



## Rich Tales on Rails: The Eastern and Oriental Express

"The monk bless you for long life, good health ... and nice complexion, too," says our translator. It's very Thailand, the land of smiles, good complexions and anomalies — for instance, the Buddhist monk has just blessed us at a 19th century Chiang Mai temple, a whistle-stop on our tour aboard a very 21st century train. story by John Borthick

The Eastern & Oriental Express is a rolling work of art, a thing of beauty on steel wheels. Its marquetry panelling — of Burmese rosewood, elm and mahogany — is almost worthy of a museum display. But a great train is more than its décor and silver service, its shunts and grunts. Over time, a train takes on the mantle of its own tales, especially if they concern scandal, romance or farce. In our “Thai Explorer” itinerary of two nights and three days – rolling from Bangkok north to Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai, then back to Lampung and the River Kwai – I don’t expect too much scandal, romance or farce. But one travels in hope.

In 1993 I had ridden on the inaugural journey of the E&O Express as the freshly minted, US\$20 million train ran from Singapore to Bangkok. I saw much of Thailand backward from the train’s glorious tail end Observation Car, an open-air caboose of cocktails and gossip. Fittingly, I was among a cast of Lugers-and-Beluga types who included a Latin American diplomat (white suited, of course), a handsome Chinese actor, the inevitable lady in red and a glamorous Eurasian writer.

Mid-way through the journey a crew from television’s Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous programme not so much boarded as occupied the train. The two “guest stars” were women vaguely familiar from 1970s sitcoms, who by now were — depending on your opinion of plastics — either triumphs of prosthesis or tragedies in silicon. The Producer took over the train’s bar car, acting as though in a parody of his own program. Celebrity fever and flashbulbs erupted around the former prime-time queens who sat trapped like rabbits in a shooter’s spotlight. Some passengers, clearly not great fans of trash television, were less than impressed. “Fellow’s got a bloody hide,” boomed one old Brit. “Anyone for a murder on the Oriental Express?” called the lady in red.

This time there are no such intrusions. My fellow passengers are well heeled, house trained, impeccably behaved. Nevertheless, the characters soon appear. An ex-pat foreign correspondent, many years in Asia, is rather fancifully whispered to be “a Company man”, CIA, although he is far too amiable to live up to the paranoid stereotype. Then there’s a svelte young British couple, soon nicknamed “Posh and Becks”. Becks, it is observed, enjoys cultivating a windswept look on the Observation Car deck, with one eye on the landscape and the other on his own reflection. We can almost hear the train’s pianist tinkling a familiar refrain about, “I bet you think this song is about you.”

The E&O’s “Shanghai Express” decor extends far beyond its public areas – the elegant dining cars, saloon and library – to every passenger compartment. My State compartment is a spacious, two-bed (not bunk) cabin with an en-suite bathroom that’s packed with enough Bulgari amenities to stock a beauty salon. I spend hours sitting by my window, watching the Thai landscape scrolling endlessly past. Down the corridor a cheerful steward, Sarwaut (“Woody” to the linguistically challenged) is on call to meet any request for a snack or other caprice. The stewards however do draw the line at some requests. One new steward had to ask his superiors if it was customary for a Western gentleman to express thanks for some minor task by smothering the steward with ardent embraces and passionate kisses? We roll through the night, arriving by morning at Chiang Mai. The off-train excursions are all special – a cruise on a rice barge, a private visit to one of Chiang Mai’s most venerated wats, meeting a royal princess – but it’s soon obvious what the main attraction is for most passengers. “It’s the train itself. The experience of being on this beautiful creation,” says Roz, an accountant from Brisbane. “I loved our Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai trips, but I couldn’t wait to get back on board.” >



In the Singapura dining car we convene for memorable meals, thanks to the E&O's executive chef, Kevin Cape. His menus have evolved from an earlier classical European cuisine to a very palatable merging of European and Asian traditions. One spectacular entrée, a tandoori of sea bass, leaves us wondering how any main course might top it. We don't have to wait long for the paneng kai Thai chicken curry that indeed excels it. All this finesse emerges from a galley about the size of a row of phone booths.

During our river cruise excursion in the ancient Thai capital of Ayutthaya, a trio of 30-ish American women passengers, all very well travelled (although perhaps not often in the tropics), cause some amusement among the Thais. When served newly opened coconuts (complete with straw) for a refreshing drink they look in alarm at these bulbous green objects that are full of a surely unpasteurised liquid. One of them asks anxiously, "Is it safe? I mean — what is it?". Magnificent Ayutthaya, 76 km north of Bangkok, was the capital of Siam from 1350 until 1767 when a Burmese army sacked it. The ruins of its temples and 400 monasteries still remain. We amble among the silent prang (reliquary towers), half-listening to our guide's commentary, half-imagining how royal Ayutthaya would have looked, sounded, smelt when it was one of Asia's great metropolises and, with 735,000 citizens, rivalled the great cities of Europe.

Heading south again we rattle in style overnight to Kanchanaburi, home of World War II's infamous Bridge on the River Kwai. "New Death Museum!" shouts a banner beside the nearby Don Rak war cemetery. The museum's sombre displays tell the story of those who perished on Japan's cruel Thailand to Burma "Railway of Death" — over 80,000 Malays and Burmese died, as did 2800 New Zealand, Australian and other Allied servicemen. Today the cemetery is a tranquil, meditative place of 6982 headstones. A simple epitaph on the grave of a 23-year old Australian gunner speaks perhaps for them all: "Too dearly loved to ever be forgotten."

Too soon our train time must conclude. On a warm afternoon, the Eastern & Oriental Express sighs to a halt at Bangkok's Hualamphong Station. Reluctantly, I abandon the window where visions of Thailand the green riot of jungle, the dawn hills of teak and wood-smoke have slid past like an endless scroll. ■

## In the Know

### The journey

There are daily flights to Bangkok from Auckland via Sydney, as well as daily flights from Auckland and Christchurch via Singapore.

### Pillow time

Your journey on the Eastern and Oriental express can either start or finish in Bangkok, where you can choose between two of the very best hotels in Asia, the Peninsula from \$162 per person per night (share twin) or the Royal Orchid Sheraton from \$112 per person per night (share twin), both overlooking the Chao Phraya River.

### Feast it up

In Bangkok take a fabulous three hour dinner cruise on the Manohra Song from \$75 per person including a sumptuous Thai set menu dinner. For an authentic Thai dining experience, the eclectic range of restaurants in Patpong is not to be missed.

### Inside information

With hundreds of markets and malls dotting the city, if you came to Bangkok for the shopping you won't be disappointed. For an amazing array of goods, particularly designer imitations, check out the Pratunam or Patpong night markets.

### Eastern and Oriental Express

There are three types of compartment — Pullman, State and Presidential. Pullman compartments prices start from \$2209 for the 3 day/2 night Thai Explorer itinerary; or \$2805 for Singapore-Bangkok (or vice versa). Prices are per person, share twin and include all table d'hote meals on board and excursions.

### It's a pleasure

For further information on The Eastern and Oriental Express or visiting Thailand, speak to your House of Travel consultant or visit [www.houseoftravel.co.nz/destinations](http://www.houseoftravel.co.nz/destinations)

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