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**Virgin Azuma train debuts in Highlands**

* ***Iconic train passes through one of most scenic routes on UK rail network***
* ***Azuma set to transform cross-border services for five of Scotland’s cities***
* ***£18m investment in Scottish depots by train manufacturer Hitachi***

Virgin’s state-of-the-art Azuma train made its inaugural visit to the Highlands this weekend as preparations to transform cross-border rail services gather pace.

The iconic train, which takes its name from the Japanese word for “east”, will be rolled out on Virgin Trains’ east coast from next year, ushering in a new era of comfort and style for rail passengers.

It passed through some of the most iconic scenery on the UK rail network as it journeyed north of Edinburgh to Inverness on Friday afternoon for the first time, before travelling back to a depot in Doncaster in the early hours of Saturday morning.

The test run by manufacturer Hitachi is part of a programme to prepare Scotland for the 65-strong Azuma fleet. The first of these will enter service in December 2018 as part of a two-year rollout programme, with Azuma services due to operate from five of Scotland’s seven cities from 2019.

The Azuma is set to be one of the most advance passenger trains on the UK rail network, able to accelerate faster than existing trains and providing more comfort and space inside.

Hitachi is building the new trains at their factory in the North East of England (Newton Aycliffe, County Durham), home to 1000 train builders including 50 apprentices.

The firm has invested £18 million to modernise depots at Aberdeen, Inverness and Edinburgh to ensure they are able to service the new fleet, securing long-term engineering jobs at all three locations.

Virgin Trains operates half-hourly services between Edinburgh and London for most of the day, with four additional services running to Aberdeen and one train a day, the Highland Chieftain, serving Stirling, Perth and Inverness.

UK Government Rail Minister Paul Maynard said: “We want to put passengers at the heart of everything we do and the £5.7bn government-led investment in a new fleet of state-of-the-art intercity trains is important step in achieving that. This test run is a key milestone in the introduction of the fleet on the East Coast Main Line and it will mean more space, more comfort and more reliability for passengers up and down the country.”

Humza Yousaf, Minister for Transport and the Islands in Scotland, said: “It is very encouraging to see the new Virgin Azuma train visit Inverness, moving it another step closer to service introduction.  The new fleet will offer cross-border passengers more capacity and the modern facilities we all now demand. The Scottish Government’s £5bn investment in the rail network is making a real difference across the country and I know developments like this make train travel a more attractive choice across the North and East of Scotland. This, in turn, can help drive the modal shift to rail as a regular option we are all keen to see delivered.”

David Horne, Virgin Trains Managing Director on the east coast route, added: “Azuma will bring a new era of style in long distance rail travel and we’re excited to see preparations gather pace that will help transform services for passengers across Scotland.”

Andy Rogers, Programme Director for Hitachi Rail Europe, said: “Our rigorous test programme is moving apace ahead of the trains entering service next year. Over the next twelve months, passengers and enthusiasts will be seeing plenty more of our British-built Azuma trains testing in Scotland.”

**About Virgin Trains**

Stagecoach and Virgin are working in partnership to operate the East Coast and West Coast inter-city routes under the Virgin Trains brand. Together, they are on track to revolutionise rail travel across the UK.

The combined network connects some of the nation’s most iconic destinations including Glasgow, Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leeds, York and London.

Virgin Trains is committed to delivering a high speed, high frequency service, offering shorter journey times, more comfortable travel and excellent customer service. Customers consistently rate Virgin Trains as one of the top long-distance rail franchise operators in the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS) commissioned by industry watchdog, Transport Focus.

On the East Coast route, £140m is being invested to create a more personalised travel experience. We have already invested £21m to completely revamp our existing fleet and customers can now benefit from 48 additional services (25,000 extra seats) per week between Edinburgh and London.

Virgin Azuma will revolutionise travel when it arrives on the east coast mainline from 2018. The fleet of 65 trains will provide an additional 12,200 seats and increase Virgin Trains’ capacity into King’s Cross by 28 per cent during peak time.

The new train reaches 125mph in around 4 minutes 40 seconds, compared with around 5 minutes 40 seconds for our current electric-powered trains and around 11 minutes for our current diesel-powered trains.

There will be new destinations, such as Middlesbrough, and more services connecting Bradford, Harrogate and Lincoln to London. Twenty-two minutes will be sliced off East Coast journeys. London to Edinburgh in just four hours, and London to Leeds in two hours will become the norm throughout the day.

Azuma will take customer experience to a new level and deliver all the comfort and style that Virgin is famous for: ergonomically designed seats throughout; some of the best leg room you’ll find on UK trains; free and faster Wi-Fi\*; power sockets for every seat; superior onboard catering in First and Standard Class, including the Virgin Trains’ Foodbar; and a distinctive Virgin look and feel, inside and out.

Hitachi is building the Azuma fleet in the UK at its purpose built £82million facility in Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, which employs 900 people, including over 50 apprentices.

Azuma is part of a £5.7bn investment by the Department for Transport in new inter-city trains.

\* For customers who book via our website

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