



SOUTHEAST ASIA

PRESS KIT

Eastern & Oriental Express introduced by Gillian Rhys

OVERVIEW

The Eastern & Oriental Express train travels through Southeast Asia, linking the trio of tropical countries of Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. The journeys start and end at a combination of three locations: the City State of Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and the Thai capital of Bangkok.

What all three destinations share is year-round hot and humid weather – although there can be cooler evenings from November to February in Bangkok – as well as a wealth of and obsession with street food (in the case of Singapore, in the orderly environs of hawker centres). “Have you eaten yet” is a phrase used in place of “How are you?” in all three cities.

Singapore, an island across the strait from Malaysia, is an easy introduction to Asia. The super clean city state is a mix of luscious greenery and gleaming modern skyscrapers with a smattering of historic houses and landmarks. A melting pot of cultures - Chinese, Malay, Indonesian and Western – reflects the mixture of people who have settled here.

By contrast, Bangkok is a sprawling metropolis jam-packed with exotic sights, smells and sounds. Waterways such as the mighty Chao Praya river and the famous khlongs (canals) criss-cross the city. Ancient temples sit side by side with shopping malls, while street food vendors are dwarfed by skyscrapers with glamorous, al fresco rooftop bars.

Kuala Lumpur lies somewhere in between—both geographically and atmospherically—with its mix of thriving markets, modern malls, the world’s tallest twin towers and colonial mansions. The city features a magnificent 100-year-old railway station in the Moorish style, all arches and minarets, which is an attraction in itself. On certain journeys passengers can alight on the platform while the train makes a pitstop just before dinner. And they’ll spot the Petronas Twin Towers sparkling in the darkness as the train continues on its way.

Similarly, passengers embarking and disembarking at Bangkok will experience the excitement of Hualamphong station, a neoclassical building that’s also celebrating its centenary in 2016. For Singapore, passengers embark or disembark at a railway station over the border in Malaysia though they’ll check in at the iconic Raffles hotel – a suitably glamorous, colonial experience - before joining the Eastern & Oriental Express.

The leisurely train journey takes in the rubber plantations and palm trees of the Malaysian countryside and the paddy fields of Thailand where golden temples and statues of the Buddha can be glimpsed among the trees.

From the Eastern & Oriental Express’s observation deck there’s a unique view to be had of local life. The train passes through brightly coloured rural stations where food stalls might be

set up along the platform among shrines, plants and flowers. Passengers may glimpse Buddhist monks in their distinctive orange robes chatting on a station bench or a group of locals sitting in a row of deckchairs enjoying an evening foot rub. Children riding bicycles try to keep up with the Eastern & Oriental Express while hard-hatted construction workers on the outskirts of Bangkok wave at the train with equal enthusiasm. Everywhere, people stare or smile – the Eastern & Oriental Express seems to have an uplifting effect on everyone who sees it.

HISTORY

The Eastern & Oriental Express made history on its launch in September 1993 as the first train to travel the whole length of the 1262 miles (1943 km) Singapore-Bangkok journey, linking the railway systems of both Malaysia and Thailand.

The train is the brainchild of visionary businessman James B Sherwood, founder of Belmond (previously Orient-Express Hotels). It was built by Nippon Sharyo & Hitachi in Japan in 1972, and first operated in New Zealand as the Silver Star. The carriages were remodelled and re-configured in Singapore workshops to run on Malaysian and Thai railway tracks.

THE TRAIN

The carriages of the romantically named Eastern & Oriental Express are painted a handsome dark green and gold. The staff, too, are elegantly attired in Thai-inspired uniforms. Cabin stewards and waiters wear crisp white jackets and richly coloured silk waistcoats while female staff are dressed in long skirts with pink silk jackets.

The train interiors are traditionally furnished with Asian touches. There's exquisite marquetry and inlay work on cherrywood and elm burr panelling; and fine fabrics and carpets including Jim Thompson silks. Unlike its sister train, the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express that travels through Europe, the carriages are not Art Deco antiques. But what they lack in age they make up for in modern comforts, some with a nod to the train's Southeast Asian home: ensuite bathrooms, air conditioning, an observation deck for enjoying the tropical climate and a reading room that's home to a resident reflexologist and fortune teller.

Like the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express though, guests do dress up for the journey. While breakfast is brought to guests' cabins, lunch and dinner are served in the Dining Car which is elegantly furnished with marquetry, deep carpets, silk wallcoverings and upholstered armchairs. The tables are set with white cloths, silver and glassware and tropical flower arrangements. Through the drape-framed large windows there's a panoramic view of the passing scenery.

In the lively bar car guests can enjoy aperitifs and entertainment such as traditional Thai dancing before dinner. Later, the gregarious pianist, Peter, keeps playing until the last guest goes to bed. When passengers return to their cabin they'll find it has been magically transformed into a cosy bedroom: bunk beds in the Pullman cabins and twin beds (from the sofa and lounge chair) in the State cabins. All have ensuite bathrooms including a shower and lavatory. There's also a Presidential Cabin with a larger sitting area and spacious bathroom.

During the day time, the sleeping arrangements vanish – after breakfast the cabin steward whisks away the beds and the cabin once again becomes a sitting area.

The trip is a convivial one: there's something about a train journey spanning a few days that draws people together. Friendships are forged in the bar car, on the observation deck, over lunch and dinner. Fellow passengers range from couples to families with young children or teenagers or older parents, and several singles. There are honeymoons, anniversaries and blossoming romances – some of which have led to marriage.

PEOPLE

Yannis Martineau, Executive Chef

French-born Yannis Martineau has been Executive Chef of the Eastern & Oriental Express for nine years and has lived and worked in Southeast Asia for 12 years.

Having been sous chef on the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express in Europe for nearly five years he took up the position of Executive Chef on board the Belmond Road to Mandalay cruise ship on the Ayeyerwady River in Myanmar where he worked for three years prior to moving to the E&O.

Working in a tiny galley kitchen, Martineau prepares dishes that are a perfect blend of East and West. He combines local ingredients using techniques from his French fine dining background such as a tom yam vichyssoise with quail followed by pan-roasted seabass with Sichuan style vegetables. Ingredients such as vegetables and spices are picked up at stops along the way.

FEATURES

Kuala Kangsar

Kuala Kangsar is a popular stop on the route between Malaysia and Thailand. This beautiful town, an easy 15 minutes from the station, is full of traditional old wooden houses. A former royal capital, its Ubiudiah mosque is one of the most beautiful in Malaysia, featuring gold domes and minarets. Nearby is the Royal Mausoleum of Perak and the Sultan Shah's former residence, a colonial mansion, now an art gallery.

River Kwai

When the gleaming Eastern & Oriental Express pulls into a stop right next to the River Kwai bridge it invariably causes quite a stir. People are intrigued and delighted by the train and clamour to take pictures. Meanwhile, passengers disembark to take a gentle raft journey along the Kwai, floating under the infamous bridge as a local historian tells its story. The tour continues to the Thailand Burma Railway Centre, a small but fascinating museum, and the adjacent cemetery for Prisoners of War – a very moving yet soothingly attractive spot.

Fables of the Peninsula

The journey begins with an overnight stay at Raffles hotel in Singapore, a white wedding cake of colonial architecture with shutters, balustrades and wraparound balconies outside; and dark wood, ceiling fans and antique furniture within. Singapore Slings—as invented at the hotel—are served on the veranda. Then dinner in one of the hotel's stunning restaurants takes guests back to a more gracious era—the perfect prelude to a journey aboard the Eastern & Oriental Express.

Passengers are transferred to the train for a five-night adventure. Once in Malaysia, the train stops at Kuala Lumpur for a morning city tour. This is followed by a journey on into the scenic mountains of Malaysia for an overnight stay at the historic Cameron Highlands Resort. In the morning guests may choose between a walk in the rainforest with a guide to discover the wildlife or a trip to a tea plantation where they'll meet a tea master for a tasting on a terrace overlooking the plantation.

Passengers rejoin the Eastern & Oriental Express and spend all subsequent nights on board with stops for sightseeing along the way. One is to the Malaysian island of Penang and its photogenic capital, George Town, with its traditional wooden houses and Chinese temples.

The train crosses the border into Thailand and makes a stop at Baan Huay Yang, a small fishing village. Passengers are taken by boat to Koh Chuan, a stunning island in a national park and home to thousands of bird colonies. On returning to the beach at Koh Chuan a fabulous buffet barbecue will have been set up. The following day the train arrives in Bangkok at the grand Hualamphong station.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & ENVIRONMENT

The Eastern & Oriental Express has supported a number of initiatives including helping to protect the threatened species of tiger native to the rainforest along the train's route. A special Tiger Express train journey raised funds for the charity Save Wild Tigers. The trip

stopped for a fund-raising gala dinner in Kuala Lumpur and generated awareness of the tigers' plight.

The Eastern & Oriental Express sources sustainable, local produce wherever possible. As a new initiative the kitchen team have just started to work with a local jam maker based in Thailand to supply the train.