

IN THIS ISSUE OF IRT NEWS

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- IRT buses arrive in Cape Town

- How broken down buses will be managed

- Why IRT stations are in the middle of the road

IRT BUSES ARRIVE IN CAPE TOWN



Photo: Bruce Sutherland

One of Cape Town's first IRT buses gets tested at the Granger Bay station. In the next weeks the other buses with new branding will be delivered.



Photo: Bruce Sutherland

From left: Andre Frieslaar, infrastructure engineer from IRT consulting engineers HHO Africa, Mayoral Committee Member for Transport Elizabeth Thompson, City of Cape Town IRT Project Manager John Martheze.

The first of the 43 custom-designed buses for the Integrated Rapid Transit (IRT) system have started to arrive in Cape Town.

The buses are being delivered in weekly batches throughout April and May, so that the drivers can start to use their advanced features ahead of the FIFA 2010 World Cup when they will form part of the World Cup 2010 transport service.

The initial order is for eight 18 metre articulated buses, and 35 smaller 12 metre buses. The new buses are supplied by Volvo, with the bodies built by Marcopolo and assembled in Gauteng.

The IRT buses have several features that make them stand out. From the outside, they are distinguished by their high doors, which open a metre above the ground to allow passengers to move straight onto or off the raised platforms of IRT stations. This allows wheelchairs, prams and large numbers of people to move in and out of a bus quickly and easily.

Inside, the most noticeable features are the large, clearly marked areas in front of the doors where seats can be folded away to allow space for wheelchairs, bicycles or baggage. There are also LCD panels and variable messaging boards which will provide information and entertainment to passengers, and the 18 metre vehicles have CCTV cameras set up at intervals to provide security to passengers.

From the moment they arrive in Cape Town, the buses are being used by Volvo to provide intensive training to the 130 drivers who will drive the buses during the World Cup. Former minibus taxi drivers are being retrained as bus drivers in a partnership between the City of Cape Town and an operating company, TransPeninsula, formed by taxi companies whose services within the Inner City will be replaced by the first Phase of IRT.

Training involves getting acquainted with the various features of the buses, including, among other things, high-tech communication systems, synchronised door opening mechanisms and boarding bridges and an ability to 'crouch' down next to pavements when the buses aren't being used with an IRT station. After this drivers need to practise docking the buses against IRT platforms, which will enable seamless passenger movement between buses and station.

Seeing is believing

The first full IRT service will be launched with a trunk route running from the city centre to Blouberg. This route will provide the first full experience of IRT, with dedicated bus lanes and stations running in the middle of the roadway and separated from normal traffic by concrete barriers. As the new infrastructure approaches completion, Capetonians have begun asking questions about the basic design of IRT.

What if a bus breaks down in its dedicated lane?

Unlike cars, IRT buses can easily drive over the concrete delineators separating them from the traffic, because of their large wheels and suspension. They also feature advanced communication systems that will allow the IRT system as a whole to adapt to any circumstances that may arise.

If a bus driver starts having problems they can use an emergency button to immediately inform the IRT's central control room at the Traffic Management Centre in Goodwood. The control room will also

continuously monitor all buses via a GPS tracking system.

Buses that are behind a broken down bus will be able to pass by moving out of the bus lane and into normal traffic lanes across the concrete delineators.

The central control room, which is in constant communication with the bus drivers, will also be able to advise drivers in the event of an obstruction on the route and assist in rerouting them.

Why are the stations in the middle of the road?

Stations in the middle of the road are internationally recognised as the best option for systems like the IRT. This model allows intersecting bus routes to share a station, so that passengers make comfortable transfers without switching platforms. It also saves considerably on infrastructural costs, as a single station can be built, instead of one on each side of the road. There will be pedestrian crossings at every station, so traffic will have to stop for passengers to cross the road to reach the stations. However even if two stations were to be built, one on each side of the roadway, passengers would still have to cross the road on either the outbound or return journey to reach the bus stop.



Photo: Bruce Sutherland

An IRT station nears completion on the West Coast route.