

THE EASTERN & ORIENTAL EXPRESS

A railway journey from Singapore to Bangkok

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‘Hm,’ said the Chinese fortune-teller, studying my date of birth. ‘You were born in the year of the dog, but you are a horse. You are a light sleeper because your bowel movements are not regular. Many ladies love you, but you can’t share a bed with them. You should pour water over your stomach when you go to the toilet, and drink prune juice every day.’

Though not entirely convinced by this analysis, I thanked him and promised to e-mail him for further enlightenment. What he hadn’t told me was that I was going on a long journey – but as we were sitting in the saloon car of the Eastern & Oriental Express, at the start of its 1,262-mile run from Singapore to Bangkok, that probably went without saying.

I approached the E&O Express with some suspicion, having travelled on its sister train the Venice-Simplon Orient Express some years before and found it all a bit too theatrical for my liking. But from the moment I arrived at the Art Deco terminus in Singapore and stepped aboard, I had the feeling that this was going to be a better experience. By the time we crossed into Malaysia – a journey of all of 30 minutes – I was sure of it.

Although it has only been operating for ten years, with rolling stock built in the Seventies, the E&O Express has the feeling of a much more venerable train. The exterior is painted British racing green and cream, with a ridged finish that suggests bamboo. Inside, the fittings are brass, the panelling is of handsome marquetry or lacquer, the lampshades are après-Lalique glass roses, and the curtains are embroidered, scalloped and passemeneteried to perfection. At the same time, the compartments are individually air-

conditioned, with en suite bathrooms cramming in a basin, loo and shower. It is a combination of old-fashioned elegance and modern comfort that Hercule Poirot would have killed for.

No sooner had we settled into our compartments than it was time for lunch. It is, in fact, always time for one meal or another aboard the Eastern & Oriental Express: returning from the dining car, I dozed off for just long enough to allow my steward (there is one to each carriage) to prepare my tea. If the number of passengers had not required two sittings for lunch and dinner, we might have eaten without interruption for the entire three days and two nights of the journey, requiring an extra locomotive to haul us groaning into Bangkok.

The food is a blend of European and Asian, and it is exceptionally good. From grilled swordfish steak with teppanyaki of vegetables in peach soya butter, to medallions of beef with mash and caramelised vegetables in pepper berry sauce, one delicious dish succeeded another. What is more, it all *looked* exquisite, with every dollop of sauce in place, despite being produced in a tiny galley on a narrow-gauge train which hardly stopped rocking for a moment.

Between mouthfuls, we took in the scenery. The view for the first day was largely of palm trees: tall ones and small ones; creeper-clad ones and bare ones; ones that looked like gangling debutantes or flouncing cabaret dancers, interspersed with stumpy Anne Widdecombes. This was Johor, the fiefdom of the Temenggung Sultanas, and famous for its palm oil. From time to time we would glimpse a modern highway with shoppers waiting at red-tiled bus stops, or children waving from dusty back yards.

Sadly, it was dark by the time we reached Kuala Lumpur, so we were unable to see the city in its full jungle-and-skyscraper majesty. Instead, we glided past moonlit watercourses, freeways swept by headlamps, and high

rises with starkly illuminated stairwells, exuding the mystery of a tropical city after nightfall, its lost corners laid bare by fluorescent light. The train stopped for long enough to let us appreciate the main station, which – modelled on a mosque – has delusions of grandeur to rival St Pancras's.

While we were having dinner (three courses plus an amuse-bouche and petits fours) our compartments were being transformed into bedrooms. In the Pullman compartments, this meant upper and lower bunks folding out of banquettes and walls; in the state compartments and presidential suites, two single beds laid out side by side. During the day they vanished again to leave enough room for four people to snack together in comfort.

Our first dawn revealed a landscape suddenly in thrall to the jungle. Trailing vines smothered trees and telegraph poles in eerie configurations, transforming them into lurking triffids and variegated wraiths. We passed stilted houses, broad-leafed banana trees, and a slick of brown river, before skirting the clear expanse of the Bukit Merah lake, where a crane took flight against a backdrop of low, mist-laden hills. By the time my steward arrived with a splendid breakfast tray, we were among emerald-green paddy fields patterned with neat irrigation canals.

At Butterworth the train stopped for two hours to allow us to explore Penang. Proceeding by ferry, coach and tricycle rickshaw, we took in the stone-cutters' quarter, where old men lolled at open shopfronts in cane chairs, the classical beauty of St George's church, and the elaborately carved Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi temple. Back at the train there were sandwiches to tide us over until lunch.

One feature of the E&O Express is its open-sided observation car with bar attached, which allows you to stand in the sweltering heat with a glass of cold beer in your hand to watch bullocks and water buffalo grazing by the tracks. The next leg of the journey, through Kedah, was the most dramatic, as huge

limestone outcrops dusted with thick foliage erupted from the landscape, looming over us like trolls. At teatime we crossed into Thailand, clacking through forest and swamp into rough plains where white egrets flew and obelisks rose from the wedge-shaped roofs of white temples in a flourish of gilt. Schoolchildren in purple shorts and shirts sat waiting at small, immaculate stations bright with bougainvillaea.

Tracing a route that swung towards the east coast of the peninsula, we reached the River Kwai at ten o'clock the next morning for a further excursion (see box). Despite having fallen two hours behind schedule on our first evening, we were only 30 minutes late when we arrived in Bangkok at mid-afternoon. The final stretch introduced us to an amphibious world where jetties projected from waterside villas, labourers waded among orderly banks of watercress, and lilies choked the ditches.

Not everything we saw in the course of our journey was picturesque. The shanty towns of rusted corrugated iron on the outskirts of Bangkok echoed other makeshift homesteads that had lined the tracks at many points along the way: most poignantly in the Thai border town of Padang Besar, where I stared from my window into a young, lost face gazing from the shadows of a bare hovel. It was a reminder, if any were needed, of just how lucky I was to be travelling on such a magnificent train.