

All aboard *for* retro train travel

The Orient Express-style dining carriages of the South Devon Railway retain all the glamour of the golden age of travel, and they are now back in service after some speedy restoration work



Magnificent views along the route of the South Devon Railway

Once used by well-heeled passengers from the Transatlantic liners en-route from

Plymouth to London, the dining cars at the South Devon Railway are redolent with echoes of the past - from the art deco ceiling lights and wood panelling, to the black and white travel posters advertising the delights of Torquay and St Ives.

It's easy to imagine the white-gloved and jacketed waiters of the pre-war era delivering a silver service dinner to passengers ensconced in the distinctive Great Western Railway armchairs as the train steamed its way through the Westcountry on the four-hour trip to the capital.

This languid luxury is often recreated in films and television dramas; one of the most recent being Stephen Poliakoff's BBC2 series, *Dancing on The Edge*. This series followed the fortunes of an African American jazz band in 1930s London. In one memorable episode, an American millionaire charts a train and takes the band and its followers on a trip through England lasting several days. They don't bother getting off the train; preferring to stay put and indulge in the limitless delights of the dining car.

The advent of air travel, of course, spelled the end of the line for most of the network's rolling restaurants, but the South Devon Railway was able to acquire two of the finest examples, The King George V and the Duchess of York (named after the late Queen Mother), together with a third carriage, Special Saloon 9005, which



Dine in retro luxury

was used by Edward VIII before his abdication.

For a number of years, SDR has been using the carriages as an addition to its daily services, offering customers a three-course a la carte menu while the train completes a leisurely, three-hour journey between Buckfastleigh and Totnes and back.

SDR's Operations Manager and

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Company Secretary, John Haslam, has a great fondness for the carriages: “All three were built in the 1930s. The King George and the 9005 catered for travellers from the ocean liners travelling between Britain and New York.

“Passengers heading for London would be dropped off at Millbay Docks in Plymouth on the tender carrying mailbags. Rather than deal with the Pullman Company, GWR decided to build its own version and constructed eight carriages. At nine feet, seven inches wide, they were the fastest, widest coaches ever run in the United Kingdom.

“They offered an at-your-seat meal service in a deep, comfortable armchair. The interior of the King George was created in a similar style to the Orient Express by the cabinet-makers, Trollope and Son at

Swindon. The carriage has a distinctive, elliptical ceiling following the line of the roof and is finished in a light, walnut veneer. Only five of these carriages now survive and we own two of them. The Duchess of York was run by another operator.”

In 1931, a ticket to dine as a first-class passenger on a GWR express train between Plymouth and Paddington would cost 10/6d. The four-course menu reflected the times with turbot, roast beef and cabinet pudding featuring regularly. The newly-invented, tinned tomato soup was another popular, if somewhat quirky, starter choice.

The food was prepared in advance and served from a small kitchen area at the back of the carriage. A similar system operates today, although the menu has moved with the times and is now likely to feature butternut squash soup, sliced, smoked duck breast, with mixed salad and pine nuts, rack of lamb and fillet of beef with wild mushroom sauce. Desserts

include raspberry crème brulee. But one thing hasn't changed: Roast potatoes have never been served, as they do not keep well.

The SDR dining carriages attract a loyal following, with many passengers opting to wear period dress. However, the service was nearly de-railed earlier this year when some unwelcome guests were spotted in one of the carriages.

“King George was cleared out as part of an annual heavy clean and it was during this work that the dining train manager noticed small, round holes in the wood panelling of the carriage,” explains John.

“These were instantly recognisable as woodworm damage, and we knew that the activity was new, as there was fresh sawdust in and around the holes. We knew that something needed to be done quickly.”

Thankfully, Rentokil was quickly on the scene and was able to deal with the problem in a matter of days.

John says: “We needed a quick turnaround on the treatment to ensure the carriage was back in use for our customers. It turned out that whole treatment was very quick. Work started on the carriage on the Tuesday and we had it back, completely woodworm free, by lunchtime on Thursday.

“We are so pleased with the work that we have decided to have both the Duchess of York and Special Saloon 9005 treated in the same way.” ■

SDR's dining service runs on 10-12 occasions throughout the year. For more information go to southdevonrailway.co.uk

Below: All aboard for a magical experience

