

WWD WEEKEND

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Reviving the Golden Age of Travel

A journey through luxury experiences that blend nostalgia with curated slow travel moments.

BY SOFIA CELESTE

ROME – Inside the new Orient Express La Minerva hotel in Rome, the lobby bar is punctuated with ferns and palms, big band music is playing as waiters in impeccable white uniforms and well-coiffed hair serve gin and tonics to the international jet set. If it weren't for the absence of cigarette and cigar smoke, one might feel directly transported to the 1930s.

Opened in April, it also unveiled Gigi Roma, a swanky bar and restaurant terrace furnished with the brass detailing and plush velvety furnishings prevalent in dining cars of yore. The talk of the town for locals and visitors alike, it's so close to the Pantheon one can almost touch the travertine

benches carved into the exterior of its dome.

Is this experience a relic or replica of a bygone age? One of the Orient Express' key partners, Arsenale Group, says the provocative mix of both is key.

"We are giving shape to a new concept of ultra-luxury hospitality," says Arsenale chief executive officer Paolo Barletta, adding that Rome, the cradle of the Roman Empire, is the perfect playground for such an experiment. Accor, which owns the Orient Express brand with LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, says a lot of it has to do with the training of its staff and the design, for which award-winning artist and architect Hugo Toro made bespoke Art Deco-era pieces constructed to mirror the group's train.

French writer Stendhal once stayed in the



Orient Express
La Minerva, Rome.

main suite of what was known as La Minerva, first built in the 17th century as the residence of a Portuguese noble family and which later became a main stop on the Grand Tour for international aristocrats of the era. The Stendhal Suite now houses bespoke bedside trunks, rich wooden detailing reminiscent of the legendary carriages, and luxurious bedding crafted by Rivolta Carmignani, the same linens once gracing Orient Express sleeper cars and which make it ever more possible to travel in time. Initially founded by a Belgian rail company and famous for connecting Europe with Asia, the Orient Express train embarked on its first journey, from Paris to Vienna, in 1883 and eventually extended services across continental Europe through to Istanbul. The first Orient Express yacht will set sail in 2026.

Dimorestudio on Channeling Old Maestros

April also marked the maiden voyage of the new and improved Orient Express, with interior designs by Dimorestudio, the architecture and design firm established by Emiliano Salci and Britt Moran. The duo propelled the decor into the '50s and '60s, celebrating the brilliance of Italian masters Gio Ponti, Nanda Vigo, Gae Aulenti and Osvaldo Borsani.

"It's about creating spaces where travelers can fully immerse themselves in the experience, where every detail contributes to a sense of wonder, comfort, and escape from the ordinary," Salci reflects in an interview.

Moran said the design process involved understanding this new traveler. In a lot of ways they are a lot like the upscale design client in search of rare pieces steeped in history and ultimate quality.

"We imagine a curious, cultured traveler, someone who appreciates design, craftsmanship, and storytelling. A person who seeks not only to reach a destination but to savor the journey itself, embracing both the historical legacy and the contemporary reinterpretation of this legendary train," he says.

Designing for the Elite Traveler

Paris-based designer Aline Asmar d'Amman is working on Orient Express' upcoming Venice location, which will open inside the fabled Palazzo Donà Giovannelli later this year. Asmar d'Amman explains that she's also designing for the type of person who took journeys in the '50s through the '70s, a time when generally only the elite travelled, experiencing lavishness and glamour in every detail.

"The Golden Age meant haute couture uniforms and tailored suits, gastronomy and socializing in plane lounges fit for a party. Now we're just a click away from overcrowded, overwhelming traveling experiences. Artistry and spaces that embrace a rich cultural tapestry, make you want to dress up, unleashing character and attitude. A discerning traveler seeks these tailored experiences where culture and lifestyle are elevated to the utmost refinement," she muses.

Asmar d'Amman is also involved in the design of the Middle East's first five-star train, which will afford travelers a privileged view of the desert for the very first time. Named the Dream of the Desert, the train is also another project of which Arsenale is involved, this time partnering with the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Culture and Saudi Arabia's Railways.

Saudi heritage elements feature inside the Dream of the Desert, as Asmar d'Amman said she spent hours looking at the details of a Saudi facade, the intricate textile weavings, the wood carvings, and the oil lamps whose light diffuses a cinematographic mood, interpreting these through a delicate modern lens, adapted to the train space and constraints. The suites, she said, are characterized by rich wood marquetry, luxurious upholstery, sensual lighting and bespoke furniture.

"From the reception lounge to the restaurant, the interiors become a continuous meditation on presence and place in motion, touching upon a noble notion of travel. Passengers who seek to feel a sense of belonging, of suspended time – where comfort, beauty and culture come together in a sensorial crescendo – will be served. My aim is to induce this feeling by

translating it into a tactile and visual language: velvety textiles that invite touch, warm woods that recall traditional dwellings, sculptural lighting that creates intimacy," she adds.

An Investment Opportunity

Cashing in on the heyday of the Golden Age and its landmarks is on the rise. Earlier this month, Yoox Net-a-porter Group founder Federico Marchetti revealed his foray into the hospitality world, joining a consortium of investors to restore the old Belle Époque landmark Grand Hôtel des Bains on the shores of Venice's Lido.

Opened in 1900, the fabled resort was long a Venetian refuge for cultural glitterati and has hosted Winston Churchill, poet Ezra Pound and celebrities including Elizabeth Taylor, Marcello Mastroianni, George Clooney, Johnny Depp and Madonna. "Venice is the land of dreams – and the Des Bains is its antechamber," wrote Thomas Mann, author of "Death in Venice," about the Grand Hôtel des Bains.



Slow Travel Replaces Revenge Travel

Earlier this year, data analysts and research firm Euromonitor International said "slow travel" has replaced the "revenge travel" that permeated after the COVID-19 pandemic. "Consumers are still spending well on things that really matter, and travel consistently remains a spending priority... consumers are willing to trade up to options that offer a combination of more meaningful experiences, but also good value for money

and pricing transparency," the firm's Insights Research Manager Stephen Dutton said, adding that this is extending itself into the mass market.

Research like this is indicative of a changing mindset, says Alessandro Isola, product manager at luxury travel specialist Abercrombie and Kent USA. "Travelers are seeking quieter, more meaningful off-the-beaten-path experiences, because they have done all those touristic trips. People are going more remote, to more exotic places ... it's about slowing down, they aren't in a rush to go from one place to another."

The Ultimate Luxury

Ultimately, the Gilded Age of travel is driven by the hardest luxury of all to obtain: time. It's all about slowing down and savoring the splendors of life, Asmar d'Amman says. "Slow travel is about surrendering to the moment with the outmost attention to details of a curated lifestyle."

Salci agrees. "It is not simply about nostalgia, but about evoking a certain state of mind, one that values slowness, refinement, discovery, and the luxury of time." ■



Interiors of the Orient Express
Dolce Vita train designed by
Milan-based Dimorestudio.



Aline Asmar d'Amman's designs
for Dream of the Desert.



In a recent Raffles campaign, May Siu, Waris Ahluwalia and Robert Rabensteiner appear as Raffles guests, while Tim Easton appears as the butler.