



Meeting... Maxime d'Angeac

Having been tasked with envisioning both a train and a sailing ship for Orient Express, the French architect discusses the change in pace from designing on land to designing on water.

Words: Ben Thomas

Since day one, my approach has been to deliver more than just interior décor," says French designer Maxime d'Angeac as he flicks through a series of sketches in his Paris office. Inspired by the architects of the early 20th century – who worked with specialists to design every aspect of a building, from the façade to the furniture – d'Angeac begins every project by pencil, hand-drawing his vision before refining it to great precision.

Immersing himself in his works like a painter in their landscape, the architect goes beyond the aesthetic, creating a dialogue between craftsmanship and materiality to tell a story. In the same vein as the masters before him, each commission sees d'Angeac assemble a team of craftspeople – upholsterers, cabinet-makers and stone-cutters – from his close circle of partners, with everything down to the door handles made to measure. And it's this collaborative approach that caught the eye of Accor when talks were underway to open an Orient Express-branded hotel.

"It was a wonderful defeat," says d'Angeac of his unsuccessful bid to design the debut property in Rome. Having presented his concept, the owners

decided to go in a different direction, but all was not lost; d'Angeac's scheme eventually prompted Accor CEO Sébastien Bazin to pick up the phone with a new opportunity. "He knew I understood the vocabulary of Orient Express, so asked me to design the train."

The train in question is a revival of the legendary Nostalgie-Istanbul-Orient-Express, which is expected to take to the tracks in 2025. With timelessness and traditional craftsmanship part of the brief, d'Angeac set about capturing the essence of the original carriages, recreating the atmosphere and spirit while ushering the train into the 21st century. "Those on board should not be able to tell if it was designed in 1925 or 2025," he reveals. "We worked hard on the technicality, integrating modern features without making them visible."

Inside the 18 carriages – three of which are being transformed into suites – is an anthology of the finest French crafts; think exquisitely crafted woodwork, goldsmithery and intricate marquetry. d'Angeac has also brought together elegant finishes that René Prou, René Lalique and Christofle – the decorators of the 1920s icon – would be proud of, from elm burr, mahogany and velvet to silk, bevelled mirror and



Inside the Orient Express carriages is an anthology of French craftsmanship, from goldsmithery to woodwork to marquetry

“This isn’t a traditional journey; we’re not just taking guests from A to B. It’s an experience.”

crystal. “The entire project is conceived as a work of art,” he explains, though is quick to add that aesthetics weren’t the only consideration. “On a train, you must also consider details; the size of a room is less than two metres, so we had to draw everything down to the millimetre.” This precision extends to every piece of décor and furniture on board, from marble-covered tables and bronze columns to the domed skylights and all-glass counter in the Bar Car.

Having envisioned the design of the train – due to launch in 2025 – d’Angeac was also the first port of call for Accor’s latest venture as it heads for the seas. Marking the Orient Express brand’s entry into the ultra-luxury cruise market, Silenseas is a 220m-long sailing boat developed in partnership with shipyard Chantiers de l’Atlantique.

Taking cues from the Golden Age of travel, the designer’s scheme channels the glamour of the French Riviera, recalling a time when artists, sovereigns and movie stars would sail between Monte-Carlo, Saint-Tropez and Cannes. “The brief was to create spaces that align with the character of the Orient Express brand,” he confirms, describing the vessel as a palace on the sea. The main difference this time however is scale, with the designer granted the luxury of space in comparison to the compact train cabins. This is expected to inform the colour palette and material selection, as well as the overall ambiance. “It’s important to have two worlds on a ship; one that is light and airy, and another that cocoons the guest,” d’Angeac continues. “The trick is to design open social spaces and pockets of privacy.”

These pockets of privacy include 54 suites – averaging a generous 70m² and culminating in the 1,415m² Presidential Suite – where passengers can recline and take in the views. “Large windows were a must on Silenseas so that passengers experience a journey of discovery,” reveals d’Angeac. “We can help them dream through the changing panorama.”

Low ceilings and curving lines presented the same challenges that those working in ship design are accustomed to, but perhaps the greatest undertaking was the planning involved in every piece of furniture and every finish. “You

cannot miss in the cruise industry, the detail and precision is like no other,” d’Angeac admits. Such meticulousness has seen the architect once again sketching every element by hand, working within the parameters of the vessel to ensure everything has a purpose. “I hand-draw everything to understand how people will interact with objects,” he continues. “It’s more than just decoration.”

Indeed, in much the same way that Orient Express founder Georges Nagelmackers was fascinated by the social scene aboard transatlantic ships of the 19th century – their conviviality inspired the restaurants and lounges of his now legendary train – d’Angeac is pushing beyond the aesthetics, generating spaces that are memorable. “This isn’t a traditional journey; we’re not just taking guests from A to B,” he states. “It’s an experience.”

Celebrating the Art of Travel à la Orient Express, a stay on board taps in to the notion of slow travel, with guests able to enjoy spa treatments and meditation sessions at leisure, as well as cultural stopovers, dining and entertainment. “Slow travel means that guests don’t just put their luggage in the hold and collect it six hours later,” says d’Angeac, lamenting modern-day travel. “It’s an ever-evolving experience, in which people discover new things and have time to take them in, from literature and music to food and wellness.”

While guests can sail the seas at the same leisurely pace of 19th century travel, Chantiers de l’Atlantique is very much looking to the future in the construction of the vessel. Thanks to a revolutionary technological design known as Solid Sail, three rigid sails and three tilting masts will provide 100% of the propulsion in the right weather conditions. This formula will combine wind power with a state-of-the-art engine running on liquefied natural gas (LNG), with plans to use green hydrogen once the technology is approved.

Both the ship and train are currently under construction at their respective workshops, and though their design briefs were somewhat similar, the architect indicates that the main difference between working on the tracks and the tides, beyond the scale, is the number of companies involved in

“Not everyone can design ultra-luxury. It’s more than simply creating an image; it’s about telling a story.”

the process. “For the train, there are 100 firms bringing their expertise and craft, whereas for the ship, everything is carried out internally,” he explains. “It’s completely different.”

Given his background however, d’Angeac is well-equipped to working in both scenarios; his collaborative approach to design means he has experience in guiding a team of artisans, while time spent on luxury residences has also seen him work more independently. “When I began my career, I worked on a number of projects that required precision; after that, I was prepared for anything,” he laughs. Such versatility stands d’Angeac in good stead for future Orient Express’ hotels too, with the architect revealing he has been in talks with Bazin and the team for potential collaborations.

In the meantime, his focus is on the brand’s debut vessel, writing a new chapter whilst paying homage to its timeless grandeur. And though the interiors are firmly under wraps for now, d’Angeac promises that they will strike the balance between past and present, offering

those on board the same feeling that the iconic train did when revolutionising the travel industry after its launch in 1883.

“We don’t want to have to refurbish things in five years’ time,” he notes, stressing the importance of using quality materials and craftsmanship to produce interiors that truly stand the test of time. “Architecture and decoration create a lot of waste, so it’s better to design for the long-term,” he continues. “We want to secure the future life of a structure so the challenge is to invent something that keeps on giving.”

On whether he himself will keep on giving to the luxury travel market, d’Angeac reveals that his move into the rail and marine sectors was down to the appeal of the Orient Express brand rather than a desire to expand to new sectors. “It’s not my ambition to design a tram or bus; my style is more haute couture,” he concludes. “In my opinion, not everyone can design ultra-luxury. It’s more than simply creating an image, it’s about telling a story.”

Orient Express Silenseas will follow the train’s lead, combining design details that channel the romance of travel



© Martin Darzacq