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PERSONAL JOURNEYS

All Aboard the Orient Local

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus
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During one of last summer's final high-season weeks, I struck up a conversation with an American backpacker in Milan's Centrale train station. She was 18, in Europe for the first time, and the itinerary she reeled off resembled a similar trip I took some 15 years ago: Amsterdam, Berlin, Vienna, Venice, Madrid. The difference was that, with my Eurail Pass, I'd made a continuous swoop of it; her backpack, garlanded with luggage tags, revealed that she had availed herself of discount airfare for a more higgledy-piggledy route. I had once arrived in Venice from Munich using the pass; my journey had taken 10 hours. She'd come in from Lisbon in 90 minutes.

My Eurail journey first summoned what has become almost a pathological preference of mine for overland travel: By now I think I'm more interested in the places in between, in border-region gradients, than in the precincts of capitals.

The farthest east I got on that trip was Budapest, but ever since then I've hoped I might one day retrace one of the great overland routes to the east, the Orient Express. That magnificent name was retired in 2009, after having appeared continuously on European timetables since 1883. The route, made famous by Agatha Christie in her Hercule Poirot mystery "Murder on the Orient Express" — a baronial passage from Calais to Paris, then calling at Dijon, Lausanne, Milan, Zagreb, Belgrade and Sofia before terminating in Istanbul — went out of service in 1977, but the name was preserved on a small segment of the route. When the final service ran from Strasbourg to Vienna in 2009, it covered a mere quarter of the original's distance.

Early last fall, I decided to piece together a contemporary version of Poirot's commute. My route required a minimum of seven trains through nine countries over less than a week. Half of the work, and at least half the pleasure, was in the planning — the logistical steeplechase of overland fanciers like me, who best enjoy distance when it feels properly earned.

Most of the seven tickets have to be bought separately, some of them are delivered exclusively by mail, and passage for the final leg can be secured only within Bulgaria, in cash. I needed to equip myself with five different currencies — and packed rations. Long gone are the "choicest morsels" of Poirot and his companions, the "delicate cream cheese" after dinner and the attendants happy to provision an exiled princess or American captain of industry with sparkling water and fresh-squeezed orange juice.

But what does remain is the chance to see Europe as a continuous, unfolding expanse, and not simply as the crow — or discount-airline — flies. I'd somehow imagined this unbroken diorama would be arrayed before me under a noontime sun. But the luxury of daylit-countryside reverie is available for only about a third of the 60-odd hours it takes to get from London, where I set out, to the Bosphorus.

The first of the two long daytime intervals, from Paris to Munich, is plowed by a duplex TGV in competing shades of mauve; my train left the Gare de l'Est in the morning and didn't stop until it had reached Saarbrücken, just over the German border. The cars have mounted screens that note speed and feature a little thermometer-like diagram of forward progress — a warning that you're rapidly running out of France.

The fields of Lorraine were toast-colored and pinstriped new-growth green, and almost everybody passed the time looking out the window. I changed trains at Mannheim, and we headed toward Munich — half the train was en route to Oktoberfest.

As we passed into Germany, the train seemed to transform. At Saarbrücken, a well-scrubbed young woman bound for her first semester at university sat down beside me. From her leather satchel she withdrew a new pencil from a leather case and

sharpened it. Everybody around us sat up a little straighter. The hillside vineyards of Baden-Württemberg glowed a smug, wealthy green.

The Orient Express plows through the Black Forest of Germany in 1983. Wolfgang Kaehler/Corbis

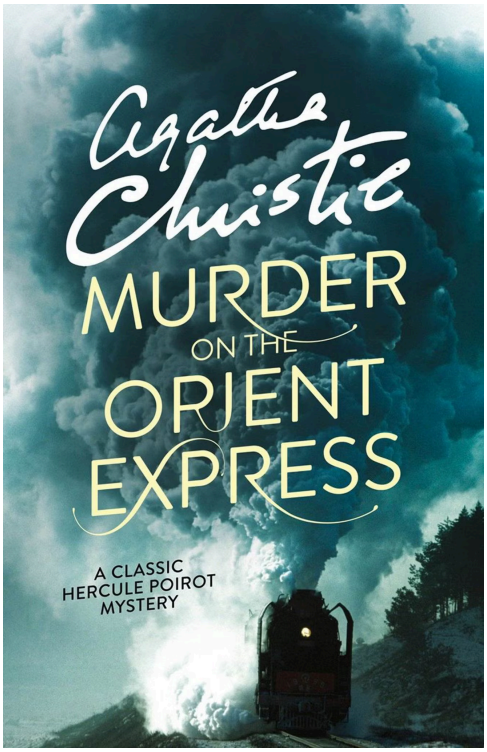
The conductor in France had barely said a word over the public address, but her German counterpart was much more garrulous. At Stuttgart, he announced that, despite our four-minute delay, travelers would make all onward connections as planned. By the time we got to Ulm, at the Bavarian border, he was pleased to report that we'd made up the lost four minutes.

On the other long sunlight run a day later, from Zagreb to Belgrade, it was hard to take the measure of the landscape, which was routinely blocked out by giant billboards advertising European Union-sponsored infrastructural improvements. And by now we were moving so slowly that the landscape barely indicated any sense of forward progress.

Inside the train, things had relaxed considerably since Germany. A tracksuited old man with a pumpkin-shaped head and a bulbous nose boarded and kicked me out of my seat by waving a grocery-store coupon he claimed was a reservation. As we poked along, he stood up and began to rant; the woman next to me translated from Croatian into German for my benefit: “In the old days these trains were a grand time. He used to drink beer and slivovitz and sing the old songs. Now, he says, with the E.U., it’s not only twice the price, it’s half the fun.” A shabby, leather-dressed man at the rear of our car, half-buried in the bottles he’d emptied, offered him a swig from his two-liter beer, but the old man was too committed to his lament to accept the possibility of fun.

The comically slow pace fostered a steady, low conversational burble that was lacking on the richer, faster Western European trains. It would take us some eight hours to cover what even a Yugo could do in three and a half, and passengers got up frequently and at whim to change their positions, like languorous competitors in an uncompetitive game of musical chairs. I was cornered by an Australian bound for Belgrade, her third visit there in as many weeks. Her circuitous path — she claimed to be heading for Bratislava — struck me as incomprehensible, but it was nice to pass the time in English.

At first, I’d been a little disappointed to find that these superannuated hauls had been mostly relegated to the dark hours. But it soon became clear enough that the night trains imparted as much, if not more, personality as their daytime counterparts. My first one, the Lisinski, from Munich to Zagreb, was hiccupy with the delirium of Oktoberfest. Women in dirndls stumbled onto the train, dragging men in lederhosen behind them off the platform.



The book that helped make the route famous.
Piero Oliosi/Polaris, via Newscom

The train itself, outfitted in tones of sea foam, felt more like a clanging convoy than the grandiose high-speed numbers I'd ridden thus far. I was perched on a top bunk, nose to the ceiling; below me were a few Belgians, an Australian and a German. The Belgians had special rail passes for Germany, Austria and Croatia, but none for the brief wee-hour stretch we'd pass in Slovenia, which was, unfortunately, our wagon attendant's birthplace. He was ready to forgive their error when it seemed as though they'd simply lost their pass. "Oh, we didn't lose it," they said, laughing with Northern European hauteur. "We just totally forgot Slovenia existed!"

"Actually," he said, without smiling, "that will be 28 euros."

My next night was spent in a chestnut-colored couchette — mildewy, threadbare, vaporous — from Belgrade to Sofia. I'd expected to be alone — anybody in his or her right mind would halve the time by driving — but I hadn't counted on the hearty good will of German backpackers, who in no time had set up an ad hoc hostel. The lone Balkans present, a Serbian Android coder and hip-hop dancer, and a German-trained Bulgarian lawyer, shared beers and told stories of war and childhood behind the Iron Curtain. We arrived at Sofia two hours late, long enough to appall the Germans and short enough to delight the Slavs.

I boarded my final couchette car, a whitewashed capsule with “Istanbul” stenciled in blue. Our attendant was Salim, a freshly shaven Turk in an emerald uniform. When I passed his compartment, curious about the blaring Anatolian folk music, he was openly smoking clove cigarettes and pouring tea for a Bosnian from a heavy bronze samovar rigged above a dangerous-looking propane camp stove. These seemed like valiant concessions to the glamour this train once had, and his example was an inspiration.

Over the whiskey I’d bought with my last fistful of Bulgarian levs, we huddled together in my compartment: a young Australian couple who’d heard we’d be at least five hours late; a Parisian who inexplicably divided his time between Seoul and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and talked about hitchhiking the length of the Karakoram Highway; and a Genevan who’d left Turkey, caught up in some minor intrigue, and was now re-entering it under his other passport.

For those continuing on to Baku and Tehran and other points east, the very first Orient Express route included a ferry ride to the Anatolian side of Istanbul. Our rail route was similarly interrupted. At Cerkezkoy, some 60 miles west of Istanbul, we were ushered through the black predawn onto a bus; work on a new Bosphorus tunnel has barred long-distance trains from reaching the city. The population of the entire train filled only half of one bus, and we soon barreled off toward the first smoky oranges of sunrise, finally making decent time. Minarets began to find fingerlike form against the sharpening horizon.

It may have felt like a slightly ignominious end to 2,000 miles of train travel to find ourselves stalled in rush-hour traffic, but somebody had factored this into the timetable. We puttered alongside the ferry wharves of the Golden Horn and into the parking lot of Sirkeci Terminal at 7:55 a.m. After six days of travel, I was only five minutes late.

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