

SINGAPORE TO BANGKOK BY TRAIN

(Aboard the Eastern & Oriental Express traveling through Malaysia) -

The Malaysian Peninsula extends southward from Thailand like an afterthought. At its southern extremity lies Singapore.

I'm standing in the middle of the old colonial Keppel Road train station, preparing to travel north to Bangkok in a private compartment on the world's newest great railway journey, the Eastern & Oriental Express.

My journey will take two and a half days. I am planning on spending the vast majority of my time away from the air-conditioned comfort of the train's seventeen carriages. Instead, I will be clinging to the railings on the open-air observation car, furiously snapping photos of a landscape that includes thick jungle, massive mountain ranges, placid lakes, a series of narrow gorges, and rice paddies tended by lone stick figures in black with rounded straw hats to ward off the sun.

It's hot in the massive station. The upper walls of the huge entrance hall are paved with some of the original tiles depicting life in the Malaysian Peninsula when the station was built in 1932. This is the place from which European plantation owners would depart the pleasures of Singapore to return home to their tea and rubber estates.

I went to wait in the tiny first-class E & O lounge, where the ancient air conditioning unit was in overdrive. It was a diverse and affluent looking group awaiting their journey, mostly Americans, a few Brits, each of whom was wearing a jacket and tie in the stifling heat, and two Japanese couples completing accessorized by Louis Vitton.

Boarding the Laura Ashley Green and beige cars, all passengers passed a line-up of smiling staff who brought their hands up to their foreheads, palms pressed together in the traditional Thai manner. Within moments of entering my compartment, Aran, an earnest young man who spoke in polite whispers, brought me a tray filled with tiny sandwiches and cakes and formal tea service.

In moments, the train started pulling out of the station, and I settled back in my seat staring out the window, sipping tea and watching as the Singapore skyline gave way to tin-roofed shacks along the tracks and, later, the Johor Bahru Causeway, linking Malaysia and Singapore. I picked up my tape recorder and spoke the words "It doesn't get any better than this".

Just an hour and a half out of Singapore the scenery changes dramatically. We are starting to pass palm oil plantations and then a long twenty-minute string of rubber tree estates. You can always spot a rubber tree. They've got deep cuts in the bark where the latex oozes out into small buckets.

Now I'm passing a series of kampongs, traditional villages of wooden houses set high on stilts with thatched roofs made from the local nipa palm. Most of the houses are set up several feet above ground to protect against the twin menaces of snakes and flooding.

We are moving through the Federal territory toward the city of Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. Alongside the tracks small bonfires burn and candles illuminate the passing faces in the huts.

Then the waving starts. My first wave came from a gathering of children who smiled broadly as our New Zealand-manufactured stainless steel carriages passed just inches from their faces. They began waving and then, unexpectedly, two of them threw me a kiss as I pass by in a shimmer of light and glass.

The children were, of course, beautiful. There are no unattractive children in Malaysia or Thailand, at least none that I saw. Most were poor, many were among the poorest kids you will ever see. But they all smiled, genuine smiles, standing by the side of the tracks in their tattered black shorts and sandals.

And they waved and they threw kisses. This happened for the rest of my journey. I asked the locals and they said it was a combination of natural friendship and something they might have seen in an American movie once. The kisses were a-la Dinah Shore, complete with long arm swings. Never once did a child ask for anything. There was no begging. There was no brooding. These were children simply expressing their friendship for strangers passing through their homeland on an elegant train while a team of master chefs put the finishing touches on a Fillet of Beef with a light herb croute served in a sharkskin sauce.

The waving is my strongest memory of this swing through Asia. It was unexpected and it helped me understand the natural tendency of children to be open and accepting, until and unless they are taught by adults to be otherwise.

There are goats in the front yard. Sometimes a water buffalo stands tethered nearby. Houses on stilts appear frequently. They have front yards of mud and silt. Swamp water laps against the wooden poles stuck deep in the mud providing support. Dense jungle growth and overhanging vines surround the tiny homes. Twice I see snakes slithering in the trees.

Tiny villages spring up around rail stations that should be named "Near Nowhere". From one end of this journey to the other, even the smallest one-room outpost of the National Railway of Malaysia comes equipped with a serious-appearing stationmaster in a freshly-pressed beige uniform who stands at attention holding his signal flags as the E&O passes by in the gathering night.

As we approached the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, I retreated from my window seat along the narrow hallways toward the front of the train and the bar car. There I met a man who had been to a temple in the Little India section of Singapore where he had engaged an older, orange-robed monk in an extended conversation near the front gate.

"And what did you learn" I asked.

"He asked me where I was from. When I said I was an American, he told me that Credence Clearwater was his favorite band. He also said that American girl singers were the best."

I left and headed for the dining car where I began my meal with a fricassee of wild mushrooms served with dim sum of goose liver. It takes longer to say it than to consume it.

Two elegant and truly beautiful Thai dancers appeared in the lounge after dinner. I briefly sat down with the on-board astrologer. He told me I loved to travel and that I lived in a big house. I told him I sold my big house, so I could afford to travel.

I walked the long distance corridors back to my compartment. I really didn't want to talk a lot on this trip. I wanted to sit in the dark and stare out at the night and catch the reflection of the moon on the rice paddies we were beginning to pass. An early shower tomorrow and then a brief departure from the train for a tour of Penang, the beetle-nut island so-loved by British colonialists.

As I try to sleep the compartment is rocking. I have black and blue marks from the plumbing fixtures I got knocked into while brushing my teeth. This train was not designed for these tracks. The fit isn't perfect. The ride isn't smooth. But I hardly care.

This is one of those travel nights you know you will remember. It's like a savings account, a memory bank and you can make withdrawals for the rest of your life. There are rain clouds this morning and the landscape looks more and more like the countryside in Vietnam. Men and women in coolie hats stoop in rice paddies hardly glancing up as the train passes. As we approach Penang, we begin to see men and women on bicycles riding on the mud-splattered dirt roads. The women manage to steer with one hand while holding a brightly colored umbrella in the other