



## A SEASONED TRAVELLER

THE VENICE SIMPLON-ORIENT EXPRESS CONJURES UP NOTIONS OF ROMANCE, MYSTERY AND MURDER. HENRY DALLAL DISCOVERS HOW EVEN A SEASONED TRAVELLER CANNOT FAIL TO BE IMPRESSED BY THE ULTIMATE IN LUXURY TRAVEL.

**THE TIME:** OCTOBER 4, 1983. The place: Paris' Gare d'Est. The scene: the inauguration of a new long-distance express train service from Paris to Strasbourg, Vienna, Budapest, Bucharest and Thessalonica to the Bosporus in Istanbul.

A next age of luxurious travel was about to begin: the famed Orient-Express became the world's most glamorous train and preferred conveyance of royalty and politicians. On the inside track of history, intrigue was the constant travelling companion, rulers merged with spies; and socialites entertained courtiers.

Subsequent European wars and revolutions reduced the service to an unrecognisable shadow. By the late seventies, coaches were dispersed across the continent and the proud Wapen-Lit's reputation would have disappeared, had it not been for a prominent spark in James Sherwood's imagination. At a Monte Carlo auction in October 1976, he acquired two sleeper coaches which became the nucleus of the reconstructed train. No railway siding or yard was left unscathed as the hulls for lost coaches began. They were collected and shipped to workshops for reconstruction and refurbishment. Original blueprints were consulted and the dining car interiors, the pride of designer giants like the immortal René Lalique, began to glow once again.

In 1982, the Venice-Simplon-Orient Express made its inaugural journey from London's Victoria Station to Venice's Santa Lucia, where

is a fresh age of elegant travel. It is here that we begin our own adventure as we step off the train and are whisked away by motor launch down the Grand Canal and onto the island lagoon of Giudecca and the Hotel Capota.

The hotel is an oasis of comfort and luxury surrounded by the Renaissance majesty of Venice. Carefully planted gardens with abundant fountains and flowers decorate what has to be the most serene, elegant and stylish address in Venice. The sounds of the seagulls, gondolas and canal traffic merge with the symphony of continuous church bells creating an enchanting atmosphere.

The hotel staff attend to every whim and detail. Our suite, complete with four private bedrooms, has a 360-degree view of the magnificent Venetian lagoon. The interiors are lavishly luxurious, yet informal. They are comfortable to the extent that you have to force yourself to leave the calmness of the hotel, to join in the frenetic city which is just five minutes away. If you wish, breakfast is quietly rolled into your room to help you contemplate how to spend the rest of the day. There are so many options.

To spend a pleasant day away from the crowds you could visit the island of Burano. A reliable boat service leaves Venice every hour. En route, it stops to pick up the glassblowers from the island of Murano who are returning from work.

This charming little island has a most colourful village laced with canals and waterways. It is difficult to imagine a more picturesque setting. Each home is painted a different shade of pastel – pinks, yellows, blues – that neatly line the canals with a rainbow of colour reflecting in the water.

The island is known for traditional lace making, and is home to the last remaining lace school. The men are either fishermen or work in the glass factories, which have been producing stunning glassware for over 800 years.

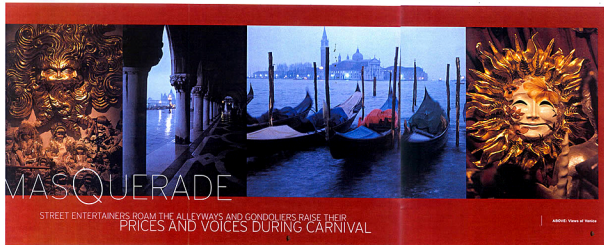
The heart of the village is in the main piazza, which is surrounded by vendors selling fruits, vegetables and fine linens. At the end of each day, the trattorias are crowded with market stallholders and noisy locals sharing a glass of wine, telling stories and exchanging news over a meal of freshly caught fish and pasta. As darkness falls, old men can be seen strolling over the cobblestone streets while their wives walk together arm in arm catching up on the local gossip. Couples linger over coffee before walking hand in hand onto the busy piazza where excited children run amongst the throng.

As I enjoy my meal, I reflect upon the magical experience of the last few days and a journey that seems to have had an element of time travel attached to it. From the enduring grace of the famous Venice-Simplon-Orient Express to the timeless elegance of Venice with its never-ending canals and all-encompassing lagoons.

FOR MORE INFORMATION  
Contact Orient-Express Tours +44 (0)203 857 9300

ABOVE: Scenes of Burano, the Orient Express and Venice.

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## MASQUERADE

STREET ENTERTAINERS ROAM THE ALLEYWAYS AND GONDOLIERS RAISE THEIR PRICES AND VOICES DURING CARNIVAL

The most elegant emanation of European carnivals is that of Venice. It dates back to the Middle Ages and reached its full splendour in the eighteenth century when even the poorest of its inhabitants enjoyed the freedom of the mask and disguise. The 'mask', a black and white mask, and the Venetian-style fringed hat were the cheapest and most common apparel, used by both men and all classes. The nobles frequently dressed as peasants or fishermen and men dressed as women.

Carnival declined after 1797, when Napoleon abolished the Venetian republic, and was only revived in 1989 when the mayor resurrected its official decree. The carnival has gradually blossomed into a haunting and beautiful spectacle: the old masquerade shows have reopened, and costumes are elaborate and breathtakingly beautiful.

Everyone has a chance to perform on this urban stage, partly middle-aged men don masks for an evening stroll; even dogs may be seen in costume. Visitors and locals alike retreat behind the mask, wearing flowing robes, the plague doctor with his beaked nose walks again, harlequins – the line with the Commedia dell'arte – is much seen, along with clowns and Punchinello, Pantalones and Columbianos. Some visitors arrive with different costumes for every night of the posing and parading.

All the weekend, throngs gather in St. Mark's Square trying to squeeze into Florian's café. Foreigners, particularly the English tourists, group around Henry's Bar. There are parties in every square, concerts in the churches, private balls in the magnificent palaces. Venetian music fills the air and a band plays – as always – in St. Mark's.

Events are organized by the city, based on an annual theme. The Golden and Silver Masquerade after opera and drama. Museums and galleries have special displays. Local community organisations create special events. Street entertainers roam the alleyways and gondoliers raise their prices and sing more loudly during carnival, plying their way through the muddy, chilly canals.

Apart from St. Mark's Square, which in carnival time more often lives up to Napoleon's description of it as 'the drawing room of Europe', the Rialto Bridge is a centre of carnival activity with street artists, pizzerias and for children, games, acrobats, puppet shows, games and costume contests.

During carnival, the city moves en masse, onto the streets. There are workshops where the face can be painted by professional make-up artists and their students.

In the final evenings of carnival, there are splendid costumed balls, also held in St. Mark's Square. Carnival ends with the burning of the carnival king's symbol tied to a post, as fireworks explode over the Giudecca Canal. Jangling in, you can don a swirling silk cape or kaftan and buy an erotic mask to take part anonymously – a delight for normally inhibited Anglo-Saxons.

TOUR COMPANIES can make the necessary arrangements to visit Venice at carnival time – but book well ahead. City Hall, which used the Grand Canal for a fourteenth-century palace with its canal side view of the action as well as the Campo and Rialto Bridge on the Grand Canal near St. Mark's, have carnival packages. For real style the Venice-Simplon-Orient Express is the only way to make the romantic journey to Venice. Carnival spirit starts back in London as passengers find mask, corset, champagne and commensurate glasses in their berth before departing on what has become the ultimate expression of refinement on wheels. Throughout the night, as the train roars across borders, the legendary Bar car, an unmitigated combination of ivory cocktail parlor and even better cocktails, holds some of the most sophisticated parties in Europe before arriving at Venice's Santa Lucia station as the masquerade commences.