



# In love with *Lydia*

CATHERINE COURtenay enjoys afternoon tea in a luxurious historic setting when she boards the 15.30 from Buckfastleigh



PHOTO: SOUTH DEVON RAILWAY

I'm a little pushed for time as I arrive at the railway station in Buckfastleigh. Park the car, a quick half-walk, half-run over the pedestrian bridge onto the platform, into the ticket office... slightly breathless – but it's ok, I've made it. Thankfully the 15.30 to Totnes is also running a little late.

It may be the whole rushing-to-catch-a-train thing. Is that why I'm excited? My platform dash certainly adds to the drama, to the theatre of the occasion, which feels like I'm about to step into a storybook adventure.

The anticipation continues as, five minutes later, the steam train pulling South Devon Railway's Pullman Car No. 246, *Lydia* arrives.

'*Lydia* embodies the golden age of luxury rail travel,' is the announcement on the

railway's website and an aura of glamour is palpable as soon as I climb onboard the Pullman to be met by one of the immaculately dressed concierge team.

The Pullman's passengers are ushered through a polished dark wood-panelled corridor, past doors with shining brass handles and swirls of gold copperplate lettering, 'ice chest', 'kitchen', 'switches & fuses'.

We're stepping back into the past, this 'golden age' of travel, but the surroundings feel as new, such is the luxurious quality of this railway carriage restoration. No faded glamour here – this must be just how *Lydia* charmed her passengers back in the 1920s.

*Lydia* was originally constructed in 1924 by the Midland Railway Carriage & Wagon Company. She was built for the Pullman Company, of *Orient Express* fame, and spent her early years running along the coast of southern France and Italy.

The Pullman is roomy, just two seats wide, with plush carpet and deep comfy seats. We settle in at our tables, Art Deco lamps on crisp white tablecloths, and our waiter brings a glass of fizz. Just before the train departs we hear a little about this carriage's history, including the time she was requisitioned for Churchill's use during the Second World War. She was a favourite of the wartime leader apparently, and also used for his state funeral.

After some years in America she came back to this country in 2000, then brought to Devon by her owner for restoration work at South Devon Railway in 2024. After more than 50 years out of public use, she came back into service on this line last May. She's an occasional, luxurious addition to the railway's dining car services, offering ploughman's or Sunday lunches and afternoon tea.

We set off, through the South Hams countryside and tea is brought to our tables by the team which runs the catering. Finger sandwiches, savoury rolls, scones with cream and jam and a selection of sweet treats – it is all so beautifully presented and the perfect balance of sweet and savoury in just the right



portions. Dining in an opulent carriage like this, expectations are high. It can't be easy in terms of catering, but they succeed on every level. The quality of food (provided in collaboration with Babbacombe Bay Café) and the service – expertly performed aboard the moving carriage – is outstanding. *Lydia* may be fabulous to sit in, but drinking from a teacup on a moving train requires a little care – thank goodness for saucers.

As we go along, the shared sense of enjoyment among *Lydia*'s passengers increases; we all start to leave our seats and take a little tour of the carriage. Opening doors, treading softly on the carpeted floor, brushing the fabric of the seats, holding the brass window rails, all while the steam engine chuffs along, with the occasional whistle blow – this really is a treat for all the senses.

At Totnes I watch as the steam engine is coupled up to the train, ready for the return journey. There's something very animated about a train driven by a steam engine, you feel every movement as she pulls, gathers speed, slows and sways. We arrive back at Buckfastleigh and I don't think anyone wants to leave. The railway team must sense this too, as we are left to take our time, gathering thoughts and sitting for a moment, just soaking up this magical experience. ●

[southdevonrailway.co.uk](http://southdevonrailway.co.uk)



PHOTO: VOLAND / SOUTH DEVON RAILWAY