



Martyn Pring: Luxury railway travel: a social and business history

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A history of luxury railway travel over the last century and a half would be interesting enough, but to have social and business history weaved throughout the story will fascinate travel practitioners and academics alike. There is currently increasing interest in the tourism marketing of luxury trains. The popular appeal of combining transport mode with luxury hotel destination has seen this type of travel established on all the continents of the world (Swarbrooke 2018). In his introduction to *Luxury Railway Travel: A Social and Business History*, Martyn Pring explains that luxury has forever been perceived as an exclusive club to which access requires finances, connections and power. Over the last 20 years, the needs of a segment of mature international travellers have been answered by the luxury tourism industry, with offerings that incorporate exploration, adventure expedition and nostalgia. Luxury train travel is now providing long-distance journeys covering continental landmasses, providing more affluent tourists with the opportunity to discover exotic new destinations.

Within the book are six chapters spanning from Victorian times to the present day, followed by four appendices each examining an important segment of Great Britain's train travel market. In the first chapter, we are returned to the years 1860–1900, described by the chapter's title as 'Victorian Expansion—The Emergence of Luxury Travel'. Here, the period's transition to trains from horse-drawn coaches is shown to have not been entirely smooth. The bumps were not removed until adequate waiting rooms and hospitality arrangements had been fully developed by the emerging railway operators—railway stations tending to be located in desolate spots. The most significant impetus for the provision of luxury rail travel in these times came from the creation of

specialist royal trains for transporting the monarchs across Britain and the continent. The luxury train travel culture was further aided by incorporating some of the enormous Victorian technical advances that were improving sea travel through the scale and size of passenger liners, while service and culinary excellence was borrowed from the fast-developing hotel sector.

The second chapter discusses the period 1901–1920 and is entitled 'Edwardian Elegance and Gathering Clouds'. Even though this was a short period of time, these 19 years of the Edwardian era encompassed immense change, witnessing the growth of a consumer-focused luxury goods industry. For the first time, luxury services were seen as an extension of luxury goods, and the wealthy came to believe that travelling first-class was a necessity. These developments were part of the expanding market of luxury goods and services where, together with spas, exclusive retail outlets catered for American plutocrats and the European haute bourgeoisie and aristocracy.

The third chapter, 'A Golden Age of Luxury Travel and Austerity', explores the years 1921–1945. Due to the huge loss of menfolk in the First World War, the 1920s saw a great deal of turmoil leading to deep-rooted economic and social changes in Britain, Europe and the rest of the Western world. However, in the midst of the upheaval, first-class passengers soon discovered that improvements in the form of new locomotives and carriages were making rail travel more enjoyable and comfortable. These improvements included restaurant carriages producing gourmet culinary experiences and new routes by specialist trains to France. The new travel options were showcased to the public via promotional media. Wonderfully atmospheric posters and travel writings by very famous people were circulated, encouraging others to try these experiences for themselves.

The book then moves forward to the years 1946–1975 in chapter four, entitled 'A Second Golden Age and New World Change'. The many changes precipitated by the war

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years had repercussions that continued through to the 1970s, starting with the consolidation and nationalisation of the railway companies. Rail had always been the traditional mode of transportation for people going on holiday, but by the mid-1950s cars were competing for this title. At the same time, the middle classes were redefining society. By the 1960s, the age of consumerism and rapid social change saw middle-class people moving towards personal material advancement and lavish living. British railway was doing its best to revert to pre-war culinary service experiences because, before nationalisation, the four railways companies had been looking at ways to expand their provision of non-luxury food. The 1960s also saw the commencement of the electrification of trains, which was finally completed by the end of the decade.

In chapter five, Pring examines the years leading up to the turn of the millennium—‘1976–2000: Preservation and Restoration Projects’. Within this 25-year period, Britain moved closer to becoming a classless society, much like America’s. The middle classes were requiring a more sophisticated tourism mix, which generated the concept of luxury dining trains. The late 1980s saw steam trains being reintroduced in Scotland on the popular route of Mallaig to Fort William. This rejuvenation of the luxury concept in the United Kingdom was mirrored on other popular routes throughout the world, for example in America, Canada, South Africa and Austria.

Chapter six is the final chapter and it takes us from 2001 to the present, a period that Pring has called ‘The Era of the New Luxury Dining Train’. By the turn of the last century, society was being dominated by those who enjoy privilege and wealth on a grand scale—the elite. The early 2000s saw the increase of luxury trains being introduced worldwide. In the UK, the flagships of luxury train travel were two of the privately run Belmond trains—the British Pullman and the Royal Scotsman. Contemporary luxury travel has had to adapt to providing affordable luxury and life-changing customised experiences to suit the needs of specific travellers.

This ranges from Eurostar offering Business Premier through to deluxe companies that provide all-inclusive, fully en-suite, long-distance, fine-dining luxury train experiences.

The last section of the book comprises four appendices; each outlines a popular route within Britain and explains its social historical context. The first appendix explores ‘Three Routes to Scotland’. These routes are historical and are still taken to Scotland—the east coast route, the west coast route and the central route. The second appendix takes a look at the ‘West Country Allure’ which describes two railway routes to the English West Country: the Cornish Riviera Express and the Atlantic Coast Express. The third appendix, named ‘Pines, Chines and Perpetual Summers’, follows the growth of Bournemouth as a seaside resort and the trains that serviced this route. Appendix four, ‘London by Sea’, concludes the book by explaining the Brighton route as being Britain’s first frequent, truly luxury service.

In closing, this very thought-provoking and interesting book will be enjoyed by academics, students and travel practitioners alike. The history of luxury railway travel, presented entwined within its historical social context, provides fascinating insights into what has until now been an under-researched topic. Martyn Pring’s rhetorical closing question, *Who knows where the luxury train industry may yet go?*, augurs more changes ahead and further research to be done on this topic.

Reference

Swarbrooke, J. 2018. *The Meaning of Luxury in Tourism, Hospitality and Events*. Oxford: Goodfellow Publishers.

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