

TRAVEL

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2008

PAGE 13

Budapest and bust

The Danube Express is a new luxury train service that brings a touch of glamour to central Europe

BY ROBIN MCKIE
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

You know you are in for an unusual train ride when you are welcomed on board by a man called Attila. And then, while you are relaxing with a drink, you are serenaded by a piano player who calls himself Apollo. This is not your average crew on a commuter train. But then the Danube Express is not your average rail service. Launched by Howard Trinder — former owner of Great Rail Journeys — the Express is his attempt to combine hedonistic rail travel and serious tourism with some relaxed entertainment. It is an ambitious goal, to say the least, and well worth testing. So, two weeks ago, I traveled by Eurostar from London to Paris, and then by Deutsche Bahn sleeper to Berlin, to experience the Danube Express on its maiden trip to Budapest.

It was an incongruous first encounter. There in Berlin Ostbahnhof, amid the clamor of the morning rush hour, stood eight gleaming coaches in blue, gold and white livery with uniformed staff and managers standing to attention on the platform. This was my introduction to Attila and Apollo, not to mention Andras, Gyorgyi and the train's other personnel.

Their names betray the train's key influence, of course. The Danube Express is Hungarian to its axles. Indeed, Trinder — working with his Budapest-based partners MAV Nosztalgia — has specifically created his hotel-on-rails to follow routes used by the old Royal Hungarian Express while also aiming to combine modern comfort with some middle European retro-chic.

The train itself is of mixed vintage: some carriages once belonged to the official train of Hungary's communist government, while its saloon car (plus piano) and spacious dining car were originally built in East Germany. Some carriages have classic, two-bunk sleepers while three coaches — previously used by the Hungarian postal service — have been completely revamped and fitted with deluxe compartments, each with an en suite shower and toilet, air-conditioning, wood-paneled, deep-pile carpets, and enough space to swing a fairly substantial mammal.

There are no bunks in deluxe, only two ground-level beds, which are made up by stewards while you are at dinner. The shower water was hot and plentiful (although the taps were fitted with timers) and even if one or two features still require a bit of attention — my shower tap was stiff, for God's sake — it would be a churlish traveler who

could not wallow in such luxury.

And there lay my problem. The Danube Express has spoiled me for all future rail travel. I thought sleepers such as the Cologne-Copenhagen and the Oslo-Trondheim were luxurious but they couldn't hold a cabin light to this sybaritic excess, with its wardrobes, butler service, and plush upholstery.

Then there was the food and drink. From the moment we boarded, champagne, wine and beer were being thrust down our throats. By the time we had reached Dresden (200km to the south), I had gone through a wide range of beverages as well as a lunch of sweet and sour soup, pork in green pepper sauce, Hungarian dill cheesecake, and most of a bottle of Szemelt Riesling.

Dresden itself was an eye-opener. The city was devastated on the night of Feb. 13, 1945 when a massed Allied bombing raid destroyed its center, killing more than 35,000 people in an act of warfare that remains controversial to this day. Four thousand tonnes of high explosives were dropped on the Florence of the Elbe, creating a firestorm that turned it into a pile of rubble. And that was what I expected to find: the pitted remains of a handful of baroque halls and mansions.

In fact, the former East German city looks stunning thanks to a remarkable engineering renaissance that has restored its flattened Zwinger pavilions and halls, the wrecked Frauenkirche and a demolished statue of Martin Luther. Dresden today is a breathtaking sight.

Then it was back to the train dinner: caviar, goose leg and cabbage; chocolate pancakes and more Riesling, followed by drinks in the lounge car. And next morning, as we skimmed through the Tatra Mountains, we breakfasted on large plates of bacon, eggs and toast before stopping for a brief tour of Kosice in Slovakia.

The second city of Slovakia, Kosice has had no German wealth to help it into the 21st century and still has statues to Russian heroes, including General Ivan Petrov, leader of the Red Army that took the city from the German army in 1944, as well as a ring of crumbling blocks of Soviet-era flats. Most poignant of all is the city's old synagogue where thousands of Jews were gathered before being deported, by train, to Auschwitz. It puts a sobering perspective on rail travel.

Kosice also has a fine Gothic cathedral and a very bad waxworks museum whose star exhibit is a model of Andy Warhol, whose family

comes from the area. If nothing else, I now know the name of one famous Slovakian. We returned to the train for a lunch of savory pancakes, duck, and cherry strudel. By the time we reached Budapest four hours later, I felt like Jabba the Hutt. We climbed off the train utterly satiated — only to find it had stopped opposite the old royal waiting rooms, once graced by Emperor Franz Joseph, and his wife Elizabeth, where a champagne reception was being held for us. It was a fine note on which to end the trip, though this constant attention and grand receptions were making me realize that being royalty might be a right pain at times.

Of course, I could have tried a bit of self-control but that surely defeats the purpose of the Danube Express: extreme indulgence on rail tracks. It is not the only train to offer over-the-top luxury, of course, but it has one key difference from its rivals, including the Orient Express. These exist to take you — in style but nevertheless non-stop — from one grand city to another. The Danube Express makes a feature of stopping en route so travelers can indulge in a little light tourism.

And given that the train has itineraries that take it through Prague, Novi Sad, Sofia and other cities of the former Soviet empire, travelers get a chance to experience some intriguing destinations. Our trips to Dresden and Kosice were certainly edifying.

Such experiences do not come cheaply, of course. A journey on the Danube Express is pricey, particularly if you choose to go deluxe. A three-day trip will cost nearly US\$3,500. On the other hand, this is a lavish experience and — equally importantly — it is fun. Some luxury trains have a smart dress code for dinner, for example; no such formality on the Danube Express.

Indeed, informality is emphasized all the time — right down to the late-night sing-song around the piano that ended, on our trip, in a conga that took passengers snaking along the length of the train.

I would like to say it was a spontaneous affair. In fact, it was heartily "encouraged" by our waiters who clearly felt that their customers required a bit of enforced enjoyment. I thought of refusing to join in the conga but then changed my mind. You don't want to argue with a man called Attila, after all.

■ On the Net: www.danube-express.com

The Danube Express is not your average commuter train, nor is it staffed by your average crew — think of it as hedonism on rails.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JULIA SPENCE/FSR

