

# TIME TRAVELLERS

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Manning the platform during a brief stop in Innsbruck, Austria, and (right) valleys fit for the trip.





● ROLL BACK TO THE **GOLDEN AGE OF RAIL**  
ON THE VENICE SIMPLON-ORIENT-EXPRESS.

**BY AARON GULLEY**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN JUDGE





Rail royalty (from left): A VSOE steward, the belle époque Gare de Paris-Est, car number 3483, and a lunch appetizer – asparagus with buffalo mozzarella, chicken oysters, and tomatoes.



**A**T THE GARE DE Paris-Est in the city's tenth arrondissement, a billboard-size mural towering above the bustling platforms depicts formality at the turn of the twentieth century. In *Le départ des poilus*, men dressed in suits, neckties, and fashion collars and ladies wearing long, splendid gowns mill about in front of antique train cars. The scene is a far cry from the station on a recent Sunday, when passengers in sweatshirts and torn jeans glower over the nuisance of travel as they scurry for dingy trains.

But on platform four, a sparkling navy-and-gold train looks as if it steamed in straight from the historic painting. The Venice Simplon-Orient-

Express is en route from London to Venice, following a similar route to the one it has plied since 1906, and I'm on board to discover whether the reality lives up to the myth. This is, after all, the heir to the train that inspired Agatha Christie's famous whodunit, and her tale of murder, celebrity passengers, and being marooned in a locomotive-size snowdrift isn't complete fiction. With fully renovated cars reclaimed from the 1920s, not much has changed since the Orient-Express' glory days – at least not inside the train.

The journey from England to Italy takes nearly 32 hours – about 30 hours longer than a flight. The train pulls out of London at 10:45 AM sharp, and after a fusillade of fine meals and one cabin overnight, passengers arrive in Venice at 6 PM the following day. In this era of FaceTime calls and jumbo jets that whisk you around the globe in half a day, you might wonder, "Why waste the time?"

"It's not so much about point A to point B," says Eleanor Flagler Hardy, one of the country's leading authorities on luxury rail travel. Hardy's Louisville, Kentucky, Virtuoso travel agency is one of the Orient-Express' top bookers, and she and her husband celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary on the route in 2010. "The VSOE is about the beauty of the cars and the history of the train itself. It's about the romance of travel. Riding this train is like going to see a grand, opulent drama, except in this case you get to play a part."

The trip makes a fitting act in the theater of my life, as my wife, Jen Judge, and I were married aboard a historic narrow-gauge railway in Colorado. We liked the metaphor of





## ● THIS TRAIN IS A MONUMENT, AS REGAL AND ARRESTING AS SAINT PAUL'S CATHEDRAL OR THE DOGE'S PALACE.

journeying into a new life together, but we also chose the unusual setting because trains provide retreats where you can relish the time with families and one another. Time seems to elongate when you travel by rail – when else do you have hours or days to stare out the window, to read, to converse, to reflect?

Before our rolling play begins, I happen on the London Transport Museum while wandering the West End and read about the days, before 1900, when most city residents walked everywhere, and only the elite could afford the extravagance of the new train lines. England was the center of the world then, and the country's affluence fueled the popularity of glamorous train travel on the Continent. Against this backdrop, Georges Nagelmackers debuted the idea of sleeper cars and launched the original Orient-Express, which first steamed from Paris to Varna, Bulgaria, in 1883, en route to Istanbul. In 1906,

when the Simplon Tunnel burrowed through the Alps and connected Switzerland to Italy, the Simplon-Orient came into its own.

A journey on the Orient-Express today is a step back into this bygone era of romantic travel, and the immersion begins before the train's first whistle. Our trip starts at the Corinthia London, whose grand facade on the Thames started out as the Métropole over a century ago. Crumpets and cocktails in the hotel's central arcade echo the days when British royals entertained aristocrats and dignitaries here.

On the morning of departure, men walk Victoria Station's Belmond platform in three-piece suits, and women tip porters to tote their Louis Vuitton valises. Belmond's British Pullman, the Simplon's sister train, conveys passengers from London through the English countryside to the Chunnel crossing, where they board the





Formal and fun:  
Cocktail hour in the bar car.

## ● THE ONLY MURDER THAT'S LIKELY ON THIS PASSAGE OF THE ORIENT-EXPRESS, IT SEEMS, IS DEATH BY GLUTTONY.

Orient-Express for the remainder of the trip. Our car, Audrey, was nearly lost in a 1940 air raid, but was later restored and subsequently frequented by members of the royal family. All of the cars on the Pullman and the Orient-Express are steeped in such lore – one commandeered as a brothel during WWII, another used by King Carol to escape Romania when he abdicated – and the histories are inscribed on wood placards in every wagon. Not long after boarding, when a white-gloved steward serves afternoon tea, it's difficult not to feel at least a bit nostalgic. Did Queen Elizabeth take her scones with clotted cream and jam, as my fellow passengers seem to prefer? And which of the finger sandwiches did the Duke of Edinburgh, Charles de Gaulle, and Nikita Khrushchev opt for: egg salad, watercress and goat cheese, cucumber, or salmon and crème fraîche?

After we transfer from the British Pullman, our Orient-Express steward, a spry, balding thirtysomething Italian named David, relays the train's history while showing us our cabin. Built in 1929, car number 3483, like the rest of the train's, has been restored

to the art deco finery of the day – including its shared bathroom. (There's no shower or bath, which is why multinight routes include hotel stays.) Everything in the 36-square-foot cabin, including a small cabinet that conceals a dainty porcelain sink, is finished in lacquer and mahogany marquetry, inlaid with pastel floral arrangements. A brass reading lamp sits beside a floral velvet couch that transforms into two bunks at night. Velvet hangers dangle from the chrome luggage rack. The space is cozy, but it's big enough for two people to stretch out and move around without feeling claustrophobic; you can double your space to have a sitting room and a bedroom by booking a suite. From the blown-glass lampshades to the hand-carved wood knob on the window crank and the weight of the fabric blinds, the space feels substantial and precious. This train is a monument, as regal and arresting as Saint Paul's Cathedral or the Doge's Palace.

Outside, northern France's golden rape-seed fields give way to hillsides dotted with cathedrals like amulets. Eventually they yield to high mountains ribbed in limestone

and crests of snow. As we plow south, Jen snaps pictures of the shifting landscape through the cabin's wall-size window and ends up with more than one of onlookers outside taking photos of the train. At the occasional stop, travelers swarm the Express for pictures with its sparkling cars and stewards in their crisp, royal blue uniforms who post up at doorways, erect as soldiers. Judging by these flattering responses, the Orient-Express continues to inspire today as it did a century ago.

"People don't enjoy *traveling* anymore," says Bruno Janssens, the Orient-Express' senior train manager, regarding transit's crowds and delays. "Here, I want people to forget their watches and enjoy their time. The world could collapse during this train ride, and, if it's up to me, you wouldn't know it until you arrive."

Eight hours into the journey, I haven't left our cabin and it feels like only an hour has passed. I sit quietly, occasionally page through a book, sip the Champagne David fetched, and study the changing countryside, appreciating how trains connect us





Wide-screen motion pictures, complimentary with every cabin.

## tip

"On the British Pullman, make sure to check out the bathrooms in each car: Every floor is tiled with a different Greek myth. It's just one reason I highly recommend a VSOE route that starts or ends in London."

— Eleanor Flagler Hardy,  
travel advisor, Louisville,  
Kentucky

with the travel experience by placing us in landscapes as we move through them.

**MEALTIME ON THE TRAIN IS AN** almost constant affair. At dinner, passengers select one of two seatings in a trio of exquisite dining cars for the likes of red mullet and sea bass in fennel fondue, Mont Saint-Michel rack of lamb, or pan-fried John Dory with smoke-cured pork. The formal dress code, which seemed like a grand idea earlier, now worries me as lunch, afternoon tea, and now this threaten to blow out a suit button. The only murder that's likely on this passage of the Orient-Express, it seems, is death by gluttony.

While we're at dinner, David transforms our cabin into a cozy nest, turning up the coal-fired heating system and laying a robe and slippers on the made-up bunk. It's a signal that it's time for one of the trip's singular experiences, a nightcap in the bar car. In spite of the late hour, passengers with martinis and Manhattans occupy nearly »

## ● ALL ABOARD

**A classic plan for the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, plus top rail journeys in Canada and South Africa.**

**STAY** Though it's a large property (294 rooms, including 40 suites and seven penthouses), the **Corinthia London** feels like a boutique hotel, with an intimate lobby lounge for cocktails and rendezvous and curated art throughout. Its Northall Restaurant serves modern renditions of British classics, and the massive ESPA Life spa is a marble-and-glass sanctuary from the city. *Doubles from \$630, including breakfast and a \$130 hotel credit.*

More striking than ever following its recent renovation, **The Gritti Palace, Venice** is filled with lush, Renaissance-style paintings and gilded antiques, and many of its 82 rooms have lavish Rubelli upholstery wall coverings. The hotel fronts the Grand Canal for easy water-taxi access, and its sunny patio is the perfect spot for savoring *cicchetti* (Venetian small plates such as soft-shell crab or prawns and polenta)

with a prosecco spritz. *Doubles from \$1,135, including breakfast and a \$100 dining credit.*

**GO** London to Venice is perhaps the most classic route traveled by **Belmond's Venice Simplon-Orient-Express**, but the train also operates on its original itinerary from Paris to Istanbul. The five-night journey, with overnights alternating between the train and Belmond's five-star properties in Budapest and Bucharest, is extremely popular and can book out a year or more in advance. *London to Venice departs: Multiple dates through November 5; from \$3,230.*

Africa's most luxurious rail experience, **The Blue Train**, takes in the breadth of South Africa — from Pretoria in the northeast to the southernmost point at Cape Town — in an overnight journey. The train calls at Kimberley for a glimpse at the

country's diamond-mining history and the British colonial village of Matjiesfontein, a National Heritage site. In 2016, it adds a unique take on safaris with an overnight journey to Kruger National Park. *Departures: Multiple dates through December 23; from \$1,470.*

Take in the Pacific Northwest and Canadian Rockies aboard the **Rocky Mountaineer's** glass-domed cars, with white-linen dining service and conductors who slow the train for wildlife sightings. Travelers sleep in hotels rather than on board, meaning all travel is during daylight hours so you don't miss anything. The latest eight-day itinerary links Seattle to Calgary by way of Vancouver, Lake Louise, and Banff, including a foray into the temperate Coast Mountains and a helicopter tour over the peaks. *Departures: Multiple dates through September 19; from \$4,079.*