



# WORD OF MOUTH

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## A RAIL ROMANCE

Railway travel is nothing new, but a wave of luxury sleeper trains are now inspiring post-pandemic travel plans. With many offering family cabins and innovative excursions, it's also a stress-free way to travel with the little ones, says ISABELLA SULLIVAN



Clockwise from top left: Adventures on the Eastern & Oriental Express; a Grand Suite on the VSOE; boarding the train; the VSOE's bar car

PHOTOGRAPHS: BELMOND

To travel by train is to see nature and human beings, towns and churches and rivers. In fact, to see life," said Agatha Christie, the novelist who, through penning *Murder on the Orient Express*, birthed an enduring fascination with the fabled train – and indeed, train travel itself. There's something about rail travel that oozes romance and adventure, be it the throwback to a time before technology, the gentle chugging of the engine or the chance to truly appreciate your journey.

Once viewed as merely a way of getting from A to B, trains are now some of the most luxurious and comfortable ways to travel and, even, holiday. Hotel giants Belmond and Anantara now have five-star wheeled outposts in the Far East, Europe and South America, and 2021 saw the EU declare the European Year of Rail – spurring the revival of many once-popular sleeper trains. Such trains have double cabins with en-suite bathrooms and glamorous restaurant cars. In the US, train-loving President Joe Biden, nicknamed 'Amtrak Joe', has vowed to revamp the entire network – rekindling interest in cross-country escapades on the *Maple Leaf* and *Sunset Limited*.

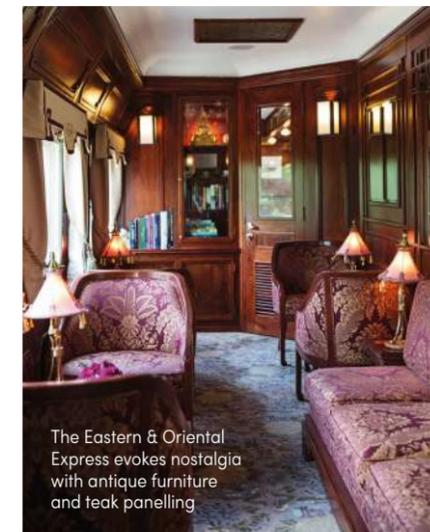
The truth is, trains meet many demands of the post-pandemic travel sphere. Trains are one of the most sustainable ways to travel, offsetting an average of 80 per cent fewer carbon emissions than aircrafts, and offer privacy and space not granted by air travel. Fewer – if any – luggage restrictions, private compartments and the chance to arrive right into the heart of a destination make a train trip or rail holiday extremely family friendly. Not to mention the novelty of such a trip with the children.

#### HOTELS ON WHEELS

Perhaps the most luxurious of all is the *Venice Simplon-Orient-Express*, the reincarnation of the fabled and now-defunct *Orient Express* by luxury operator Belmond. In 17 Art Deco-style carriages, guests are whisked between London, Paris, Venice and Istanbul, transported back in



#### GUESTS ARE WHISKED BETWEEN LONDON, PARIS, VENICE AND ISTANBUL, TRANSPORTED BACK IN TIME TO THE GOLDEN AGE OF TRAVEL



The Eastern & Oriental Express evokes nostalgia with antique furniture and teak panelling

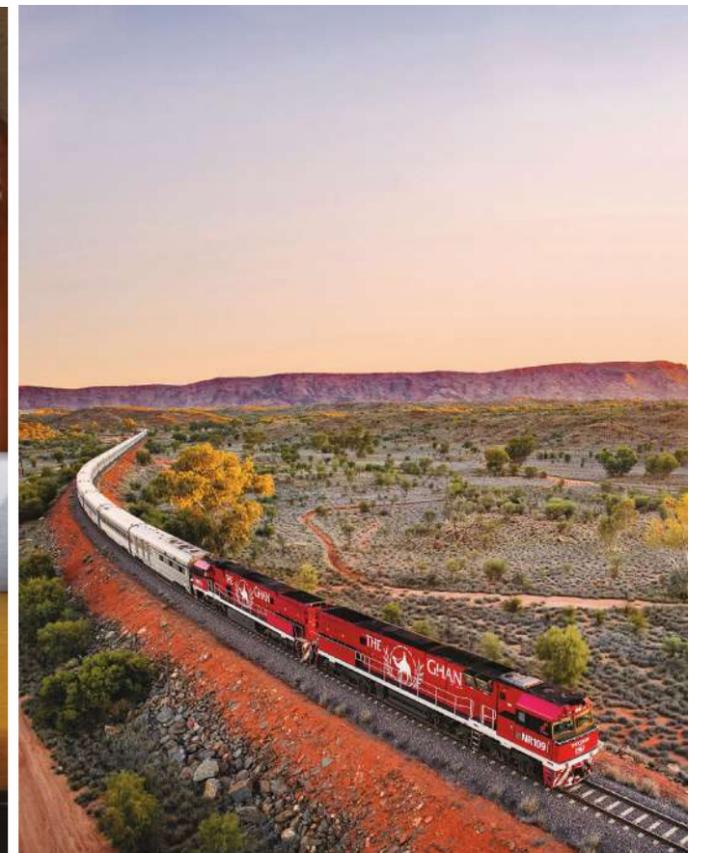
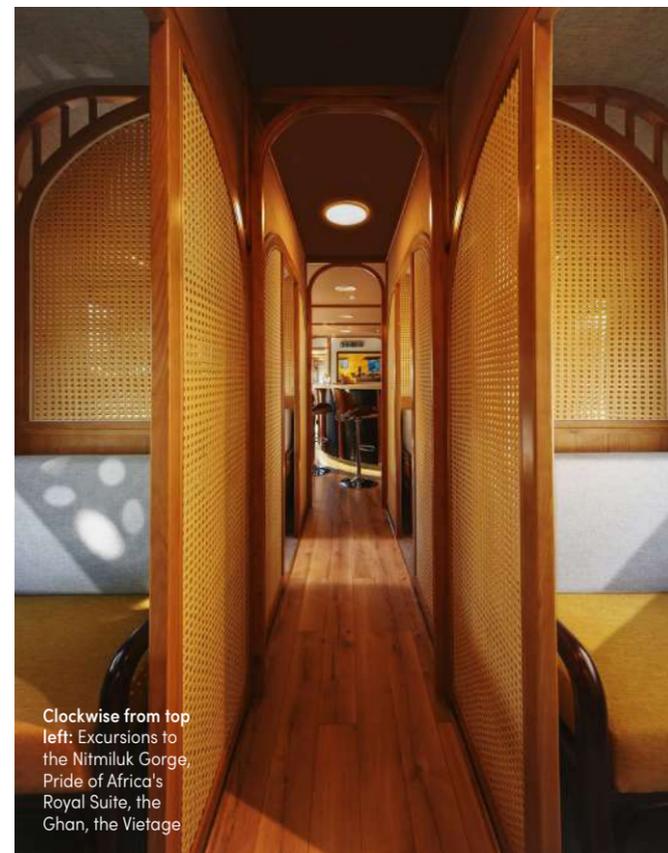
time to the golden age of travel. Large windows look out onto bucolic Italian lakes and snow-capped Swiss Alps, and white-gloved waiters tend to your every need in the midnight blue lounge car and three fine dining restaurant carriages.

This year, the train introduced five new boarding points and three new ultra-luxe Grand Suites, making stops in Rome, Florence, Geneva, Brussels and Amsterdam. Belmond operates such luxury trains in Peru (climbing to Machu Picchu), England, Scotland, Ireland and between Bangkok and Singapore on the *Venice Simplon's* Far East counterpart, the *Eastern & Oriental Express*. With a short sojourn on board costing the equivalent of a week in Belmond's five-star land establishments, guest can expect a superlative level of service and luxury.

When it comes to epic rail odysseys, few countries do it better than India, home to seven luxury trains, most notably the *Maharajas' Express*. A world away from the cacophony of the national rail network, the train offers six tours around the beguiling sub-continent, including tours of the Golden Triangle and Goa. Opulent interiors are inspired by former ruling dynasties of Maharajas, full of jewel tones and wooden panelling. Guests can tick off the *Taj Mahal* in Agra, discover the 'Pink City' of Jaipur and spot Bengal →



Rovos Rail's Pride of Africa is a safari holiday on wheels



Clockwise from top left: Excursions to the Nitmiluk Gorge, Pride of Africa's Royal Suite, the Ghan, the Vietage

tigers in Ranthambore National Park, before returning to their five-star hotel on wheels. This same railway odyssey can be experienced on the plains of Africa and Australia, where the Pride of Africa and Ghan train reign supreme. Ideal for safari-loving families thanks to en-suite cabins and an open-air viewing carriage, the Pride of Africa – operated by Rovos Rail – journeys around Botswana, South Africa and Tanzania. A highlight is a Big Five escapade through the diverse landscapes of KwaZulu-Natal. In Australia, the Ghan snakes between Adelaide and Darwin through Australia's untamed outback. Passengers enjoy excursions to Alice Spring and helicopter rides over the Nitmiluk Gorge before returning to modern wood-paneled double cabins and enjoying on-board culinary experiences such as local delicacies, kangaroo fillet and saltwater barramundi fish.

Of course, for true rail-loving wanderlusts, the bucket-list trip is the enigmatic Trans-Siberian railway, running

from Moscow to the wilds of Siberia and the Far East. Many trains plough this route but the most luxurious is the Golden Eagle Trans-Siberian Express. In ornate Tsarist carriages, guests are treated to caviar, bubbles and five-course meals as they journey to Vladivostok in the Russian Far East or Mongolia's capital of Ulaan Baatar.

**WHIRLWIND ESCAPES**

A short rail break is the perfect way to dip your toes in the timeless mode of transport, with many luxury day trips and overnight adventures available around the world. Last year, luxury resort group Anantara had its foray into train travel with the launch of the opulent Vietage train. In response to changing travel habits onset by the global pandemic, the train hosts just 12 guests in six private compartments on day trips along the unhurried coastline of central Vietnam, running between Hoi An and Quy Nhon. Interiors hark back to the French colonial era and guests enjoy gourmet Vietnamese cuisine and even spa treatments.

In Europe, intertrailing is no longer the preserve of teenage backpackers. Traversing between cities without renting a car or hurrying the family to the airport can be experienced in the first-class compartments of premium sleeper trains, with Moscow to Nice, Rome to Palermo and Paris to Venice all highlights of the nocturnal network. In March, the Berlin to Stockholm night train was relaunched. By December 2021, passengers will be able to travel by romantic sleeper from Vienna to Paris via Munich, and Zurich to Amsterdam through Cologne. A route from Zurich to Rome is also set to debut in 2022, allowing travellers to roll right into the heart of the Eternal City. Many train lines offer family tickets and families are able to share cabins – charming bunkbed suites are a popular choice.

Be it a desire to appreciate the journey or need for space and privacy, demand for this nostalgic, romantic, sustainable and stress-free way to travel is on the rise. It's time to get on board. 🚂