

Recreating the Golden Age of Rail Travel

Odette Anderson

Introduction

The Orient-Express Group, the epitome of luxury and style, was founded by James B. Sherwood, as a subsidiary of British Sea Containers Limited in 1976. Since then, the Group has expanded to encompass 16 luxury hotels in some of the most beautiful locations in the world, three 'nostalgic' trains (with another coming into operation at the end of 1998), a unique river cruiser, four safari lodges and two award-winning restaurants.

The Golden Age of Travel

In 1883, the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits (CIWL), founded by the Belgian engineer Georges Nagelmackers, launched its first and most famous luxury train, the *Orient-Express*. The *Orient-Express* service set an unparalleled standard for de luxe trans-European train travel. With the opening of the Simplon Tunnel at the Swiss-Italian border in 1906, the *Simplon-Orient-Express* began operating its historic Paris–Milan–Venice



Venice Simplon-Orient-Express winding through Alps

(VSOE)

route and, with the later addition of sleeping carriages, extended the service to Belgrade, Sofia, Athens and the famous destination of Constantinople (Istanbul), which has evoked so many romantic novels and films. For a while, during the heady 1920s and 30s, the Paris-Venice sector of this service was deemed to be the most luxurious train journey in the

world, a reputation which Mr Sherwood has been keen to maintain.

The next major breakthrough, which has significance in today's market, was the addition of the London-to-Paris sector in 1889. A beautifully appointed Pullman train made the journey from London to Dover, where passengers crossed the Channel before joining Wagons-Lits carriages in Calais to take them on to Paris. Here, the equally stunning *Continental Train* was coupled to the *Orient-Express* for onward travel to 'magical' cities, only read about before in travelogues of the time.

To reflect the changing times, the service was also rechristened the *Simplon-Orient-Express*, a symbol of luxury which remains to this day.

However, in the 1950s, the novelty and speed of airplanes adversely impacted the number of people travelling by train, and a further reduction in the number of passengers due to mass low-cost air travel also occurred in the 1970s. Sadly, the fall-off continued until the service was finally closed in May 1977.



Dining in style on Venice Simplon-Orient-Express

(VSOE)



Routes of Simplon-Orient-Express and Taurus-Express in 1930-31

(© Wagons-Lits Diffusion, Paris 1998)

The Modern Day Orient-Express

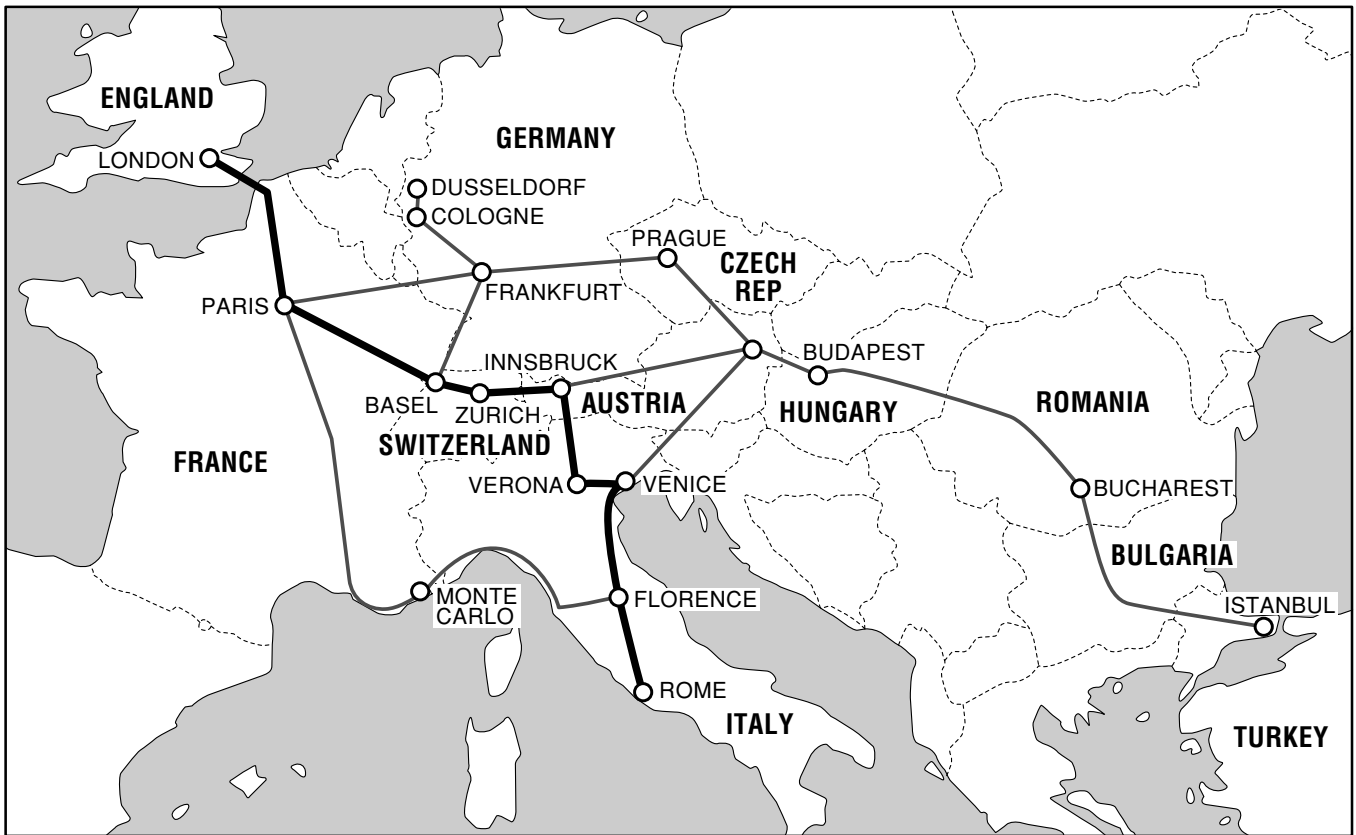
In October 1977, American businessman and train enthusiast, James B. Sherwood, (President of Sea Containers Ltd. and now Chairman of Orient-Express Hotels), bought two Orient-Express sleeper carriages, built in the 1920s, at a Sotheby's auction in Monte Carlo. This was the

first step in the renaissance of the great train!

Since that time, 35 Pullman cars, sleepers, and restaurant cars—all with an amazing historical pedigree—have been acquired and fully restored to their former glory at workshops in England, Belgium, and Germany. Master craftsmen have worked miracles with marquetry, glazing, and traditional upholstery to recreate the

feel of those 'Golden Days'.

On 25 May 1982, the beautifully-restored carriages made their inaugural run from London to Venice via Milan, offering a new opportunity to relive the glory days of European train travel. The train now runs regular scheduled services from early March to mid-November, through the breathtaking Alpine scenery of Austria and Switzerland, taking in the beau-



Routes of modern Venice Simplon-Orient-Express

(VSOE)

tiful cities of Paris, Zurich, Innsbruck, and Venice.

Since 1982, passengers of all nationalities and ages (Fig. 1), including members of the British and European Royal families and aristocracy, politicians, captains of industry, not to mention world-famous show-business personalities, have made

this 'historic' journey.

Today, passengers are offered either an à la carte or a table d'hôte menu. A 24-hour cabin service is also available for light snacks and refreshments. Christian Bodiguel, the Executive Chef, caters for 125–200 guests each day.

The seasonal menu changes weekly over

a 3-month period. Christian and his team take on provisions in Paris, such as live lobsters, langoustines, asparagus, artichokes, filet de bœuf, and veal sweetbreads—to mention just some of the ingredients. Everything except patisserie and bread is cooked on the train. The service and food compare with the most critically acclaimed restaurants in the world.

The bar car serves drinks throughout the journey and a pianist entertains at a grand piano. Passengers are encouraged to enter into the spirit of the occasion by dressing in period, with the gentlemen wearing dinner jackets. It is a magical experience. From March to November each year, the service operates between London, Paris/Dusseldorf and Venice. There are additional departures between Venice and Rome and from Venice to Vienna, Prague, Paris and London.

In 1998, the *Orient-Express* will again take the tracks all the way to Istanbul, like its predecessor in 1883. This jour-

Figure 1 Passenger Profile of Venice Simplon-Orient-Express

Average number of passengers per season:	13,000
Average number of nationalities who travel per season:	26
Top four nationalities travelling in 1996:	British: 39% of all passengers American: 22% French: 11% Japanese: 10%
Average age of passengers:	Under 35: 14% 35–54: 44% Over 54: 42%

ney will span five days and four nights, the second night being spent off the train at a luxury hotel. A hotel room will also be available for passengers on day 4 of the journey. Excursions along the route are planned in Budapest, Hungary, and Bucharest, Rumania. In Budapest, lunch will be taken at the famous Gundels Restaurant, run by George Lang, the renowned restaurateur.

Just north of Bucharest, Peles Castle at Sinaia is included in the itinerary to reflect the journey made just over a century ago, when passengers were invited by King Carol to visit the castle, to mark its completion.

The 1998 schedule also includes a departure from Venice to London, which will, for the first time, travel via Monte Carlo and up through the breathtaking scenery of Provence with hill-hugging villages dotting the horizon.

British Pullman's Connection with Orient-Express

To complement the magnificent rake of the Wagons-Lits carriages used on the *Continental Train*, a similarly-restored Pullman train is used for the journey be-



Exterior of British Pullman

(VSOE)

tween London and Folkestone, where passengers cross the Channel in a 55-minute voyage on Hoverspeed's (a sister company in the Sea Containers Group) SeaCat catamaran.

As well as running between London and Folkestone, the Pullman train also offers discerning travellers the opportunity to make day or weekend excursions to historic cities, castles and landmarks throughout the UK. Special dates are added to its year-round schedule to link with major sporting or social events, such as Royal Ascot, the Cheltenham Races,

Valentine and Mother's Day celebrations, culminating in a series of seasonal luncheon and dinner trips leading up to the Christmas holidays.

Leaving either Victoria Station in London or other major cities throughout Britain, passengers travel in either restored Pullman dining carriages, or in coupés, small compartments seating up to four people. Each carriage is unique with its own name and fascinating history, and once formed part of world-famous trains such as the *Golden Arrow* and the *Brighton Belle*.



Entertainment in E&O bar car

(VSOE)

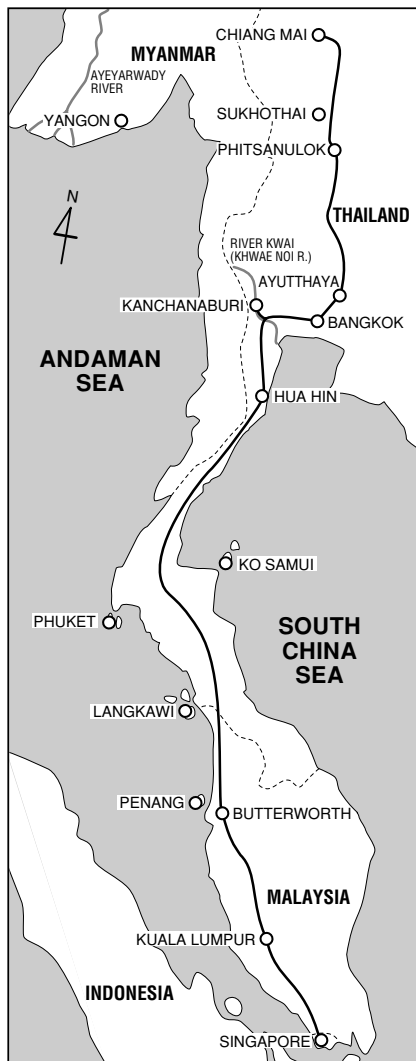
The Eastern & Oriental Express

Following the success of the legendary *Venice Simplon-Orient-Express*, the *Eastern & Oriental Express* (E&O) was conceived in 1987 by James Sherwood and his wife, the author Dr Shirley Sherwood. In keeping with the other services, the E&O aims to recapture a bygone era of gracious living, with superb service and delicious foods, coupled with a five-star hotel on wheels—another dream of those wonderful 'Golden Days of Rail Travel'. Originally built by Nippon Sharyo Ltd., and Hitachi, Ltd. of Japan in 1972 and operated as the *Silver Star* in New Zealand by New Zealand Railways, the



Observation deck on Eastern & Oriental Express

(VSOE)



Route of Eastern & Oriental Express (VSOE)

24 carriages were totally remodelled and rebuilt in Singapore.

The E&O was inaugurated in September 1993, making history as the first train to carry passengers directly between Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Bangkok in conjunction with both Malayan Railway (KTM) and the State Railway of Thailand (SRT). It is the only de luxe train to travel the full length of the 1943-km peninsular. The leisurely journey takes three days through scenic countryside. In ad-

dition, the train stops in Kuala Lumpur at the Royal Station of Hua Hin. There is also an opportunity for a trishaw tour of Georgetown in Pinang (Penang). On the southbound journey, the train stops at Butterworth where passengers can enjoy a day excursion to the island of Pinang. Of course, passengers can join or leave the train at any of these points.

Once on board, passengers can wander through the nineteen luxurious custom-made carriages, designed and fitted by Parisian designer, Gérard Gallet. The train is comprised of an open-air observation car with teak benches and gleaming brass fittings, two bar cars, two dining cars and sleeping compartments with en suite bathroom and shower facilities. As one would imagine, the stunning décor befits a product from the Orient-Express stable.

Entertainment with an Oriental flavour is provided during the journey—dancers, musicians and fortune tellers alternate with the resident pianist in one bar car. There is a small library in the saloon car with books and games for passengers.

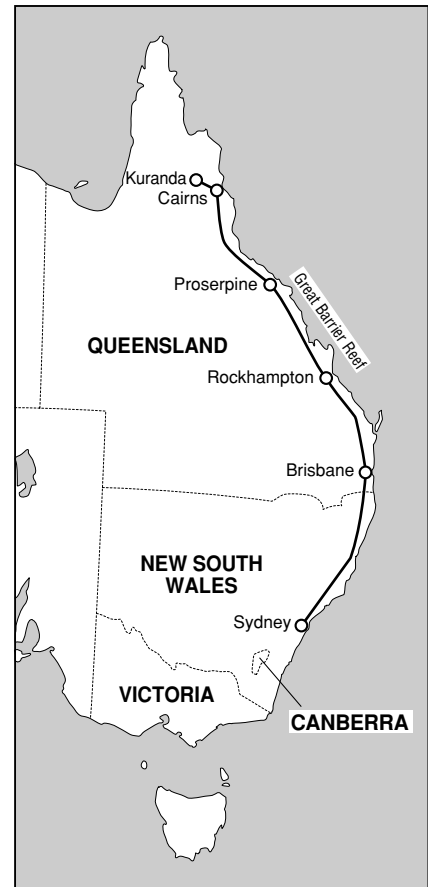
Figure 2 Passenger Profile of Eastern & Oriental Express

Annual number of passengers:	10,000
Total number of nationalities who have travelled:	74
Top five nationalities in 1996:	American: 25%
	Japanese: 21%
	German: 15%
	English: 11%
	Swiss: 6%
Average age of passengers:	The majority of passengers are Aged over 45:
	Under 25: 3%
	25–34: 9%
	35–44: 13%
	45–54: 25%
	55–64: 28%
	Over 65: 23%



Edwardian-style compartment on Great South Pacific Express

(VSOE)



Route of Great South Pacific Express along east Australian coast (Orient-Express Hotels Japan Ltd.)

There is also a boutique selling an exclusive range of E&O designs. In January 1997, the River Kwai and the bridge of cinematic fame were incorporated into the schedule. Now, the E&O travels weekly between Singapore and Bangkok, taking in the extended journey to Kanchanaburi, Wang Pho and the River Kwai, giving passengers an opportunity to take in this famous site. No wonder the *Eastern & Oriental Express* is now known as the 'world's most exotic train journey', forming the ultimate centrepiece of an Asian holiday for 10,000 guests annually (Fig. 2).

Great South Pacific Express

The natural attractions of the vast bushland separating the vibrant cities on Australia's eastern seaboard, naturally lend themselves to overland travel. In

December 1998, Venice Simplon-Orient-Express Ltd., in partnership with Queensland Rail (QR), will launch Australia's ultimate tourist train, the *Great South Pacific Express*.

The *Express* is being built entirely in Australia using local materials and historic designs from Australia's railway heritage. It is a quintessential Australian train. Initially, it will run weekly all year round along the east coast of Australia, from Brisbane to Cairns and vice versa, with excursions to the Great Barrier Reef and the World Heritage Rainforest. It will also

make fortnightly departures from Brisbane to Sydney.

Up to 20 carriages long, comprised of superb sleeping cars, all with en suite bathrooms, as well as a variety of restaurant, bar and lounge cars, the *Great South Pacific Express* will set new standards of glamour on Australian tracks, combining luxury with state-of-the-art amenities and modern safety standards. ■



Odette Anderson

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