developed a new generation of trains offering unrivalled comfort.

Leopold II first rented sleeper cars from this company, for his personal travels, before ordering the construction of a new royal coach from them in 1901.

The round the world travels by Albert I and Elisabeth

Future King Albert I was a regular train traveller. He visited the Alps and Southern Europe. At age 23, he travelled to the United States for three months. It was by train that he discovered this immense country, crossing it from east to west before returning to New York. At the request of his uncle Leopold II, he met American railway tycoons to determine whether they were interested in investing with Belgium, outside of the United States.

After their wedding in 1900, Albert I and Elisabeth discovered a shared passion for travel and photography. The couple made numerous journeys by train, notably taking them to Central Europe and to France. Albert also represented his uncle during official ceremonies away from Belgium, like the coronation of Czar Nicolas II and for the inaugurations of stations or when important visitors came to Belgium.

After his coronation in 1909, Albert I multiplied his official visits abroad, amongst other reasons to stress Belgium's neutrality to its powerful and war-minded neighbours. He was not however able to avoid Belgium becoming involved in World War One. Resisting on the banks of the Yser river with his troops, the Knight-King was the incarnation of the Belgians holding out against the enemy. After the war, he was strongly committed to the creation in 1926 of SNCB the National Railway Company of Belgium, successor to the Belgian State Railways.

Post war, the Belgian sovereigns made official visits to the United States, Brazil and India. They made numerous trips by train and were welcomed everywhere with much enthusiasm thanks to their heroic conduct during World War One. Egypt was one of the favourite destinations of Albert and Elisabeth. Albert was also to visit the Belgian Congo on two occasions.

Elisabeth and Albert I in Egypt

Since her childhood, Queen Elisabeth was fascinated by Egypt, a country she discovered during a first voyage with her aunt, the Empress Sissi. She was later to return with Albert I in 1911. The discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen in the Valley of the Kings, encouraged her to go to Luxor in 1923, so that with her son Leopold, she could attend the opening of the Pharaoh's tomb. After crossing the Mediterranean, Elisabeth and her son Leopold took the train from Alexandria, notably to travel to Luxor. In 1930, the Queen returned once again to Egypt with Albert I for an official visit.

Miniature trains for the little princes

Like many children, the little princes at the Belgian Court received miniature trains as gifts. Among these toys, only the Märklin train set belonging to Prince Charles was retained. It is presented for the first time at Train World after its restoration.

A generation later, in the 1930s, the children of Leopold III, Josephine-Charlotte, Baudouin and Albert, would in turn receive a miniature train layout, a gift from the King of Romania during a visit to Belgium.

And, on a visit to Mechlin in 1938, to attend the procession of Our Lady of Hanswijk, young Prince Baudouin received a model of the *Éléphant*, one of the very first locomotives that ran in Belgium. It was made by the workers of the SNCB central workshops located at Mechlin.

Little princes and trains

Like many children, future king Leopold II was fascinated by trains. His father, King Leopold I expressed his worry in letters that his son did nothing but draw, mainly locomotives with plenty of smoke.

Albert I also drew trains, especially to decorate a Christmas card that he gave to his mother.

Teachers of the future King Leopold III made their lessons more lively ones by using the times and the routes of the trains taken by his parents.

King Philippe, just a few months old, took the train with his parents to return home to Belgium from Rome.

The interest shown by the young princes continues to this day with the visits by the King's children to Train World.

TALKING HEAD 3

Leopold III and the renewal of the Belgian Railways

After World War One, future King Leopold III travelled with his parents to the United States, Brazil and India, where much of the travel took place by train. As he grew older, Leopold stood in for his father on many occasions for railways inaugurations, like the one in 1924 at Ostend, for the ferries operating the route to Great Britain. In 1931, the crown prince attended the opening of Belgium's first electrified railway line brought into service by the private company that operated the line between Brussels and Tervuren.

Despite the economic depression, the 1930s represented a period of renewal for the railways. In 1932, the first multiple unit trains were inaugurated by Leopold and Astrid. Then, three years later, for the hundredth anniversary of the railways, the now Royal couple attended the service introduction of SNCB's first electrified line between Brussels and Antwerp. It was also during the reign of Leopold III that the gigantic works to complete the North-Midi Junction in Brussels restarted.

Since the Middle Ages, a Joyous Entry is a tradition that takes place when a sovereign visits the «capital» cities of their provinces. This tradition, brought back to life by Leopold I, was continued later by his successors. The Belgian public will especially remember the Joyous Entries of the future King Leopold III and his wife Astrid. When Leopold ascended to the throne in 1934, this occasion offered the Royal couple the opportunity to visit the country's main cities once again. The tragic death of Queen Astrid in 1935 was to bring these Joyous Entries to an abrupt end.

During the reign of Leopold III, the wooden royal train, built prior to World War One became outmoded and required replacement. Three new metal carriages destined to be used by the King were ordered by SNCB. These were inaugurated in 1939 when Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands visited Belgium.

The Brussels North-Midi Junction and the Royal Salons

Very soon after the creation of the railway, Brussels replaced Mechlin as the centre of the railway network. Yet, the capital only had two terminal stations: one to the north, the country's largest and the other to the south. Due to increased rail traffic, the government decided in 1903 to start work on a junction through the city linking Brussels-Midi and Brussels-North. It was then that Victor Horta designed the new central station to be located near the Grand-Place, the drawings for which were to evolve over the years.

A half-century after the start of work, the North-Midi Junction and the new Brussels-Central train station were finally inaugurated by King Baudouin on 4 October 1952. Henceforth, the station used to welcome state visits was no longer the old North station that used to be located on Place Rogier, but the Brussels-Central station. Brussels-Midi became the country's largest station.

The three main stations forming the North-Midi Junction were all provided with royal lounges. These serve to receive and welcome visiting dignitaries or as waiting rooms for the royal family. Prior to World War One, a number of stations around the country had a royal lounge. However, with the exception of the Brussels-Central lounge, all of the others are gone.

During the reign of King Baudouin, cars and aeroplanes were more and more often to replace the train for royal travel and during state visits. Yet, until the early 1970s, many distinguished guests, after first landing at Zaventem, were to take the royal train to travel with King Baudouin to Brussels-Central station. This rail link, inaugurated by the King in 1956, was the first one in the world to enter service between a capital city and its airport.

The stations and royal stops

During the reign of Leopold II, a number of projects were studied to link the North and Midi stations together. Some of these plans even called for creating a stop under the Royal Palace or right next to it. This station, located in the heart of the capital city would have been linked to the rail network via a line built towards Brussels-North or Brussels-Luxembourg. One of the most ambitious projects in the 1880s, called for building a monumental station right in the heart of the capital, where the Bozar is now located.

As early as 1841, a stop was created near the Laeken bridge to make it easy to access the train from the King's nearby residence. In 1857, a first station was built on the edge of the Royal domain. This was to be replaced in 1880 by another structure designed by architect Balat. This stop, which still exists today gained listed status in 1996. A number of projects that did not come to fruition were also started, aiming to build a larger station near the canal or the Palace of Laeken.

The construction of the railway through the Lesse valley, via Houyet, was to allow Leopold II to have a stop built in 1891 not far from the Domain of Ardenne, purchased and enlarged by his father. Leopold, who preferred to stay at his own Ciergnon Castle, envisaged transforming this residence into a luxury hotel. In the end, the King was to sell the Domain of Ardenne to Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits.

While in Paris, in 1900, Belgian Edouard Empain was building the electric metropolitan railway, Leopold II decided to link the Palace of Laeken to the railway network by building an electric rail line. The King then asked French architect Charles Girault to build a new wing to add to his palace, under which an underground station would be built. Although partially built, this project was abandoned by Albert I due to its excessive cost.

TALKING HEAD 4

Royal weddings

Trains were to play a leading role in a number of royal weddings. In 1853, Archduchess Maria Henrietta of Austria was chosen by Leopold I to marry Leopold, the heir to the throne.

She travelled to Belgium by train from Vienna. The train stopped at Verviers. There, Maria Henrietta was entrusted to her husband to be at the private residence of the Viscountess of Biolley.

In 1857, the train allowed Maximilian of Austria to travel to Brussels to wed Charlotte, daughter of Leopold I. Maximilian was to go on to become Emperor of Mexico. After the tragic death of her husband, shot by revolutionaries in Mexico, Charlotte, who had lost her reason, was brought back by to Belgium by Queen Maria Henrietta, by train from Trieste where she was living.

The second daughter of Leopold II, Stephanie, was married in 1881 to Archduke Rudolf, Crown Prince of Austria. A special train was chartered for the Belgians who wished to attend the religious ceremony in Vienna.

The marriage of future King Albert I with Elisabeth, in 1900, took place in Munich. Their arrival by train at the Brussels-North station gave rise to an enthusiastic welcome. The same scenes were seen thirty years later with the publicised arrival at Antwerp of Princess Astrid. She then went by train to the capital with Prince Leopold.

In January 1930, the Italian royal train built by Fiat, came to Brussels to collect Princess Marie-José, daughter of Albert I and Elisabeth, to take her and her family to Rome, where she was to marry Crown Prince Umberto of Savoy.

In 1953, it was the turn of Princess Josephine-Charlotte, daughter of Leopold III and Astrid, to bid farewell to Belgium at the Brussels-North station, before travelling by train to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg where she was to marry the Hereditary Grand Duke Jean.

Three Queens carried to their final resting places

Louise-Marie, first Queen of the Belgians, died on 11 October 1850 in Ostend. The next day, the first morning train from the coastal town brought the sad news of this death to the capital. And, it was also by train that the Queen's coffin was brought to Brussels.

Queen Maria Henrietta, wife to Leopold II and who since 1895 resided at Spa, died in the town on 19 September 1902. After an initial funeral service held there, the coffin of the second Queen of the Belgians was carried by special train to Brussels where the official funeral was held.

After the sudden death of Albert I, the last great drama to affect the royal family was the accidental death of Queen Astrid that took place at Küsnacht in Switzerland, on 29 August 1935. A train brought her coffin back to Belgium. All along the route, the funeral procession was saluted in silence. Astrid's coffin was then transferred to the Royal Palace.

TALKING HEAD 5

State visits

Due to the country's privileged geographic location and its advance in the field of railways, Belgium was to occupy a leading place in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Many crowned heads of state came to Belgium to discover the train made available to them by Leopold I. This was especially the case of Queen Victoria who in 1843 made one of the first official visits to our country. Protocol established for this occasion was to serve as the model for other State visits throughout the nineteenth century.

While Leopold II welcomed many heads of state and made numerous official visits abroad, his successor, Albert I, was also to visit many countries, notably travelling to Berlin and Paris. When the German Emperor Wilhelm II and French President Fallières made State visits to our country, the King made sure that these two special guests were treated in exactly the same way, to avoid any talk of favouritism while tensions were running high between Belgium's two main neighbours. After World War One, Albert I welcomed US President Wilson who visited the towns and regions martyred by the German invasion.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Albert I and Leopold III received visits from many heads of state who travelled to Brussels by train. Visitors were ceremoniously welcomed at Brussels-North, then located at Place Rogier, which was at that time, the country's largest train station. Immediately after World War Two, Prince Regent Charles received General De Gaulle and Winston Churchill, who came to celebrate the nation's liberation in Brussels. Both of them travelled to the capital by train where they were welcomed with immense enthusiasm by the population. At the Belgian Parliament, Churchill for the first time mentioned the creation of the United States of Europe.

All of the details relating to the organisation and the times of travel by royal train are detailed in a pink bulletin. Before the inauguration, in 1952, of the North-Midi junction, State visits arrived at Brussels-North. Then it was up to the Station Master to handle protocol and the safety plan. Once the junction entered service, Brussels-Central was to become the station used to welcome State visitors. During King Baudouin's reign, the royal train was notably to carry Queen Elizabeth II in 1966 and President Georges Pompidou, in 1971.

Six preserved royal coaches

Of the vast fleet of coaches built for the Belgian Royal Family since 1836, six of them have been preserved to this day. The first royal train comprised three carriages: a saloon carriage (1901), a restaurant - conference carriage (1905) and a lounge - dining carriage (1912). Back then, the train comprised additional carriages for various purposes, such as embarking horse carriages and their horses. These wooden carriages were painted in the chocolate brown livery of the Belgian State Railways that operated the rail network prior to the founding of SNCB in 1926.

The second royal train was inaugurated in 1939. Built in Mechelen, by the SNCB central workshops, its interior decoration is the work of a number of private companies. Used by Kings Leopold III and Baudouin as well as by the Prince Regent Charles, this train comprises three carriages: a lounge carriage, a dining carriage and a sleeping carriage. These metal carriages were painted in the SNCB green livery.

The last train journey on board the royal train dates back to 1982 when King Baudouin I and Queen Fabiola travelled to the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg on a family visit.

These six royal coaches, restored in 2014, are now retained by the SNCB Historical heritage department. For lack of space, the 1939 sleeping carriage could not be presented at Train World as part of the Royals & Trains exhibition.

Restoring and preserving the royal coaches

Preventive conservation

Over the years, due to often less than ideal storage conditions, damage affected the inside and the outside of the coaches. Most of the damage observed in the royal coaches was caused by the climate, ventilation, pollution, light and maintenance. To stop any more deterioration occurring in the future, we have set out a preventive conservation and management plan. The system of nozzles and pipes that you can see around the royal coaches ensure continuous ventilation and maintain the right humidity level inside these precious coaches.

Newly dressed up outside

To ensure that the three royal coaches, presented for the first time at Train World as part of the Royals & Trains exhibition, look their best, the outside of the 1905 Restaurant - Conference car, the 1912 Saloon - Dining car and the 1939 Restaurant car were fully restored. After in-depth cleaning, the outside paintwork of these coaches was completely renewed.

This work was done by a company called Moyson in collaboration with SNCB's Train World Heritage department.

Interior restoration

The interior restoration of the cars was done in collaboration with the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage.

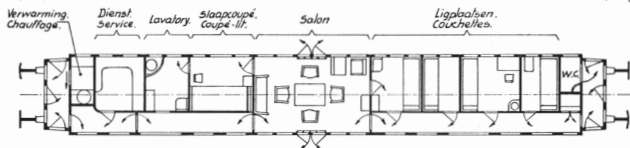
The first work started in 2013. Air circulation was fitted inside the coaches to progressively lower the relative humidity so that the materials and objects inside would have time to adapt.

Once this step was completed, a company called Helicon Conservation Support mechanically removed the different kinds of mould and insects found inside the coaches.

In parallel, restoration work was performed on the paintwork and the wallpaper, while ensuring respect for the historic wear found inside the coaches. Mattresses, carpets and (movable) furniture was further treated against insects and mould by freezing them.

THE ROYAL SALOON CARRIAGE - 1901

This carriage comprises a luxurious private lounge, a sleeping compartment with a wash room for the King and four couchette compartments, a service area and another heating area.



The compartments intended for the King can be accessed directly from the central lounge. Decorations and ornaments in the Art nouveau style embellish the corridors and the sleeping compartments, while the lounge is rather more Louis XVI in style.

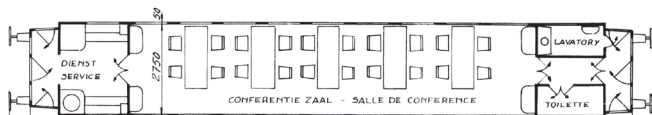
In the lounge, the side panels and furniture are made from polished mahogany. The ceiling comes with a painting on canvas reproducing floral motifs with countryside medallions and allegorical figures. Golden bronze light fixtures with their Venetian glass lampshades are installed to light the ceiling.

This royal saloon carriage was built by Compagnie Générale de Construction at Saint-Denis, near Paris, a subsidiary of Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits.



THE RESTAURANT - CONFERENCE CARRIAGE - 1905

This carriage comprises a large dining and conference room, a service area, a corner washbasin and toilets. The interior is Louis XVI in style. The furniture and the side panels are made from polished mahogany with golden bronze and mother-of-pearl decoration patterns.



The leather-covered seats are embellished with a medallion bearing King Albert I's «A» monogram. The ceiling is covered with a painting on canvas with allegorical figures. The entire carriage is richly decorated with mirrors, curtains and golden bronze chandeliers. This restaurant - conference carriage was built by Belgian manufacturers.

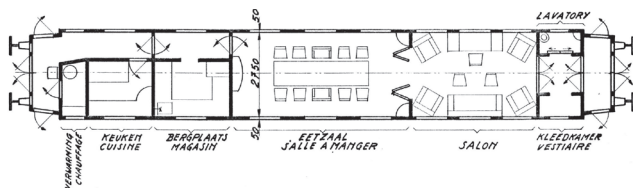


THE LOUNGE - DINING CARRIAGE - 1912

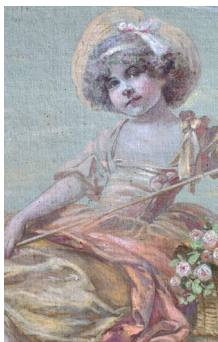


This carriage comprises a luxurious lounge and a small dining room that extend the entire width of the carriage. The two rooms are next to each other. The interior of the lounge is in Art Deco style, while the dining room takes its inspiration from Louis XV.

The dining room furniture is made from solid oak. The lounge furniture is decorated with marquetry made from a number of varieties of wood, ivory, mother-of-pearl, etc. The ceilings of the two compartments have been decorated with paintings on cloth. The entire carriage comes with curtains, ventilation rosettes, radiator covers and bronze light fittings. This lounge - dining carriage was built in Belgium.

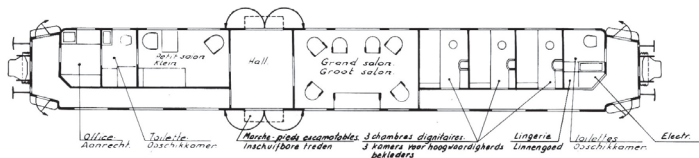


One of the decorative medallions shows a child whose face looks very like that of the young Princess Marie-José, Albert I's daughter.



THE LOUNGE CARRIAGE - 1939

This carriage was normally used by the sovereign. Wide double doors preceded by folding stairs, gave access to the grand entrance hall. On its sides, this carriage bears the amaranth colour coat of arms of the Belgian Royal Family as well as a silver metal crown on each door.



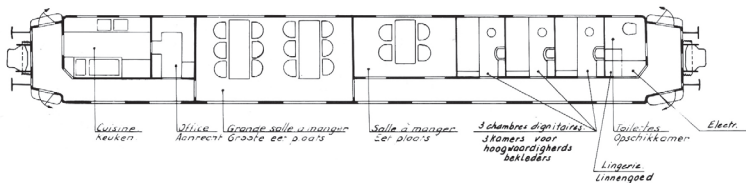
On one side, the hall opens into the grand salon. Furnished with arm chairs, it takes up the entire width of the carriage. Next to the grand salon, three compartments can be found, equipped with a couchette and a wash room. The other end of the hall leads to the King's private office.

The interior decoration calls on plenty of mahogany and other exotic cuts of wood. The private office is lined with walnut panels and linen cloth.



THE DINING CARRIAGE - 1939

This carriage comprises a large and a small dining room, a galley with a pantry, three compartments with couchettes and a wash room. The grand dining room takes up the entire width of the carriage and can seat twelve.



On either side, the room is lined with panels made from tropical wood. The stylised patterns show a woodland scene with an antelope, birds and tropical plants. The brown coloured curtains are made from velvet and silk. The two tables in the grand dining room covered with Caucasian walnut marquetry while the arm chairs are covered with beige pigskin. In the small dining room for four people, two alcoves are covered with golden leather. One of these alcoves is home to a crystal floor standing light.

