



The return of Tito's train: From Serbia to Montenegro - a track to the past

President Josip Broz Tito's Blue Train, scene of the dictator's famed parties with world leaders, is back in service as a tourist attraction

MICHAEL WILLIAMS | SATURDAY 13 JULY 2013

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Could there ever have been a more extravagant mobile assembly of the world's nastiest dictators? Here, plushly seated on the 28 red leather chairs around the long conference table

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in this sumptuous railway carriage rolling elegantly through central Europe, are the ghosts of some of the legends of evil, tucking into the spoils of power. Surely that's President Gaddafi of Libya. And dipping into the beluga over there, isn't that the Shah of Iran? President Ceausescu of Romania is clearly having a feast, while the vodka bottle in the corner is quietly being drained by Leonid Brezhnev of the Soviet Union.

At least that is how it once might have been, when President Josip Broz Tito, the post-war president of Yugoslavia, presided over the celebrity passenger list on his luxury train, built as a peripatetic presidential palace to impress the international heads of state who flocked to Belgrade in the 1960s and 1970s. The roll call of world leaders is seemingly endless – Haile Selassie, François Mitterrand, Yasser Arafat, Prime Minister Nehru of India, President Sukarno of Indonesia – all booked a ticket on the train to court the maverick Balkan leader and his idiosyncratic brand of “benevolent communism”. Even our own Queen Elizabeth supped here once – and to prove it there's a photograph of her above the luggage rack looking all girlish and giggly over a glass of champagne, and clearly succumbing to Tito's legendary charm.

This morning, the seats around the power table are occupied by a more modest group. Tito's palatial “Blue Train” has been hauled out of the rusting sidings where it has long languished, and I join a handful of local Serbs and tourists aboard the vintage carriages as we embark on one of the last great “secret” train journeys of the world.

This is the the 476km (295 miles) Belgrade-to-Bar railway, completed by Tito in 1976 and blasted through mountains from the former Yugoslav capital to the Adriatic coast in Montenegro. Like his magnificent palace on wheels, this is one of the heroic achievements of modern railway engineering. It took 23 years to build the 254 tunnels and 435 bridges at a cost of 104 lives. The line passes precipitously over the Mala Rijeka viaduct, the tallest in Europe. Yet in recent years the tracks have been crumbling through neglect and were severed twice by Nato bombers during the Yugoslav war.

There are so few of us aboard today that it seems surreal to be invited to “spread yourselves around” among the six luxurious coaches in this palace on wheels. “It’s going to be a long trip,” says Nemanja, who shows passengers aboard. “There’s so much space you can have a snooze in the president’s suite – no one will mind much.” But judging by the Serbian railways officials bustling along the platforms with their braid and red peaked hats, this is no time to abandon protocol. Cleaners are still busy buffing the door handles and the intricate mahogany, pear and walnut marquetry of the carriages is fragrant with fresh beeswax. A powerful cherry-coloured Romanian-built locomotive is purring ready on the front.

But not everything is as it once was. With its melancholy ecclesiastical architecture, Belgrade must be among the saddest of European capital railway stations. Hard to believe, as pigeons flap around the aspidochelons in the gloomy booking hall, that it was once a destination of the Orient Express. The most exciting train in the sparse timetable these days is the evening stopping service to Moscow. In the deserted platforms, an old steam locomotive rusts on a plinth and a graffiti-covered commuter train slumbers in a siding.

Another sign of the times is the four dilapidated carriages tagged on to the front of our train for “local passengers”. “We must save energy on the journey,” an official explains. While this may seem like post-Tito-era “democracy”, the austere carriages for the proletariat are securely locked off from ours.

However, who’d blame Serbia for wanting to be a bit glamorous again, for trying to reinvent itself after the pariah years of the brutal Milosevic regime that followed the death of Tito? The scars of a Nato missile strike in 1999 are still evident near the station. No better way, then, to restore the glory days than through the symbolism of a luxury train – the personal creation of an international showman. And there is no more authentic ambassador than Tomislav Popovic, president Tito’s former personal steward, who has returned to his old onboard stamping ground.

Tomislav, still sleek at 75, with glossy dark hair and immaculate uniform, lets his celebrity-filled memories flow – in contrast to the stained concrete communist-era suburbs lining the first part of the route. “Look, this is where he would fling down the windows to address the crowds. Thousands would turn out to adore him at every station,” he declares. And all along the corridors there is opulence unchecked. The state compartments, bathrooms, kitchens and sleeping areas are a riot of Sixties deco – all chrome and veneer that might put to shame the skills of G-Plan’s finest. There can perhaps be no finer kid leather than on the bindings of the volumes of Tito biography that line the president’s study, along with a set of the works of Lenin. Few presidential armed guards can have been cossetted in a personal suite of such luxury.

Then there's the "annexe" used by the president's "companion" with its walls lined in silk wallpaper. Thrice married – finally to Jovanka, 25 years his junior – Tito had a fondness for women that was legendary. But, the perfect steward is discreet about the occupants of this room. "After he died and we emptied his safe on the train, we found only one thing. It was a picture of his wife."

But now the call comes for lunch in the restaurant car and we are regaled with a Tito-era blow-out of specialities of the Vojvodina region. The extravagance of the veal consommé, pork cutlet stuffed with sausage and mushroom, followed by baklava and accompanied by local wines, is matched only by the drama of the scenery: hair-raising bridges, vertiginous gorges, frothing rivers pass in an endless panorama by the window in this wild landscape.

But hold on. The train has suddenly ground to a halt. We are at Priboj, notorious as the place where Tito once stood at the train window and decreed to his audience that a bus and truck factory should be constructed – without bothering to check whether there were any local raw materials. The derelict factories surrounding the station bear witness to the fiasco. It appears that our train has been stopped by a similar reality check. After more than an hour of tinkering, the engineers announce there is no "air in the brakes" of the elderly coaches. This might not matter, except this is one of the most severely graded lines in the world; in a horrific accident in 2006, a train was derailed near here plunging into a gorge, killing 45 people.

When the track was new in the 1970s, a journey on this world showpiece railway took seven hours. Now, because of the poor state of the track, the fastest trains take 11. This afternoon, with wheels not turning at all, there is only one solution – as valid now as it was in the Tito era. Bring out the rakija. Tomislav has loosened his tie and produces some home brew in a litre plastic water bottle: "Quadruple distilled – 50 per cent and much better than the commercial stuff." The waiter lends us some of the monogrammed glasses that once soothed the lips of world leaders. Over Tomislav's "special brew", the talk among the Serbian passengers returns to Tito. Would he have demanded the train driver be shot if his eminent guests had been aboard today? Nemanja thinks he might have got to work himself with a spanner.

Why do so many in this modern European state still hanker after the Tito era, whose lure has led to the resuscitation of the presidential train? There is even a word for it, says Milica, who is not old enough to remember the Tito days. "It's called 'Jugonostalgija'," she says. "And there are young people here who feel sentimental about a world they have never known."

Eventually there's a creak, and we crawl off. As darkness falls, the passenger manifest is turned into a sweepstake and we while away the remaining journey guessing the time of arrival. Glasses are raised and there's a cheer as we pull up at our destination more than 13 hours after departure. Benevolent communism? As the sweepstake spoils are divided, it is hard-nosed capitalism that eventually wins the day.

Michael Williams is the author of 'On the Slow Train'. His latest book 'Steaming to Victory' is published by Preface, price £25

Travel essentials

Getting there

Michael Williams travelled as a guest of Explore Montenegro (020-7118 1002; montenegroholidays.com). A six-day "Tito's Blue Train" tour costs from £899 per person, including a day aboard the train with five-course lunch, a night in Belgrade with a traditional dinner and city tour, a boat trip with lunch on the Bay of Kotor in Montenegro and four nights' four-star accommodation. There are limited numbers of train-only tickets available with prices starting at £99 including lunch. The train runs weekly until October.

Montenegro Airlines (020-7864 4031; montenegroairlines.com) flies from Gatwick to Podgorica and Tivat in Montenegro. Alternatively, Dubrovnik in Croatia is served by easyJet (0843 104 5000; easyJet.com) from Edinburgh, Gatwick and Stansted, while [British Airways](#) (0844 493 0787; [ba.com](#)), Monarch (0871 940 5040; [flymonarch.com](#)) and Norwegian Air Shuttle (020-8099 7254; [norwegian.no](#)) fly from Gatwick.

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