



Sit back and enjoy a first class ride on the new Orient Express route from Stockholm to Venice

A WHISTLE blasts as the Orient Express slides out of Stockholm's Central Station. Hugo, our aqua blue-uniformed steward pops a bottle of prosecco.

Paris with fair city to be seen, watching the shrinking skyline. For all its easy-going equilibrium image, Sweden's capital is an imperial city of gracious facades and plume-dotted cavalry guarding a royal residence bigger than Buckingham Palace.

No wonder the world's most illustrious train seems at home here.

My wife, Hennie, and I had down in to join her a jaunt to Copenhagen, the first leg of the train's journey home to Venice.

For us, it's a case of relishing the minimalist opulence of 1920s-style rail travel, bookended by another in each of two historic Scandinavia rail capitals.

We stay in regal style at the harbour side Grand Hotel, where Central Express sets up the check-in desk in the lobby which, alarmingly, is swarming with silk gowns and gowns in white tie.

Suddenly they all swoop off into a gilded hall to meet His Majesty King Carl Gustaf.

Not our fellow travellers after all, please.

It's a shortish walk to the Central Station, where the gold-lettered, navy engravings stretch along the platform.

We settle into our mahogany-paneled cabin. There's a washbasin in a corner cabinet, but loos are in a shared compartment, down the corridor (another touch of 1920s authenticity).

Not are there showers, which is why every night on board is followed by a city hotel stay.

The private-run train is not exactly hot to the renowned Swedish minimalist by Agatha Christie which connected European cities with London, on the other hand, the Twenties and Thirties vintage cars are lovingly restored by the Venice Simplon Orient Express (VSOE) company, clearly share the same gene pool.

Calais to Venice is a 1,000-mile, stock-in-trade, but these days the company sets its bounds wider, with numerous different European departures.

MODERN trains designed for speed and with wi-fi, can make the journey from Sweden's east coast and over the Øresund Bridge to Copenhagen in less than five hours.

However, the point of this venture is to stretch and savour the experience, so instead we strike out first across central Sweden towards Gothenburg.

From here, our meandering route takes us down the west coast to Malmö on the country's southern tip, facing the Danish capital, before dark tunnels we snake alongside lakes and through forests of fir ming with silver birches. But beware, through the message screen on



by Martin Symington

most people the focus of this trip is the on-board scenery.

Dinner is the principal event, served in a trio of private dining cars decorated with art deco motifs and leather-upholstered seats. Hennie slips on a chic mauve dress. I change into my suit and tie and we settle down to taste a chef Christian Boudier's four-course dinner.

The menu fuses Michelin star-standard classical French with Nordic virtues: fillets of codder marinated in squabi, cooked in a cloudberry sauce.

At cloudberries, those silky codder nuggets of eppor nectarine. From the Arctic. What a touch.

After that, we have digestifs in the bar car, where a pianist in a silver suit sits at a lily grand tinkling melodies including traditional Alde songs (available, I suppose). At least half the company is Scandinavian, and a few leopards later an inopportune eruption breaks out.

Meanwhile, Hugo is busy transforming the velvet bench seats of our cabin into roomy upper and lower bunks made up with crisp linens.

"Whose turn is it to go on top?" queries a happy lady across the corridor to her tasselled berth. Hugo's singular beds face the pinnacle of sophisticated travel this train may be, but just the impression he is used to bearing variations on this bit of rivalry.

When we stop at Angelholm station, the platform is thronging with fans. We feel like film stars, though the real celebrity is the train. In the end there's a snarl. The only locomotive allowed to haul these carriages over the

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First stop: Gamla Stan in Stockholm and a steward on the Orient Express

A MasterChef class in Moroccan cuisine

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But even the most hopeless of cooks can experience a little MasterChef magic on their new food-focused holidays with a winner or finalist from the show. Even better, the trips are all about eating fine food, not just cooking it.

There's India with Dhruv Baker or Thailand with Andrew Kojima. I chose Marrakech with Keri Moss, joint winner of MasterChef: The Professionals in 2012.

We roam souks infused with spices before emerging onto the Red City's chaotic central square, Djemaa el-Fna. Donkeys and scooters dodge snake charmers and crowds gather around the dozens of outdoor restaurants where grilled meat sizzles and snail soup bubbles.

We journey to saffron farms and Berber blossom oil. 'Not good,' she tuts, like MasterChef judge Monica Galetti, at my attempt.

Fouiza was taught to cook at the age of five by her grandmother. 'My recipes have been passed down generations. They're all up here,' she says, tapping her head.

A feast is served on the flower-filled rooftop, where storks soar overhead and calls to prayer echo through the air. We eat milky camel meat (tastier than it sounds) and an aubergine, fennel and blood orange salad prepared by Keri.

The briouats are a big hit. As Gregg would say, eating doesn't get better than this!

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villages in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains; tour the city's famous sights and its backstreet ovens where families take their dough to be baked.

We're never far from a foodie treat: tender tagines; spongy coconut macarons and street-side mechoui lamb, cooked in an underground pit and served with a sprinkling of salty cumin.

But we prepare the best meal in the kitchens of our plush riad, the Dar les Cigognes.

Under the watchful eyes of Keri and Fouiza — one of the riad's rotund dadas (cooks traditionally employed by wealthy Moroccan families) — we go to work 'fluffing' piping hot couscous.

Later, Fouiza demonstrates how to prepare delicate samosa-like briouats with sweet and savoury fillings like spiced beef and rice with raisins and a splash of orange blossom oil.

MasterChef Travel (0207 873 5005; mastercheftravel.com) offers four-night trips to Marrakech from £995pp including flights, transfers, accommodation, breakfast daily and some other meals. Keri Moss is accompanying a trip departing November 16, 2015, priced from £1,395 pp.

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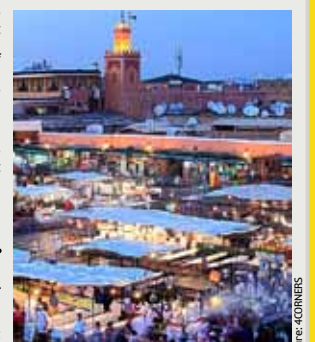
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