



# Splendour on the Oriental Express

From Singapore to Bangkok in wood-panelled, silk-covered, colonial opulence

BY JUDITH RITTER

It is a jaw-dropping moment. Eckashay, a handsome, slender, young man with a startlingly white shirt and maroon silk vest is standing in the exotic wood-panelled passageway with a mahogany tray of pastel tropical drinks. We have just climbed the three steps from the steamy platform of the Singapore train station into the cool dim interior of the Eastern and Oriental Express, one of the world's most luxurious trains. My 17-year-old daughter will later tell me that "there's gotta be something psychotic about a train that costs \$1,000 a night when you could take a helicopter ride in Las Vegas for way less!" Right now, however, the foreign charm of this attractive young man is working its magic. Actually, everything is magical, if not perfect, for us on this 2,000-kilometre, two-day journey up the Malay Peninsula from incredibly civilized Singapore to chaotic, exotic Bangkok.

This is what happens when you read too much Somerset Maugham or Joseph Conrad. You find yourself turning the yellowed pages of old travel books, staring at antique maps, tracing the pale pink dragon tail of the Malay Peninsula. Siam ... the Malay States ... the Malacca Straits ... and, at the very tip, the Singapore of spices and pirates and Sir Stamford Raffles. You imagine a train, British green and gold, its interior trimmed with wooden marquetry and Chinese lacquer; afternoon tea is served in delicate china cups on silver trays; and the thukka thukka thuk of the wheels continues through the moonlit jungle night to Kuala Lumpur, Penang and beyond.

"Afternoon tea will be served shortly," Eckashay announces as he guides us to our compartments, while the train squeals and lurches out of the station toward Malaysia. Unaccustomed to the motion, we bounce off the walls, careening first to one side and then the other, like billiard balls on an antique table in some exclusive London men's club. Eckashay glides gracefully in front of us, his tray perfectly balanced. The cabin door swings open and I am in a tiny world of bevelled



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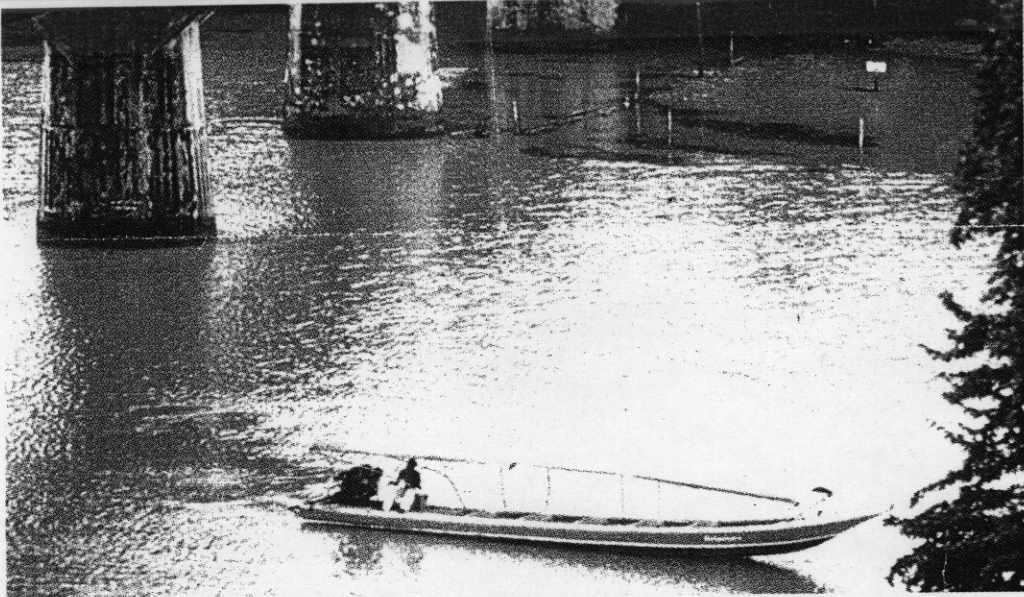
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My daughter and her teenage travel companion burst in, evaporating my 19th-century reverie. They've already thrown open their backpacks, turning their equally elegant two-person cabin into a college-dorm-room disaster. Quite unlike the parasoled young ladies who once rode trains similar to the Express, my young ladies bolt down the hall to check out the saloon car, library and the two very refined-looking Belgian boys who just boarded with their parents.

The library, half the width of the train carriage, is short on books, long on turn-of-the-century elegance with its dark panelling and brocade chairs. But I can see no cigar-smoking colonels in white jackets; just a knot of boisterous tourists in T-shirts, khaki shorts and running shoes. They defy the ambiance of the "Empire" with a hint of L.L. Bean, and democratically disregard the "Wardrobe Notes" sent out to all E & O travellers.

"The atmosphere on the Eastern and Oriental Express is a combination of refinement and relaxation. During the day, smart casual clothing is most appropriate ..." These travellers are waiting for the afternoon's entertainment, a free session with a Chinese astrologer, who is clad in a fluorescent fuchsia satin robe and red pillbox hat, and sits in a quiet corner nearly hidden behind a stack of weighty-looking astrology books.

The news from the astrologer is neither here nor there. He could well be saying "Buy low, sell high," which, given the whopping bill everyone is in for, might be good advice. However, I haven't come for advice. I have come for history. So has Valerie Close, a high-energy Australian woman with a husky, thunderous laugh, lots of anecdotes and girlhood memories of the sound of team trains rumbling through the night in her little country town. "Trains were part of our daily life. We would hop



The Eastern and Oriental Express trundles over a bridge on the River Kwai in Thailand on its 2,000-kilometre journey along the Malay Peninsula. Below, Eckashay, a cabin boy, serves drinks in a mahogany-panelled corridor of the train.

on them, go down to the river and dive off the railway bridge. Railways have always been a fascination for me."

Indeed, since the mid-19th century, train travel has been something of a passion for most southeast Asians. Malaysia's very first railway, built of wood, was eaten by ants, but sultans and governors general were undaunted. Track by track, the cities on the peninsula were connected. There was, however, never a single train to cover the whole distance between Singapore and Bangkok. The E&O is the first.

So, while historically the train and its route are a bit of a fiction, as a faux period piece, the train works.

Nothing makes us feel more authentically "colonial" than the five-star, five-course meals served in the elegant dining car. As typical North Americans, dressing for dinner becomes a little exhausting after a couple of meals. The Europeans and Brits, on the other hand, seem to have a real sense of "Empire," and take to the anachronism rather well. Some wear white linen suits and big hats to lunch. Others wear black tie and gowns for dinner. The food is delicious, extravagant and imported, and the view from the panoramic windows of the dining car — newly greening rice paddies, endless flowering trees sometimes close enough to brush the windows — are mesmerizingly beautiful. But the contradictions are painful: We pass naked children playing in muddy puddles outside corrugated tin shacks. Someone else we pass eats rice out of a crumpled paper bag as we finish off our chocolate orange mousse. At that moment, "extravagant" becomes "obscene" and "delicious" seems redundant.

The E&O as fiction — as a *pièce de théâtre* — is just as much fun as a murder-mystery weekend. It's the perfect



backdrop for sipping a cold drink in the bar car or curling up in a rattan chair in the library to read 19th-century fiction. Unfortunately, neither 19th-century fiction nor board games are a big draw for teenagers, and one image I'll always keep is of six teens — Belgian, British and Canadian — sitting very properly in the library trying to figure out just how to get through the very long night stretching out before them.

There are several stops along the way: a quick visit to the island of Penang; a moving 20 minutes in the Chungkai War Cemetery, the last resting place for hundreds of British POWs, who perished as slave labourers building the Thailand-Burma Railway during the

Second World War; and a quick trip on a motorized raft down the River Kwai.

The real highlights of the trip, however, are the unexpected ones: The train is forced to stop once to let dozens of slick, black water buffalo lumber across the tracks. But my most brilliantly memorable time is spent at night out on the back of the observation car. The light from the back of the train is the only thing illuminating the dark, and we can see our own shadows on the track as it ribbons its way through the jungle.

Rooms on the Eastern and Oriental Express cost \$1,300-\$1,930 (US) per person for the two-day trip. Meals are included. Phone: 1-800-524-2420; Web site: [www.orient-expresshotels.com](http://www.orient-expresshotels.com)