

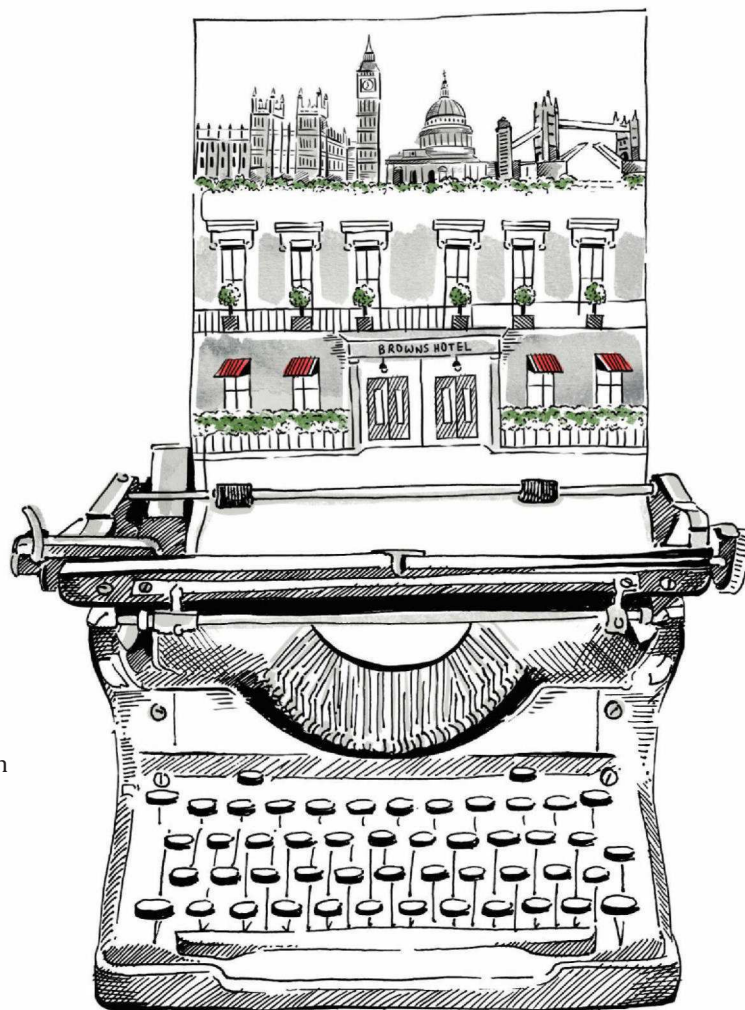
# THE PLOT THICKENS

A new tour, which kicks off in London, follows Agatha Christie's footsteps across three continents, revealing the inspiration behind some of the Queen of Crime's greatest works. **By Amanda Eyre Ward**

**IN JANUARY 1922**, a young writer named Agatha Christie embarked on a 10-month voyage around the world with her husband, Archie. She was 31 years old and the mother of a two-year-old daughter, Rosalind, who stayed behind in England. Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, had been published only two years earlier. On the trip, she would surf in Hawaii, cruise the Zambezi River, and ride a train through Australia's Dandenong Ranges.

These experiences would find their way into her later works—a character from her 1924 book *The Man in the Brown Suit* was directly inspired by Major Belcher, Archie's boss, who made the trip with them. Throughout her novels, foreign destinations become more than just a setting—they almost become characters themselves. What is *Murder on the Orient Express* without the titular train, which Christie herself traveled on many times?

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the author's grand adventure, luxury tour operator **Black Tomato** ([blacktomato.com](http://blacktomato.com)) has debuted a series of itineraries that parallel her trip. There are three "chapters"—Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and North America—that each range from 10 to 15 nights and can be booked either individually or as a whirlwind 40-day journey.



This summer, I went to London for Black Tomato's "prelude experience," which introduces you to Christie's world before you set off on whichever chapter you've chosen. I stayed two nights in a sumptuous suite at Brown's Hotel, one of Christie's favorite haunts, where she often went to write in the drawing room (some claim it's the setting of her novel *At Bertram's Hotel*). I saw an interactive production of Christie's play *A Witness to the Prosecution*—the jury is made up of audience members—and stood outside the Notting Hill address where she lived from 1934 until 1941.

But the highlight of my visit was tea with Christie's great-grandson, James Prichard, in the drawing room at Brown's. (Black Tomato arranges the meeting with Prichard when his schedule permits. If he is not available, guests have tea with British historian Lucy Worsley.) We chatted for hours over tiny sandwiches and treats—prawn cocktail, a smoked chicken and apricot sandwich, cherry pistachio tart—and cups of Ceylon and lavender-and-lemongrass tea.

"My great-grandmother's travels were a huge influence on her writing," Prichard told me. He explained that Christie continued to see the world when her grand tour was over—after her divorce in 1928, she traveled alone to Syria and Iraq (where she met her second husband, Max Mallowan, and would later return to participate in his archaeological digs). *Death on the Nile* was published in 1937, four years after she and Mallowan took a cruise on the river. The couple's 1958 trip to Barbados is said to have inspired the setting of *A Caribbean Mystery*.

"By the time she reached the height of her fame," Prichard said, "she was an older woman. We forget that she was intrepid and adventurous in her youth. When she first went to Baghdad, she was on her own. She got on a train here in London, stopped off in Istanbul, and ended up there. I think that says everything." 🌐

[blacktomato.com](http://blacktomato.com); Agatha Christie itineraries start at \$7,195, not including the two-day London introduction.