A new era in Territory tourism has begun with the world famous passenger train, The Ghan, beginning its inaugural journey from Adelaide to Darwin Chief Minister and Tourism Minister, Clare Martin, said today.

“Three hundred and twenty excited passengers and forty eager staff have begun this historic journey on the first Ghan from Adelaide, through the Territory, and onto Darwin,” she said.

“Today is the first day of an exciting journey for the passengers but - just as importantly - it’s also the start of a new journey for the NT tourism industry.

“Tourism has been hit hard by events such as September 11, Bali Bombings, SARS and the collapse of Ansett but, with the start of train passengers travelling through the Territory, today marks a new era in tourism.”

Ms Martin said a big crowd was on hand to farewell the first passenger train on a new service that will take tourists - many that would not have normally have visited - through the NT each year.

“The Ghan will bring a new and valuable type of tourist to the Territory where they will holiday and inject millions of dollars into the local economy.”

Ms Martin said that The Ghan could hold up to 600 passengers but would normally host between 400 – 500 people.

“Well over $15 million worth of pre-sale tickets have already been purchased for The Ghan which clearly shows that it has captured the imagination of train lovers and travel buffs,” she said.

“Great Southern Rail, the train’s operator, expect to have an extremely busy first year and the Northern Territory will be the big winner from this.”

Ms Martin said that her Government has allocated an additional $27.5 million to the NT tourism budget and spent almost $8 million building and upgrading passenger terminals in the Territory’s major centres.

“My Government has shown its strong commitment to this passenger service and we are proud to be helping build this new and important era in Territory tourism.”