

Posh Paris normally hates its suburbs. And yet over the past few months even the denizens of the chic city have been seduced by a new voice from the wilderness lands beyond the ring road. Faïza Guène's first novel *Kiffe kiffe demain* has taken France by storm. The title loses something in the translation, but roughly it means 'More of the Same Tomorrow'. It is a book about a little corner of hidden Europe, for it is set in the edgy world of the Parisian suburbs where Moroccan and Algerian immigrants struggle to survive. Guène explores this world where the exotic blends imperceptibly into the everyday. It is a book for a long train journey. *Kiffe kiffe*

ORIENT EXPRESS

demain was published in August 2004 by Hachette Littératures (194pp €16). An English language edition is due out early next year.

Faïza Guène is just twenty years old, the daughter of Algerians who moved to Paris before she was born. She was brought up in the suburb of Pantin, northeast of the city centre, a place of railway yards, canals and grey apartment blocks. Pantin is a place ignored by the thousands of commuters who pass through it each day on the trains to and from Paris Gare de L'Est railway station. One of the many trains that rattle past Pantin's apartment blocks each day is the Orient Express.

The business travellers running for the train have long ceased to notice even the elegant arch of the great fanlight window at the south end of the booking hall. The spring late afternoon sunshine illuminates the station concourse. Still less do the regular commuters remark on the delicate sculptures that represent the cities and rivers of the regions of France served from this great terminus. As the latecomers rush from the booking hall to the platform, they dash past Alfred Herter's monumental painting of hundreds of soldiers leaving by train for the front in 1914.

A woman wearing a chador stands alone on the tiled concourse, a spectral figure amid



a detail from Alfred Herter's 1926 painting *at the Gare de L'Est*

the commuter rush. The train guard shouts as a man clutching a laptop computer, a briefcase and a coffee runs for the train at the last moment, and then, just after a quarter past five,



François-Alexandre Duquesney's Gare de L'Est façade

the train is on its way, picking a route out of the Gare de L'Est through a corridor of graffiti, over the Canal St-Denis and under the boulevard périphérique. It trundles out through Paris' eastern suburbs. As the train gathers speed, no-one notices the little suburban stations. And they ignore the gritty world of the rough, tough streets, where the apartment blocks smell of last night's couscous, Algerian music fills the air and young men go mad watching reruns of silly American sitcoms.

In the corner seat, a manicured woman in her thirties reads the first few pages of a novel called *Kiffe kiffe demain*. The young Romanian with tousled dark hair sitting opposite her has never heard of the book, but studies the picture on the understated front cover. The woman reader glances up, the travellers' eyes meet just very briefly, and the Romanian averts his gaze and hides in the pages of the medical journal on his lap. A plane passes low overhead on the glide path down to Charles de Gaulle airport to the north. And now, on the right, a first glimpse of the River Marne, and beyond the heartless sprawl that leads to EuroDisney.

East of Lagny, and now well out of the city, the train slows to cross an old bridge across the meandering Marne river. One of the champagne marketing men, who has had a profitable day in the capital, glances up from his papers and catches a post impressionist glimpse of the river bank, where skin pinks and ochres, blues and an array of greens merge into a half remembered painting by Fernand Pinal. The Romanian doctor misses this spring scene. The

woman reading *Kiffe kiffe demain* is less attentive to her book, and looks rather longingly at the willows, the grass and the meadowsweet.

A man speaks on his mobile, sealing a rendezvous for an hour's time when the train makes its first stop at Châlons, a town which rather curiously changed its name a few years ago from the perfectly acceptable Châlons-sur-Marne to the even classier Châlons-en-Champagne. Off to the left there are glimpses of the chalky slopes and vineyards that underpin the quiet wealth of this affluent corner of France. On the right, the lavish Château de Boursault, built by the extravagant Veuve Clicquot who gave her name to one of most illustrious champagne houses. The train speeds through Epernay and soon it is slowing for Châlons. The laptops are closed for the last time today, she with the fingernails adjusts her hair and absentmindedly leaves *Kiffe kiffe demain* on the train seat as she prepares to disembark. The man with the mobile confirms to his lover that the train is already entering Châlons' rather spartan station platform.

Almost everyone in the carriage alights, many anxious to get home to their morsel of paradise for a glass of wine and dinner. Now the Romanian doctor can spread out a little. There is space, a table even, and he unwraps a salami sandwich, places it on the table and with great care sprinkles a little sachet of salt over his simple supper. He carefully moves an empty coffee cup, places it under the seat and opens a bottle of mineral water. He dines alone,

putting aside his medical journal, and turning instead to the French novel abandoned by the smart woman who left the train at Châlons.

Now it is dusk and the train is running through the low hills of eastern France. It stops briefly at Nancy. The Romanian vacillates between the urban ghetto of the novel and fitful

sleep. He does not notice the River Rhine, but now a man in uniform walks through the train, politely asks the traveller in German not to put his feet on the seats and requests his ticket. The Romanian is in another world, with Doria and her Moroccan mother in a Paris tenement. He puts down the book, opens a plain brown envelope in his jacket pocket, removes the blue and white ticket and gives it to the ticket inspector. "Danke," says the uniformed official, stamping and returning the ticket to the doctor, adding: "Change trains in Vienna tomorrow morning."

In the pages, there is angst that he who is known only as 'the bearded one' has left Paris and returned to his native Morocco. The doctor takes a small brown blanket from his bag and sleeps a little. Exactly at midnight, the train stops in Stuttgart. The Romanian is awakened by the rough and tumble of a group of Turkish speaking teenagers who have just managed to catch the last train home. One offers the lone overnight traveller a cigarette, which the Romanian takes. Another picks up a Paris business newspaper, discarded on the floor by last evening's homeward commuters, and reads aloud in faltering French from *La Tribune*. The young Turkish lads mock their friend's unhappy accent. One asks the doctor where he is going. "Home," says the Romanian softly. "Back to Romania. I've been away for many years."

It is only a half hour before the Turks also disembark, again leaving the Romanian to his novel and the night train. "Destiny is misery because you can do nothing about it," says Doria, the novel's teenage heroine. The doctor



detail from the Gare de L'Est station concourse

reads and does not notice Munich at three in the morning. But at Salzburg, he stops reading, steps on to the station platform, buys a coffee and sends a text to his mother. "Home early tomorrow. Love Razvan," it reads. Then he returns to the carriage and sips the coffee.

Razvan skims the convoluted plot of Doria's life as she mocks her

classmate Nabil until she finds he is her only hope if she's to get her maths homework even half right. By the time the train arrives at Linz in the Danube Valley, Doria has learnt a bit about life from Hamoudi. He's a neighbour who smokes dope and steals to make a few quid here and there.

At St Pölten, the station platforms have been swept, and the loudspeakers announce the arrival of the 7.41 am commuter train to Vienna. A porter stands on a step ladder and waters the spring flowers that hang along the platform. Several dozen men and women climb aboard and suddenly the train is crowded. Razvan relinquishes most of the space he has claimed during his fourteen hours on the train and recedes into the corner and *Kiffe kiffe demain*. The commuters tut tut, as they do every morning, at the old coffee cups that despoil their ordered lives. They check the share prices in their newspapers and read the reviews of last night's opera in Vienna.

Doria is now learning to shape her own life. Her mother follows Doria's example and gives up her mediocre job at a crap hotel and goes on a course to learn to read and write. The commuters worry about whether their children reached school okay, what they will cook tonight and where they might travel this summer. Razvan sends a text back to Paris saying he's not coming into work today. Or tomorrow. Or ever. The Austrian woman sitting beside him evidently does not like the way his fingers run deftly over the mobile keypad. She shifts a little, uneasy at being seated next to this man who has been travelling all night.

The entry into Vienna is slow, as the train switches from track to track as it edges into the city from the west. But, exactly on time, as every morning at 8.30 am, the Orient Express draws sedately to a halt at the Austrian city's Westbahnhof. The commuters rush to leave the train and get to their offices. Suddenly Razvan is alone again. He lingers over the last page or two of *Kiffe kiffe demain*. "I will lead the revolt of Paradise" says Doria, as a young man with a huge black plastic refuse bag comes through the train collecting the detritus of the night. Razvan picks up a couple of newspapers and gives them to the cleaner who smiles and says a few words. Then the Romanian carefully packs away *Kiffe kiffe demain* in his bag, and steps out onto the platform to check the connections to Bucharest.

keeping track of the orient express

DETAILS

Many readers of *hidden europe* will have been surprised by the implication in the foregoing article that the train described is the *real* Orient Express. It is indeed called the Orient Express and it certainly has a greater claim to be the Orient Express than the much more well known tourist train with its polished blue carriages that runs around Europe carrying well heeled tourists to spots like Venice, Prague and Budapest. The company that runs this latter train has very effectively used the name *The Venice Simplon Orient Express* (VSOE), with the last two words writ large, to promote its upmarket rail cruises on a train that offers glamorous carriages, sumptuous cuisine and all the trappings of a five star hotel.

But kid yourselves not. The VSOE carriages, smart though they may be, have nothing

fares

If you want to ride the Orient Express from Paris to Vienna, the one way fare is €167.00 inclusive of reservations. Expect to pay a supplement of €21 upwards for a couchette and from about €50 extra for a sleeper. If you yearn for a little more comfort on the return journey, you could always fall back on the VSOE tourist train, which on three occasions this year will make a weekend trip from Vienna to Paris. Join the train early on a Saturday afternoon at Vienna's Westbahnhof, enjoy pampered luxury on board and disembark in Paris early on the Sunday morning. Prices start from €1435 per person one way, sharing a sleeper compartment. The fare includes dinner on board, but, that notwithstanding, it still makes the real Orient Express seem rather a bargain.

whatsoever to do with the trains of today or yesteryear that headed out of Paris Gare de L'Est station bound for Vienna and the Balkans. The VSOE offers something truly special, albeit at a price. It uses some of the most elegant sleepers ever built for the Wagons-Lit company, and, during the heyday of European rail travel, these carriages would have found regular service on the Blue Train from Paris to the French Riviera, a train that still runs daily from the French capital to the resorts of Provence. They would also have been found on the Roma Express from Paris to Rome and on the Nord Express from Paris to Berlin and Riga.

Over the years quite a number of different routings have been used by trains that bear variants on the name Orient Express. There was the Ostend Vienna Orient Express, which provided the setting for Graham Greene's wonderful tale of subterfuge, murder and politics in his 1929 novel *Stamboul Train*. Then there was the Simplon Orient Express, that never even served Paris Gare de L'Est at all, but started from the Gare de Lyon and travelled via Lausanne, Milan, Venice and Trieste to reach the Balkans. This was the train on which



Agatha Christi set her novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, the film version of which greatly exaggerated the luxury of the carriages, but in so doing fuelled the modern day advertising of the exclusive VSOE glamour train. The stylish Pullman car which plays so central a role in the star studded 1974 film is a piece of artistic bravado, an innovation which was of course essential to the plot. In reality, the original Simplon Orient Express train was a much more modest affair than the book or film would have us believe.

There were yet other variants on the theme, such as the Arlberg Orient Express and much later the Direct Orient Express. But what of the *real* Orient Express. Well, that started life in 1883 as the Express d'Orient, running from Paris Gare de L'Est via Strasbourg, Munich and Salzburg to Vienna and on into the Balkans. In 1891, it was renamed the Orient Express, and that is the name it has retained until this day. Politics and wars have intervened, but the train that now bears the name Orient Express still leaves Paris every day at 5.17 pm, and follows much the same route as did the first train over 120 years ago.

Sadly, the Balkan adventures of the Orient Express have been trimmed back over the years. Until 2001, it still carried through carriages beyond Vienna to Budapest and Bucharest. But nowadays the Orient Express is just the regular overnight train from Paris to Vienna. It still carries the illustrious name, but appears more prosaically in many timetable listings as train EN262 (eastbound) or EN263 (on the return journey back to Paris). Passengers like Razvan, in the account above, for destinations east and south of Vienna now need to change in the Austrian capital.

Tourists who pay the earth to travel on the VSOE cruise train from London to Venice probably have little idea that the real Orient Express is still going strong. Just as some of those evening commuters returning from Paris to Châlons-en-Champagne, or those making their regular morning trip from St Pölten into Vienna have probably long since ceased to remark on the fact that the train they use most days is called the Orient Express. ■

Most European railway companies do not seem to make much of the fact that trains number EN262 / EN263 are still called the Orient Express. Details of the Paris – Vienna direct overnight trains can be found on any of the regular railway web sites. The French Railways www.sncf.com allows online bookings.

If you want to splash out and ride the VSOE cruise train, the company has a very glitzy and easy to use website at www.orient-express.com. The Venice Simplon Orient Express is just one of five tourist trains run by Orient Express Hotels Ltd. Expect, on any of their services, a festival of effortless magic that ensures your complete insulation from the real world outside the carriage window.

For a minutely detailed history of the Orient Express, there is no better place to start than with the Man in Seat 61's website on www.seat61.com. Mark Smith's awesome travel website provides a rich resource for anyone wanting to ride the Orient Express, or indeed travel elsewhere across Europe by train.

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PREVIEW

Hidden europe returns to Paris in the next issue, this time not to ride the Orient Express, but to capture, in *capital moments*, the scents and sounds of the city and its suburbs. And we report from Matiční Street in Ústí nad Labem on the raw deal often experienced by Europe's Roma population. We explore some of Europe's bizarre little enclaves (or do we mean exclaves?), like Campione d'Italia and Llivia, both communities which are politically part of one country and yet are seemingly located within the territory of another nation. And, also in our July 2005 issue, we visit a Swiss watchmaking town that numbers among its sons the architect Le Corbusier and automobile pioneer Louis Chevrolet. *Beyond City Limits* returns with a look at day trips from Kraków. And what's a hogback? Read more in *hidden europe 3*, published on 1 July. ■