



Venice Simplon-Orient-Express introduced by Gillian Rhys

HISTORY

The legendary Venice Simplon-Orient-Express recreates all the magic of the golden age of travel. A collection of original 1920s carriages crafted to convey the rich, famous and powerful throughout Europe, it is one of the world's great travel experiences. Each of its 17 carriages was once part of glamorous, historic trains such as Le Train Bleu and the Rome Express—and has its own story to tell.

The advent of air travel saw luxury trains fall from favour — but in 1977 American businessman James B Sherwood (founder of the Belmond portfolio) sensed a renewed appetite for a more elegant style of escape. Encouraged by press interest in antique carriages at a Monte Carlo auction, he snapped up two sleeping cars with a view to launching a fabulous vintage train linking London and Venice. He continued to seek out more, scouring Europe's museums, railway sidings and even private gardens where some lay abandoned or used as fanciful dining rooms. All were lovingly restored to their Art Deco splendour and relaunched as the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express in 1982.

Two sleeping cars, 3543 and 3544, feature interior designs by the renowned designer René Prou. During the Second World War the latter was stored in Limoges, France where it was used as a brothel. Sleeping car 3425 was part of the train on which King Carol of Romania escaped with his mistress in 1940.

The three dining cars have equally intriguing pedigrees. Etoile du Nord, with its beautiful marquetry, once formed part of the Danube Express from Bucharest to Constanza and was later part of the inaugural run of the Rapid King Carol 1 Pullman — a popular service in Romania along the Black Sea. L'Oriental, decorated in black lacquer, was once part of the Cote d'Azur, a train taking the bright young things from Paris to Nice. Dining car 4141 was also part of this glamorous train and later joined the Deauville Express. The carriage boasts panels of classical figures designed by celebrated glass artist René Lalique.

LOCATION

The Venice Simplon-Orient-Express travels through continental Europe; its classic journey is the weekly overnight route to and from London and Venice via Paris, through the Alps and across the Venetian lagoon. The two routes are slightly different, allowing for different views: for London to Venice the train passes through the Gotthard tunnel and for Venice to London it goes through the Arlberg tunnel instead. For the ultimate celebration, passengers can take the London to Venice trip as a return journey.

Each journey brings its own stunning, ever-changing scenery: the Eiffel Tower illuminates the Paris skyline as guests enjoy dinner, while the snow-covered Alps greet them when they awake the following day. En route to Berlin ancient castles crown craggy cliffs as the train passes through the Rhine Gorge.

There are one-night, two-day journeys between some of Europe's most beautiful, historic and romantic cities including Paris, Venice, Prague, Vienna and Budapest.

Four-night, five-day journeys link Venice and Paris with an overnight stay at a Budapest hotel; and Venice to Paris with two-night stays in either Prague or Vienna.

Just once a year the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express makes a five-night journey between Paris and Istanbul. This thrilling journey includes overnight stops in Budapest and Bucharest and daytime halts in Sinaia and Varna for excursions to these fascinating destinations. The train then travels from Istanbul to Venice.

An annual journey between Paris and Berlin was recently launched, linking two of Europe's most dynamic cultural scenes.

THE TRAIN

Passengers are welcomed aboard the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express by white-gloved stewards in blue and gold uniforms who take care of them throughout the trip. They are shown immediately to their exquisite, vintage cabin where their luggage will already be stowed.

The train is made up of the famous sleeping cars, three dining cars, a bar car complete with grand piano and resident pianist, and a boutique. Each carriage features polished wood, beautiful marquetry, plush fabrics and antique details such as candlesticks and hooks to hang pocket watches.

The cabins are single, twin or two can be configured together as a suite. During the daytime a plump sofa lines one of the walls; when passengers return from dinner their cabin steward will have cleverly transformed it into cosy bunk beds with crisp sheets and fine blankets. An upholstered ladder leads to the upper berth. After breakfast, while passengers take a stroll along the train, the steward whisks away the beds to return the cabin to a sitting area.

Cabin Suites are two twin cabins joined together, offering a choice of sitting and sleeping options. Each cabin has a washbasin concealed in a closet, while lavatories are found at the end of each carriage.

PEOPLE

Pascal Deyrolle, General Manager

"I have come full circle," says Pascal Deyrolle who became General Manager of the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express in 2014 "I started as a cabin steward on board in 1992."

"As a steward I enjoyed talking to and looking after my guests," says Pascal. You have a list of tasks to do, it's like running a mini hotel: you handle the luggage, the check in and check out, and the cleaning — but you run your own show."

Within a year he was promoted to head of department; in 1996 he decided to undertake more formal training and left to study hospitality management at Paris's IMHI/ESSEC business school. From there he moved to Australia where he worked on a luxury train for five years. "Then I travelled the world: America, Mexico, Peru, France. And after 25 years, here I am back in Venice, where my office is based," he says. "Now I am on board the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express once a month."

Pascal recalls many favourite moments while travelling on the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express. He describes the snow-covered Dolomites and Alps as "magical!". On the Paris-Istanbul journey the train stops at Varna by the Black Sea and all passengers alight at passport control to cross the Bulgaria-Turkey border. "It's an exciting, social occasion — absolutely my favourite part of the trip," he says. Pascal also mentions the magnificent scenery of the Rhine gorge on the Paris to Berlin journey. Travelling close by the river's edge, the train passes castles perching among vineyards on craggy cliffs, the mysterious Loreley where a temptress

is said to have lured sailors to their deaths and a 15th-century fortress shaped like a ship on an island in mid-stream.

JOURNEYS

The Classic Venice to London Journey

Between March and November the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express travels from London to Venice and back again. For many guests the journey is a once-in-a-lifetime celebration, and the atmosphere fizzes with anticipation and excitement.

On the northbound journey the train departs Venice Santa Lucia station at 11am, crossing the Venetian lagoon then travelling at a leisurely pace through the Dolomites, Austria and Switzerland. The next morning, after breakfast, the train stops at Paris with a chance for passengers to stretch their legs on the platform before continuing to Calais. There they leave the continental Wagons-Lits to complete their journey through the Channel tunnel. Emerging at Folkestone, they board the carriages of the Belmond British Pullman train and travel through Kent to Victoria station, the conclusion of their journey.

Paris to Istanbul

While the trains' shorter journeys have a celebratory feel the six-day journey to Istanbul is all about adventure. As the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express travels towards the edge of Europe passengers stop for overnight stays at hotels in Budapest and Bucharest, with the other nights spent on board.

After crossing the Danube from Romania into Bulgaria the train arrives in Varna, a beach resort town with a surprisingly grand station with a wonderful Art Nouveau roof. Passengers spot the Black Sea and then breathe in the scent of the ocean when they disembark.

The border crossing is a lively experience as the passengers alight to have their passports stamped at the customs booth. They have the chance to chat to one another as well as meeting passers-by who gather to admire the handsome train.

New Route, Paris to Berlin

The Venice Simplon-Orient-Express adds a new route every few years, the most recent being Paris to Berlin. After the train passes from France into Germany it runs through the UNESCO heritage site between Bingen and Koblenz, offering magnificent views of castles on vineyard-terraced cliffs.

An onboard jazz band plays 1920s music, evoking a Berlin cabaret. From 2017 it is planned to route the train so that it arrives through East Berlin and passes the city's major monuments.

FEATURES

Dining

Dining is a highlight of the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express; guests dress in their finery for what are unforgettable occasions. Included in the journey are breakfast and afternoon tea, served in the cabins, and lunch and dinner, taken in one of the three magnificent dining cars. The bar car is abuzz with lively conversation before and after these gastronomic events.

Most of the produce is sourced in Paris or the departure city, with other special ingredients picked up en route. By the time the train arrives at its final destination the pantries are empty and the team start loading up for the following journey.

Executive Chef Christian Bodiguel selects only the finest produce whether it is seafood, meat or vegetables. His team always buy raw, whole fish from trusted fishermen who guarantee that it is sustainably caught.

Bar Cars

The Bar Car keeps humming until the last guest has gone to bed. Built in 1931 as part of France's Sud Express, it was recently refurbished in hues of rich blue and gold.

Head Barman Walter Nisi shakes up exciting cocktails and has created a new caviar menu in collaboration with the renowned producer, Petrossian. Guests can sip Walter's signature Guilty 12 concoction and savour shots of Alverta Royal caviar, caviar cubes and sandwiches of 'papierusse', a wafer-thin sheet of pressed caviar.

Adding further glamour to the train, a Champagne Bar has recently been created in the train's Cote d'Azur dining car. This lavish carriage is decorated with glass panels by renowned artist-craftsman René Lalique — now complemented by gorgeous ice buckets from the company that still bears his name.