



The plot thickens

There's a murderer in our midst, and it's up to us to root out the culprit. Channelling the razor-sharp wits of Miss Marple and the little grey cells of Hercule Poirot, this one-day train journey feels more like a voyage into the pages of an Agatha Christie novel than a simple jaunt through the Kent countryside.

Of course, the fact that we're grilling suspects over a magnificent five-course meal in a plush art deco train carriage should have been the first clue that this is no ordinary mystery.

Belmond's vintage train the British Pullman runs a series of classy day trips including this Murder Mystery Lunch, alongside visits to Bath, Canterbury and York; to sporting events such as the Grand National or Goodwood; and, new this year, pop-up dinners prepared by celebrity chefs such as Aldo Zilli, Tom Kerridge and James Martin.

These days out don't come cheap, but we were on board with a passenger celebrating his 21st birthday and a couple who had always wanted to try a vintage train journey and finally decided to give it a go, proving there is plenty of scope to sell these for special occasions or as an extra escape for well-heeled clients.



Katie McGonagle plays detective on board Belmond's British Pullman

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ASK THE EXPERT



Graham Balmforth, national sales manager at SuperBreak

"Belmond day trips are perfect for special occasions. Trips can include anything from tours of popular UK cities to visits to Goodwood Revival, Christmas markets, Edinburgh's Military Tattoo or The Shard in London. Look at existing customers and see who might be interested in a trip like this – it could be upmarket cruise customers, long-haul travellers and those celebrating events such as a wedding anniversary, important birthday or even customers who are planning to propose. Although these are day trips, agents have a great opportunity to increase the booking value by adding nights in the city where the train departs."



Belmond's Murder Mystery Lunch on the British Pullman starts at £340, including a round trip from Victoria through the Kent countryside and a five-course lunch with champagne and half a bottle of wine per person. belmond.com

▶ PAST TIMES

Belmond has its own art deco waiting room tucked away near platform one of London's Victoria station, setting the dramatic mood with dark, heavy fabrics, polished gold fittings, and 1920s-style posters on the walls.

It does get busy just before departure, but staff are on hand to keep things moving, and there's complimentary tea and coffee.

Once on board, that's replaced with a glass of champagne – served in vintage crystal, of course – and the train chugs away on its non-stop route, passing through Whitstable, Canterbury and Ashford before returning to central London.

The five-course menu and half bottle of wine per person included on this package are served at a leisurely pace over the course of the five-hour



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journey, with a strong focus on British ingredients and attention to detail from the chef right through to the white-gloved waiters.

▶ FOLLOW THE CLUES

At the heart of this journey is an intricate murder mystery plot packed with twists and turns to uncover. A small cast of actors moves up and down the train, chatting informally with little groups of passengers and gradually building up the background to the murder.

With people playing everyone from the victim's nurse and mistress to his ex-wife, business partner and butler, the characters drop crucial hints along the way and are ready and willing to be grilled by passengers practising their detective skills.

They certainly embody all the dark drama of a classic murder plot, but they're also enjoyably whimsical and light-hearted, with the cast making knowing nods to popular culture

through references to *Downton Abbey* or topical news stories, the equivalent of a nod and a wink to make sure no one takes it too seriously.

▶ VINTAGE STYLE

The real stars of this show, however, are the vintage train carriages that set the scene perfectly. Before embarking, passengers are sent a booklet explaining the history of each carriage – all with different names, backgrounds and a unique story to tell. They find out which they'll be travelling in on the day.

The stories are every bit as tangled as an Agatha Christie plot: Audrey, a carriage built in 1932 for the Brighton Belle, survived a Blitz bombing raid and went on to ferry members of the Royal Family around; Cygnus formed part of Sir Winston Churchill's funeral train; the oldest carriage, Ibis, travelled back and forth from Milan to Venice on the Simplon-Orient-Express in 1925; while the aptly-named Phoenix was almost destroyed in a fire and only rebuilt in 1952 for use on the Golden Arrow service.

A huge amount of effort has gone into restoring their original decor, with art deco mosaics, marquetry and vintage fittings at every turn. Such high-brow surroundings certainly create the right atmosphere for this luxurious day trip, so all passengers have to worry about is working out whodunnit. 