

Simply stylish - a passage to Venice

STOP THE CLOCKS,
KICK OFF YOUR
SHOES AND
CONSIGN STRESS
TO THE SIDINGS AS
YOU LUXURIATE IN
A JOURNEY ON THE
VENICE SIMPLON-
ORIENT-EXPRESS WITH
ANDREW DON.



www.orient-express.com

Train journeys that bring a smile to the face and rejuvenate the spirit are few and far between these days. The misery of London's Tube or the daily commute by rail to work could coin a new phrase for the travel experience – *tribulation terrible* (pronounced with a French accent).

For most of us, trains go with the hustle and bustle of modern life. They get you from A to B, if you are lucky, but a pleasure they are not.

The thought of travelling a thousand miles by rail brings many folks out in a cold sweat, but then they have not experienced the Orient Express – the London-to-Venice trip on the Venice Simplon-Orient Express, specifically. For rail travel does not get much better than this.

A bygone age

The rolling stock harks back to an age when carriages were the work of fine craftsmanship, to a time when the service was known as "The Train of Kings, the King of Trains", when beautiful hardwoods, painstakingly painted insignias and no-expense-spared decor ruled rail.

As the authentic vintage carriages begin their motion, you could easily imagine Louis Armstrong singing *It's a Wonderful World* as the train pulls out from the platform, as you luxuriate in enchanting surroundings that evoke an atmosphere of an era that people of my generation are far too young to remember and perhaps can only imagine from what they have seen in films.

The only thing that passengers tend to regret about this 31-hour, 1,065-mile trip from London's Victoria Station to the final destination of the former maritime city-state of Venice is that they want it to go on...and on...and on.

Still, I always think it is better to come away from a trip wanting more than feel like screaming: "I'm a car driver, get me out of here".

London to Folkestone

You will not, in fact, embark the Orient Express train in London. The Victoria stretch requires passengers to initially catch the British Pullman train to Folkestone, Kent: a sumptuous experience in itself with its 11 Parlour cars each individually decorated and with its own identity and marquetry.

The British Pullman is a traditional 1920s and 30s type. Each car has its own name, style and





history. Minerva, for example, has Edwardian-type marquetry and Zena was used in the film *Agatha*, about Agatha Christie in 1976.

The train offers the ultimate in relaxation. As the sounds of the train winding its way through England's verdurous pastures, establishes a hypnotic rhythm that soothes away your cares until they disappear far behind you like the miles of track fading into the distance.

Onward to France

You alight at Folkestone to board luxury coaches that take you through the Channel Tunnel whereupon reaching Calais you board the blue and gold carriages of the Continental Wagon-Lits of the Venice Simplon-Orient Express, named after the Simplon Tunnel under the Alps, linking Switzerland and Italy.

The cabins are delightfully decorated with mahogany panels inlaid with individual marquetry patterns, much like the British Pullman. Designs include Art Deco, floral and leaf patterns, flower garland, flower basket, trapeze and tiger lily.

Once you ease into the journey you will want to go with the mood and blend in with the refined nature of your surroundings. Passengers tend to wear smart elegant attire during the day and, in the evening, lounge suit or black tie for gentlemen and formal dinner dresses for the ladies.

You do not need an excuse to travel in this way although many people travel to celebrate a birthday, an anniversary, or are on honeymoon. But if it is merely to experience the slow pace of life, the fine dining onboard and the exquisite scenery that populates the route, that is reason enough to take this journey of a lifetime.





Luxurious surroundings

The Simplon-Orient Express is an opportunity to be pampered and you will take delight in the attentions of your own personal steward. Imagine sipping a pre-dinner cocktail in one of three cosy and sumptuously decorated restaurant cars followed by a four-course meal prepared by the skilled French chefs, to the backdrop of the baby grand piano and the ever-present sound of train over rail.

While you indulge, your compartment will be magically transformed into a warm, comfortable bedroom ready for when you retire for the night. Many people claim the gentle sound of the train eases them into a restful sleep that they have not experienced for many a long year.

The Alps from your window

When you awake the following morning, you may have to pinch yourself as you peer out of the window. Greeted by the sight of daylight breaking over the Swiss Alps after the train has routed through Paris, following track through Lichtenstein before crossing into Austria via the spectacularly scenic Arlberg Pass, where the railway nestles against the valley wall, rolling along the mountain sides.

The train passes Innsbruck turning south through the Brenner Pass from Austria into Italy to reach Verona before turning east again to reach Venice Mestre. You will have watched the Alps fade away, then, post-breakfast, whiled away the morning drinking coffee, chatting to other passengers, perhaps reading that yellowing novel you never found time for.

Final destination

You can watch the Italian Dolomites fly by while you partake of a three-course lunch in another one of the restaurant cars, and then the Brenner Pass, until the train crosses the Venetian Lagoon bound for Santa Lucia station on the shores of the Grand Canal in central Venice, walking distance from the Rialto Bridge and St Mark's Square.

All too soon, your trip on this quarter-of-a-mile long work of art will have reached its end; the Champagne will have stopped flowing, and you will be free to explore your romantic destination or perhaps prepare for an onward journey, relaxed and in a totally different frame of mind than you were in 31 hours earlier.

