

Sommeliers, a personal concierge, and Michelin Star meals: Luxury train travel is the new business class

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Photo: Belmond



If you've ever dreamed of the luxurious train travel depicted in "The Darjeeling Limited" or any of the litany of Agatha Christie film adaptations, you're in luck: high-end rail travel is making a comeback, and this time with 21st-century perks.

On Italy's forthcoming La Dolce Vita Orient Express, for example, guests can choose from eight detailed travel itineraries that transport passengers to destinations including Tuscany, Sicily, and Rome in style.

Each guest will be introduced to a private concierge before their journey begins, and while on board, they will have access to a private lounge for games of chess and backgammon. In the evenings, guests can expect to receive handwritten notes to dine in the train's restaurant, where a storyteller circulates through tables sharing "legends and fables." Guests with questions about their evening attire can even receive clothing advice from the train's attendants.

Among the available journeys is the Truffle Route tour from Rome to Monferrato: on this particular trip, guests will begin their travels by dining on a meal prepared by 3-Michelin-starred Chef Heinz Beck while listening to performances by live musicians. On the second day, the train stops in the village of Nizza Monferrato for a tour of a UNESCO World Heritage Winery and a truffle hunting expedition.

The train's exclusivity gives travelers "a chance to double down on the Italian experience and access parts of Italy that they might not normally consider," Samy Ghachem, the train's general manager, told the Conde Nast Traveler. "It's the first luxury train slow cruise concept of its kind in Italy."

It's unsurprising that new businesses are getting in on the extravagant train travel business. This year has seen a 43% increase in luxury rail travel compared to 2023, according to Andrew Channell, the senior vice president of product at Railbookers, a specialist train travel agency.

"That massive increase isn't just in one place, either. It's not driven by any one destination or any one campaign," Channell told the Conde Nast Traveler. "It's driven by demand for these types of experiences all over the place."

Channell cites the pandemic as an influencing factor – as well as the holistic nature of train travel. While an airplane is typically a means to get from point A to point B, spending time on the rails is a travel experience in and of itself.

On the Venice Simplon Orient Express (no relation to the La Dolce Vita Orient Express), wine-loving guests can avail themselves of the train's sommelier, who matches each of the train's three-course, locally sourced meals with a bottle of wine. This take on the legendary train – owned by the luxury travel company Belmond – boasts a party-like atmosphere in the evenings, with a pianist and mixologists on staff.

Shorter trips on Belmond's Orient Express take guests from one European city to the next: routes include Paris to Budapest and Amsterdam to Venice. Guests can also book a five-night journey from Paris to Istanbul, with cabins beginning at £17,500 (\$18,917.) In keeping with the train's 1920s ambiance, guests are expected to wear formal evening attire at dinner, while wearing jeans is strictly prohibited.

"That sense of specialness, exclusivity, rarity, and [of something] once-in-a-lifetime" is what's behind the popularity of luxury train travel, Channell told the Conde Nast Traveler. "It comes down to enjoying the entirety of your journey from end to end."