

Track Magic

There's something irresistibly alluring about trains. Look back to the golden era of the great express trains and even the hardest cynic enters a reverie of misty-eyed nostalgia – the gently swaying carriages, immaculate porters waiting on the platform, the ever-changing view racing past your window.

And then there's the romance and intrigue of it all. The train had everything – opulence, excitement, fine cuisine and the ability to glide across international borders, often overnight – ideal for romantic interludes, clandestine meetings and roving spies travelling from one region to another.

As the express trains of old criss-crossed Europe and beyond, they attracted the rich and famous – as well as the infamous – and in turn created backdrops to plots by such famous writers and directors as Agatha Christie, Graham Greene and the master of suspense films: Alfred Hitchcock.

Now most of these famous trains are only distant memories, superseded in the 1950s and 60s by air travel. Railway lovers mourned the gradual demise of those great express trains – today, most people regard a train journey merely as a dreary commute from A to B. The halcyon days of rail travel seemed to be dying.

But not dead. Noble Caledonia has teamed up with luxury train travel experts GW Travel to offer a tempting choice of classic rail trips. With these itineraries, it is still possible to recreate those elegant days, whether you are chugging past the paddy fields of China or the snowy peaks of Canada's Rocky Mountains. And then there's the world's longest and most famous train experience, the one that every train enthusiast longs to do – the Trans-Siberian Railway. Just uttering its name evokes romantic images of frosted plains, snowy steppes, moody skies, scenes from *Dr Zhivago* and strangesounding cities – Perm, Omsk, and Blagoveshchensk.

Lesley Blanch, in her semi-autobiographical book *Journey Into the Mind's Eye*, perfectly encapsulated the passion and mystery that has surrounded the great Trans-Sib – the icon of the rail world: *'Best of all, he would tell me of the great train that ran across half the world... He held me enthralled then, and today, a lifetime later, the spell still holds. He told me the train's history, its beginnings... how a Tsar had said, "Let the Railway be built!" And it was... For me, nothing was ever the same again. Gradually, I became possessed by the love of a horizon and a train which would take me there.'*

A few Westerners had braved the Trans-Siberian in Soviet times, travelling behind hulking steam locomotives, smoke boxes emblazoned with a massive Red Star. But 6,000 miles in a six-day, non-stop trip down the line from Moscow to Vladivostok wasn't necessarily a fulfilling journey for tourists eager to experience the new Russian Republic.

One of GW Travel's early ambitions was to introduce a more leisurely and luxurious 14-day journey that included several stops along the way. The concept was to recreate one of the great trains of the past, combining stylish, luxurious sleeping carriages, bar and lounge cars with impeccable service and cuisine. They even negotiated with the Russians to buy one of their last steam locomotives. Dealing with the Russian way of doing things wasn't always easy – since those early years there have been battles against an endless stream of petty bureaucracy, corrupt officials and Dickensian ways of doing business.

In 1996, for example, GW needed to pay all sightseeing companies along the Trans-Siberian route, none of which could receive foreign transfers. Cash was the only option. The amount needed for the six-week round trip was a staggering US\$160,000. A security guard was employed to guard the money 24 hours a day. Only halfway through the trip was it pointed out that the amount he was looking after was more than he could earn in ten lifetimes. Fortunately, he was not tempted.

After setting up the luxury Trans-Siberian Express, it was time to look further afield to the line that links Russia and China, following the route of the famous Silk Road. It seemed a natural transition to take the train that ran between Moscow and Vladivostok along the Silk Route to the Chinese border. After months of negotiation, everything came together, creating a once-in-a-lifetime rail adventure that would be almost impossible for the independent traveller to complete.

From Moscow, the train takes in the mountains, deserts and cities of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan before reaching China. For many, this is one of the last great border crossings in the world. Passengers are transported by bus from the broad-gauge Russian train through no-man's land to the standard-gauge China Orient Express, a government train that was once used by Chairman Mao. On the way, a great deal of patience and endless form-filling is necessary to cross the border, but it's an essential part of the experience and provides a memorable stamp for any passport. The journey then continues through China's Gobi desert, past the Magao Thousand Buddha cave complex at Dunhuang, Xian's terracotta warriors and many other fascinating highlights before finally arriving in Beijing and its Forbidden City.

The sublime landscapes of China lend themselves perfectly to exploration by train. Thousands of miles of train track weave their way through the heartland of real China where rural tranquillity collides with modern reality. Pass fields of women stooping over green patches of vegetables or silvery rice paddies, heavily laden water buffalo plodding their tortuous way across fields, the velvety limestone hills of Guilin and the vibrant, colourful and everexpanding cities. The prestigious Shangri-La Express does just that, carrying wide-eyed passengers through the country between Beijing and Hong Kong, stopping off at the Three Gorges as well as a special winter tour to the Harbin Ice Festival.

2006 is an exciting year for train enthusiasts. The Chinese are building a line between the Gobi desert and Lhasa, enabling tourists to travel to the Tibetan capital by train for the first time – the highest passenger line in the world. From September, GW is running the first deluxe train to Lhasa, where extra oxygen will be pumped into the carriages to counter the high altitude – and the breathtaking views of the Himalaya. Another exciting venture in 2006 will be the first ever luxury train to travel right across the Indian subcontinent. The Darjeeling Mail is a 16-day journey from Calcutta to Mumbai (or vice versa) taking in India's icons – the Taj Mahal, Varanasi, Delhi, Jaipur and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. It allows guests to see the classic India from the decadent carriages of The Viceroy of India as they travel some 2,230 miles through Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. On board, every tiny detail has been carefully considered to create the perfect fusion between the stylish luxuries of train travel with cutting edge, modern facilities. It is sure to become one of the classic train journeys of the future. One thing we can be sure of is that the era of the train is far from dead. Not only can discerning travellers explore the world in style aboard a luxury 'hotel on wheels', but they can get to obscure and remote destinations that would otherwise be almost impossible to reach. The number of people being seduced by the adventure of rail travel is on the rise, and while more and more areas around the world are opening up, the good news is that this is set to continue.