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James Sherwood interview: the man who relaunched the Orient-Express

James Sherwood, the American who reinvented luxury railway travel 30 years ago, tells Elizabeth Grice how a 'crazy' buy started his empire.



"In 1977, Sherwood bought at auction two shabby pre-War first-class sleeping carriages without an engine, remnants of the fabled Orient Express train"

By Elizabeth Grice

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James Sherwood has been chasing faded beauties all his life. Sometimes they are hotels that have seen better days, and sometimes they are old railway carriages. On Wednesday, one of his famous conquests, the British Pullman, drew out of London's Victoria Station in a hailstorm to celebrate the story of how the American entrepreneur "restored the art of travel" by reviving the glory days of once-famous hotels and trains.

It's likely to be the classiest book launch of the decade. Freightened with train buffs, hotel managers and film-makers who have exalted the romance and intrigue of the Orient-Express – of which the restored British Pullman carriages are the English end – the train took a leisurely route through the Surrey hills, treating its passengers to the sort of service most people last experienced 30 years ago, if ever. As the train gathered speed, the sound of cut-glass tinkled authentically at the place settings.

Sherwood, round as a Toby jug, was in ebullient form. Against a blizzard of station announcements, the founder and chairman emeritus of Orient-Express reminded his guests of how he had stood in more or less the same spot 30 years ago to launch the train it had taken him five years to restore. Now he has six luxury trains, 50 top-end hotels and is still, aged 78, scouting.

"I think there is a demand for the best," he told me. "In life today we are confronted with so much mediocrity. In an age when everyone is deluged with homogeneous brands, I have liked to create the special. There is a real unfulfilled need and desire to experience it."

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In 1977, Sherwood bought at auction two shabby pre-War first-class sleeping carriages without an engine, remnants of the fabled Orient Express train. He admits he wasn't a railway enthusiast chasing some boyhood dream but was intrigued by the surge of nostalgia for the train's last trip. It gave him an idea. The previous year, he had bought the loss-making Hotel Cipriani in Venice for less than £1 million "on a whim". The British were dotty about historic trains and they loved Venice. Why not refurbish the Orient Express and operate it from London to Paris to Venice, luring passengers to stay at the hotel?

That meant tracking down 25 other original cars, of which some were in dazzling service for the launch of Sherwood's autobiography, *Orient-Express: A Personal Journey*. One had been used as a transporter for racing pigeons, another was a garden house, yet another had been used as a brothel in Limoges. Sherwood restored them to their original grandeur, down to the last Art Deco flower spray piece of marquetry. The bill was \$31m (£20m) and the project, like most of Sherwood's, vastly and irrelevantly over budget.

He made his first fortune from the marine leasing company Sea Containers, which he founded in 1965. Its flotation on the New York Stock Exchange made him a multimillionaire at the age of 36, free to indulge his twin obsessions: snaffling renowned but down-at-heel hotels and trains.

As a young naval officer, even before he could afford it, Sherwood had the habit of always booking into the best hotel in town. Travelling to 80 countries on Sea Containers business gave him the perfect opportunity to spot potential gems for his hotel portfolio – a method he describes as a long and patient courtship. Over the years, 50 hotels in 24 countries have fallen to his predatory charms, including the Cipriani, the Copacabana Palace in Rio de Janeiro, the Ritz in Madrid and the Mount Nelson in Cape Town. Often, he says, it took years "to shake a property loose from its owners".

In 1981 he acquired the Villa San Michele near Florence and by 1986 had added the Hotel Splendido in Portofino. And all the while the Venice-Simplon-Orient-Express was taking on a life of its own, dictating the image and branding of the emergent luxury hotel company.

"When I bought those two old carriages in Monte Carlo," he says, "people thought I was slightly crazy. They said it was a fun idea but it wouldn't work. The common wisdom was that luxury rail travel was dead. Now it's fully booked every year and the carriages, every one different, are in better condition than they have ever been. Concorde has come and gone and the Orient-Express is still here. It was a good hunch."

Not that Sherwood has had things all his own way. He lost the Plaza Athenee in Paris to the Sultan of Brunei. He was sidelined in the battle for the Savoy Hotels Group, and Mohamed Al Fayed wouldn't sell him the Paris Ritz.

Al Fayed roared with laughter when Sherwood approached him about the Ritz and said he'd be delighted to sell – for a billion dollars. "To take the sting out of his refusal," Sherwood writes, "Al Fayed gave us some Turnbull and Asser ties and frozen bags of what he claimed were stags' testicles from his estate in Scotland, which he said would improve our sex life."

The appendix to his book contains an intriguing list of Sherwood's 10 commandments for a five-star hotel. He is fanatical about quiet and cannot stand under-lit rooms. "Some general managers have forgotten the purpose of a desk." He requires a choice of sheets and blankets as an alternative to duvets and specifies the minimum width for a king-size bed – 1.83 metres (exactly 6ft). He can't abide hotel telephones that don't have the number written on the instrument. Forcing guests to go down on their knees to reach the safe is unacceptable. A swimming pool is obligatory, with an absolute minimum depth of 1.9m (6ft 2in). Soap should be in a paper wrapper. The quality of room service can always be judged by the quality of the croissants, coffee and orange juice.

But there is one golden rule that does not appear in his book. He confides it just as the train is about to depart. It is that a great hotel will always come to the financial rescue of an embarrassed guest who has lost his wallet or credit cards.

"The first manager of the Cipriani did this for guests who got into trouble and never once was the hotel not repaid. You have won a customer for life. And that customer tells others..."

Orient-Express: A Personal Journey by James Sherwood (The Robson Press) can be ordered from Telegraph Books (0844 871 1515; books.telegraph.co.uk (<http://books.telegraph.co.uk>)) for £23 plus £1.25 p&p.

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