

Vintage Romances

Crossing a continent by train evokes the golden age of luxury rail travel. It's a

journey in classic style, where good things take time

TEXT BRIAN BERKMAN AND GENEVIEVE SWART



Passengers witness not only a changing landscape but also the shift from Buddhism to Islam and back to Buddhism again

There was a time when adventurous travellers began their journeys on a platform, watching a train chug into the station, heaving to a halt in a sigh of smoke and steam. Passengers clad in their travel finery milled about as porters wheeled loads of suitcases and guards blew urgent whistles. Carriage doors slammed and the Tannoy announced exotic destinations: 'Platform two for the Orient Express...'

For modern travellers, trains have powerful nostalgic appeal, conjuring up the romance, glamour and opulence of yesteryear's sojourns, when members of a privileged upper class traversed continents in style.

Today, train travel is more about the journey than the destination. It's about slowing down and taking time to enjoy the ride, watching as great deserts or forests flash by, meeting

interesting characters over apéritifs, savouring the finest local cuisine in the dining car, and, of course, enjoying modern luxuries such as en-suite compartments.

Though it's changed its route over the years, the Orient Express may be the most famous train in the world, having achieved celluloid immortality by featuring in both the adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* and James Bond's final showdown in *From Russia with Love*. Other names carving romantic tracks in our collective imagination include South Africa's iconic Blue Train, a five-star moving hotel that has transported kings and presidents, and Rovos Rail, a privately operated service of reconditioned vintage engines and carriages that is capturing a portion of the Blue Train's market share.

For all of today's great train journeys, luxury is key. This is what to expect on five of the best.

PREVIOUS SPREAD
Keeping the romance alive: Rovos Rail's vintage steam engine
ABOVE LEFT The Eastern & Orient Express crosses the River Khwae Yai, famously featured in the World War II novel and film *The Bridge over the River Kwai*
ABOVE RIGHT Twenties chic lives on in the Venice-Simplon Orient Express from London to Venice

1. VENICE-SIMPLON ORIENT EXPRESS (VENICE TO LONDON)

The train that began it all is unchanged since the 1920s, when it was the only luxury railway to traverse the Continent. The route through the Italian Dolomites, Austria and Switzerland to England scores a 10 for nostalgia and romance, but close to zero when it comes to providing basic comforts. Although the VSOE was the first European train to supply soap back in the day, it doesn't provide many amenities expected by modern travellers: passengers have to share one toilet with everyone on their carriage and there's no shower, which means you have to rely on a washbasin (albeit one enclosed in a beautiful walnut cupboard with lovely fluffy embossed towels) for 30 hours.

All cabins are standard and have connecting doors; some passengers book two and use it as a suite when travelling with a partner. Unlike other trains, there is no observation car; the

bar carriage is the place to get to know fellow travellers over cocktails while a piano tinkles in the background.

Meal times are a highlight on the VSOE: there are three sittings of outstanding cuisine – brunch, lunch and dinner – served in three individually styled carriages. Jacket-and-tie or a dinner suit is compulsory for dinner, which means travellers need to plan their carry-on luggage carefully as general luggage travels on a different train. The service at meal times is impeccable, and the opportunity to be surrounded by such beauty – one carriage is decorated by famed Art Deco jewellery designer René Lalique – is rare.

The Channel crossing to England, by underground coach, is unpleasant but smoother and faster than going by ferry. At Folkestone Harbour, the British Pullman is the perfect venue for a spot of afternoon tea before the onward journey to Victoria.

www.orient-express.com

2. EASTERN & ORIENT EXPRESS (SINGAPORE TO BANGKOK)

The Eastern & Orient Express is the first passenger train to link Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. Going from Singapore to Bangkok, passengers witness not only a changing landscape but also the shift from Buddhism to Islam and back to Buddhism again, with shrines in gardens signalling the arrival in Thailand.

The train makes several excursion stops along the way, including at Butterworth, in Malaysia's Penang province, the highlight of which is seeing a school of rickshaw bikes, each with a green Eastern & Orient umbrella, waiting to pick up passengers. There is also a stop right on the Khwae Yai River bridge in Thailand, famously featured in *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, the Pierre Boulle novel about World War II Allied prisoners of war who were forced to build part of this railroad. ▶



ABOVE Luxury travel needs luxury fare: the Blue Train's superb menu is complemented by a selection of top South African wines

Aesthetically, the Eastern & Orient Express is like something from a Merchant-Ivory film, replete with an opulent green and cream exterior and corridors that are all wooden marquetry in Eastern designs. Cabin interiors feature wooden panels in cherry and elm with intricate inlays, while embroidered silk curtains and the Express's signature gold lamp frame the huge window in each cabin.

Unlike its sister train, the Venice-Simplon Orient Express, the Eastern & Orient Express cabins include a shower (better suited to Oriental proportions than chunky Western ones, but a shower nonetheless) and a toilet. There is generally a pianist or a fortune teller to entertain in the lounge car, which is the centre of social life on board and the spot to drink a Singapore Sling, if not taking afternoon tea in your cabin. The on-board cuisine – breakfast, lunch and dinner is served – is of a quality fitting the splendid visual feast the train serves up.

www.orient-express.com

3. THE BLUE TRAIN (CAPE TOWN TO PRETORIA)

Going from Cape Town to Pretoria in 30 hours, the Blue Train remains an icon of luxury rail travel in South Africa. Air-conditioned carriages and sealed windows make this the most silent and cushioned of journeys, with the train going

only 60km per hour during the day to make the most of the views (it picks up speed overnight to reach its destination on time).

Although a taste for animal print is a prerequisite, the Blue Train is otherwise a stylish, walnut-panelled experience. The compartments have either a double bed with a three-quarter-length bath or twin beds and a shower. All are graced by a picture window allowing panoramic views by day and, while crossing the Karoo at night, starlight so bright it shines into the room.

No journey can be called luxurious if it doesn't feed the body as well as the eyes. Meals are a languid affair on the Blue Train thanks to excellent cuisine, complemented by a selection of notable South African wines (such as Meerlust Rubicon and Vin de Constance), which is included in the full board price. A butler per carriage and high levels of service guarantee a relaxing experience.

The southbound trip stops over in Kimberley for a tour of the Big Hole and Diamond Museum, while the northbound journey stops over at Matjiesfontein for a tour on a vintage bus so laden with buffoonery that some may find it excruciating. The Du Toit's Kloof Pass, traversed shortly after leaving Cape Town on the northbound route, is truly breathtaking.

www.bluetrain.co.za ►

All Blue Train cabins are graced by a huge picture window allowing panoramic views by day and, while traversing the Karoo at night, starlight so bright it shines into the room



4. ROVOS RAIL (PRETORIA TO DURBAN)

Entrepreneur Rowan Voss has created a train company that promises – and delivers – a range of sumptuous classic journeys, each starting at the railway line's own historic Capital Hill Station in Pretoria, and ending at Cape Town, Durban, Victoria Falls, George, Dar Es Salaam or Windhoek.

A vintage experience that includes a steam haul whenever possible, the overwhelming sense on a Rovos trip is one of being looked after – from the large plastic goggles with which to look into the oncoming wind to the fact that technology is forbidden in public places, fostering a sense of peace. The open bar and restaurant with high-quality cuisine can, however, lead to overindulgence.

Rovos Rail lives up to its claim as 'The Most Luxurious Train in the World' largely because of the cabin space it offers. In all respects but one (having to keep the tap depressed over a steel basin rather than a ceramic or marble one is a bit tacky), the vintage carriages are comfortable and restful. The train stands still overnight so there is no bumping and creaking to keep light sleepers awake, and there is an open observation car to alleviate any claustrophobic feelings that may arise.

The route from Pretoria to Durban is a three-day journey that begins with polite smiles on departure that transform into pleasant conversation by disembarkation. Two safari excursions are included in the journey. The first, at the edge of the Kruger National Park, offers splendid views of elephants and rhinos splashing about at a water hole. The second is a dawn safari at KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park and is best suited to early risers.

www.rovos.com

5. THE TRANS-SIBERIAN EXPRESS (MOSCOW TO VLADIVOSTOK)

The epic journey from Russia to the Pacific starts at Moscow's Kazansky Station one dark winter evening. The true Trans-Siberian speeds east over the Ural Mountains, across Siberia – its snowy wastelands enlivened only by ghostly silver birches – to Vladivostok, 9 258km and seven days away.

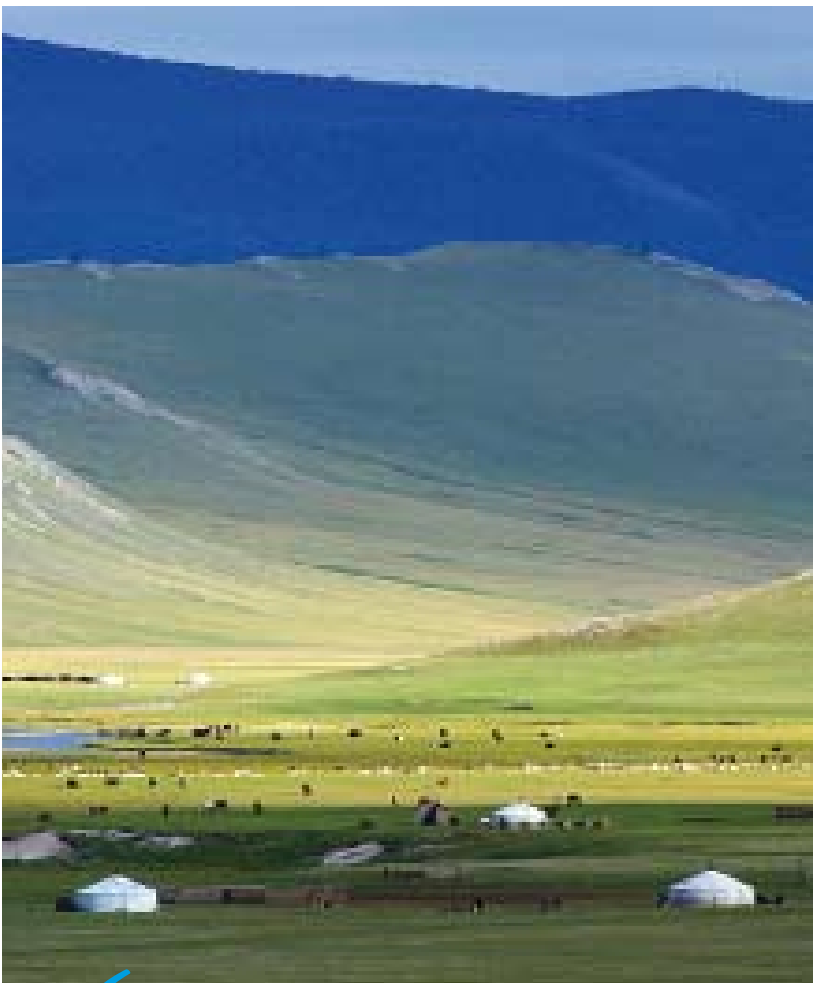
Many travellers take the Trans-Siberian to Lake Baikal, then head south on the Trans-Mongolian, the so-called 'smugglers' train' full of enterprising vendors that speeds across the steppes, where nomads live in tents, to Mongolia's capital of Ulaanbaatar. The next leg of this line – with glimpses of the Gobi Desert, rich only in dinosaur bones – goes to Beijing.

The splendour of this journey lies more in the scenery than the train. Carriages have shared toilets and washbasins; shower cubicles cannot be guaranteed. Fellow passengers can just as easily be majors with the Russian Army as Mongolian traders carrying an unusual cargo, boxes of everything from plastic syringes to microwaves. During pauses at stations, wrinkled old women with headscarves, painted eyebrows and scarlet lipstick sell dumplings – which are preferable to the stodgy fare on offer in the dining car.

If sharing a cabin with Russian truck drivers does not appeal, there is a more luxurious alternative. These days, it is possible to travel from Moscow to Vladivostok in style on the Golden Eagle, a privately owned luxury 21-carriage train that offers en-suite cabins with underfloor heating, butler service, caviar dining and DVDs on plasma screens.

The Golden Eagle takes 14 days to journey through Kazan, Irkutsk, Lake Baikal and Khabarovsk. Ultimately, it's the sense of awe at the landscape and distances covered that makes this a spectacular journey. Colin Thubron's book, *In Siberia*, is a good companion.

www.trans-siberian.co.uk ●



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TOP Many travellers take the Trans-Siberian as far as Lake Baikal, where they hop on the Trans-Mongolian and head south to Beijing

ABOVE The Trans-Mongolian cuts through the steppes, peppered with the tents of nomads, to the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar