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A GASTRONOMIC ADVENTURE
THROUGH THREE COUNTRIES, ABOARD
THE EASTERN & ORIENTAL EXPRESS

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PHOTOS: BELMOND



TIMELESS OPULENCE

A GASTRONOMIC ADVENTURE THROUGH THREE COUNTRIES,
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STORY & PHOTOS BY
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Having grown up in India, I'm no stranger to train travel. So even though I've lived in Southeast Asia for more than a decade, train travel has never really enticed me; that is, not until I laid eyes on the Eastern & Oriental Express.

The most luxurious way to travel and taste three Southeast Asian countries on wheels, the E&O is in a class of its own. You can ride it from Bangkok to Singapore, or do what I did — fly to Singapore and ride the train back to Bangkok.

The ultimate in slow travel begins at check-in at the E&O lounge in the Fullerton Hotel in Singapore. A welcome drink and light snack prepare you for the feasting that is to come. Once you're through with all the formalities, including immigration through Singapore and into Malaysia (which takes

a matter of seconds), you are ushered onto the train and into a quaint cabin, where your luggage has already been delivered.

Once on-board, you'll notice the train's lush, beautiful cherrywood-paneled corridors and silken upholstery, with a notable Asian influence in the design. Nothing evokes childhood memories like being seated on a train, hearing the whistle blow and then chugging down the tracks. Sheer delight!

As I settled into my cabin and got familiar with all its nooks and crannies (including the tiniest bathroom I have ever seen) we were already leaving Singapore on our way to Johor Bahru in Malaysia. I relaxed and watched the world go by, as afternoon tea was served. The tea is served in a silver teapot, sugar bowl and milk jug. This is no ordinary train.



Chef Ian Kittichai's dinner aboard the E&O.

The cuisine on the train is part of the adventure, reflective of the country you're travelling through at the time. At the start of the journey, Malaysian tea is served with a curry puff, small tart, caramel custard and pandan dessert.

I resisted the urge to spend the rest of the afternoon in my cabin and headed down along the long corridors to the end of the train, where the observation deck is situated. The deck, with its own bar, is reminiscent of a colonial veranda and is the perfect place to take in the panoramic scenery and breathtaking sunsets through the Malaysian palm trees and rubber plantations. (If you want to soak in the ambience via a phone screen, WiFi is available.)

Since the E&O represents an age gone by, it's only appropriate to dress up for dinner. (I decided on the 6pm seating as 9.30pm is too Spanish for me.) The first dinner is by executive chef Yannis Martineau, who has been with the E&O for 11 years. Chef Martineau welcomes you with his unforgettable amuse bouche. The *tom yum* cappuccino was the best introduction to a chef's style of cooking I've had in a while — light, creamy and so delicious! "Return guests often request this. It's probably the most popular item in any season," he said.



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The cuisine on the train is part of the adventure, reflective of the country you're travelling through at the time



The first night's dinner begins with crab, mango and cucumber cake, salmon eggs, crispy rice, and wasabi and fruit coulis, served with grated-at-your-table Buddha's Hand, a citrus indigenous to Southeast Asia. "I found this citrus in Vietnam where it is used for offerings at the temple," chef Martineau explained. "I then saw a Vietnamese friend add the zest to stock, to give it that tang. The zest is more interesting because of its fruity taste and lemony flavour. This particular Buddha's Hand is from the Cameron Highlands in Malaysia, which we pass, so it seemed appropriate to add it to the menu. It is also very different from anything our guests would normally have."

The menu is seasonal and there are separate menus for the northbound route (Singapore to Bangkok) and southbound route (Bangkok to Singapore). Expect to be indulged with slow-cooked Australian Angus beef medallion, taro puree, Asian peas and lotus root; seared barramundi with egg floss butter on soy bouillon, baby cos lentil and enoki; and mango mousse with coconut panna cotta, caramelised nuts, raspberry jelly, matcha sorbet and tuile for dessert. All this is washed down with wines from Argentina and Chile. The meal ends with petit fours, which I decided would be better eaten in bed so had them delivered to my room for a late night snack.

Cuisine by Chef Yannis Martineau aboard the E&O.





Chefs Yanniss Martineau and Ian Kittichai.

The night still being young, I decided to mosey over to the Piano Bar in the middle of the train. This is the spot where guests get together for a chat over pre- or post-dinner cocktails. You are even encouraged to sing, accompanied by resident pianist Peter Consigliere, who has been entertaining guests for almost 24 years. As the train rolled into the night, I returned to my cabin to discover that my designated butler had magically converted it into a cosy bedroom, the ornate marquetry bathing in the glow of my bedside lamp, a little souvenir on my pillow and a gown and slippers laid out.

The following morning, breakfast was served in bed. (This is the kind of service that one could get used to. I may need to hire a private chef one of these days.) I managed to drag myself out of bed in time for the day's excursion, beginning with a traditional village experience in Labu Kubong, in the Malaysian town of Kuala Kangsar, where the first rubber tree was planted. Villagers welcomed us with a

traditional gendang silat martial arts performance, after which came my favourite part — an introduction to the local flora and sampling of local snacks. More curry puffs and a first taste of Malaysian doughnut or “kuih keria” were followed by tastings of local fruit and washed down with a local lime drink. Refuelled, we were led on a guided tour of rice paddies and shown how rubber gets tapped first-hand at a plantation. If, unlike me, you like exercising more than just your mouth, you can opt to trek to a local hilltop for the panoramic views, weather permitting.

We were soon back on the train in time for another round of delicacies from chef Martineau. He told me that logistics are the most important thing on the train, along with the cooking. “My menu represents where we are, like the dim sum and nonya curry [the day's lunch],” he said. “The menu gets more Thai as we enter Thailand. I need to be very precise with the ordering and make sure everything is on-board. I do have a few tricks depending on where

we stop, like people bringing me things I have forgotten like spices or dairy items.” The chef has had a 15-year career working solely on trains, though his career spans longer. “I love the challenge of working on trains. It's never boring and doesn't get old.”

There are 10 chefs who work on the menu, with eight on-board at any given time. They work in shifts: six in the morning, six in the evening and two on the graveyard shift. “The kitchen runs 24 hours,” explained chef Martineau.

Once lunch is done, you can either laze the afternoon away in the reading room or get a Thai foot massage. I chose to indulge in a cheeky nap, after which, I was ready for afternoon tea, curated by chef Ian Kittichai. Pandan salee cake, lychee cream choux, a longan scone served with clotted cream and jam and a chicken gao-la completed his selection. Perfect to wake up to!

The rains of the afternoon continued into the early evening and brought with it a rather mellow mood. It was lovely enjoying the lush green views as we crossed over the Malay border into Thailand.

The second dinner is often by a guest chef. On this occasion, it was chef Ian, his second time cooking aboard. Expect Issaya Siamese Club favourites like rice-berry crackers, chicken and coconut relish and dayboat diver scallop and wing bean salad, quick seared with organic peas, peanuts and roasted chilli dressing.

“You need to know the kitchen and the train beforehand to get an understanding of what can be done,” he said. “I've never cooked on both legs of the journey. I try and use local organic, fresh and seasonal ingredients as much as possible. The menu has to be planned well to make sure produce is obtainable from the markets of Malaysia and Thailand.”

The star of the night was his famous lamb shank in massaman curry simmered in aromatic spices, with sweet potatoes and cucumber relish and steamed jasmine rice. The mere sight of this dish will take your breath away. Succulent and tender to the bone, the massaman is a truly luxurious dish, fitting for the train we were on.

Dinner ended on a high note with pandan and tapioca pearls with jasmine and green tea steamed cake, red fruit sorbet and mulberry sauce. “Pandan is used a lot in Singapore, Malaysia and in the south of Thailand. I extract the juice, which is bitter and that goes well with dessert,” the chef explained.

The most challenging thing is staying in motion with the train. “I've never been train sick until I stood in the E&O kitchen. I have cooked on a boat, even small fishing boats and have adapted well. I thought this would be easier. But unfortunately not. Ten seconds of standing in the kitchen and I felt sick. The trick, I finally learnt, is to keep balanced and move along with the train,” said chef Ian, who has now got his train legs.

“I really enjoy working with the staff, most of whom have been here for 20-odd years. It's all very laid back and easy,” he added.

I ended the journey with a tour of local flavours hosted by chef Ian in Kanchanaburi, where I visited a fresh market, an acclaimed fermented rice noodle house and capped it off with a traditional Thai cooking class on a boat as I cruised along the River Kwai.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “It's the not the destination, it's the journey.”

Visit belmond.com/eastern-and-oriental-express.

POP-UP CULINARY COLLABORATIONS

From Feb 5-7, Singaporean pastry chef Janice Wong brings her passion for desserts and culinary art to the Bangkok to Singapore route.

From March 1, a two-night gastronomic adventure starts in Singapore with chef Luke Mangan.

Departing Sept 2, French chef Didier Corlou serves up a four-hands dinner, a signature afternoon tea and an intimate spice atelier.

On Oct 8, celebrity Thai chef Ian Kittichai will host his signature dinner.

