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ABOARD THE EASTERN AND ORIENTAL EXPRESS

"It was my purpose to spy out the land in a very private way, and complete my visit without making any acquaintances"

- Mark Twain writing in "The Scenery"

(Penang, Malaysia) -

I'm crossing from Butterworth, on the mainland, to Georgetown, the capital of Penang. It's name translates to Beetle Nut island in Malay. This was once a major outpost of British colonialism in Asia and I am particularly anxious to see the now aging mansions that housed high-ranking officials of her Majesty's Civil service.

The colorful streets of Georgetown are filled with market stalls selling fruits and vegetables including the legendary durian, a brownish fruit that is said to "smell like hell and taste like heaven". The very presence of one piece of the fruit on a Thai or Malaysian Airlines flight can cause passengers to leave the aircraft in mid-flight.

I didn't have long to explore Penang as I was due back on the train in two hours. But I had to see the Eastern and Oriental Hotel, built by the three Sarkies brothers in 1885. These are the brothers who ran Raffles in Singapore and the Strand in Rangoon.

The E & O hotel was a favorite of Somerset Maugham and Noel Coward. It is now properly fading, and one expects to see, and finally does see, sweating mustachioed men in white linen suits sitting under ceiling fans on the terrace discussing business over a cool drink made from the juice of a fresh papaya. But its nothing like the old days when the place was packed with British nationals and the youngest brother, Arshak, would parade through the lobby with glasses of whiskey and soda balanced on his head.

I searched for Peter Lorre for fifteen minutes and then gave up. It had been planned that I would return to the ferry terminal for the short trip back to Butterworth by trishaw, a version of a rickshaw propelled by a bicycle behind the carriage. I have never used this kind of transportation during my travels because I was never comfortable with the notion of one human being carrying another without mechanical assistance. But it was expected in this situation and so I entered the small carriage. To my horror, my driver seemed to be about 80. He bundled me up against the rain in a black tarp and, weaving literally across the road and back, began peddling me down streets that have little changed since the British left.

We are passing the central courthouse. There is something called the Internal Security Law here which allows the police to hold you for a two-year

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period without formally charging you with a crime. Families were camping outside the building, waiting for the release of a loved one.

During my two hours in Penang I had been reminded that there is no such thing as welfare. "In Malaysia, you don't get anything if you don't work" I was told by my smiling host. He waited for a response.

You can tell that the average Asian in this part of the world believes that America is one big public welfare trough and that Americans are being suckered and are too stupid to realize it. Of course a lot of Americans believe this. I tried, whenever I could, to point out that the vast majority of welfare recipients are young children and the elderly and that it is inconceivable that they could be put to work. I made as much headway defending this position in Asia as I have in America.

I passed posters urging the citizens to be safety conscious. Last year in Malaysia there were more than 300,000 accidents involving motorcycles. These accidents are a leading cause of death. Those who own motorcycles are referred to as "temporary Malaysians".

The average Malay eats six times a day. Noodle breaks occur around 10:00 am, at four in the afternoon, and there's some final slurping around midnight. This is in addition to the three standards.

Skin care is important in this part of the world. I saw women in white face going about their daily shopping, protected from the harsh rays of the sun with a solid schmeer of heavy white lotion. It looked like a convention of groupies from the rock group Kiss.

Malaysia has 19 million people and an abundance of natural resources. About sixty percent of the country is dense jungle.

During my brief stay I learned one important local phrase. "Sama-sama" means, "I wish you everything that you wish me".

Southern Thailand -

I've reboarded the train and we've crossed the border into Thailand. Things have changed in the most subtle of ways. There are more water buffaloes, more chickens in the front yard, and as the rain starts to pour down, it seems that even more mud covers the landscape.

I see a man in a green bathing suit at the edge of a swollen brown, brackish stream, trying to catch snakes in a burlap sack.

We are just 45 minutes out of Hat Yai, a Thai city that has an awfully naughty nightlife reputation and a Rolex collection that has to be seen to be believed. I've heard about the train station and I step off the train for just a few minutes to view the vendors on the platform hawking dried fish, lemon grass, and barbecued meats.

As the train rocks and rolls toward Bangkok, its inlaid mahogany carriages swaying and jerking to some private rhythm, I begin to notice more and more housing by the side of the tracks. I head back to the observation car, a fascinated

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intruder, watching laundry being hung out to dry by women who seem oblivious to the train's passing except to nod a soft hello ever so subtly.

There are no washing machines here and there were none in Malaysia. The poorest people in Asia believe that washing machines ultimately destroy clothing. Hand washing is thought to be much safer because it prolongs the life of the garment.

The train is slowing down now, almost stopping, and tin covered shacks stand side by side along the track. The train stops and I am staring at a young girl in a tattered power blue dress. She is eating from a rice bowl with her mother and father. I am close enough to see that there is no meat for her rice bowl. She smiles at me and nods. A child of nine or ten. Her wispy black hair falls over a face that shows nothing but innocence. Her blue eyes shine. I am in a Buddhist country and I can feel the glow from these people through the double pane windows of the Eastern Orient Express. The mother smiles and looks down quickly. The father looks at me quickly, just a flicker of a smile, then turns away. But the girl keeps staring. Then, just as the train begins to move again, she brings her hands up in the prayer position and touches her fingertips to her forehead. She is saying goodbye.

In the days to come I will stay in a magnificent hotel with floating pools filled with lillies, I will dine atop the most exclusive club in Asia, I will watch the sun set from a junk in Hong Kong Harbor. But I know that when I return to the States, a day will not go by when I won't remember, for a moment, the look of contentment on that little girl's face.

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