

Exploring luxury train experience quality: a netnographic study across ten iconic journeys

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Received 18 September 2025
Revised 17 November 2025
18 January 2026
4 February 2026
Accepted 15 February 2026

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Abstract

Purpose – This study advances scholarship on sustainable and transformative luxury by showing how slow, place-connected mobilities generate meaningful guest experiences via luxury trains.

Design/methodology/approach – A netnographic analysis of 432 TripAdvisor reviews across ten internationally-recognised luxury trains was conducted, and data analysed through the Interactive Experience Quality (IXQ) model as a theoretical lens.

Findings – Findings highlight three interpretive movements: anticipation and symbolic expectation-setting; immersive engagement through motion, space, and sociability; and lingering emotional aftertaste, revealing how luxury trains foster deep emotional resonance, narrative continuity, and experiential congruence through a blend of mobility, heritage aesthetics, and relational hospitality.

Practical implications – Luxury train operators may benefit from adopting a journey-wide experience design approach that prioritises sequencing, hosting, and interpretation as core design resources. Doing so can support credible sustainability and transformative luxury positioning by embedding place engagement and learning opportunities into the journey in ways that are coherent, ethically mindful, and practicable in small, mobile contexts.

Originality/value – The study positions luxury train travel as a theoretically generative empirical context for examining experience quality in motion, extending existing experience scholarship beyond predominantly static luxury settings and large-scale mobile formats, positioning luxury trains as an evolving site of experiential, sustainable, and transformative consumption.

Keywords Train travel, Slow tourism, Netnography, Experience quality, Sustainable luxury tourism, Transformative luxury

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Luxury train travel has undergone a significant revival in recent decades, evolving from a functional mode of transport into an experiential journey emphasising comfort, exclusivity, and cultural immersion (Karri, 2023). This evolution reflects broader shifts in luxury tourism, where experiences are increasingly shaped by values of mindfulness, sustainability, and narrative engagement (Thirumaran and Raghav, 2017). In this context, luxury train travel provides a multi-sensory form of slow tourism, one that seamlessly combines scenic beauty, cultural heritage, and high-end amenities, making the journey itself as meaningful as the destination (Kosykh *et al.*, 2023).

Iconic trains such as the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express in Europe or the Maharajas' Express in India have long offered luxury experiences. Their re-emerging appeal suggests a reimagining of historical luxury in contemporary form (Peira *et al.*, 2022). This is evident in global rail revitalisation efforts, such as Italy's Orient Express La Dolce Vita, Japan's Cruise



Train Seven Stars in Kvermyushu, and Australia's The Ghan. These journeys are characterised by nostalgic design, fine dining, and personalised service, positioning them as immersive, heritage-based alternatives to other forms of mobile luxury (Pring, 2019).

This recent resurgence in luxury train travel aligns closely with the principles of slow tourism, which prioritise deep cultural engagement, environmental awareness, and unhurried travel (Kosykh *et al.*, 2023). Rather than focusing on efficiency, luxury trains encourage disconnection from the fast pace of modern life and reconnection with authenticity and nostalgia (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a). Importantly, this form of travel also counters several mediated critiques of contemporary tourism. From an environmental standpoint, luxury train journeys present a lower-carbon alternative to air and cruise travel, aligning with global calls for decarbonisation and more sustainable mobility practices (Roosien *et al.*, 2024). From a socio-spatial perspective, their itineraries often traverse regions outside mass tourism hubs, enabling more dispersed visitor flows and fostering engagement with less-visited communities and landscapes. These characteristics highlight a broader movement to reintroduce luxury trains as culturally embedded, immersive experiences that appeal to contemporary sensibilities (Potter, 2024).

Despite growing popularity, academic research on luxury train travel remains limited (Pring, 2019). While the broader literature on luxury tourism includes studies of unique accommodation (Harkison *et al.*, 2018a; Manfreda *et al.*, 2022), experiential luxury (Batat, 2022), and mobile contexts such as cruises (Hwang and Han, 2014), the specific qualities that define experience quality within luxury train settings remain underexplored. This is particularly important given that luxury trains challenge dominant tourism models reliant on high-emission travel, packaged itineraries, and heavily visited destinations by offering an experience that supports more sustainable and emotionally meaningful forms of travel (Karri, 2023; Kosykh *et al.*, 2023).

This study addresses this gap by conducting a qualitative netnographic analysis of 432 guest-authored TripAdvisor reviews from ten internationally recognised luxury trains. Drawing on Manfreda *et al.*'s (2023a) Interactive Experience Quality (IXQ) model, the research explores the central questions: *How does experience quality unfold in luxury train travel, and in what ways does it differ from other luxury tourism formats?* In doing so, the study contributes to the literature on sustainable and transformative luxury, experiential tourism, and slow travel, and offers practical insights for luxury train operators seeking to design emotionally resonant, culturally embedded, and guest-centred travel experiences aligned with evolving traveller values.

2. Literature review

2.1 The evolving nature of luxury tourism experiences

Luxury tourism has undergone a significant conceptual shift, moving beyond material opulence toward multi-dimensional, co-created experiences that foreground personalisation, authenticity, and emotional engagement (Iloranta, 2021). Yet while scholars position luxury as an interactive, relational process shaped by space, service, and social connection (Iloranta, 2021; Manfreda *et al.*, 2022), much of this work idealises these dynamics without sufficiently interrogating how they are produced or for whom they hold meaning. The growing emphasis on sustainable and transformative luxury, for example, is often celebrated as evidence of a value-driven consumer turn, but empirical proof of its operationalisation in real-world contexts remains limited (Amatulli *et al.*, 2021). Assertions of sustainability risk becoming aspirational rhetoric unless they are examined in relation to the material, labour, and environmental conditions that underpin luxury service delivery.

Transformative luxury similarly positions luxury as a route to the emotional and personal development of travellers and the well-being of luxury stakeholders (Batat, 2022), yet this literature tends to privilege conceptual narratives while offering limited examination of lived experiences and direct practice. The result is a conceptual landscape rich in values-based

language but thin in empirical scrutiny. Scholars have noted that the field remains dominated by conceptual and normative argumentation, with little evidence tracing how such value logics translate into practice across different forms of luxury mobility (Kesuma *et al.*, 2026). In particular, studies that analyse the operationalisation of values in mobile luxury contexts and trace experience across the pre-, during-, and post-journey phases are scarce (Harkison *et al.*, 2018a; Manfreda *et al.*, 2023b). Addressing this gap requires a temporally explicit analysis of designed journeys that specifies the mechanisms through which new forms of luxury value logics are operationalised in practice (Batat, 2022; Leban *et al.*, 2024; Serdane *et al.*, 2020).

Contemporary luxury travellers actively shape their experiences, seeking exclusivity not only in material comfort but also in cultural depth and meaningful engagement (Karri, 2023). Rather than engaging in passive consumption, they increasingly prioritise interactions that stimulate the senses, evoke emotional responses, and foster reflection (Iloranta, 2021). These preferences mirror a growing desire for “luxury with purpose,” where emotional fulfilment, ethical values, and social consciousness converge in the travel experience (Manfreda and Harkison, 2025). This evolving demand aligns closely with the principles of slow travel, which emphasises immersion, contemplation, and appreciation of the journey itself over speed and efficiency (Serdane *et al.*, 2020).

Among emerging forms of luxury tourism, luxury train travel stands out for its ability to blend exclusivity with slow travel principles. It offers an unhurried, immersive journey that facilitates deep engagement with landscapes, cultures, and social encounters, and a setting where travellers can disconnect from daily routines and forge lasting, emotionally resonant memories (Kosykh *et al.*, 2023; Peira *et al.*, 2022). However, existing discussions of luxury trains often catalogue attributes and benefits, while paying less attention to the temporally extended and mobility-led nature of the train experience. As luxury tourism continues to evolve, understanding how service design and management and guest participation intersect becomes crucial for developing travel experiences that are not only high-end but also meaningful and transformative (Manfreda and Harkison, 2025).

2.2 Conceptualising luxury train travel

Luxury train travel has emerged as a distinct segment within experiential luxury tourism (Karri, 2023; Pring, 2019), which, unlike traditional luxury transportation that prioritises speed, privacy, or efficiency, repositions the journey as the core experience. These trains are not merely transitional spaces but destinations in themselves (Dogra and Karri, 2020). Meticulously designed interiors, gourmet dining, and attentive service foster a sense of indulgence and intimacy (Pring, 2019). The limited capacity of luxury trains enables a personalised guest experience, marked by frequent, meaningful interactions between staff and passengers, which mirrors the relational environment of luxury lodges or small-scale cruises (Lee and Chen, 2017; Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a). Despite this profile, luxury trains remain comparatively under-examined as a research context, with few holistic, empirically grounded accounts of the journey as a process.

Other forms of luxury tourism – such as luxury lodges (e.g. Harkison *et al.*, 2018a, b; Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a), small cruises (e.g. Hwang and Han, 2014), or luxury peer-to-peer accommodation (Mody *et al.*, 2017) – have attracted increased attention as newer luxury conceptions diverge from traditional luxury values. However, while luxury trains share attributes with other high-end travel experiences – including exclusivity, curation, and comfort – they are set apart by their dynamic engagement with place and an evolving journey narrative (Karri, 2023; Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a). The constantly shifting scenery offers visual stimulation and geographic immersion, enriching the guest experience with a sense of place-based storytelling (Pring, 2019). The social dimension further defines luxury train experiences. As for other small forms of accommodation, small guest numbers and communal lounges foster social interactions that are often absent in larger, more segmented forms of luxury tourism (Harkison *et al.*, 2018a; Manfreda and Harkison, 2025). These relational dynamics reflect an ongoing shift in luxury

consumption towards connection (Eijdenberg *et al.*, 2024) – whether with people, heritage, or the self. However, the phenomenon requires further empirical scrutiny to move beyond its largely conceptual treatment.

As guests become increasingly mindful of the ecological impact of air and sea-based mobility, trains offer a lower-carbon alternative that does not compromise on comfort or cultural immersion (Peira *et al.*, 2022). The renewed appreciation for train travel reflects a desire to reconnect with travel as a process, where the act of journeying offers space for anticipation, calm, and adventure. By embracing slow, mindful travel, luxury trains align with the growing demand for eco-conscious luxury tourism (Leban *et al.*, 2024). This balance of heritage, experience, and sustainability reinforces luxury trains as a distinctive and evolving segment within the luxury tourism market.

2.3 Experience quality as a theoretical lens

As a mobile, immersive, and socially attuned format, luxury train travel offers a compelling example of how contemporary luxury tourism experiences are increasingly shaped by values such as reflection, cultural depth, emotional resonance, and sustainability (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a). Unlike point-to-point transportation models, luxury train travel invites guests to engage deeply with both the journey and its evolving contexts – spatial, social, and emotional – which foster co-created and emotionally engaging travel moments that unfold across time and space (Peira *et al.*, 2022), and positioning it as an ideal site for exploring the concept of experience quality.

The concept of experience quality has gained increasing traction in tourism and hospitality research, particularly as a response to the limitations of traditional service quality models such as SERVQUAL and SERVPERF (Alnawas and Hemsley-Brown, 2019). While these models focus on performance-based and operational indicators, they are often insufficient for capturing the affective, co-constructed, and holistic nature of (high-end) tourism experiences (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a). In contrast, experience quality emphasises emotional and psychological outcomes, shaped by interactions among the guest, the service environment, and the broader social and cultural context (Chen and Chen, 2010). These outcomes are subjective, dynamic, and emergent, deeply influenced by guests' prior expectations, personal values, and in-the-moment perceptions (Chang and Horng, 2010).

In the context of luxury train journeys, this lens becomes especially relevant. The experience unfolds across multiple touchpoints – onboard environments, off-train excursions, interpersonal interactions, and solitary moments. These moments are co-created through sensory immersion and social connection (Harkison, 2018). As such, the guest experience is best understood not as a singular event, but as an evolving series of emotional and cognitive moments shaped by space, time, and personal resonance (Manfreda *et al.*, 2022). Crespi-Vallbona (2021) similarly shows that satisfaction accrues holistically through guided interpretation and shared meaning-making over the course of a visit, rather than at a single touchpoint. In luxury train contexts, curated onboard hosting and off-train interpretive excursions play a comparable mediating role, deepening relational and symbolic appraisals across time.

To inform this exploration, the present study draws on the Interactive Experience Quality (IXQ) model developed by Manfreda *et al.* (2023a). The IXQ model conceptualises experience quality as emerging from the interaction between three spheres: the personal (e.g. cognitive and emotional states), the physical (e.g. design, sensory environment), and the social (e.g. staff and guest interaction). These spheres are interwoven, dynamically influencing emotional states such as awe, relaxation, and wellbeing. Crucially, the model also embeds a temporal dimension, accounting for how guest perceptions and emotional responses evolve across the pre-, during-, and post-experience phases. This temporal framing allows for a deeper understanding of how luxury train travel moments coalesce into extraordinary luxury experiences (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a).

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative method as it enables the exploration of complex, subjective experiences that cannot be meaningfully captured through numerical data (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Understanding the motivations, emotions, and evaluations of luxury tourists requires access to rich, narrative-driven reflections (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023c). Anchored in an interpretive paradigm, this study prioritises individual perceptions of lived experiences, recognising that meaning in tourism emerges through personal and socially constructed realities (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

To capture these individual perceptions, the study employs netnography, a specialised ethnography adapted for digital environments (Kozinets, 2022). Netnography has gained significant traction in tourism and hospitality research, particularly as travellers express their experiences online in organic, emotionally expressive ways (Mkono and Markwell, 2014). It is especially relevant in luxury tourism contexts, where direct participant observation is often impractical due to the exclusivity and cost of participation, and where researcher presence may inadvertently alter guest behaviour (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023c). As a non-intrusive method, netnography allows researchers to access naturally occurring, unsolicited guest reflections, offering authenticity and emotional depth often lost in structured interviews or surveys (Kozinets, 2022).

The decision to use TripAdvisor as a data source reflects its widespread credibility and richness of content in tourism research (Kotur, 2022). The platform is recognised for hosting detailed, emotionally expressive, and experience-based reviews, particularly in niche travel segments such as luxury and experiential tourism. Although limitations exist, its open-access format and high volume of candid guest narratives make it a valuable source of high-quality data (Mkono and Markwell, 2014). Moreover, anonymity and pseudonymity in online reviews often allow travellers to speak more freely, resulting in deeper disclosures about personal values, satisfaction, and emotional response (Sugiura *et al.*, 2017). Using TripAdvisor as a sole data source is common in tourism netnography, and we follow this convention here for comparability and depth (see, e.g. Mkono and Markwell, 2014).

This study focuses on guest reviews of ten internationally recognised luxury trains, selected for their prominence in the luxury tourism market, global reputation, and geographic diversity (Rizzo, 2022). The selected trains span North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia, allowing for a culturally and regionally diverse dataset. To systematically manage the data, a three-stage sampling process was implemented. First, purposive sampling was used to identify reviews published between July 2017 and July 2023, capturing guest experiences before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling *et al.*, 2021). Reviews that contained minimal content (e.g. one-word or single-sentence entries) were excluded to ensure analytical depth. Next, a quota-based sampling strategy was applied, selecting 10% of reviews from each train to ensure proportional representation across datasets of varying size (Rathnayaka and Jayalal, 2021). This percentage aligns with netnographic practice, balancing dataset manageability with thematic comprehensiveness (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Finally, a stratified random sampling approach was used within each quota, aided by a random number generator to reduce researcher bias (Ma *et al.*, 2016).

In total, 4,305 TripAdvisor reviews were screened, from which 432 were selected for analysis. Table 1 presents the distribution of reviews across the ten trains.

Reviews were extracted and logged in an Excel spreadsheet, capturing metadata such as title, travel date, full text, and rating. The dataset was uploaded into NVivo 12 for thematic analysis (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). A hybrid inductive–deductive thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2022). Open coding was used to identify recurring expressions, which were then organised into axial categories and main themes. These were later mapped against the pre-, during-, and post-experience journey phases and interpreted through Manfreda *et al.*'s (2023a) Interactive Experience Quality (IXQ) model.

To ensure rigour, a series of trustworthiness measures were implemented. Two independent researchers conducted coding for 20% of the dataset to improve dependability, with

Table 1. Luxury train reviews and selected sample (TripAdvisor, July 2017–July 2023)

Luxury train	Destination	TripAdvisor reviews	Selected reviews (10%)
Belmond British Pullman	England	490	49
Cruise Train Seven Stars	Japan	1	1
Golden Eagle Trans-Siberian Express	Russia	90	9
Maharajas' Express	India	28	3
Palace on Wheels	India	35	4
Rocky Mountaineer	Canada	2,481	248
The Blue Train	South Africa	220	22
The Ghan	Australia	639	64
The Royal Scotsman	Scotland	10	1
Venice Simplon-Orient-Express	Europe	311	31
<i>Total</i>		4,305	432

Source(s): Developed by authors

discrepancies resolved through discussion. Divergent or atypical cases were retained and analysed as counter-narratives, improving confirmability and richness of interpretation. To enhance credibility, themes were cross-referenced with academic literature and industry reports. Finally, external validation was undertaken with academic experts in luxury tourism, who evaluated the thematic framework and contributed to refinement through critical feedback (Manfreda and Harkison, 2025). This process helped merge overlapping themes, clarify coding definitions, and ensure the analysis remained rooted in the dataset rather than the researcher's preconceptions.

4. Results

This section is organised around a narrative arc that mirrors the unfolding emotional and temporal rhythms of travel. The findings reveal how luxury is co-created through mobility, anticipation, emotional resonance, and reflective meaning-making. Informed by the IXQ model (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a), three experiential movements were identified: anticipatory framing (invited into the story), immersion in motion (through space, rhythm, and sociability), and the lingering trace (memory, congruence, and post-experience meaning). Rather than fixed consumption stages, these movements represent overlapping affective processes through which travellers construct, inhabit, and remember the luxury train experience.

4.1 *Invited into the story: anticipation, imagination, and expectation setting*

Luxury train experiences begin well before departure, shaped by aspirational motives, cultural scripts, and lifestyle preferences that imbue the journey with symbolic meaning. Travellers often choose luxury train journeys to celebrate milestones, fulfil long-held dreams, or share meaningful time with loved ones. These motivations position luxury train travel as a narrative and emotional event that holds deep meaning for travellers. Because of this, guests enter the experience with elevated anticipatory expectations shaped by pre-existing cultural imaginaries, often drawn from literature, film, or family stories (Pring, 2019).

In contrast to mainstream luxury hospitality, where service is often evaluated through metrics such as brand prestige, service consistency, or technological innovation (Hwang and Han, 2014; Shin and Jeong, 2022), luxury train journeys are framed by temporality, landscape immersion, and symbolic rarity. This sets the tone for a form of luxury rooted in storytelling and self-narration (Wu and Lai, 2025). Travellers' anticipation is often intertwined with specific expectations about place, heritage, and service, amplified by a strong affective and symbolic charge as the journey becomes a marker of achievement, love, and memory.

It was on our bucket list to take the Orient Express from London to Venice. My parents had taken it 25 years ago and told me how wonderful it was . . . (Couple – Venice Simplon-Orient-Express)

Travellers often engage in detailed pre-travel research on elements such as service classes, dining arrangements, lounge amenities, and carriage design, treating the train's physical and service attributes as key symbolic cues of anticipated luxury.

We had heard so much about the Mountaineer, how wonderful the trip and views would be, how fabulous the food would be and how lovely the staff would be. Before booking, we had researched the difference between silver leaf and gold leaf service. (Couple – Rocky Mountaineer).

Anticipation is layered with emotion and personal history, revealing how travellers engage in “expectation work”, a cognitive and affective process of aligning imagined futures with symbolic milestones (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a). These deeply personal, culturally embedded desires for reconnection, reflection, and reward often mark these experiences as more meaningful and transformative for travellers (Duerden *et al.*, 2018). Expectations are also filtered through previous luxury travel encounters, particularly journeys aboard other luxury trains worldwide, shaping both anticipation and critical appraisal.

We have made train trips around the world, and in many ways, this was one of the best . . . The cost is well above any other train trip we've made, including trans Canada and even private train travel across Russia. But we enjoyed it very much. (Couple – The Ghan).

Guests who have previously experienced high-end services, such as those found in five-star hotels, luxury cruises, or luxury air travel, often bring heightened expertise and elevated expectations. Travellers with a deep history of engaging in luxury tourism possess what can be termed “luxury literacy”, a nuanced ability to assess and interpret luxury offerings before, during, and after consumption (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a).

We are self-funded retirees in our late sixties with lots of pleasure and business travel experience all over the world and as such, we have high but not unreasonable expectations when we travel. Importantly, we always try to match our expectations with what we believe we purchased. (Couple – The Ghan).

In contrast to luxury hotel stays, where expectations often rely on standardised brand cues (e.g. star ratings, global chains) (Manfreda *et al.*, 2022), luxury train guests frequently engage in a deeper symbolic alignment, seeking congruence between their values, prior experiences, and the journey's promised heritage narrative or spatial design (Peira *et al.*, 2022). Unlike guests at standardised luxury hotels or cruise brands, who often expect consistent, replicable service across properties (Harkison *et al.*, 2018b), luxury train guests anticipate a one-off, narrative-rich experience, rooted in the unique character of the train's history, design, and service culture (Karri, 2023).

4.2 *Immersion in motion: experiencing luxury through movement, connection, and emotional depth*

If the pre-departure phase marks a symbolic entry into the imagined journey narrative, it is once the train departs that this imagined story becomes sensorially and emotionally real. The consumption phase of luxury train travel unfolds as a dynamic process in which physical, emotional, and relational experiences coalesce rather than as a static, transactional encounter with luxury commodities.

4.2.1 *Physical and sensory immersion: space, scenery, and mobility.* Scenic immersion is one of the most frequently celebrated aspects of the luxury train experience. Moving through deserts, mountains, forests, and rural towns, travellers are presented with a slow, unfolding view of the world, one that differs markedly from the static perspectives of resorts or the aerial distance of air travel.

You might think two days on a train would get boring, but you would be wrong. Starting from Jasper, the train passes through picturesque mountains, then farms, a semi-arid “desert” around Kamloops, then Pacific mountains and last rainforest. Pictureworthy almost all the way. (Friends – Rocky Mountaineer).

Research underscores the visual consumption of evolving natural and cultural landscapes significantly enhances traveller satisfaction and emotional resonance, particularly within experiential luxury tourism contexts (Rhoden and Kaaristo, 2020). This continuous visual transition enables a form of attention that is both contemplative and affective, aligning with principles of slow tourism and theories of embodied mobility (Fullagar *et al.*, 2012), creating a layered, multisensory connection with place. Meals served on board are described as occasions, ritualised sensory events situated within the material and temporal rhythm of the train.

The real star of this experience, though, was the dining. Incredible that such great meals could be created in the small space of a dining car kitchen. (Solo – The Ghan).

Similarly, private cabins function as key sites of affective and sensory engagement. Though compact, they are often described as cocoon-like spaces of warmth, comfort, and nostalgic elegance, where the integration of local materials, heritage motifs, and vintage aesthetics within the cabin design enhances authenticity and deepens emotional resonance, aligning with contemporary expectations for unique, context-sensitive luxury experiences (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a).

Imagine you’re a time traveller who decided to go back to the 1920s . . . Imagine boarding a great gleaming blue train . . . shown to your personal cabin. A cabin with veneered wood walls and cupboards, a table and chairs and an en-suite toilet and shower . . . (Solo – The Blue Train).

Luxury train cabins exemplify the art of delivering luxury within spatial constraints, offering a harmonious balance of functionality, aesthetics, and emotional engagement. Unlike the spaciousness of luxury hotels or cruise suites, luxury train cabins are inherently compact yet achieve a perceived luxury through features such as multifunctional furniture, ambient lighting, and panoramic windows.

Our cabins were beautifully designed for a small space. We each had a sofa that turned into a bed at night, a small table, a sink with crisp linens and a box of toiletries . . . (Friends – Venice-Simplon-Orient-Express).

However, guest reflections also reveal the physical limitations of these confined spaces. While many celebrated the nostalgic and aesthetic dimensions of their cabins, others noted the bodily discomfort caused by prolonged sitting or restricted movement.

The seats are uncomfortable after 3 or 4 hours, but most days we are sitting for 8 and sometimes upwards of 12–14 hours. The foot rest doesn’t extend far enough to relieve the stress on one’s buttocks or lower back, and when my husband tried to extend the foot rest his feet were crushed under the seat in front. (Couple – Rocky Mountaineer).

Although such reflections did not dominate reviews, they underscore an important tension between visual/spatial beauty and physical ease. As Manfreda *et al.* (2023a) argue, when one dimension of a luxury experience, such as physical comfort, falls short, it can disrupt the perception of coherence and value. Onboard amenities such as lounges, observation decks, and curated entertainment experiences also play a critical role in shaping the luxury train experience.

The lounge and observation cars were perfect for watching the scenery, making new friends or having a cocktail or cognac served by one of the very capable bar staff. (Couple – The Blue Train).

Unlike luxury lodges and hotels, which typically provide expansive grounds and wellness amenities, or cruise ships, which offer diverse entertainment zones and scheduled activities, luxury trains prioritise reflective, low-intensity leisure that complements the experience of movement and landscape immersion (Kosykh *et al.*, 2023). Recent research highlights that such understated, sensory-rich spaces reflect a more mindful kind of luxury (Leban *et al.*, 2024), which is more likely to bring about meaningful and transformative experiences for travellers (Sheldon, 2020).

4.2.2 Meaningful social interactions: intimacy and community on the move. The intimacy of shared and enclosed space, the extended duration of the journey, and the slow tempo of travel all create conditions for organic social exchange. This aligns with other forms of small-luxury tourism, such as luxury lodges, where these conditions foster a deep sense of hospitality and exchange, leading to the establishment of liminal communitas (Manfreda and Harkison, 2025). Staff-guest relationships emerge as central to the co-creation of meaningful interactions. The relatively intimate scale of the setting allows staff to move beyond procedural service into realms of narrative, care, and affect, and where guided interpretation helps translate place meanings into relational value (Crespi-Vallbona, 2021).

Our steward Bobby was so attentive from start to finish, constantly filling up our glasses. He explained to us about the history of the train and the carriage we were in. (Couple – Belmond British Pullman).

The importance of storytelling abilities and the consequent interactions align with emerging understandings of experiential luxury, where emotional engagement, feeling personally valued, and authentic connection are increasingly prioritised over material displays (Wu and Lai, 2025).

Big shout-outs to Kristi, Sarah and Nook who looked after us in Silverleaf! They were so attentive to everyone's needs and had great stories about the history of the railway and communities along the way. (Couple – Rocky Mountaineer).

The familiarity and human warmth that develop throughout multi-day luxury train journeys contribute significantly to a sense of belonging and community, positioning staff personalisation and storytelling as central to both service quality and the broader social architecture of the luxury train experience (Kosykh *et al.*, 2023). These communitas expand through communal spaces, such as lounges, which act as catalysts for spontaneous conversation and relationship-building with fellow travellers (Karri, 2023).

The Blue Train has an observation car with large windows, the main lounge and the Club lounge where one can mingle with the fellow guests and enjoy afternoon tea or a drink. (Couple – The Blue Train).

While social engagement is common across many luxury settings, such as luxury lodges or cruise ships, luxury trains uniquely foster deeper, more spontaneous connections due to their smaller scale, limited entertainment options, and continuous movement (Peira *et al.*, 2022). In contrast to resorts or cruise ships, where guests may disperse across pools, spas, or theatres, the concentrated and carefully designed social spaces aboard luxury trains encourage face-to-face engagement and casual conversation.

You do have to be willing to share your table with the other guests but we travelled with a lovely bunch of Brits and Americans. We all got on well which was just as well as we travelled on all the excursions together. (Couple – Palace on Wheels).

Off-train excursions involving meeting local people, learning about customs, and experiencing traditional practices give travellers a deeper, more personal insight into the destinations they visit (Lee and Chen, 2017). These moments of interaction, though brief, were described with emotional weight:

Discovering Mongolia and Siberia was amazing. Nothing like I thought it would be. The scenery entertained most people. The day excursions were interesting and we gained a good insight into the culture and customs of the locals. I thought 10 days may be too long, but time flew! . . . Highlights were the excursions, the professionalism of the guides (Svetlana esp) Mongolian village, ytrusk, meeting a nomadic family, and local dasha visit and train bbq. We made many friends on the journey. (Couple – Golden Eagle Trans-Siberian).

These encounters challenge the idea of luxury as isolation, pointing instead toward systemic, relational, and participatory dimensions of value creation (Manfreda and Harkison, 2025).

4.2.3 Personal and emotional engagement: cognition, affect, and reflection. While the physical and social dimensions of the luxury train experience provide the architecture of immersion, it is in the emotional and cognitive register that the journey becomes truly extraordinary (Duerden *et al.*, 2018). Escapism and a sense of liminality are defining aspects of the luxury train experience, offering guests the rare opportunity to disconnect from the pressures of everyday life and immerse themselves in a serene, peaceful environment, experiencing psychological restoration.

Imagine boarding a great gleaming blue train just after sipping champagne and nibbling canapés in a luxurious lounge while being serenaded by a glamorous saxophone playing lady . . . all this and a great window to watch the World go by as you travel at a leisurely pace. (Solo – The Blue Train).

For many, the journey was imbued with personal significance. Reviews often drew on emotionally charged language – “unforgettable,” “once in a lifetime,” “a dream come true” – to articulate the meaningfulness of the experience, reflecting a genuine transformation in how guests related to time, place, and luxury during their journey.

Having travelled extensively I can honestly say that this is the best holiday I have been on. I come down from an experience that has left me more in love with India, it’s wonderful people and it’s immense hospitality (Couple – Maharaja’s Express).

Aligning with past research on other forms of luxury tourism (e.g. Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a; Harkison *et al.*, 2018b), the “luxury feel” of the journey is essential to heightening the emotional experience of luxury train travel. Guests are immersed in an environment of indulgence, where every element, from ornate décor to personalised amenities, contributes to a heightened sense of refinement, comfort, and exclusivity (Lee and Chen, 2017; Pring, 2019).

It’s an incredible journey and every moment is precious. The dining is extraordinary and the historic walkways to the architecture is definitely worthwhile to indulge. The Grand Suite offers luxury robes, slippers, bathroom products, gift from luxury designer LV and plenty more left to surprise you . . . (Couple – Venice-Simplon-Orient-Express).

A sense of nostalgia was present across the narratives and was unique to this type of luxury experience. The aesthetic and historical features of luxury trains evoke memories or imagined associations with a bygone era, deepening the emotional connection between travellers and their journey (Peira *et al.*, 2022).

You book this train for the amazing experience of luxury travel as it was in the 1920s . . . it’s old-time rail travel, and it’s part of the magic. (Couple – Venice-Simplon-Orient-Express).

Elements such as vintage carriage décor, formal dining rituals, and the gentle rhythm of train travel cultivate a deliberate sense of temporal dislocation, enabling guests to “step back in time” and experience a historically resonant form of luxury (Peira *et al.*, 2022). This resonates with findings in guided heritage contexts, where interpretation converts aesthetic/historic cues into cumulative, memory-rich appraisals across the visit (Crespi-Vallbona, 2021). The role of nostalgia in creating the luxury train experience resonates with the growing concept of luxury as memory-rich, meaningful moments rooted in authenticity and heritage (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023b).

Awe was another recurring emotion, it is often associated with transformative emotional states, particularly when individuals encounter stimuli perceived as vast, extraordinary, or fleeting (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a). Guests reported moments of sublime encounter with nature and scale, experiences that defied their expectations and brought about deep emotional responses. While scenic beauty is a component of many luxury travel experiences, what differentiates luxury train journeys is the unique emotional magnitude guests feel when encountering landscapes from within a curated, mobile environment (Karri, 2023).

It is difficult to put into words just how incredible this experience is. Just a perfect two days from Vancouver to Banff with the most amazing scenery. Photos simply don't do it justice, but this is definitely the best way to experience an unforgettable journey. (Couple – Rocky Mountaineer).

The slow rhythm of train travel facilitated this introspective immersion (Fullagar *et al.*, 2012). Unlike high-speed transit or hyper-scheduled cruise itineraries, luxury trains created pockets of unstructured time in motion. This temporal openness allowed for daydreaming, journaling, meditative looking, and spontaneous conversation, experiences that support cognitive restoration and emotional attunement (Farkic and Taylor, 2019).

7 days from Moscow to Vladivostok and never a moment's boredom! . . . The endless birch and fir forests were not a bore, they were peaceful. Rest of time we read and dozed . . . (Friends – Golden Trans-Siberian).

Emotional engagement extended not only to moments of joy or spectacle but also to the experience of deceleration, reflection, and reconnection with self and others (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023b). In these experiences, this brings a heightened opportunity to create not only memories, but experiences that are truly meaningful and potentially transformative for travellers (Sheldon, 2020).

4.3 *The lingering trace: memory, aftertaste, and post-experience meaning*

The post-experience phase involves guests reflecting deeply on the emotional, cultural, and personal significance of their journey. These reflections produce experiential outcomes such as learning, gratitude, and congruence, determining the long-term resonance of the experience and contributing to guests' overall evaluation of the luxury train journey. For many guests, post-journey reflection is marked by a deep appreciation for the cultural insights and regional knowledge gained during the trip.

This trip was an excellent way of travelling through tremendous scenery whilst learning at the same time about the historical situation of this section of Canada. (Couple – The Rocky Mountaineer).

Research highlights that storytelling and experiential learning significantly enhance the long-term impact of tourism experiences, especially when guests revisit these narratives in their reflections after travel (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a; Su *et al.*, 2023). Similarly research on slow tourism suggests that immersive, unhurried experiences create space for authentic cultural understanding and personal growth, as guests are given time to absorb context, process emotion, and internalise meaning (Fullagar *et al.*, 2012; Serdane *et al.*, 2020). Gratitude also emerged as a dominant experiential outcome, not just for what was seen or consumed, but for the experience of feeling seen, known, and cared for.

I feel honoured and privileged to have travelled on the Seven Stars in Kyushu Cruise Train. A wonderful experience on an absolutely stunning train . . . and one I will never forget . . . (Solo – Cruise Train Seven Stars).

Unlike luxury environments where novelty or spectacle dominates, trains encourage a kind of emotional stillness and attentiveness. Travellers expressed fulfilment and gratitude in quiet moments, in the absence of rush, in the opportunity to slow down and savour time with others or with themselves.

So, with nothing to worry about, you are left to enjoy the train and the view. (Couple – Rocky Mountaineer).

Experiential congruence – the feeling of seamlessness experienced where every aspect of the journey harmoniously works together (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a) – was a recurrent theme in post-journey reflections. Guests described a satisfying alignment between what they had imagined and what they encountered, creating a sense of harmony and narrative coherence.

Everything about our trip from London to Paris was flawless. From check-in at Victoria Station to the final goodbyes in Paris, every detail was handled with precision and elegance. (Family – Venice-Simplon-Orient-Express)

In post-travel reflections, luxury train journeys are often described as remarkably harmonious experiences, where every aspect, from décor and service to pacing and atmosphere, aligns to create a unified emotional narrative. This congruence is crucial in luxury contexts, where guests seek not only quality but also a sense of narrative coherence and effortless flow (Manfreda *et al.*, 2022). Unlike some luxury hotels or cruises, which may offer fragmented services or inconsistent quality and rely on external providers, creating emotional dissonance, luxury trains provide a contained, curated environment that promotes experiential continuity.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1 Conclusions

Luxury tourism is currently being reshaped by broader shifts in how “good” travel is defined and legitimised, through heightened environmental accountability, increasing scrutiny of high-impact mobilities, and an expanding market emphasis on slower, more place-connected forms of travel that foreground meaning and depth over spectacle. In this context, luxury trains constitute a salient empirical site through which to examine how luxury is being reconfigured as a form of mobility, temporality, and place relationship.

This study explored the distinctiveness of luxury train experiences, addressing a gap in tourism scholarship that has theorised luxury primarily through static hospitality formats (e.g. boutique accommodation) and large mobile settings such as cruises (Harkison *et al.*, 2018a; Manfreda *et al.*, 2022). We framed luxury train travel as a context in which experience quality unfolds in motion and over time. Studying this mode illuminates shifting values in luxury tourism, away from status-driven consumption toward sustainability and transformation (Batat, 2022; Manfreda *et al.*, 2023b; Leban *et al.*, 2024).

The study identified experiential dimensions distinguishing luxury trains from other high-end formats commonly used to theorise luxury (e.g. hotels, cruises) (Harkison *et al.*, 2018b; Hwang and Han, 2014). Three interwoven aspects characterise the luxury train experiential journey in terms of experience quality (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023a): anticipatory framing, immersion-in-motion, and enduring meaningful impact. This study positions mobility and temporal continuity as structuring conditions of experience quality, differentiating luxury trains from static hospitality and large-scale cruise formats, and addressing the under-theorisation noted in prior work. Collectively, these findings establish luxury train travel as a theoretically generative empirical context for extending experience quality scholarship and practice toward temporally continuous, place-connected.

5.2 Theoretical implications

The theoretical importance of this study lies in its capacity to inform how luxury travel may be conceptualised as travel systems evolve, particularly as the sector confronts questions of legitimacy, impact, and future mobility pathways. By foregrounding temporality and mobility, the study contributes to the ongoing rethinking of luxury beyond static environments and narrow status signalling, toward forms of luxury experienced through time, movement, and place relations. The study findings offer four theoretical implications that clarify how

experience quality is constituted when luxury travel is mobile, spatially bounded, and temporally extended. First, the study addresses the dominance of conceptual rather than empirical examinations of sustainable and transformative luxury (Batat, 2022; Manfreda and Harkison, 2025) by providing evidence from luxury train travel. It extends understanding of how luxury tourism consumption embedded in slow, place-connected mobilities can be more beneficial than standard luxury experiences. Findings show that such experiences generate positive guest outcomes – gratitude, learning, and congruence – contributing to meaningful and potentially transformative experiences that can benefit host communities and places. This reframing strengthens the empirical basis for recognising that not all luxury consumption is status-driven, and some formats naturally support transformation-oriented trajectories (Batat, 2022).

Second, the study extends experience quality theory by showing how temporality is generated through mobility. Responding to calls to apply and refine IXQ across varied contexts (Manfreda et al., 2023a) and to attend to tempo and presence emphasised in slow tourism scholarship (Fullagar et al., 2012; Serdane et al., 2020), we show how mobility and temporal mechanisms deepen emotional engagement and foster reflective meaning-making across the journey. This constitutes a mobility-centred extension of IXQ (Manfreda et al., 2023a) that reframes static accounts toward extended, dynamic journeys central to slow and deep travel, theorising luxury as experience in motion.

Third, the study directly advances the luxury train literature by addressing persistent gaps in how these journeys are conceptualised and empirically understood. Existing studies have largely provided descriptive accounts of luxury trains while calling for more detailed, temporally explicit investigations of how luxury is actually experienced and interpreted across the journey (Pring, 2019; Dogra and Karri, 2020; Karri, 2023; Peira et al., 2022). By tracing guest narratives across anticipatory, in-motion, and impact phases, this study offers the first integrated, empirically grounded explanation of the experiential mechanisms underpinning luxury trains journeys. This moves the luxury train discourse beyond static or attribute-driven descriptions, establishing a process-based understanding of what differentiates luxury trains within the wider luxury tourism landscape.

Fourth, the study advances tourism and hospitality experience design and management knowledge by articulating a processual design vocabulary and clarifying the conditions under which luxury, small, mobile contexts operate. The vocabulary maps design and management work across the experiential journey. The findings specify boundary conditions that convert apparent constraints into design resources when made explicit and paced. This contribution thus translates evidence from luxury train into an actionable lexicon for designing experience-in-motion, extending experience-design and management logics beyond static settings. In doing so, it answers Manfreda et al. (2023a)'s calls for emic, temporally holistic, psychologically attuned, and practitioner-usable extensions of IXQ toward tourism and hospitality mobile formats.

5.3 Practical implications

The practical importance of this study is heightened by a shifting operating environment in which luxury providers are increasingly expected to demonstrate coherence of value, integrity of place engagement, and defensible claims of benefit, rather than relying on traditional markers of exclusivity alone. Practically, the study underscores the value of managing luxury train experiences as a unified, temporally continuous journey from anticipation to post-travel reflection, rather than as discrete service encounters. Such a journey-wide orientation entails allocating resources, pacing, and staff roles to protect the narrative and emotional continuity across all stages. This includes prioritising capacity in high-stakes nodes where meaning is concentrated (e.g. storytelling, dining, cabins), sequencing staffing and service flows to align with scenic peaks rather than fixed mealtimes, and framing operational constraints as markers of craftsmanship through staged “craft under motion” moments. It also involves spatial and

sensory structuring – differentiating areas for quiet reflection from social spaces, and synchronising lighting, sound, and announcements with key vistas – so attention, rather than activity volume, is the primary managed resource. Procurement and product development follow the same logic, with choices around materials, furnishings, and spatial configurations guided by mobility constraints while preserving heritage cues that underpin authenticity.

Operational performance and narrative integrity are jointly optimised, ensuring the material and atmospheric dimensions remain coherent with the journey’s temporal and emotional arc. Additionally, consistent with our findings, brief but authentic, guided interactions with local communities (e.g. small-group excursions led by local experts, narrative framing that connects onboard heritage to place) amplify experiential outcomes such as learning, gratitude and congruence in the post-journey phase. Given the short dwell times and contained guest numbers typical of luxury trains, operators should prioritise quality of contact over quantity: small cohorts, clear cultural protocols, and hosted interpretation that links scenery to lived practice, while avoiding extractive or staged encounters. Although trains often operate with lower volumes and slower tempos than other luxury formats, community touchpoints should be paced and capacity-aware to minimise disruption and commodification. This approach aligns journey coherence with responsible place engagement, preserving narrative and emotional continuity while tempering potential impacts.

5.4 Limitations and future research

Finally, this study has several limitations. It relied solely on publicly available TripAdvisor reviews, which, while detailed, reflect self-selected, retrospective accounts that may overrepresent particularly positive, negative, or memorable experiences and underrepresent less digitally engaged travellers. Using a single review platform (rather than multiple sources) may also introduce platform-specific biases; however, TripAdvisor’s scale and consistent structure provided comparable, naturally occurring narratives across cases. To mitigate single-source bias and support transferability rather than statistical generalisation, we used a maximum-variation sampling strategy (multiple trains, operators, routes, service classes, party types, seasons), achieving global reach and diversity in guest backgrounds and travel purposes. The netnographic approach captured authentic guest narratives but did not allow direct engagement or observation, limiting insights into fleeting, emotional, or embodied experiences (Manfreda *et al.*, 2023c). Additionally, the analysis focused only on guests, excluding employees and local communities, whose perspectives are vital to understanding the co-creation of meaningful luxury experiences. Future research could incorporate ethnographic fieldwork or *in situ* interviews and adopt a multi-stakeholder approach.

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