

# ALL ABOARD!



## Four great ways to see the world through the window of a train.

**N**o sense denying it: There is a magic about trains. This magic can take hold early in life, and sometimes it never lets go.

Maybe it dates to all those childhood hours spent watching toy engines and boxcars chug around in circles on the basement floor. Maybe it comes through all the great songs we've heard over the years about lonesome whistles and trains a' comin'.

Maybe it's simple nostalgia here in the age of air travel, a longing for a time when we didn't have to take off our shoes here and latch our seat belts there.

**STORY BY JIM DUFFY**

Whatever the source, trains have a way of grabbing a special sort of hold in the imagination. The mere sound of one rolling in from the distance can stir something deep inside, a desire to climb aboard and see what adventures await out there on the rails.

That doesn't have to be a passing daydream. Great train journeys await in just about every corner of the world.

Here are snapshots of four of the grandest rail-travel opportunities to be found.









### CONTINENTAL EXTRAVAGANZA

When it comes to sheer luxury, no brand name in travel approaches the cache of the Orient Express. Oddly, though, the train's first-ever run on October 4, 1883, sounds like a rather arduous affair. The Express ran only from Paris to Vienna that day; a full rail connection with Istanbul wouldn't be available for another six years.

Instead, passengers were ferried across the Danube at Vienna and herded onto another train headed to the Bulgarian city of Varna, where they boarded yet another ferry to reach their final destination. But even such an inauspicious beginning didn't stop the Orient Express from

becoming synonymous in the decades that followed with most all of the sumptuous things in life—fine cuisine, exquisite service, lush accommodations and lavish surroundings.

**The Orient Express  
and other luxury rail  
lines in Europe date  
to the over-the-top  
railroad days of the  
1920s and 1930s.**

Alas, the original Express is no more; the train stopped running in the 1960s. Not to worry, though: The Venice Simplon-Orient Express is here to offer today's travelers a fair facsimile of the original experience. This Orient Express runs twice a week between London and Venice (with longer "premier journeys" sometimes offered to special destinations, including one to Istanbul in 2007).

The two-day, one-night trip to Venice begins in London's Victoria Station, aboard impeccably restored and appointed





**Photo page 23: Alaska Railroad's new double-deck dome cars pass breathtaking scenery. Page 24: The Venice Simplon-Orient Express passes through Lucerne, Switzerland. This page: a posh dining car on the Venice Simplon-Orient Express, left; unparalleled service on the Orient Express even comes to your door.**

old Pullman cars bearing such timeless-sounding names as *Minerva*, *Perseus* and *Phoenix*. Once over the Thames, the first order of business is a three-course lunch, served in leisurely fashion while the train rolls through London's suburbs and into the English countryside. The food is the work of top French chefs. The service is the province of an Italian wait staff.

At Dover, a brief detour intrudes on the mood as passengers disembark for a regular coach shuttle through the Channel Tunnel. But once safely on the continent, it's back into the reassuring lap of luxury. The blue-and-gold carriages of the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-lits et des Grands Express Europeens*, the French company that created the Orient Express and other luxury rail lines in Europe, date to the over-the-top railroad days of the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike the Pullmans, these cars are known only by numbers, but each boasts its own design pedigree, detailed history and elaborate furnishings.

On the Orient Express, the job of passengers is to eat, drink, sleep, eat some more, socialize and then eat still some more, all the while admiring the views out the window. Everything else is best left to stewards, waiters—and the always reliable maitre d'.

With arrival in Paris comes a formal French dinner, followed by piano entertainments over nightcaps in the bar car. The next morning, breakfast arrives with a full view of the Alps. Morning tea is next, and lunch arrives soon after a

brief stopover in Innsbruck. The descent into Italy offers some spectacular scenery, with Venice coming into view in the late afternoon.

*For detailed information about traveling through Europe aboard the Venice Simplon-Orient Express, visit [www.orient-express.com](http://www.orient-express.com).*

## ALASKAN VISTAS

Traced on a map, the Alaska Railroad looks like a bit of a letdown. The storied Denali Star line between Anchorage and Fairbanks covers just 356 miles, the tiniest sliver of the nation's largest state. Not to worry, though: Once this train starts rolling and leaves urban Anchorage behind, there's nothing small or modest about the vistas that soon come into view.

The country's tallest peak at 20,320 feet, distant Mount McKinley towers in the background as the train passes through sprawling wetlands, pristine pine forests and some amazingly rich farmland. (The growing season may be a scant three months here, but summer days deliver as many as 19 hours of crop-nourishing sunlight.) Don't forget to pack your binoculars, as the train slows frequently to let passengers properly admire the likes of moose, caribou and grizzly bears making their way in fields full of colorful wildflowers and lush blueberries.

Such scenery is the main reason more than half a million

travelers sign on every year for this 12-hour excursion. Most do so during the summer season when the entire trip unfolds in those long daylight hours. Owned by the state, the Alaska Railroad has earned a reputation for taking special care of its tourist trade. In addition to a staff of professional guides, the Denali Star is chock-full of helpful high school students who've been through an intensive four-month training regimen on the state's natural and cultural history.

The first of the two main stops en route to Fairbanks is Talkeetna, a classic frontier village that serves today as a base station for the adventurous souls who dream of climbing McKinley (only about half of those who try actually make it to the summit). River safaris and raft trips are available at this stop. So is the Museum of Northern Adventure, which has memorable tales to tell of gold rushers, bush pilots, mountaineers and other adventurers.

Denali is the second stop. Here, a bevy of buses and tour

companies will be waiting at the station to take passengers out to the spectacular Denali National Park and Preserve. At 6 million acres, the park is bigger than Massachusetts. It boasts an astonishing collection of wildlife amid sprawling tundras, glacial rivers and boreal forests. You can stay overnight at Denali, or linger for a week if you prefer, catching the train again at your convenience. No automobiles are allowed into the park's inner reaches; travelers make their way through the park aboard regular shuttle buses. Comprehensive bus tours also are available; a proper one will last anywhere from five to 13 hours.

Back aboard, the Denali Star covers the last leg of its journey to Fairbanks by traveling through several tunnels and then along the rocky ridges of the Nenana River Canyon, serving up breathtaking views of a river below that tends to flow wild and white. Coming into Fairbanks, the train passes over the Nenana along 702-foot-long Mears





Memorial Bridge, one of the world's longest single-span bridges. This is where President Warren G. Harding drove the golden spike that marked the completion of the construction of the railroad on July 15, 1923.

For detailed information on traveling the Alaska Railroad, visit [www.akrr.com](http://www.akrr.com). For information about visiting Alaska, visit [www.travelalaska.com](http://www.travelalaska.com).

## ACROSS VAST SIBERIA

Most of the world's great train trips are relatively convenient affairs, delivering levels of comfort in tune with our expectations of the modern world (and sometimes, as in the Orient Express, surpassing them). This is not the case with the Trans-Siberian Express between Moscow and Vladivostok.

For starters, this trip is uncommonly long—seven days, eight time zones and nearly 6,000 miles (not counting extensions into Mongolia and China). Then there's also the matter of scant creature comforts. Veterans of this trip report via the Internet a barrage of annoyances: iffy hot water supplies, sporadic housekeeping and dirty exterior windowpanes.

Then there's the food, which an online travel agency that has booked thousands of travelers on the line out of Beijing describes this way: "What you get in Russia has declined over the years ... So bring enough of your own instant whatever."

Intrepid travelers may well be able to shrug off such complications, however, and for them, the Trans-Siberian will be the trip of a lifetime.

This is the longest continuous rail line in the world, after all, extending more than one-third of the way around the globe while running through endless stretches of short-

## Rail Reads

Don't bring beach reading onto the train. Try these rail-flavored tomes instead:

*Murder on the Orient Express.*

by Agatha Christie

*The Great Railway Bazaar* and *The Old Patagonian Express.*

by Paul Theroux

*Nothing Like It in the World: The Men*

*Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad.*

by Stephen E. Ambrose

*Anna Karenina.*

by Leo Tolstoy

*The Edge.*

by Dick Francis

*The Great Train Robbery.*

by Michael Crichton

grass prairie (called "steppe" in Russia) and rich taiga forests. Construction of this railway began under Czar Alexander III in 1891, with convict work crews many thousands strong starting on opposite ends of the line and working toward the middle. The job took 14 years.

This is not a train geared to dawdling tourists. The two or three daily stops last less than half an hour each, barely enough time to run into a store for a few essentials. But opportunities for overnight stopovers abound. There's the millennium-old city of Yaroslavl, with its spectacular churches. Krasnoyarsk boasts fascinating gold-rush history and the nearby Stolby nature reserve.

Photo, page 26: An Alaska Railroad train runs along the Placer River. This page: The Trans-Siberian Express.



## Rail Extremities

These rail journeys offer travelers a glimpse of some genuinely world-class extremes, including:

- Alaska's Mount McKinley can make a case for itself as the world's tallest mountain. True, Everest rises to 29,000 feet above sea level (8,839 meters), but its base rests at 17,000 feet (5,181 meters). McKinley, by contrast, reaches its 20,000-foot peak (6,096 meters) from a starting point just 2,000 feet above sea level (609 meters). Do the math: McKinley's rise is 18,000 feet (5,486 meters), Everest's just 12,000 (3,657 meters).
- In Siberia, winter temperature can plummet below minus-90 degrees Fahrenheit (-68 Celsius).
- Travelers on the Venice Simplon-Orient Express pass through two of the world's longest tunnels. At 31 miles (50 kilometers), the Channel Tunnel between England and France ranks second. At 12 miles (19 kilometers), the Simplon Tunnel in the Alps ranks fifth. (The other three members of the top five are in Japan.)
- Except for railroad-less Antarctica, Australia is the world's driest continent. Parts of the desert outback that The Ghan traverses get just four inches of rain a year.

In Irkutsk, the Trans-Siberian skirts the shores of gorgeous Lake Baikal, the world's deepest body of fresh water. Siberian Ulan Ude is the center of Buddhist culture in Russia, home to a famous restored monastery called Ivolginsk Datsan. At the end of the line lies Vladivostok, a maritime city built around a spectacular harbor on the Pacific Ocean. It offers connections to whole new worlds of adventure: a ferry line to Japan, for instance, or a climb back aboard the train, this time headed down into China.

*There is no one Web site or phone number that delivers reliable and comprehensive information about traveling the Trans-Siberian. The best way to plan such a journey is through a travel agent with extensive experience in booking tickets and making arrangements in Russia.*



## HEADING INTO THE OUTBACK

One of the newest of the world's great train adventures awaits Down Under. Railroad buffs there endured the better part of a century salivating with anticipation over a long-planned north-south run across the Australian continent.

The first leg of the journey was completed all the way back in 1929, but it wasn't until 2004 that "The Ghan" finally began making its regular run from southern Adelaide to northern Darwin.

The two-day journey covers nearly 2,000 miles and boasts some of the world's most remote and astounding natural scenery. In some stretches, the view from the train window will seem quite forbidding — The Ghan takes its name from the Afghan camel trains that in the 1800s offered the only means of transport through the vast Australian desert. In other stretches, the view will be majestic — rivers in the remote Northern Territories run through rock-lined canyons on the scale of the American Grand Canyon.

With two locomotives and about 40 carriages, The Ghan stretches more than half a mile along the rails. It offers the usual array of accommodations, from the scrunched-in-your-seat basics all the way up to the Prince of Wales private carriage, which sleeps 10 and has its own private lounge.

Railroad travel Down Under has come a long way since the making of the popular old legends about trains stranded so long by flash floods that conductors had to venture out on hunting expeditions to feed the passengers.

The Ghan makes two main sightseeing stops. The first is at Katherine Gorge, a seven-mile stretch of deep orange canyon lined by steep cliffs rising more than 200 feet above the Katherine River. Here, Ghan passengers can sign on for canoe trips, boat cruises and helicopter flyovers.





**Photo, page 28: The Ghan crosses the Ferguson River. This page: Local residents welcome The Ghan to the town of Katherine, top; private lounge in The Ghan's Prince of Wales carriage.**

The other is the city of Alice Springs. Nearby Desert Park showcases the environment of the famed Australian outback and explores the culture of the continent's aborigines. City tours, park tours, automated no-pedal bicycle rides and helicopter flyovers are all available here.

Urban Darwin is The Ghan's final destination. When the train arrived here on its maiden trip two years ago, a group of 60 fun-loving locals greeted it with a perfectly choreographed stunt, all bending over in unison to moon The Ghan and its passengers. Obviously, Australians can be a quirky and unpredictable bunch.

If you don't get enough of a taste of the country while aboard The Ghan, don't worry. You can sign on for a trip aboard the Indian Pacific, the train line that runs east-west across the continent between Sydney and Perth.

**For information on traveling The Ghan, visit [www.gsr.com.au](http://www.gsr.com.au). For information about visiting Australia, see [www.australia.com](http://www.australia.com).**

