

Luxury on the Orient Express: The ultimate train experience

By Paul Sussman for CNN

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The Orient Express is the last word in luxury train travel

LONDON, England (CNN) -- It may not be the longest train journey in the world, a record currently held by the 9,288.2 km (5,787 miles) Trans-Siberian Railway.

Nor is it the most strikingly scenic: The Glacier Express in Switzerland, and Vietnam's Reunification Express both offer views -- of mountains and jungle respectively -- that make most other train routes look positively mundane.

Nor is it even the world's most exclusive rail experience -- with a maximum of 22 passengers per trip, touring France in the über-chic Palladium probably deserves that title.

For sheer luxury, character, panache and historical resonance, however, no train journey on earth can quite match a trip aboard the legendary Orient Express, a locomotive that justifiably bears the nickname "King of Trains."

"It is quite simply the ultimate luxury train experience," says UK rail expert Mark Smith.

"It is that unique combination of classic hotel standards on board a beautifully restored vintage train.

"Traveling on it is unforgettable, a rail-lover's dream. It totally lives up to all your expectations."

Nick Pigott, editor of Railway Magazine, agrees.

"It has a cachet attached to it," he explains, "A sense of history and romance that still lingers even in this cynical day and age.

"Its name has become a byword for luxury and intrigue and adventure."

Unique throwback

The Venice Simplon Orient Express (VSOE) to give it its full title is, confusingly, not the only train to be called "Orient Express."



The train passes through some of Europe's most beautiful scenery

There is also a standard daily 'Orient Express' rail service between Paris and Vienna; A "Nostalgic Orient Express" running sporadically from Zurich to Istanbul and Athens; and luxury 'Orient Express' trains in, respectively, America and China.

Nor, strictly, is the VSOE the direct descendant of the very first "Express d'Orient" that left Paris on October 4, 1883 bound for Istanbul.

That honor goes to the aforementioned standard service which, although it comprises modern rolling stock and now only travels as far as Vienna, nonetheless boasts an unbroken line of timetable lineage all the way back to that original 19th century locomotive.

If it lacks an absolutely perfect historical pedigree, however, and has to share its name with several other services, the VSOE is nonetheless, in character at least, unarguably the true heir to the heyday of luxury train travel, a unique throwback to a lost age of opulent sleeping compartments, cordon bleu dining cars, immaculately uniformed staff and titled clientele.

A private venture owned and operated by Orient-Express Hotels, Trains and Cruises, the VSOE has been running once weekly from London to Venice and back since 1982 (the original luxury Orient Express service petered out in the 1960s).

The journey actually involves two separate trains, each made up of restored vintage carriages from the 1920s and 1930s.

The first leg takes passengers from London's Victoria Station to Folkestone aboard a train made up of traditional British Pullman carriages.

At Folkestone they transfer through the Channel Tunnel on a luxury motor coach before boarding the second train -- the VSOE proper -- which carries them through France, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria and north-east Italy before terminating in Venice, a total distance of 1,715 km (1,066 miles).

Jeans not allowed



Passengers travel and sleep in beautifully restored vintage carriages

During the 31-hour journey -- which includes one night on board the train -- passengers have a chance to experience the full opulence and magic of early 20th century first-class rail travel.

Customers are expected to dress elegantly -- jeans and trainers not allowed -- and are tended by over 40 staff, including chefs, waiters and compartment stewards.

"It is a wonderful, relaxing, romantic experience," says Mark Smith. "So much so that my wife and I actually got engaged on board.

"The service, food and atmosphere are everything you could possibly want. Everyone dresses in dinner suits for the evening meal, you go to bed in perfectly restored 1929 Wagons-Lits sleeping cars, and when you wake up in the morning you have coffee and croissants delivered to your apartment while you sit gazing at spectacular Alpine views out of the window.

"It is London to Venice by train in the style to which I would like to become accustomed."

Not surprisingly, this sort of luxury doesn't come cheaply, with a one-way trip costing £1,390 (\$2,440) per person.

According to Nick Pigott, however, the expense only adds to the magic of the journey.

"It maintains the exclusivity of the whole thing," he explains. "It means that those who can afford it are doing something that very few people will get a chance to experience."

Royalty and spies

Just as today there are a number of trains that style themselves "Orient Express," historically there was never a single locomotive that actually bore the name.

"It was always a service, an abstract idea rather than a particular set of rolling-stock," explains Mark Smith.

"In the same way that, for example, you wouldn't have a single unique plane flying what in the timetable appears as BA Flight 123 from London to New York, so the Orient Express service involved many different trains."

That service was initiated by Belgian Georges Nagelmackers, founder of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits.



A poster from the heyday of the Orient Express service

His first "Express d'Orient" left the Gare de Strasbourg in Paris on October 4, 1883, traveling as far as Giurgiu in Romania where passengers were taken across the Danube by ferry, carried onwards to the Black Sea aboard another train before completing the journey to Constantinople (as Istanbul was then known) by ship.

Within six years trains were running direct to Constantinople via Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade and Sofia, while the completion of the Simplon tunnel beneath the Alps in 1906 led to the opening of a second, southerly route via Lausanne, Milan, Venice and Trieste -- locomotives going this way were styled the "Simplon Orient Express."

The next 30 years comprised the heyday of the service, when its trains were used by everyone from royalty to spies, diplomats to millionaire businessmen, and it became immortalized in such literary works as Graham Greene's *Stamboul Train* (1932) and Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). The latter, incidentally, was originally titled *Murder on the Calais Coach*.

The Second World War signaled the beginning of the end for this type of luxury train travel, however, and although various Orient Express services continued in the post-war era they lacked the majesty and mystique of those pre-war journeys.

The luxury sleeper service gradually slipped out of use, and it was only with the inauguration of the VSOE in 1982 -- brainchild of businessman and train lover James Sherwood -- that Europe once again boasted a train experience fit for a king.

Since then the VSOE -- which only runs between March and November -- has carried over 350,000 passengers and covered more than four million kilometers of track. Nelson Mandela, Roman Polanski, Paul Newman and Liza Minelli are just a few of the famous names to have sampled its unique brand of rail travel.

As British journalist Maggie O'Sullivan put it: "It may not go to the Orient or be an express, but this is the last word in luxury train travel."