

# Fine Dining on *Orient Express*

Kan Sakurai

The first *Orient Express* service was launched some 128 years ago in Meiji 16 (1883) when Japan had yet to complete the Tokkaido main line between Tokyo and Kobe.

On 4 October 1883, a cheering crowd of thousands gathered at Strasbourg Station (Paris Gare de l'Est today) to catch a glimpse of the first departure of the *Orient Express*. At 19:30, as spotlights glared and an orchestra played a march, the brilliantly polished train pulled out on her historic maiden journey bound for Constantinople (Istanbul) in the far-off 'Orient' and the gateway to Asia.

What captured people's imaginations about the *Orient Express* was not just that it was the first direct service from Paris to Istanbul (earlier train passengers arrived in Constantinople having come south by ferry across the Black Sea from Varna in Bulgaria), but also that it was the most luxurious train they had ever seen. Wagons-Lits (an international sleeper train company) had new sleeper and restaurant carriages built in the height of style, with furnishings including wall-to-wall Turkish carpets, full-silk-finished walls, and mahogany interior. It was undoubtedly the launch of the world's first distinguished luxury train.

Records show that, excluding the lead steam locomotive,

the first *Orient Express* was comprised of five carriages coupled as a baggage car, two sleeping cars, a restaurant car, and another baggage car. The front and rear baggage cars carried passengers' luggage, mail, food and drink, and were also the rest quarters for the crew.

The glory days continued as the *Orient Express* achieved massive popularity, with sister trains being launched in quick succession as the 20th century started. In particular, the end of World War I marked the beginning of a golden era. The list of regular passengers was headed by royalty like Queen Marie of Romania, King George of Greece and King Boris III of Bulgaria, as well as the world's aristocrats, high-ranking bureaucrats, diplomats, multi-millionaires, authors and, on some occasions, spies, turning the *Orient Express* into a European society hotspot.

Agatha Christie's famous story *Murder on the Orient Express* was published right at the highpoint in 1934 when there were three more *Orient Express* services—the *Simplon-Orient Express*, *Arlberg Orient Express*, and *Oostende-Wien Orient Express*.

However, passengers started to dwindle at the end of World War II, spurred by the advances in civil aviation due to the rapid development of aircraft during the war. Major cities of Europe could now be reached by commercial aircraft for the first time in hours. When you realize that Paris to Istanbul took 56 hours by *Orient Express*, while a propeller aeroplane could make the journey in just 6 hours, competition between train and plane became no contest. Naturally, *Orient Express* regulars no longer alighted at the station but at the aerodrome.

Thus, a gloriously historic final curtain came down on the *Orient Express* in May 1977 after 94 years of service.

However, like a phoenix and after just 5 years in retirement, the *Orient Express* rose again in May 1982 as the



Paris Gare de l'Est (the former Strasbourg Station)

(Author)

*Venice Simplon-Orient Express* (VSOE). The route reverted to the former *Simplon-Orient Express* from Paris to Venice with *Golden Arrow* trains starting from London connecting to Paris, making a route starting in London and ending in Venice!

So, what are we waiting for, all aboard the VSOE for a 1750-km, 30-hour, one-night-and-two-days jaunt from London to Venice!

Victoria Station, London at 10:40 as the top VSOE relay runner slips away from Platform 2 on time on the first leg of our trip to Venice. The British Pullmans are superb vintage carriages built in the 1920s and 30s; they have even been used on royal trains to transport HRH Queen Elizabeth II and HRH Prince Charles, giving the train even more gravitas.

'Welcome, sir. Mr Sakurai!' were the cordial words I heard the moment we pulled out of the station. They came from a steward dressed smartly in black trousers with gold stripe and gold-braid decorated white jacket. Each dining table was topped by welcoming VSOE Reserve champagne. With the steward's greeting came canapés of shrimp, roast beef, caviar, and other delights. A mixture of euphoria from travelling on the world's most luxurious train and the surge of excitement that came with departure prevented me staying completely calm, so I raised my glass to toast the

forthcoming trip.

Soup was served next—it was a vegetable soup in a tomato base. Simultaneously, the champagne glass was removed and replaced by a wine glass, full to the brim



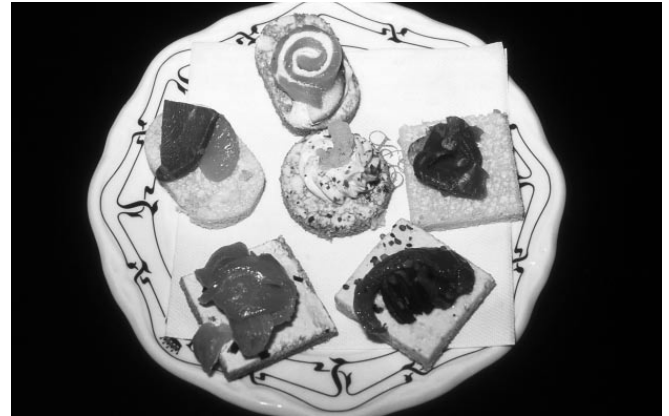
Champagne VSOE

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High society onboard

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Canapés

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Exclusive waiting room at London's Victoria Station

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Lunch is served

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with a white Chardonnay. The steward set the table, changed plates and glasses, leaving no fingerprint on cutlery—for sure, this was a rolling three-star restaurant.

The main course arrived with smoke salmon complemented by roast chicken and an asparagus and pine nut salad, served with Domaine Mont Grenier red wine. This main course was loyal to the natural flavour of the ingredients, and with a simple finish, just right for the Japanese palate.

Meanwhile, we had passed through London and with the arrival of the main course, were now breaking into the countryside of Kent. Sunlight splashed the gently rolling fields. Chubby round sheep and black-and-white dairy cows chewed the cud—what a heartwarming vista to see from a train.

Having just enjoyed the dessert of apple pie, cinnamon and cream and drained my after-meal coffee, the Pullman eased into Folkestone, passing beautiful neat rows of brick houses and coming to rest in Folkestone Station at 12:45.

Stepping off the train, we were welcomed by a small ensemble of trumpet, euphonium, banjo, and drum. Having listened to some lilting melodies on the platform, we hopped onto a waiting bus, which then slipped effortlessly onto the *Le Shuttle* car ferry train for the 49.2-km trip through the Channel Tunnel and then onto a parking spot next to the platform at Calais-Ville Train Station, a run of close to 40 minutes.

There stood the 17 blue-and-gold striped carriages of the Wagons-Lit sleeper train, seeming impatient to leave for Paris and onto Venice.

Closing in on the train, the beautiful lacquered navy blue livery and mid-section sparkled with brilliantly polished face-to-face lions—the same emblem as the first Wagons-Lits crest.

Wagons-Lits, founded by the young Belgian entrepreneur Georges Nagelmackers in 1872, is properly called Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits (International Sleeping Car Company), but just the French for sleeping car—Wagons-Lits—stuck as the common name. Nagelmackers' dream was for his company to provide comfortable sleeping cars for international trains crisscrossing Europe.

1872 was the fifth year of the Meiji Era in Japan when the Tokyo Shimbashi-to-Yokohama railway opened—a striking piece of westernization. However, close the countries of Europe seemed, Nagelmacker's vision to establish a



Brilliantly polished Wagon-Lits emblem

(Author)

structure for international rail travel, while rail was still in its infancy in Japan, is nothing short of amazing. Within just 11 years of setting up the company, he achieved his goal in the shape of the *Orient Express* travelling from Paris to Constantinople.

Avoiding the flames of both world wars, the undoing of the *Orient Express* was not war but the rapid development of aeroplanes following World War II.

Finally, in 1971, in its 99th year, Wagons-Lits withdrew from the sleeper car business and the Paris–Istanbul *Orient Express* followed suit in 1977, closing an era.

Nonetheless, right before my very eyes stood the blue prima donna—neither a dream nor an illusion or replica—none other than the real *Orient Express*, without a spot of dirt or dust to be seen, waiting for me to board. It was as if that *Orient Express* had somehow risen like a phoenix.

The central player in that rise is the American, British-based shipping magnate James B. Sherwood, the current chairman of *Orient Express* Hotels. In October 1977, Wagons-Lits put the *Orient Express* carriages up for auction in Monte Carlo. Sherwood, an enthusiast from childhood and an especially big fan of the good old days, purchased two 1929 Wagons-Lits carriages at Monte Carlo. This triggered a desire to visit Europe's marshalling yards and sidings in search of discarded original Wagons-Lits sleeper and Pullman cars. In time, he managed to acquire 35 cars. Nevertheless, at more than 50 years of age, most were half decayed and no longer in a state to be called the *Orient Express*. Thus, Sherwood spent 5 years and US \$3000 million of his private funds to restore the carriages to the condition of their heyday in the 1920s. Thus, once again, we can enjoy journeys on the *Orient Express* in original



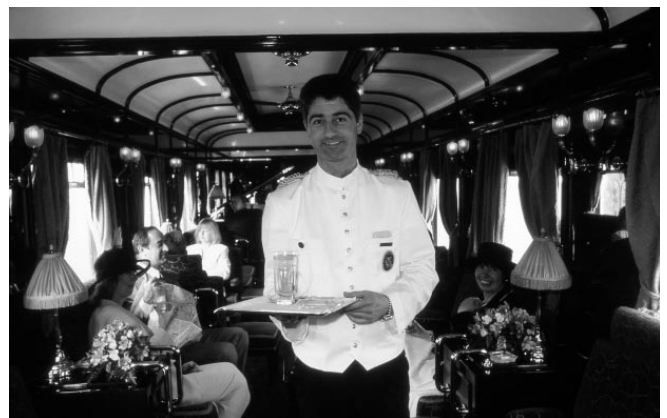
Interior of sleeping compartment

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Bar car

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Daytime bar car

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Wagons-Lits carriages.

The 17-car train is hauled by a pair of SNCF BB67000 diesel locomotives (commonly known as nez cassés or 'broken nose' because of their flattish fronts), with 11 sleepers, three restaurant coaches, a bar car and two service cars used by the crew. A smartly dressed steward in blue uniform and white gloves was waiting to guide me to Car F, which was third from the locomotives and a double-cabin sleeper with body number 3555 built in 1929 as a first-class sleeper by Entreprises Industrielles Charentaises (EIC) in La Rochelle, France, with interior by Nelson. It has had a varied career, being used on the *Pyénées-Côte d'Argent*



Souvenir boutique

(Author)



'Oriental' restaurant car

(Author)



'Étoile du Nord' restaurant car

(Author)



'Côte d'azur' restaurant car

(Author)

*Express* and the *Sud Express* lines and then from 1949 to 1961 on the *Simplon-Orient Express* line, having previously been part of a stationary hotel in Lyons during WWII.

I settled down with the assistance of the steward, the suitcase I had handed over in the morning at Victoria already stowed in the compartment for me. And, there, on the small window table, stood a bottle of champagne nestled in a silver ice bucket. In fact, when making my reservation in Tokyo, I had requested this, so I could pop the cork as soon as the train pulled out. The compartment interior was in the usual teak-like pattern, the walls in fine marquetry, elegantly curved brass door knobs, coat hangers dressed in fabric to stop them rattling on the journey, a washbasin with triple mirror and more. As to be expected on a train, there is not much space, but, even so, I had this gorgeous private compartment for my own until reaching Venice next evening. Unrestrained joy welled up—a joy that only passengers on the *Orient Express* can know.

In the midst of my reverie, there was a knock and the door opened with the greeting, 'Bon soir, monsieur' from the steward in blue who had greeted me earlier, the restaurant manager in black uniform with gold braid, and the chief waiter. As soon as I told them that I spoke almost no French, they switched to English, with the effortlessness of good

bilinguals. 'Welcome aboard. I am the restaurant manager. Dinner will be served in two sittings, the first from 18:30 and the second from 21:00. Which would you prefer?'

I wavered slightly, but opted for the first sitting and the restaurant manager handed me a small slip of paper printed with 'Oriental, 1st, No. 7' as he said, 'We look forward to serving you.'

Next, the steward gave me a rundown on the compartment, asking me when I would like my bed made and at what time I would like breakfast the following morning. The steward was the person I would rely on most until I arrived in Venice the following evening.

After we pulled out from the station, it was clear that the scenery had changed since we had crossed the Channel. Both provide vistas of green countryside, but on the British side, the farms looked like miniature gardens with farm houses dotted here and there, whereas, on the French side, I could not see an individual farm but just an endless expanse of pasture—for sure, this brought the realization that I was on 'The Continent.'

The time for dinner approached, so I changed into a dinner jacket. There is a dress code on the VSOE from dinner onward, with ladies expected to be attired in fine clothes such as evening dresses, and gentlemen properly dressed in dinner jackets or dark suits. All the fuss of carrying a dinner jacket for just one night was a little tiresome, but if that is a condition for riding the *Orient Express*, who was I to complain. Rather, it was better to enjoy the chance to dress up, because, when all is said and done, there is only one train in the world that requires formal dress for dinner!

As I walked into the dining car, the smiling face of the restaurant manager was there to greet me with, 'Welcome, sir! Mr Sakurai.' And, without even the chance to show my table reservation, I was escorted to 'Oriental' table number seven.

Oriental is not the formal name of the restaurant car. It is the nickname for this particular restaurant car, which is one of three coupled together. To help passengers distinguish



Dinner time



Cheeses appeared

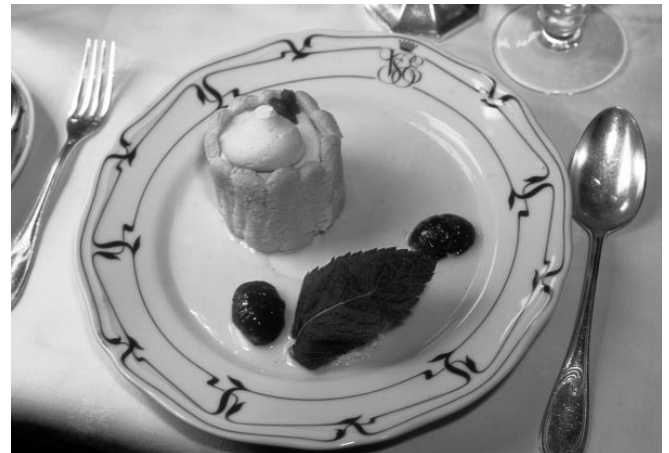
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Entrée

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Dessert

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each car, all have nicknames (Oriental, Côte d'azur and Étoile du Nord) according to their interiors. The Oriental was built as a first-class diner by the Birmingham Railway Carriage & Wagon Company in England back in 1927 and has a long history of being used on famous expresses in Europe, such as the *Étoile du Nord Express*, the *Edelweiss Express*, and the *Fleche d'or Express*. In later years, the interior was refurbished in an oriental style similar to that of restaurant car 3583 built by EIC and hence the nickname. The evening menu was headed by an entrée of scallops accompanied by olive oil and lemon dressing as well as tuna fish with herb-flavoured tartar sauce. Yet, it was difficult to think of this as dinner because I was in Europe in early summer when the days are long. The hands on the clock said 19:00, but the sun was still sat in a daytime sky, say about 15:00 in Japan. On occasions, sunlight blitzed the dining table in strong flashes. So much so, that I felt like I

was taking a late lunch. Yet, a glance round the restaurant car showed that everyone was in formal evening attire—no mistaking it, this really is a gorgeous world of dining.

Next up was the main dish, roast lamb topped with artichokes, rosemary and gravy and accompanied by vegetable mousse and roast potatoes. I ate with relish, admiring the French flavour, which was as wonderful as expected. After the main dish, a large tray of cheeses appeared, to be followed by a dessert of chocolate and coffee mousse, and finally individual chocolates.

I woke at 07:00 next morning with the train travelling through eastern Switzerland.

With a knock and opening of the door, came 'Good morning, sir. Did you sleep well?' from the smiling steward. 'Breakfast is ready. Shall I bring it?' What arrived was a continental breakfast of orange juice, croissants, raisin pastries, butter and a selection of three jams together with



Breakfast room service (Author)



Lunch time (Author)



Continental breakfast menu (Author)



Lunchtime main dish (Author)



Brunch (Author)



Head chef Christian Bodiguel (Author)

strong coffee. At a glance, it looked simple, but with freshly baked pastries having been picked up in Zurich and heated on the train's coal stove, the aroma was truly one of freshly baked delights.

Just after 08:00, the train stopped in the last Swiss station of Buchs. The Swiss locomotives were changed to Austrian, and, just on 09:00, we set off again to cross the long railway bridge over the Rhine into Liechtenstein. The tracks bisect this small country but there are no stations.

Moreover, in just 8 km we passed out of the principality. I was still gazing about as the train entered Austria. So, here we were, about to enter the Tyrolean section of the *Arlberg Orient Express*, celebrated as the most picturesque part of the journey.

The Tyrol landscape had me glued to the window taking in fresh sparkling meadows with grazing sheep and cattle, delta-roofed farmhouses dotted here and there, church steeples, ancient medieval castles and more. The backdrop



The Brenner Pass

(Author)

The lunch menu was an hors d'oeuvre of steamed sea bass and asparagus accompanied by sour cream dressed with caviar followed by a main dish of chicken breasts and small lobster as well as ravioli and green-bean-stuffed aubergine. With ravioli on the menu, I was reminded of our destination—Italy.

Pictured in the train window were the uninterrupted silvery white peaks of the Alps. Meanwhile, opening my eyes to the dining tables, I saw delicious dish upon delicious dish. Dining while watching the changing scenery from the window is a delight to the eye and tongue.

Just as I was finishing off with sorbet, the head chef Christian Bodiguel came into the restaurant car. 'Is everything to your liking, sir?' Of course, my reply was, 'Excellent!'

The 1750-km trip was coming to an end. This was my final meal on the train and soon we were crossing the Brenner Pass into the dazzling sunshine of Italy. Sadly, as my afternoon tea provided by room service came to an end, we pulled into Venice Santa Lucia Station and I would have to leave this lovely train with all my fond memories of a wonderful and historic trip. ■



Venice Santa Lucia Station

(Author)

was the unbroken vista of the Austrian Alps, 3,000-m peaks with shimmering glaciers. As to be expected, the view was number one in scenic splendour. With my forehead pressed to the window appreciating the landscape rolling by, an onboard announcement rang out: 'Ladies and gentlemen, lunch will be served in the restaurant cars. Passengers with first sitting reservations please come to the restaurant cars.'

My seat is number 12 in the *Étoile du Nord* car, a first-class diner built by the Birmingham Railway Carriage & Wagon Company in 1926. Of course, just like the other Wagons-Lits carriages, this too was used for dining on famous express trains, such as the *Étoile du Nord* and *Danube Express*. Its interior finished in beautiful marquetry in the style of the *Étoile du Nord* trains. Yesterday, the *Oriental*, today the *Étoile du Nord*—it is a wonderful touch to change the restaurant for each meal, so passengers can enjoy dining in different decors.

**Kan Sakurai**

Mr. Sakurai is a photojournalist specializing in railway tourism photography. He is currently a lecturer at Tokyo College of Transportation Studies. In 1993, he completed a round-the-world tour using only land and naval transport in 88 days, and has ridden on trains in 86 countries. He has published numerous books and articles, including: *Railway World Heritage* (Kadokawa Group Publishing) and *World Railway Dream Travelogue* (Travel Journal, 1994)