



—Gendreau, courtesy Thos. Cook

LAST MAN ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

By JOSEPH WECHSBERG

"ORIENT EXPRESS," it said on the white shield of the French railroad car. And underneath, "Paris - Strasbourg - Stuttgart - München - Wien - Budapest-Bucuresti." It was 8:20 p.m. on the evening of Saturday, May 27, 1961. In five minutes the Orient Express, once a great train of romance and mystery, glamour and nostalgia, would leave for its last run from Paris to Bucharest.

Considering that this was to be a funeral, the mood was pretty gay on the platform of the Gare de l'Est. Few people knew, and fewer cared, that a

great era in railroad history was coming to a close. There was the cheerful confusion so characteristic of French railroad stations: kissing couples (not all of them leaving, some had come only for the joy of kissing), large families embracing each other as if parting for life (many would go to Chalons-sur-Marne, two hours away), and there was the usual contingent of crying kids, barking dogs, shouting Vichy water vendors. Conspicuously absent were glamorous adventures, *femmes fatales*, international financiers and superspies. I saw no bemonocled diplomats, rajahs with retinue, Mata Haris. What had happened to the great, super-de-luxe Orient Express?

At the door of a royal-blue sleeping

car with the gilt inscription "*Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens*" a chestnut-brown-uniformed *conducteur* was talking to a Wagons-Lits official who, I gathered, had come as a reluctant pallbearer. He regretted the publicity surrounding the demise of the famous train. Admittedly, the Orient Express would no longer be running, but after all you might still take the Arlberg Orient Express every night from Paris to Bucharest, by way of Zurich, the Arlberg Tunnel through the Austrian Alps between Langen and St. Anton (which gives the train its name), Innsbruck, Salzburg, Vienna, and Budapest. The "Arlberg" has a Paris-Bucharest sleeper and is frequented by diplomatic

couriers who usually lock themselves in a first-class compartment, and by diplomats, businessmen, journalists, members of delegations—the happy few who manage to get the necessary visas for the trip through the Iron Curtain. And there is the Simplon Orient Express which leaves the Gare de Lyon in Paris every evening at 7:54 and reaches Istanbul—1,889 miles, eleven customs inspections, and seventy-seven hours and thirty minutes later—by way of Vallorbe, Lausanne, the Simplon Tunnel through the Italian Alps, Venice, Trieste, Zagreb, Belgrade, and Sofia. In Nis the train splits in two, with one section going to Thessaloniki and Athens.

Romantic routes, but pretty hard to travel for people without diplomatic passports. Too much red tape, too many visas required. Old Wagons-Lits hands speak nostalgically of the days before the last war when you could go from Paris to Warsaw by way of Berlin in twenty hours and seventeen minutes. Now it takes twice as long despite faster tracks and stronger engines, because of long border stops and customs inspections. Back in 1900 you could take the North Express from Paris to St. Petersburg, as it was then called, in forty-seven hours. No visas were required. Those were the days!

"The paradox of our civilization," said the Wagons-Lits official. "We build faster trains and at the same time greater restrictions than before. *C'est idiot*. A way of life has come to an end, Monsieur. The old Orient Express was part of that life."

The old Orient Express made its first run almost seventy-eight years ago to the day. On June 5, 1883, a train de luxe consisting of two stove-

heated, oil-lighted coaches left Paris for the Orient, by way of Vienna and Budapest. In Giurgiu the passengers were ferried across the Danube, continued by rail to Varna on the Black Sea, and took a boat to the Bosphorus. Two years later the first direct train went via Budapest and Belgrade to Constantinople (Istanbul). By that time the Orient Express had become the outstanding status symbol of its era, was frequented by incognito Balkan rulers, grand dukes, millionaires, and artists. In the following decades the Orient Express became the favorite train of mystery writers (Agatha Christie, Graham Greene), film makers, and Sunday supplement readers. It became the train of international intrigue and murder, though, to tell the awful truth, no one was ever bumped off on the Orient Express. (During the hectic postwar days an American military attaché disappeared from the Arlberg Orient Express one night in 1948; his body was later found in the Golling Tunnel in the Austrian Alps.) If you read the newspapers at the time of our grandparents, the Orient Express seems to have been the exclusive domain of daring diamond smugglers and beautiful *demi-mondaines*, of great tenors and big gamblers. Everybody on the train was said to have "a veiled mystery in his past and a sinister purpose in his future."

"In the early years of the century the Orient Express was the epitome of elegance on wheels," said the Wagons-Lits official, now almost on the verge of tears. "They had posters in the Paris travel bureaus, 'Take the Orient Express, Most Glamorous of All International Luxury Trains.' What a train it was! Showers on some sleepers. Ma-

hogany walls inlaid with lemonwood birds and flowers. Red plush seats with lace headrests. Silk armchairs in the salon cars. In the dining car there were bone china and Belgian crystal. They would serve caviar and champagne, and the specialties and wines of each country as the train passed through. And the *conducteur* would wish you good night in seven languages."

"My papa, God bless him, worked for The House in those days," said the *conducteur*. Like all employees of the patriarchal Wagons-Lits Company he calls it "*la maison*." "Papa's autograph book had the signatures of all the kings and *milliardaires*. And the tips! Papa said that Italian aristocrats, Russian dukes, and American expatriates were the best tippers. The French and the Germans were not bad, but the British, Swiss, and regular Americans were—thrifty."

YES, you would become an overnight celebrity by making a trip on the Orient Express, or on the Warsaw-Cannes Express or Bucharest-Cannes Express. Deluxe trains where the passengers would pay first-class fare and a 50 per cent premium but no one cared. The landed gentry of Hungary, Poland, and Rumania would bring their own valets and chambermaids, silk sheets and bedcovers. The *conducteur* would make the bed with plebian linen and the valet would put patrician silk sheets over them. A rich countess went to Paris twice a year to have her poodles trimmed by a specialist. Katharina Schrott, the Burgtheater actress and great friend of Emperor Franz Josef, would also bring her dogs on the train, and the cook in the dining car would

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The Orient Express was the traditional favorite of mystery writers such as Graham Greene and Agatha Christie, above. But its most famous role was in the Hitchcock mystery film "The Lady Vanishes," a scene of which is shown here with dark-eyed Margaret Lockwood and Michael Redgrave in a cabin on the train. In 1948 an American military attaché disappeared from the Arlberg Orient Express, and his body was found later in a tunnel in the Austrian Alps.



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Looking at Moorea; from "Tahiti," by Barnaby Conrad (Viking).

—Fred Lyon, Rapho-Guillumette

WHO'S SPOILING THE \$OUTH \$EAS?

By JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN

A FEW weeks ago the Sunday New York Times, always just barely liftable, was a few ounces heavier even than usual. The cause of the extra weight was a twenty-page multicolored advertisement section prepared by the Pacific Area Travel Association (known as PATA), and its title and theme were "Discover the Pacific." In its pages geography was pushed around a bit, to the point where the "Pacific Area" wandered as far afield as India. But for the most part the focus was on those bits of land in the tropic ocean which are known collectively as the South Seas.

Big stir in the Pacific, the text and ads informed us. *A gay, festive world, a new playground, a whirlwind of fun.*

. . . Lovely hotels, pampering service, air conditioning, they said. . . . Unspoiled, they said. And, of course, paradise.

Turning the pages, I found myself thinking of a good friend, whom I shall call Raoul, with whom I spent much time not long ago in Tahiti. Not long ago, by the calendar at least, but well in the past as things are moving in the South Pacific, for then Tahiti could be reached by air only in slow and ancient flying boats on a round-about course, whereas now you breeze down in hours from Hawaii or California. Raoul was a true twentieth-century Polynesian: meaning that, by blood, he was one-quarter Polynesian, one-quarter French, and one-quarter English, with the fourth quarter a blend of Chinese, Portuguese, and American

sea captain. But he had been born in the islands. He loved the islands. He loved their beauty, their peace, their remoteness from the toil and trouble of a fouled-up world. And he hated the great airstrip that was then being thrown across Tahiti's lagoon to accommodate the jets that would soon be roaring in.

One day he was talking of this as we drove along the coast road. A procession of trucks rumbled past, bulging with gravel and blasted rock. Then we passed close to the strip, and from behind palm and hibiscus came the clatter of drills and the rasp of steam shovels. Raoul scowled. "This will be the end of Tahiti," he said. "The end of the South Seas. Soon we will be like the Riviera, like your Miami Beach—" He sighed and shook his head. He