

# Golden age

Rediscover the joy of travel on a luxury rail journey from Istanbul to Budapest, via dinner with Dracula, writes **Russell Higham**

**I**t's midnight and I'm at a sleepy railway station on the border between Turkey and Bulgaria, which looks like it hasn't changed since the Cold War. Dressed in a dinner suit, I step down from the elegant train carriage onto a concrete platform, passport in one hand, champagne flute in the other.

As a series of party-dressed passengers alight the Golden Eagle Danube Express and totter tipsily forward to show our passports to the poker-faced customs official, I'm not sure whether I feel more like Michael Palin or Michael Caine.

It's a scene that could just as easily come from an episode of *Great Railway Journeys* as from a classic 1960s spy film. Then it hits me: this kind of moment is exactly why I fell in love with travel – for the sense of adventure, the unexpected and the total escape from everyday life.

## KING OF THE CASTLES

The journey from Istanbul to Budapest – traversing six borders through four countries to sample highlights of Golden Eagle's Castles of Transylvania tour – is the first fam trip the company, founded in 1989, has done, according to product development director James Masterson. He, along with owner Tim Littler, has gathered 40 international travel agents and tour operators for a grand-depart reception on the roof terrace of the Four Seasons Sultanahmet in Istanbul. Sister hotel to the palatial Four Seasons Bosphorus (see *Where to stay box*), it's a fitting start to the rail journey of a lifetime.

Transported by coach to the train, we're ushered along red carpets and onto sumptuous 1950s carriages, which Golden Eagle has painstakingly restored and furnished to five-star hotel standard. There's no scrambling to squash bags into ➤

## DESTINATIONS

### RAIL HOLIDAYS | DANUBE EXPRESS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bran Castle in Transylvania; breakfast on board; the service was always attentive and friendly; one of two dining cars on the Golden Eagle Danube Express PICTURE: Russell Higham

overhead lockers here; we're back in the 'golden age' of travel. Instead, a dapper valet guides me to my Superior Deluxe cabin with its grand bathroom, living room with table and chairs, double wardrobe, solid wood panelling and an L-shaped sofa that converts into a king-sized bed.

Pulling myself away from the scenery gliding past the two full-sized picture windows, I join a gala dinner in one of the two dining cars. After an exquisite eight-course meal prepared by chef Joe Rawlins, whose Cheshire restaurant La Popote is listed in the Michelin Guide, there are cocktails in the bar with resident pianist-saxophonist Gabor. However, I retire to my cabin where a different kind of music, the soft hum of wheels on rails, lulls me gently to sleep.

#### TIME FOR TEA

Next morning, I'm awoken by a polite rap on the door when my valet, Laura, delivers a hot cup of tea at exactly the time, to the minute, I'd requested it for. While I'm at breakfast – a five-star affair with both buffet table and waiter service – she makes up my room for daytime use.

Slowly but steadily, we cross from Bulgaria into Romania, passing rustic villages and Soviet-era farms whose residents stop to wave, on our way to a very special event: a dinner date with the

“Golden Eagle always goes one better for its guests, hiring out the top floor of Dracula's Castle

Prince of Darkness. Bran Castle (aka Dracula's Castle) dominates the craggy Transylvanian skyline and has been featured in countless horror films. The lower rooms of this medieval fortress – approached, as you'd expect, via a spooky graveyard – are available for public viewing. But Golden Eagle always goes one better for its guests, hiring out the top floor of the castle, where a private dining room can be found via a long, dark stone staircase. A chamber quartet plays as we dine, and I'm glad to see the steak is not served worryingly rare...

#### PLAIN SPEAKING

The following day brings another country and another adventure. In Lajosmizse on the Great Hungarian Plain (or Puszta), we're treated to a spectacular show at Tanyacsárda, a top cultural attraction with a horse farm, riding school and a restaurant voted the best in Hungary. After ➤

WHERE TO  
*stay*

#### Hotels to add before and after the Danube Express journey



##### Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at the Bosphorus

Few hotels could rival this 170-room Ottoman palace for location and views, sitting on the Bosphorus Strait looking across the water to Asia. From the balcony of my suite, complete with cavernous marble bathroom, or from its wide waterfront restaurant terrace, I can almost reach out to the minarets twinkling in the sun as calls to prayer echo around the city. Orate gardens are lined with sculptures by artist Lorenzo Quinn (son of actor Anthony Quinn) and lead to the vibrant neighbourhood of Besiktas, where locals mingle among riverside cafes and market stalls. Combined with Four Seasons' superlative service, it's the perfect start to this luxury rail journey. Room rates from £527 per night.

[fourseasons.com/bosphorus](https://fourseasons.com/bosphorus)



##### Radisson Collection Hotel, Basilica Budapest

A short walk from Budapest-Nyugati station, newly opened Radisson Collection Hotel, Basilica Budapest is the perfect base to explore Hungary's magnificent capital. Its 71 stylish rooms are housed in a former school, with a rooftop cocktail bar overlooking revered landmark, St Stephen's Basilica. The chic ground-floor restaurant serves Hungarian and international cuisine but leave room for the area's latest foodie draw, the Time Out Market in Corvin Palace, a picturesque tram ride away. Rooms from £114 per night.

[radissonhotels.com](https://radissonhotels.com)

## DESTINATIONS

### RAIL HOLIDAYS | DANUBE EXPRESS

#### TRADE VIEWS



**Chris Stanley,**  
The Luxury Train  
Travel Company

"We always know that when a client is on a trip with

Golden Eagle, there are never going to be any problems. It's like money in the bank. And afterwards, we know they'll probably come back to us and want to do another trip with them."



**Keri Burns,**  
Railbookers

"The level of service that you experience on these trains is so

special. You're treated like family, only better. The care and attention to detail – everything is done to ensure that your experience matches or exceeds what you expected when you booked."

PICTURES: Russell Higham



ABOVE: Hungarian Lipizzaner horses; a brass band welcomes the train's passengers into Budapest's Nyugati station

sampling two national staples – goulash soup with plenty of paprika and *lángos* (deep-fried flatbread with cheese and sour cream), we go next door to the equestrian arena, where riders race and perform acrobatics on top of beautiful Hungarian Lipizzaner horses.

The train awaits in a private siding and as the final leg of the journey comes to a close in Budapest's grand Nyugati station, we're piped in by a brass band

in full regalia. Locals wave flags and welcome us cheerfully while I bid a sad farewell to our beautiful train and its staff. This epic journey aboard Golden Eagle's Danube Express has made me feel like a proper traveller again, an experience many holidaymakers now seek – and are willing to pay a premium for. It's certainly given me a taste for luxurious train travel that I'll struggle to replicate back home on the 7.46am to Victoria! **TW**

#### BOOK IT

**Golden Eagle Luxury Trains** offers the eight-day Castles of Transylvania journey on the Danube Express from €11,800 per person, based on two sharing a twin Deluxe Class cabin, and €15,200 in a Superior Deluxe cabin. The Danube Express is also featured by tour operators including Fred Holidays, Great Rail Journeys, Railbookers and as part of cruise-and-rail packages with Uniworld Boutique River Cruises. [goldeneagleluxurytrains.com](http://goldeneagleluxurytrains.com)



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