

# Insight

Expert opinions on the future of travel

## THE BIG INTERVIEW

GILDA PEREZ-ALVARADO

CEO OF ORIENT EXPRESS

**‘You never know who you’re going to meet. It’s a great place to do business’**

Hannah Brandler catches up with Gilda Perez-Alvarado about the ambitious transformation of the iconic Orient Express brand



**SINCE ITS LAUNCH** in 1883, the Orient Express’ iconic sleeper trains have been a symbol of luxury and aspiration; topping travellers’ bucket lists, inspiring Agatha Christie novels and prompting copycat carriages along the way. The appetite for luxury trains is as strong today as ever, thanks to the growing demand for ‘slow

travel’, sustainability and experiential trips.

While the original iteration ceased operations in 2009, French hospitality giant Accor acquired the brand in 2022 to revive it for a new generation of travellers. Last year, Accor also teamed up with LVMH to further boost its luxury development. (Note that this is a separate entity to the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, owned by Belmond.)

That’s where Gilda Perez-Alvarado comes in: leading the charge on Orient Express’ transformation from exclusive rail journeys to a high-end hospitality brand on land and at sea, while also combining

a century’s worth of heritage with a modern vision.

The monumental project kicked off in April with two launches: the La Dolce Vita Orient Express train in Italy as well as the brand’s first hotel – the 93-room La Minerva in Rome, housed within the 17th-century Palazzo Fonseca.



### BIOGRAPHY

Perez-Alvarado joined Accor in 2023 as chief strategy officer, overseeing global strategy, relations with hotel owners and strategic partnerships. She added CEO of Orient Express to her role in January 2024, and also holds board and membership positions at organisations including World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC).

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There's more to come next year, with the opening of Palazzo Donà Giovannelli in Venice in August, and the launch of the world's largest sailing yacht, The Corinthian – complete with 54 suites, five restaurants helmed by chef Yannick Alléno, plus wellness entertainment areas. Setting sail in June 2026, itineraries will cover the Mediterranean and Caribbean.

The common thread tying the three offerings together is heritage, explains Perez-Alvarado – each product is a “chapter” which makes up the “book called Orient Express”. The hotels occupy historic palaces, the trains are essentially museums on wheels – showcasing restored carriages from the 1920s to 70s – and the new yacht features Art Deco interiors. “We’re very aesthetically inclined, but there’s also a story behind it to enhance the experience,” she adds.

Accor is well-suited to the task, thanks to its experience of heritage brands such as Raffles and Fairmont – both are over 100 years old.

“The beauty about being in Europe is there are so many heritage brands,” she adds. LVMH, meanwhile, has helped with “ultra-luxury positioning and understanding what high-net worth consumers are looking for”.

## **Immersive travel**

Arguably the brand's main selling point is its ability to secure exclusive experiences and hidden spots in cities swamped by tourists. “A lot of our guests are well travelled; they’ve seen it all. People want to see places they love through a different lens – that’s what we aim to offer,” Perez-Alvarado says.

The rising interest in slow travel has also put the brand back on the map. “Covid accelerated a trend that we

## **‘People want to see places they love through a different lens – that’s what we aim to offer’**

were already seeing, with people wanting to be more experiential rather than just buying goods,” she adds.

Behind the scenes, the team work scrupulously to cement strong relationships with local communities to unlock once-in-a-lifetime experiences. “Our staff are the linchpin of the operation – they respect guest preferences and are responsible for creating the currents to make sure everyone’s feeling how they intended. We need to create the perfect ecosystem,”

Perez-Alvarado explains. “You go deep into those destinations, we don’t want commoditised experiences.”

One minute you might be indulging in Michelin-starred meals onboard while winding through scenic surrounds, the next you’re being serenaded by musicians in ancient caves in Matera, learning local crafts from artisans, or discovering private aristocratic estates with expert historians.

## **High net-working**

While the Orient Express is more commonly associated

with leisure, its high price point attracts high-powered executives from a range of industries – and work doesn’t quite stop while they’re on rails. “We’ve seen it all – entertainment, fashion, technology, finance, insurance and real estate sectors... From a networking point of view, it’s a great place to do business,” Perez-Alvarado says.

“You never know who you’re going to meet on the Orient Express. It goes back to how it started in 1883. It led to great stories and meetings,”

## **OPPOSITE PAGE:**

The bar car on La Dolce Vita in Italy





she adds. But, of course, when guests have had their fill of business jargon, they can retire to their lavish private suite and switch off.

Each of Orient Express' offerings are also available for corporate buy-outs – whether for away-days, incentives, galas or product launches. Companies can choose to reserve an entire train, for instance, or take over select carriages – with itineraries tailored to their needs.

### Championing artisans

Rail is, by its nature, more eco-friendly, but Orient Express is going beyond the transport element and bringing sustainability into the design process.

"Take our hotel in Venice, which is being restored hand-in-hand with the Italian state – we find artisans who can do the same craftsmanship as hundreds of years ago – to the latest safety standards." As such, Orient Express plays a part in keeping industries alive in a world beset by AI.

When it comes to the brand's forthcoming L'Orient Express train in France, the team are currently busy restoring 17 carriages from the Nostalgie-Istanbul-Orient Express train that dates back to the 1920s and 30s. The monumental project, which is set to take to the wheels in 2027, has brought together artists and craftspeople across 30 different trades – from glass-makers and cabinetmakers to lighting experts.

Keeping sustainability front of mind is also key for the brand's appeal going forwards, with the next generation of travellers more concerned with sustainability.

"In the future, the score card is going to be more than just five stars. It's going to be: what are you doing for sustainability? Who are you partnering with? What's your carbon footprint? What's your leadership saying and doing? Brands must make sure they are aligned in terms of values," she asserts.

That brings us to the new 220-metre-long yacht, designed in partnership with engineers at Chantiers de l'Atlantique. "The Corinthian is the perfect juxtaposition of modernity in that it is a state-of-the-art engineering marvel, powered by liquefied natural gas [which offers a reduction in emissions compared to traditional marine fuels] – and we have systems to identify marine life so we're respectful," she explains.

With all this to come, what's next on the agenda? The idea is to package all of Orient Express' offerings into a *grand voyage*. "While every single asset is unique, we want to make sure that you loop it together," she tells me. In practical terms, she suggests starting your journey with a stay at the Palazzo Donà Giovannelli in Venice in August 2026, then hopping on La Dolce Vita train to Rome, staying at La Minerva and, finally, embarking on The Corinthian to the south of France. "You can do it all!" **BT**

## NEW LOOK

**The Orient Express' artistic director Maxime d'Angeac has unveiled models of the bar, restaurant and suite cabins for the future train, set to launch in 2027**



### BAR

Expect plush booths in apple green, with marble tables, carpets in tropical leaf motifs, a glistening gold Champagne button and a Cartier-designed clock to keep track of dining services – from coffee to cocktails.



### RESTAURANT

Lalique-inspired rail motifs are displayed on the restaurant carriage's partitions, while lampshades mimic the brand's original models.



### SUITE

The wine-hued suite is replete with rounded features, celestial-inspired carpets, a sofa that transforms into a bed and a striking hand-embroidered wood panel with mother-of-pearl and bronze beads.

