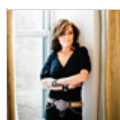


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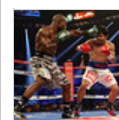
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RUTH BENDER CONNECT

April 11, 2014 8:46 p.m. ET



The restored locomotive of the Orient Express exhibition stands outside Paris's Arab World Institute. AFP/Getty Images

In a first step to bringing a railroad legend back to life, France's SNCF has restored an original Orient Express train in the center of Paris.

The national rail operator and Paris's Arab World Institute have teamed up for the exhibition. From the end of the 19th and throughout the 20th century, the Orient Express transported the rich and famous across Europe, inspiring countless artists and writers. On the train, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot investigated a murder, while James Bond battled a nasty double agent in "From Russia With Love."

The French rail company is working on a version of the Orient Express that mirrors the train's original spirit: traveling slowly and in luxury. "The idea is to create a cruise on rail tracks," said Patrick Ropert, head of the SNCF's Orient Express unit.

The rail group approached the Arab World Institute, a foundation backed by French and Arab League states, with the idea to mount an exhibition to mark the 130th anniversary of the train's maiden journey from Paris to Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1883. The SNCF financed the \$3.5 million cost of "Once Upon a Time the Orient Express," which runs through Aug. 31. The rail group will use its share of entrance fees for developing its modern Orient Express.

A Look Inside the Orient Express

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In a first step to bringing a railroad legend back to life, France's SNCF has restored an original Orient Express train in the center of Paris. *AFP/Getty Images*

In an interview, Jack Lang, president of the Arab World Institute and a former minister of culture and education, said he wasn't convinced at first, but then quickly realized the potential for a blockbuster: people's passion for trains mixed with nostalgia. He brought in his longtime adviser Claude Mollard, who has played a key role in many big French cultural projects, including the Centre Pompidou arts complex. As the rail show's curator, he decided to send visitors on a journey through the train's history in what he calls an "augmented reality" exhibition.

"You enter the Orient Express as if you were attending a play," Mr. Mollard said. It all starts with a locomotive perched outside the institute's glass-paneled building overlooking the Seine. SNCF volunteers spent over seven months piecing back together the locomotive that starred in the 1974 movie based on Christie's famous novel "Murder on the Orient Express." There's a train whistle, too, and occasional steam.

Visitors then board four original 20th-century train cars and walk among items meant to recall some of the train's famous passengers—an old typewriter for Graham Greene, costumes for singer Josephine Baker. Tables vibrate, lamps flicker and prerecorded Arabic conversations sound through the train's wood-decorated corridors, with leather-covered ceilings and velvet curtains.

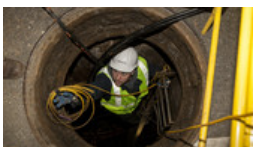
Visitors aren't allowed to sit, except those paying \$165 for a dinner cooked by Michelin-starred chef Yannick Alléno. The meal takes place in the restaurant car after the show has closed for the day.

Mr. Lang believes there is a place for a new Orient Express. "People aspire to a moment of calm and slowness in our speedy world," he said.

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