

This Day in History... June 5, 1883

Orient Express

On June 5, 1883, the *Orient Express* made its first trip from Paris to Vienna.

The world's most luxurious train was the brainchild of Belgian Georges Nagelmackers. Nagelmackers first became interested in trains on a visit to the United States in 1867. Impressed by the railroad sleeping cars on Pullman night trains, he decided to establish a network of similar trains in Europe.

In 1874, Nagelmackers founded the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits (International Sleeping-Car Company). To promote his idea, Nagelmackers staged a test run, inviting special guests to take a 1,243-mile railway trip on his *Train Éclair de Luxe (Lightning Luxury Train)*. On October 10, 1882, they departed Paris, arriving in Vienna a little over 24 hours later. The train then returned to Paris on October 14.

With that trip a success, Nagelmackers then prepared for regular service. The first run came on June 5, 1883. From then until October 4 of that year, the train ran regular trips between Paris and Vienna. That October, the route was extended to Istanbul by way of Munich, Vienna, Budapest, and Bucharest. Until 1889 (when the rail line was completed) the last leg of the trip (from Varna, Bulgaria, to Istanbul) was completed by ship. The journey took 67 hours and passengers slept on the train for three nights. In 1891, the train's official name was changed to the *Orient Express*.

Orient Express service was halted during World War I, then resumed in 1918. The 1930s marked the height of the railroad's popularity, during which time it ran three parallel services: the *Orient Express*, the *Simplon Orient Express* (which took a southern route through Milan, Venice, and Trieste), and the *Arlberg Orient Express*, which ran through Zurich and Innsbruck to Budapest.

The legendary train became synonymous with luxury travel during the 1930s with its comfortable sleeping cars and restaurant cars that were known for their excellent cuisine. Royalty, diplomats, and wealthy patrons frequently made use of the *Orient Express*.

Service was again interrupted during World War II. And by 1962, only the Simplon line was running. Over the years, the line was shortened as passengers chose speed over luxury. France's TGV or Train à Grande Vitesse (high-speed train) could make the trip from Paris to Vienna overnight. By 2009 all *Orient Express* routes had disappeared, ending an era of train travel in Europe.

The legendary train has been the setting for mysteries and comedies for decades. In Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, inspector Hercule Poirot traveled from Istanbul, then called Constantinople, and solved the mystery of a murder that took place on the train. In addition to using the legendary train as the setting for her story, Christie also used actual events that took place around the time of her writing the book. In 1929, an *Orient Express* train became trapped in a blizzard similar to the circumstances in her book. Christie, herself, was stuck on an *Orient Express* train after returning from visiting her husband, an archaeologist on a dig. Some of the characters in her mystery were based on passengers the author became acquainted with while the tracks were cleared and repaired after severe flooding.

The *Orient Express* has also been featured in Bram Stoker's 1897 book *Dracula*, Ian Fleming's *From Russia, with Love*, and in the 2004 film version of *Around the World in 80 Days*, among many other books and films.



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