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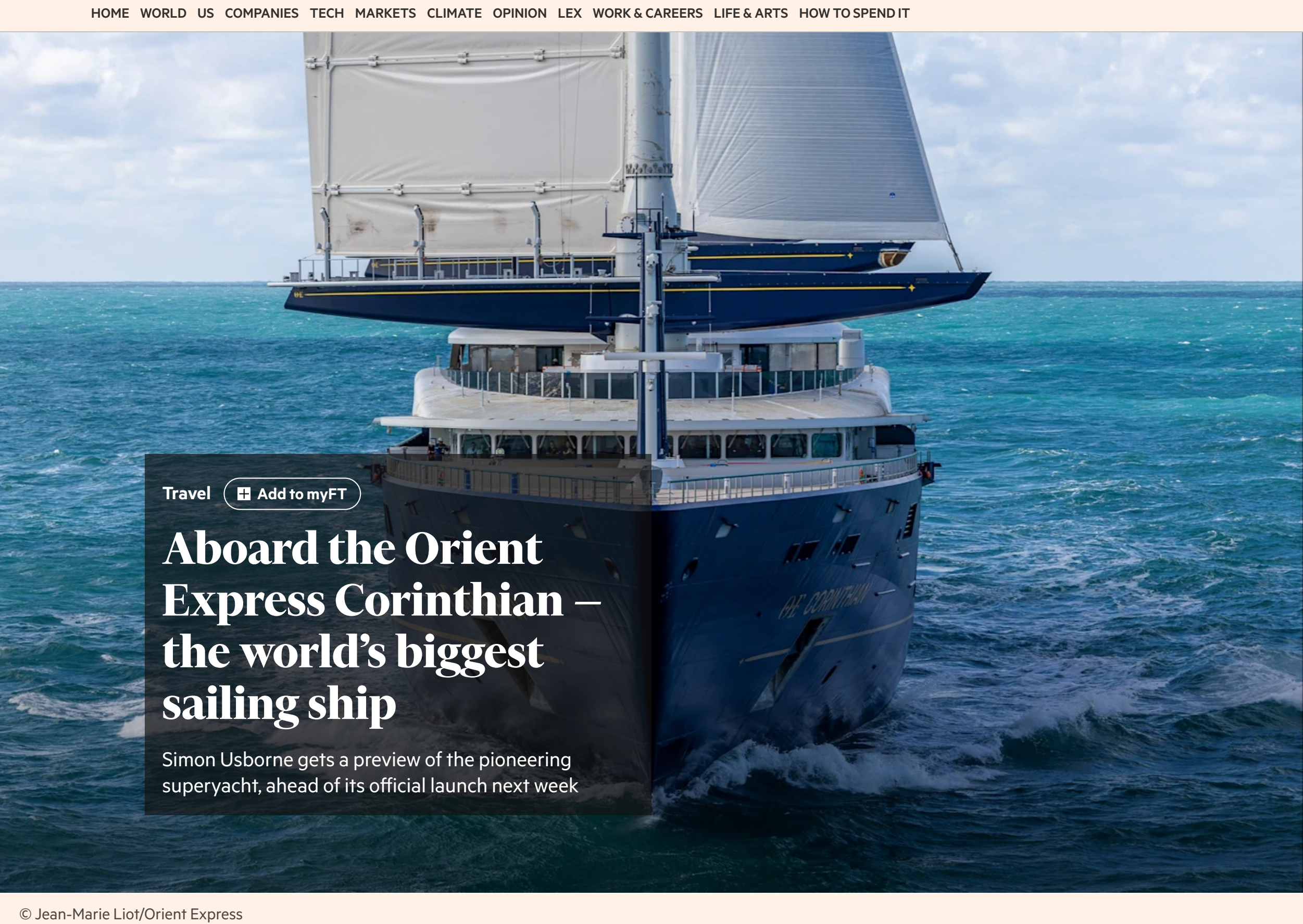

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Aboard the Orient Express Corinthian — the world's biggest sailing ship

Simon Usborne gets a preview of the pioneering superyacht, ahead of its official launch next week

© Jean-Marie Liot/Orient Express

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Residents of the French port town of Saint-Nazaire are used to the sight of strange new beasts of the sea chugging into the Loire estuary. For more than 170 years, the Chantiers de l'Atlantique shipyard, which sits 30 miles downriver of the city of Nantes, has built warships, oil tankers and grand ocean liners.

In recent years, some of the world's largest cruise ships have blocked the sun above the yard with their 20 decks, waterslides and cabins for 5,000 passengers or more. But when I visit in early April, all eyes are on the very different vessel now nearing completion in the mile-long Bassin de Penhoët.

I'm the first journalist to step aboard the Orient Express Corinthian, the world's largest and, arguably, most unusual sailing yacht. At 220 metres long, it looks like the love child of a sheikh's superyacht, a cruise liner and a child's drawing of a sailboat, its three carbon-fibre masts rising more than 100 metres above the waterline.

The yacht's rigid sails, which fold like paper fans on top of boom-like balestrons when not in use, are expected to cut fuel consumption by 40 per cent (though it can run under wind power alone, there's also a massive engine room below deck). Passengers should not, however, expect to see any savings reflected in their bills; the Corinthian is sailing into a nautical arms race involving some of the biggest names in luxury hospitality.

The Orient Express Corinthian during trials off the coast of western France © Jean-Marie Liot

One of the three carbon-fibre masts © Alex Crétey-Systermans, for the FT

The masts rise 100 metres above the waterline © Maxime Castric

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The ship, which has 54 cabins with a capacity of 110 guests (the crew will number 170), is the first vessel in a fleet being launched by Orient Express, a name steeped in rail rather than maritime history. In 2022, Accor, the French hotel group, completed the purchase of the brand from France's national rail company SNCF, almost 145 years after the first Orient Express service rolled east out of Paris.

In 2024, the luxury goods conglomerate LVMH partnered with Accor to accelerate not only the revival of OE trains but also new hotels and yachts, which will eventually appear on linked itineraries. In a meeting of grand French corporate powers, OE Sailing Yachts appointed the Saint-Nazaire shipyard to build the first two vessels, incorporating the new rigid sail system the yard had already patented.

Ahead of the official launch on May 2, I'm taking a tour with Maxime d'Angeac, a Paris-based architect and designer. He has been tasked with translating OE's art deco heritage, much of which is based on mythology that has built up like layers of lacquer since the interwar golden age of travel.

Wearing hard hats and hi-vis vests, we step into an environment of controlled chaos; more than 550 workers are finishing the yacht's interiors, hanging artworks and signs, unrolling bespoke carpets and finishing some of the cabins.

"I'm not sleeping much at the moment," says d'Angeac, who's 63 and has been working on this project for almost four years. (He's also creative director for the first restored OE train, which will start linking Paris and Istanbul next year. The OE Dolce Vita, a new Italian train based in Rome, was launched in 2025). He frequently pauses the tour wearily to berate workers who are not wearing little carpet booties over their shoes to protect the new floors. I wonder what the French is for "frazzled".

An 'appartement prestige' suite on board the Corinthian

A desk space in one of the suites © Photographed for the FT by Alex Crétey-Systermans

Inside the 'yacht club' at the rear section of deck five

White leather covering on a pillar © Photographed for the FT by Alex Crétey-Systermans

We start, as passengers will, in the main saloon, a vast lounge that stretches the full 25-metre width of the Corinthian. It sets the tone for the whole yacht, with a contemporary take on gilded-age excess. So while the dark-wood Corinthian columns are ornate, the chandeliers are almost minimalist, featuring large circles of translucent alabaster. "Art deco is not an old style; I see it as a kind of grammar," d'Angeac says as he surveys the space, which is still waiting for furniture to be installed. "Everyone can write their own book."

It's not that the designer is short of heritage to draw from — at sea as well as on the rails. The first Orient Express train service was launched in 1883 by La Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits. Its founder, Belgian businessman Georges Nagelmackers, was purportedly inspired by George Pullman's American sleeper trains, as well as the early transatlantic ocean liners.

France was a major player: its Compagnie Générale Transatlantique (CGT) emerged in the 1850s to take on what became Britain's Cunard Line. Originally conceived to deliver mail, the state-subsidised ships morphed into lavish passenger liners that were also hybrids, being powered by steam as well as sails.

Panels of sculpted detail, specially made for the Corinthian's lobby © Alex Crétey-Systermans

A close-up of the detail of the ornately sculpted panels

The minibar in one of the ship's 54 cabins © Alex Crétey-Systermans

By the 1930s, CGT had done away with sails for its grandest ship yet; the SS Normandie. Built with three giant funnels in the same shipyard as the Corinthian, it first set sail for New York in 1935, breaking speed records with a crossing of just over four days. It was also a showcase for French style and culinary prowess, with lavish art deco interiors and a dining room, dripping in illuminated Lalique glass, that could seat more than 700.

Among several nods to the Normandie, d'Angeac has commissioned bas-relief panels in plaster and wood by a French sculptor Etienne Rayssac — a tribute to the work on the older ship by the art deco pioneer Jean Dunant. There are also more than 200 prints by Roger Schall, who was commissioned by a French magazine to capture the Normandie's maiden voyage before going on to become a renowned fashion and society photographer.

There are acres of teak and exotic veneers — walnut and smoked eucalyptus among them — and tonnes of marble. I'm most struck by the Calacatta Violetta marble in the bathroom of the first cabin d'Angeac shows me, which looks like it has been sliced from a giant slab of nougat. The spacious, 47 square-metre "suite panoramique", which is the smallest on the Corinthian, also features a generous daybed under an enormous window.

A daybed (not yet completed) with a view on board the Corinthian © Alex Crétey-Systermans

Cabins, all of which include butler service, quickly rise in scale and grandeur up to the seventh-deck penthouse suites, which I'm told are not ready even for a hard-hat viewing. The 225 square-metre Agatha Christie suite occupies the aft section of the deck with a sweeping wraparound terrace and private gym.

Prices are, shall we say, buoyant; a panoramic suite, sleeping two, starts at €17,700 for the first three-night trip from Marseille to Rome via Corsica in July, rising to more than €30,000 for a six-night Caribbean cruise — and €60,000 for the 14-night Barbados-Lisbon Atlantic crossings the ship will complete twice a year between its Caribbean and Mediterranean seasons.

Yet OE is confident demand is strong in a busy new sector, as resort hotel groups pile into the cruising industry with an armada of luxury vessels. Ritz-Carlton has launched three ships since 2022 (two of them built at the Saint-Nazaire shipyard). The 95-suite Four Seasons I launched in March, while Aman's Amangati is due to cruise into the Med next year with just 47 suites.

A computer-generated image of Aman's Amangati, due to launch next year

The Ritz-Carlton Evrima in Sorrento. It launched in 2022, and has 149 guest cabins

The Four Seasons I, which had its maiden voyage in the Mediterranean last month, has 95 guest cabins

These floating resorts all have superyacht styling but are closer to mini cruise liners than purebred gin palaces, their capacity ranging from about 100 to 450 passengers in the case of the larger Ritz-Carlton ships. But none boasts the travel heritage — or the sails — that the Corinthian is about to bring to the Mediterranean. "I'm not scared of this competition, we are not even in the same category," d'Angeac says with a smile and a dismissive Gallic shrug.

After the designer gets lost in the sprawling kitchens and service areas of the ship, we emerge blinking into the sunlight on Le Flybridge, the huge front section of the seventh deck. I look up at the towering masts, which have been designed to tilt so that the ship can pass under the bridge at the entrance to New York City's cruise ports. I can now see the carbon-reinforced folded sails sitting on their balestrons, which themselves look like yacht hulls. It's not a sight that would please a maritime purist, perhaps, but it will certainly set the Corinthian apart in seas that are saturated with motor yachts.

The Corinthian at sea, during trials off the west coast of France © Jean-Marie Liot

The interiors make generous use of marble in suite bathrooms © Alex Crétey-Systermans

In the middle of the deck, I look down into what OE is calling the "couloir de nage", a 17-metre pool for length swimming that sits at the bottom of what could just as easily be described as a crevasse. There's a wider pool for posing in with an adjoining "yacht club" on the rear section of deck five, where two of the Corinthian's five restaurants also sit, including L'Encre, a light-filled oyster bar.

The other restaurant here is La Table by Yannick Alléno, where the decorated French chef will oversee menus for just 24 guests each evening (you'll have to pay extra to eat there). D'Angeac leads me into what is a remarkable space, with high ceilings, oak panelling and more carved pieces featuring animal scenes by the sculptor Rayssac. One wall is clad in enormous panels of obsidian-black glass that are rippled to look like a moonlit sea.

The Corinthian also includes a Guerlain spa, a theatre with a neighbouring recording studio and a separate cinema. There's a games room, a library and La Marina, a beach club, on the rear lower deck. The whole ship hums with the promise of a slightly placeless grandeur that tacks close to the mythology of the Orient Express without steaming into an iceberg of pastiche.

If d'Angeac is happy with the results, he's perhaps too stressed to show it. Will he be requesting a generous discount on a penthouse suite for him and his wife this summer? "I have to tell you a secret . . . " he says, smiling as he guides me back to the dockside. "I get very seasick. Perhaps we'll take the train."

Details

Simon Usborne was a guest of Orient Express (orient-express.com). Suites on the Orient Express Corinthian start at €11,400 for two nights, all-inclusive

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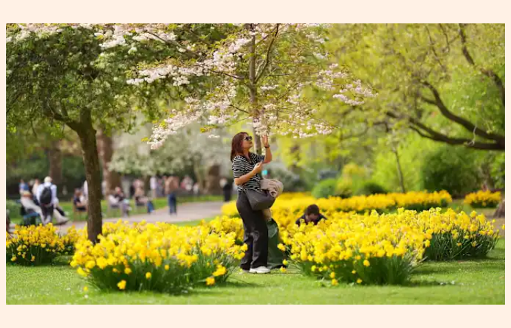

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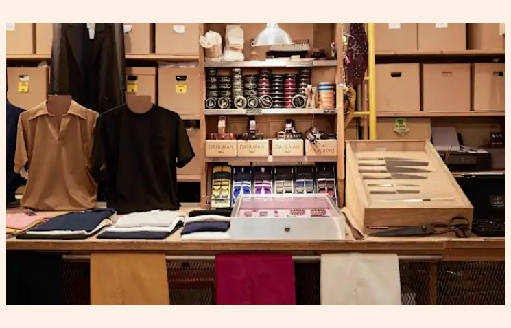

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