

Reintroduction of Passenger Trains on the Mildura Line

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18 May 2009



This paper briefly reviews the feasibility of reintroducing passenger trains on the Mildura line, in light of the recent restoration of the line allowing higher train speeds. The paper considers the issue in comparison to other regional train services reintroduced in Victoria in recent years.

Previous Services

The Mildura line reached Donald in 1882, Woomelang in 1899, and Mildura in October 1903. The official opening of the line took place on 13 November 1903. The line was extended to Merbein on 4th July 1910.

Mildura is 571 rail kilometres from Melbourne via Ballarat; Ballarat is 119 rail km from Melbourne and the rail distance from Ballarat to Mildura is 452 km

For many years, Mildura was served by an overnight train with sleeping cars; from 1957 to 1967, Mildura a day train known as the “Mildura Sunlight” was introduced; this was replaced in 1967 by the reintroduction of overnight services, and these were upgraded as “The Vinelander” in August 1972. The service was withdrawn in September 1993. “The Vinelander” covered the distance in 10 ³/₄ hours, at an average speed of 53 kmh.

Rehabilitation

Prior to the recent rehabilitation, the poor state of the track resulted in severe speed restrictions – to 50 kph between Ballarat and Dunolly; and 60 kph from Birchip to Mildura. These restrictions effectively precluded the return of passenger services owing to train speed not being comparable with the speed offered by highway coaches.

The \$90 million track rehabilitation of the Mildura line, completed in 2009, has restored 80 kph line speed to the Mildura line. The possibility of higher train speeds invites reconsideration of the feasibility of a passenger train service.

Comparison with other V/Line long distance Services

V/line operates several types of country passenger services:

- Commuter trains to non-electrified areas on the fringes of Melbourne, such as Bacchus Marsh, Kyneton, Seymour, Geelong and Stony Point, provided by Sprinter Trains, or locomotive hauled trains of relatively old rolling stock;
- Regional Fast Rail Services to Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong and Traralgon provided on high speed track by V/Locity trains capable of 160 kph over significant sections of their journey;
- Long Distance trains to Warrnambool, Swan Hill, Bairnsdale, and Shepparton (and normally, Albury). These are locomotive hauled and include a buffet car and First Class accommodation in the consist.
 - The following table indicates the average speed of these Long Distance services once they have passed the limits of the Regional Fast Rail Upgrade:

Service (Outer leg)	Distance (km) Outer leg	Minutes For outer leg (Best time)	Average Speed of Fastest Service on outer leg	Distance (whole journey)	Duration of Fastest Service from Melb (minutes)	Av Speed (Whole journey)
Geelong-	195	138	84.78	267	193	83

Warrnambool						
Bendigo-Swan Hill	183	128	85.78	345	259	80
Traralgon-Bairnsdale	117	89	78.88	275	217	76
Ballarat-Mildura (Estimate based on 75 kph average speed)	452	360	75	571	460	75

It will be noted that the average speed of long distance trains is marginally slower on the inner leg of the journey, due to rail congestion around Melbourne and the increased number of stops that are made. However a net journey time of 460 minutes from Melbourne to Mildura appears feasible compared with the 640 minute schedule that applied with speed restrictions in the service withdrawn in 1993. This is a significant change that warrants consideration.

On this basis, allowing a 20 minute stop at Maryborough for tourists to stretch their legs and visit the historic station precinct, an 8 hour train journey from Melbourne to Mildura could be the basis for consideration.

Since the withdrawal of the previous train service, “Great Train Journeys” or rail based tourism has become very significant worldwide. This market could be tapped by a suitably promoted (and named) day train. A day train could be provided using existing V/line long distance rolling stock and would not incur the cost of constructing, converting or refurbishing sleeping cars.

The following schedule is illustrative of what might be reasonable:

					Read Down AM ↓	Read Up
					TUESDAY THURS SAT	SUN WED FRI
Melbourne				dep	9.10	4.05
Ballarat				dep	10.40	2.35
Maryborough				arr	11.35	1.40
					PM	
				dep	12.00	1.15
St Arnaud				dep	1.00	12.15
Birchip					2.15	11.00
Ouyen					3.45	9.30
Red Cliffs				dep	4.55	8.20
Mildura				arr	5.15	8.00
						AM ↑

- In several cases, successful Sprinter or V/locity services have been extended or are to be extended to reintroduce passenger train services to additional regional cities. The three cases are Echuca, Ararat and Maryborough.

While the use of a V/locity train for the Mildura service could be considered, the absence of on-train catering facilities and the extra space provided by long distance locomotive hauled trains probably counts against this option.

Reintroduction of Passenger Services on Ararat, Echuca, Maryborough and Bairnsdale lines

Ararat, Echuca, Maryborough and Bairnsdale are all communities that lost passenger train services during the 1990s, and which have since had their services restored. Mildura and Leongatha are two communities that also lost passenger trains but to which the services have not been restored.

The following are key aspects:

Ararat

Train services to Ararat were restored on 11 July 2004 after a gap of seven years. Today there are three trains each way daily Monday to Saturday, and two on Sunday.

The train service serves Beaufort and Ararat (as well as connecting coach services to Wimmera centres). The services are provided by V/locity trains extended from Ballarat.

The population of Ararat (2006) was 7200 and Beaufort 1100.

Bairnsdale

Passenger train services from Sale to Bairnsdale were reintroduced on 3rd May 2004.

The main population centre served by the reintroduction of this passenger train is Bairnsdale, (population 11500), as well as other coastal and East Gippsland centres served by connecting coaches.

The services are provided by V/Line long-distance trains, which include a buffet car in their consist.

Echuca

Daily passenger trains to Echuca were reintroduced on 18 February 2007 and are provided by V/locity trains extended from Bendigo. A total of 18 services weekly are provided, and the reinstatement of daily trains followed the expenditure of \$10 million in track and level crossing upgrades.

The train services Echuca (population 12358), Elmore (population 900), as well as connecting road coaches to the Riverina.

Maryborough

The Minister for Transport has announced that train services to Maryborough are to be reintroduced in 2010, and that services will be provided by V/locity trains. \$50m has been committed to related upgrades including the provision of new train stabling.

The communities served will be Maryborough (population 7990) and Creswick (population 2500).

Summary of Communities to which Passenger Train Services have been restored:

Community	Date Returned	Train	Population Served	Service Provided
Ararat	11 July 2004		7200	3 trains daily
And Beaufort			1100	
Bairnsdale	3 May 2004		11500	
Echuca			12358	3 trains daily
And Elmore			900	
Maryborough	Planned 2010		7990	
And Creswick			2500	
Mildura	?		58499	
And St Arnaud			2300	
And Ouyen			1400	

Tourist Opportunities

It may be expected that a restored Mildura passenger train would be used both by residents and tourists wishing to visit Mildura and to experience a “great railway journey”. Such trips are widely promoted in all countries, examples being the TranzAlpine express in the South Island of New Zealand, the *Sunlander*, *Indian Pacific* and *Ghan* in Australia and many others. There is no product of this kind currently available in Victoria (other than Puffing Billy and various small ventures such as those at Maldon, Queenscliff, Leongatha and Walhalla, which do not fit this category).

The recent restoration of the Maryborough station provides the opportunity for tourist traveling to and from Mildura to have a mid journey break and to experience and photograph the magnificent restored station, to which Mark Twain, the author of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* referred when he said that Maryborough was “a railway station with town attached”. The station includes a coffee shop and antiques shop and would make a suitable 25 minute stop. The train journey could provide a useful tourist product as well as offering access to Mildura and its attractions.

However the point of arrival at Mildura is critically important. The current consultants’ study is intended to involve the removal of the freight centre and better connections between the City of Mildura and the river front, but it is important that the centrally located passenger station, which is within walking distance of the Grand and Mildura Hotels and Deakin Avenue Motels, is not lost in these changes. Many

cities in North America, including Niagara Falls, have implemented redevelopments resulting in stations being removed from urban centres and have later regretted these decisions.

Concluding Observations

- 1. It is feasible to consider reintroducing a regular passenger train service to Mildura;**
- 2. Mildura is said to be the only significant inland city in Australia without passenger train services, and is significantly larger than the other Victorian regional cities to which passenger train services have been returned;**
- 3. The feasible speeds are consistent with the speeds offered by other V/line long distance passenger trains, as set out in this paper;**
- 4. With current line speed limits, a journey time of around 8 hours is feasible;**
- 5. The service could be provided by standard V/line locomotive hauled long distance trains, some of which are becoming available as V/Locity services increasingly replace them;**
- 6. The service could initially consist of three trains per week in each direction, but with daily trains as a medium term objective;**
- 7. The tourism aspect could be developed by promoting a “great railway journeys” theme, naming the train, and providing a 25-minute stop at Maryborough in which travellers could enjoy the restored station precincts, stretch their legs and have photo opportunities.**
- 8. The possibility of a motorail service could be considered: this is important in view of the significance of “grey nomads” and retired baby boomers in the Australian domestic tourism market;**
- 9. It is vital that redevelopments currently in progress in the Mildura station precinct do not result in the loss of this centrally located terminus for passenger trains and interchange to coach services.**