



THE FOOD OF LOVE

THERE'S A CERTAIN INTIMACY IN BREAKING BREAD WITH A LOVED ONE, BUT IF YOU DON'T HAVE TIME TO COOK A SPECIAL MEAL AT HOME, SEARCHING FOR ROMANCE IN A RESTAURANT CAN BE A MINEFIELD. GISELLE WHITEAKER DISCOVERS THE ULTIMATE ROMANTIC DINING EXPERIENCE.



Top: Lincoln Cathedral sits atop a hill.
Above: The romance of steam train travel.

Pullman-style dining marries comfort and cuisine.

“For my birthday, Deb gave me an envelope for every month of the year. This was in this month’s envelope,” explains Rob, the dapper gentleman sitting opposite when I ask him why he signed up for this experience. Deb is beaming with pride. “Was this a special birthday? One with a zero?” I ask. “No. It was just another birthday, but every experience is something we can do together.”



I glance at my boyfriend Elio in the hopes that he’s listening. He didn’t arrange this date on a steam train with Steam Dreams – I did – but it’s his turn next and Deb and Rob might be able to teach him a thing or two about grand gestures.

A little thrill had run through me when we approached the train at London’s King’s Cross station and I’d peered through the window, past a glowing lamp, to see tables set with crisp white tablecloths. Now, seated in a generously proportioned, plush maroon seat in the classic, wood-panelled carriage, I feel like I’ve taken a step back in time, to the undeniably romantic era of steam train travel. What I’m really looking forward to, though, is the Pullman-style dining, with brunch served on the journey north to Lincoln and dinner served on the return leg.

The train is being hauled by an LMS Stanier Black Five 45212 engine, built at Armstrong Whitworth in 1935. Originally built for the London Midland and Scottish Railway, this baby headed the final steam-hauled revenue-earning service for British Railways on 4th August 1968, not returning to the mainline until 2017. Clinking glasses of champagne with our new friends as we chug out of London, we feel privileged to be on board.

Travelling by steam train is not about speed. It’s about glamour. Trainspotters photograph the Black Five as we mosey our way north, partaking of a morning feast. We start with a mini pastry to whet the appetite, before moving on to a glass espresso cup layered with fruit compote, yoghurt and granola. Next up, the medley of fresh fruit includes watermelon and raspberries, drizzled with mango coulis, which paves the way for a potato rosti, topped with roasted, dry-cured bacon and scrambled eggs, served with portobello mushroom and braised tomato. Sipping our coffees, we lean back and admire the winter sunshine warming the fields, the pale blue sky stretching to the horizon. This is the life.

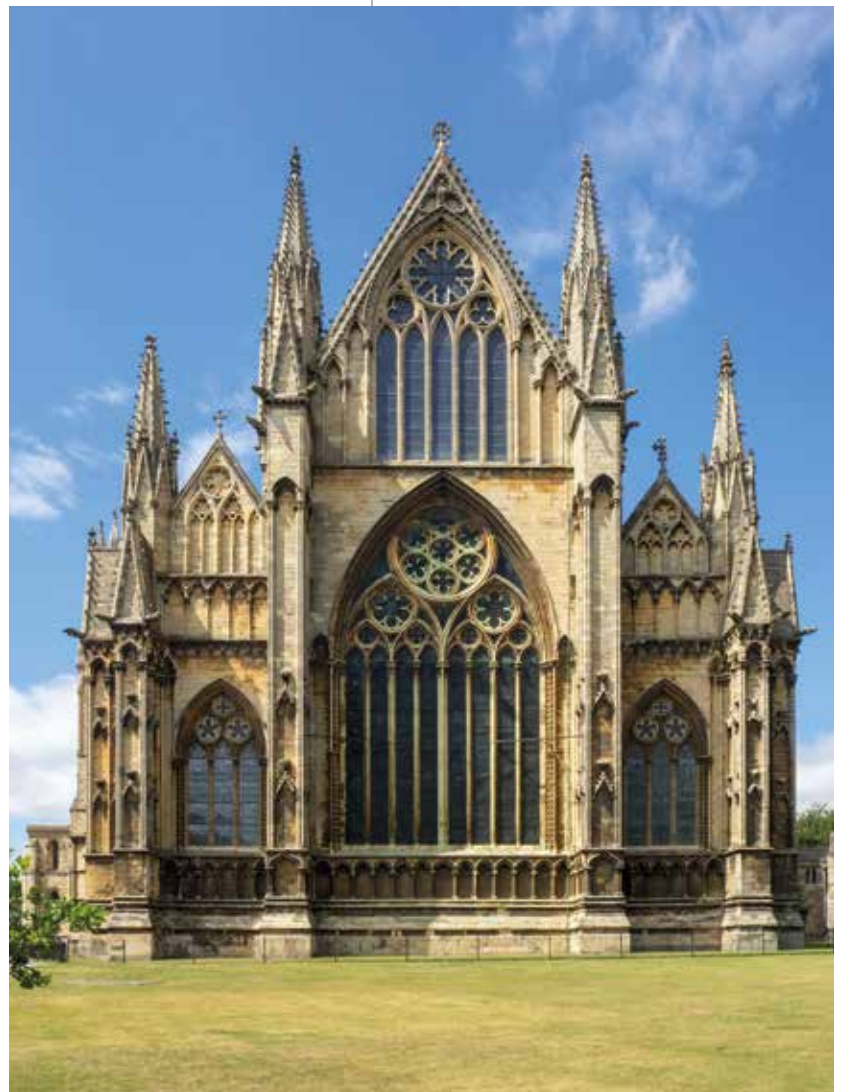
Crowds have gathered around Lincoln station to herald our arrival and we line the platform to watch the Black Five roll away. She’ll be back to pick us up in around four and a half hours. Left to our own devices, we huff and puff our way up Steep Hill towards the Cathedral Quarter, past tiny, colourful stores selling fudge, liqueurs, fine tea and fashion.

Over 1,000 years of history lives on at Lincoln Castle, home to the 1215 Magna Carta and 1217 Charter of the Forest. We stroll in the footsteps of past kings along the castle walls, and explore the Victorian prison. Naturally, though, it is Lincoln Cathedral that is the highlight of any visit to

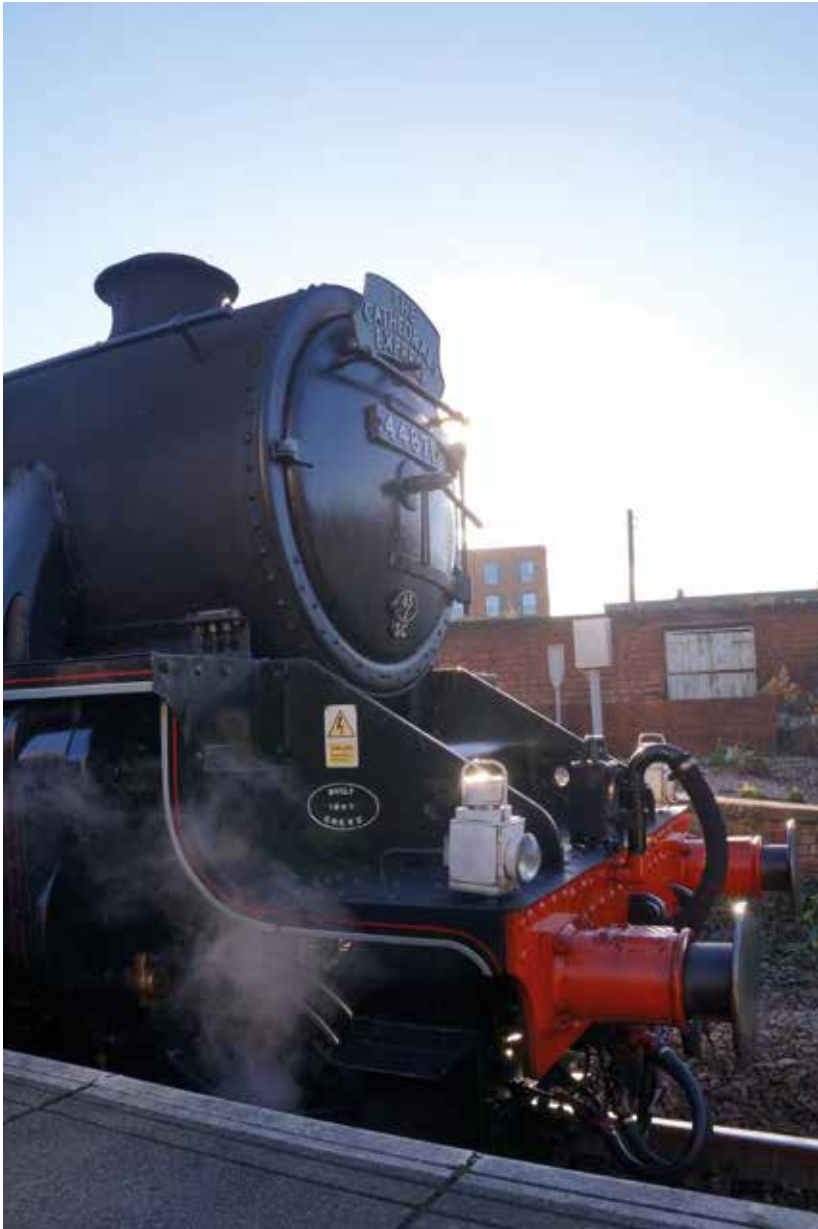
The train is being hauled by an LMS Stanier Black Five 45212 engine, built at Armstrong Whitworth in 1935.



Above left: Boarding the Steam Dreams train. Above: A corner of the cathedral.



Lincoln Cathedral dominates the hilltop.



The Black Five at rest.

this pretty city. Perched on top of the hill like an angel on a Christmas tree, the cathedral is considered to be one of Europe's finest Gothic buildings, featuring stunning views from the roof and tower and intricate design inside. It's quite the sight, particularly when the sun dips in the afternoon, washing everything with a golden glow.

We arrive back at the station in time to join the crowds waving smartphones and jostling for position on the platform. "Behind the yellow lines," yells the attendant repeatedly as folk continue to join the throng. It isn't long before the Black Five makes her way into the station, bellowing clouds of steam like a mythical dragon.

Sinking back into our seats, we are looking forward to a leisurely dinner as we roll on home. It's hard to believe that the beautifully presented fare is put together in a kitchen so narrow that Chef Director Tony Keene and his team can barely squeeze past each other. The train movement adds to the challenge. Tony explains that some of the sauces are that little bit thicker to reduce the danger of splashing, and careful plating and nimble serving staff are a necessity. He clearly thrives under pressure, as every course is superb and plentiful.

By the time we draw into King's Cross late in the evening, Deb and Rob have become good friends of ours and our cheeks are rosy from fine dining and a glass or two of wine. Admiring the Black Five as we say our farewells, we conclude the Steam Dreams experience is so much more than a meal. The Pullman-style dining is just the rather delicious icing on a glamorous cake. ■

INFO

For the ultimate romantic day out and dining experience, see www.steamdreams.co.uk. Gift vouchers are also available.

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Layered fruit compote, yoghurt and granola.



Mushroom terrine with cranberry sauce.



A romantic table setting.

STEAM DREAMS CHUTNEY

INSPIRED BY A BRITISH RAIL RECIPE

METHOD

Mince the garlic cloves, finely chop the ginger, and peel and grate the carrots. In a large saucepan, bring the sugar and vinegar to the boil. Reduce the heat and simmer until the sugar has dissolved, then stir in the rest of the ingredients.

Bring to a boil again, then reduce the heat and simmer for one hour, until thick. Remove from the heat and allow to cool.

Transfer to sterilised jars and store in the fridge before serving.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 garlic cloves
- 3cm piece fresh ginger
- 500g carrots
- 300ml carrot juice
- 200g caster sugar
- 200ml cider vinegar
- 0.5 tsp ground cumin

