

It took a little over 80 hours for the Orient Express to go from Paris to Istanbul. And to the average peasant in a field watching the imposing steam locomotive and the glittering blue carriages of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits go past, the gap between their worlds was just as extreme as it is for a suburban teenager reading about Kim Kardashian's wedding.

Prince Harry might have caused a scene when he partied hard at his Las Vegas hotel, but King Ferdinand I of Bulgaria upset other guests a lot more when he turned up in immaculate overalls and demanded access to the controls of the iconic train. The monarch took the corners at breakneck speed, causing chaos in the kitchen and spilling passengers' champagne.

There were various trains known as the Orient Express – the route evolved over decades, with one luxury service, the Venice-Simplon Orient Express, still operating. SNCF, the French railways operator, plans to introduce a 21st century version and is already offering high-end tie-ins from Moynat luggage to scented candles. Don't hold your breath though: there's no plan to see an actual train on rails for five years.

If you can't wait, there's an exhibition on the golden age of the Orient Express at the Institute of the Arab World in Paris until the end of August.

If the opulence of the exhibition serves as a stark reminder that the gulf between rich and poor is not so different from a century ago, other aspects show things getting actively worse. Once the travellers of a



The Orient Express: A ticket to a golden age

century ago reached Istanbul, they would transfer across the Bosphorus from Sirkeci station on the European side to Hydrapasa station and the Taurus Express, another train owned by the same company. In the same high standard of luxury – air-conditioned carriages having been invented for the routes – they would travel on to Aleppo, Baghdad, Beirut, Mosul or Jerusalem. As the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the geopolitical realities

shifted, the Shah of Iran permitted the train to come to Tehran, while other routes extended down to Luxor in Egypt. Where there were gaps in the railway across the desert, the connection was assured with a fleet of Rolls-Royces.

The evocative 1920s posters portraying Baghdad, Beirut, Mosul and Jerusalem as fabulous tourist destinations are a striking part of the exhibition. But that's no reason to see it as a

misty-eyed nostalgia trip, according to Gilles Gauthier, president of the exhibition's scientific committee.

"We thought the history of the Orient Express and the Taurus Express was a marvellous way to evoke a century of history which was both exciting and tragic," Gauthier said. "For this part of the world, the train was seen as a way of modernising, but in practice, it was also an instrument of foreign incursion and domination."

Some want the train to come back. In Beirut, the opulent trains used to terminate at Mar Mikhael station, but the last train arrived there 37 years ago. Local organisations are using the station as an arts venue and lobbying for the train to return. One of the exhibits is two men – one aged 100, the other 95 – talking about their

jobs working on the railways and in ticket offices in Lebanon and Syria. In a region where the economic opportunities for young people are grim – and outright civil war is often raging – the exhibition shows how much, and how little, has changed.

While the sepia tint photos of rich European tourists posing in harem-theme fancy dress are most definitely of their time, the desire to travel in the best possible conditions is as strong as ever. Few trains evoke as much passion or enthusiasm as the Orient Express. At a time when headlines from the region bring endless negative news, it's fascinating to glimpse an era when a holiday in Homs was the most glamorous thing imaginable.

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