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Luxury Balkans

My epic train trip from Venice to Istanbul

A nostalgic journey aboard a plush sleeper is a magical way to see this corner of Europe. By **Nicole Trilivas**

On a wet night, on a train somewhere deep in the Serbian countryside, with a dry martini in hand, I can't help but feel I am experiencing something magical.

Trains — especially nostalgia-inducing private sleeper trains like this one — transport you to a different era. Out of all the spiffy new sleeper trains hitting the rails of late (see the new high rollers from Belmond and Orient Express), Golden Eagle Luxury Trains' Danube Express is neither the newest nor the most aesthetically pleasing, but I can't argue with what's outside the window. Croatian hillsides gilded in extravagant morning light. A heavy-green Bosnian horizon punctuated with minarets. Wide, flat fields unfurled carpet-like before Bulgaria's Rhodope mountains.

No, it's not the most luxurious train, despite the roughly £20,000-a-head price for this trip, but I'd argue it is the most spoiling way to see this curious corner of Europe, starting in Venice and ending in Istanbul, while chugging through Bulgaria and former Yugoslav countries — including Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and — along the way. It's why my fellow 40-odd passengers and I have climbed aboard this hotel on wheels for the 11-night trip: we want the Balkans but we want it in comfort.

"I've done river cruises and cruises along the coast but nothing goes inland like this," one guest tells me when I ask what made her choose the Balkan Explorer journey, which has been running for a decade. Like many of us, she's impressively well travelled but had never been to the Balkan peninsula. And now feels like the right time to check it out, especially since Golden Eagle made some tweaks to this year's itinerary, including adding new stops in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and extending the stop in Belgrade with an overnight hotel stay at the

modern-classic Bristol Belgrade, which dates back to 1912.

A private-island hotel stay in Venice

We kick things off with two nights in Venice at the garden-draped private island hotel San Clemente Palace, but the real fun starts when we board the train at Santa Lucia station on the Grand Canal and settle into our en suite cabins. They feature wood panelling, Prussian blue damask curtains and, crucially, a private bathroom with shower (plus L'Occitane amenities).

As the train snakes from the Venetian lagoon, we lunch on silky white mushroom risotto and cold pinot grigio in the dining carriages, then disembark for a short loop around the Adriatic port city of Trieste. We're back aboard for a dinner of cool fennel and citrus salad and buttery lamb chops (plus live piano music in the bar car) while en route to Slovenia, the first of the six socialist republics of Yugoslavia to declare sovereignty in 1990. We don't yet get into politics, instead ending the day with a private night-time tour of the spectacular netherworld of the Postojna Cave, a five-minute drive from the Postojna railway station. Another new addition to this year's itinerary, the private cave tour is made even more special by a surprise saxophone concert. The cave's otherworldly acoustics are chill-inducing, with notes chasing each other through the dripping snow-white stalactites.

Once back on board, we retire to our turned-down cabins, where banquet seats have been transformed into beds, and speed into the inky night towards Croatia. Unfortunately, because of rail works we aren't able to make our scheduled stops and tour the newly added coastal destinations of Pula and Rijeka. Instead we spend a rain-dreary day on a plan B of wine tasting in Istria's hilltop town of Motovun. Not a bad alternative, we all agree.

From Slovenia and Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina

Things start to get especially interesting from here, when Alpine-esque Slovenia and the gauzy Mediterranean haze of Croatia give way to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Bulgaria, which still have that opulent, pastel-pretty Austro-Hungarian influence, only with a more pronounced, obvious Yugoslav and Ottoman past alongside it.



The Old Bridge, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina



The Danube Express

I wake to a steamy Americano brought to my cabin and Bosnia and Herzegovina churning past my window, mosques and sun-catching Orthodox domes now joining the Catholic churches peppering the landscape. Our first stop is in the capital, Sarajevo. We arrive into its main railway station, which is strangely empty, like almost all the others on the trip. In the labyrinthine old city centre, which looks unchanged from its Silk Road heyday, we drink strong Bosnian coffee served in

long-handled copper pots in cafés and stand, chillingly, in the very spot where Archduke Franz Ferdinand met his demise courtesy of a bullet from a Yugoslav nationalist, kicking off the First World War. But first we visit the Tunnel of Hope.

Now we talk politics. At each stop we're introduced to local guides. Some are decidedly better than others, notably in Bosnia. Fariz tells us, "I was born in 1998, after the war," as we make our way to the tunnel, hand-dug in 1993 during the Siege of



The dining car

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Sarajevo to transport supplies, "but the stories are all personal, from my family." He tells us about the Bosnian War through throat-tightening statistics but what sticks most are his anecdotes. "My uncle once traded his leather jacket for a pack of cigarettes," he says.

Growing up in the 1990s, my association with much of this area was shaped by that war but it feels like the right time to forge different, positive links in both Sarajevo and the vivid tourist hub of Mostar, about two hours southwest on the train. It's famed for its arched bridge and the steely-nerved locals, who are known to leap from it into the milky-green Neretva River — one of the coldest in Europe, hovering at about 7-10C.

From Belgrade to Bulgaria and the last stop, Istanbul

Next it's an overnight train ride to Belgrade, the one-time capital of Yugoslavia, to see its new expensive mixed-use waterfront and vintage red trams. We drink rakija in the ancestral townhouse-turned-museum House of Jevrem Grujić ("Drink five and you'll get a Serbian passport," I'm told) and visit the mid-century modern train of Tito, the former president of Yugoslavia. It sits in an old depot on the outskirts of the city and there's something strange about sipping Tito's favourite whisky, Chivas Regal, on board from original cut-crystal snifters still stamped "Made in Yugoslavia".

Then it's on to Bulgaria — an overnight journey southeast — for a swift spin of

Sofia, seeing only its tidy, communist-era side, all serious and severe. Many of us vow to return one day to properly visit.

Our stops are memorable but too fast and fleeting, just a taste. When I think back on them, I remember them in snippets: a talismanic cigarette left in tribute on the marble-monolith grave of Tito in Belgrade; waxy candle smoke curling heavenwards through cloudy shafts of light in Sofia's neo-Byzantine St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral; a schoolboy playing folk songs on a bagpipe-like *gaida* on the leafy, hilly streets of Bulgaria's second city, Plovdiv.

My more defined memories are aboard the train. My fellow travellers — Britons, Americans, Kiwis, Koreans, Brazilians, Malaysians — are a delight, as are the sincere, hard-working staff, many from Serbia or Hungary, where the train is based. It's an intimate experience, all of us crammed together like this, and you can't help but make friends (this surprises me, as train travel typically makes me want to stare into the middle distance in wordless reverie rather than socialise, but there's time for both). I wake up giddy, opening my cabin curtains to new countries, and fall into sleep seduced by my unexpectedly comfortable double bed dressed in white sheets and topped with a Hungarian Stühmer truffle. Even the dead-of-night passport checks in cigarette-smoke-filled border stations such as Kalotina Zapad on the Serbian-Bulgarian border feel part of the adventure.

Hospitality comes in various forms,

Need to know

Nicole Trilivas was a guest of Golden Eagle Luxury Trains, which has 11 nights — six nights' full board on the train, two nights' B&B in Venice, one night's full board in Belgrade, and two nights' B&B in Istanbul — from £20,279pp in a twin cabin, including some extra meals (goldeneagleluxurytrains.com). Fly to Venice and from Istanbul. Next tour dates: Oct 2-13, 2026 (waiting list); May 7-18, 2027; Sep 10-21, 2027; Oct 19-30, 2027

and aboard the train it's best expressed in the food, served on monogrammed china, atop pressed white tablecloths. Ever-changing oven-fresh bread, velvety Argentine steak, caviar-crowned scallops on the half shell atop a pink beach of Himalayan sea salt: I have no idea how the long-time F&B manager Krisztian Szoke and his ace team do it, wizarding up these multicourse fine-dining feasts in tiny, teetering train kitchens. Served by lamplight in two rattling dining cars, every night is an occasion. The tables seat two or four and work perfectly well for solo travellers like me, yet most nights I end up sharing them with others, drifting into conversations that range from the meaningful to the joyously

inconsequential. "Small human moments," Szoke calls them. And somehow, here those moments feel easier to find.

After Bulgaria, it's an overnight trip to Turkey. We wake in Istanbul, bustling and crowded and fragrant, and alight for the last time. The spell cast by the train is unmistakably broken (even though we still have two more lovely nights at the saffron-hued Four Seasons Sultanahmet). "I hope your writing will carry the same special atmosphere of the train," Szoke tells me when I leave, "so that people will understand why all of this is so unique and meaningful." I hope so too — but words only go so far. Until you come aboard, it's hard to understand.

