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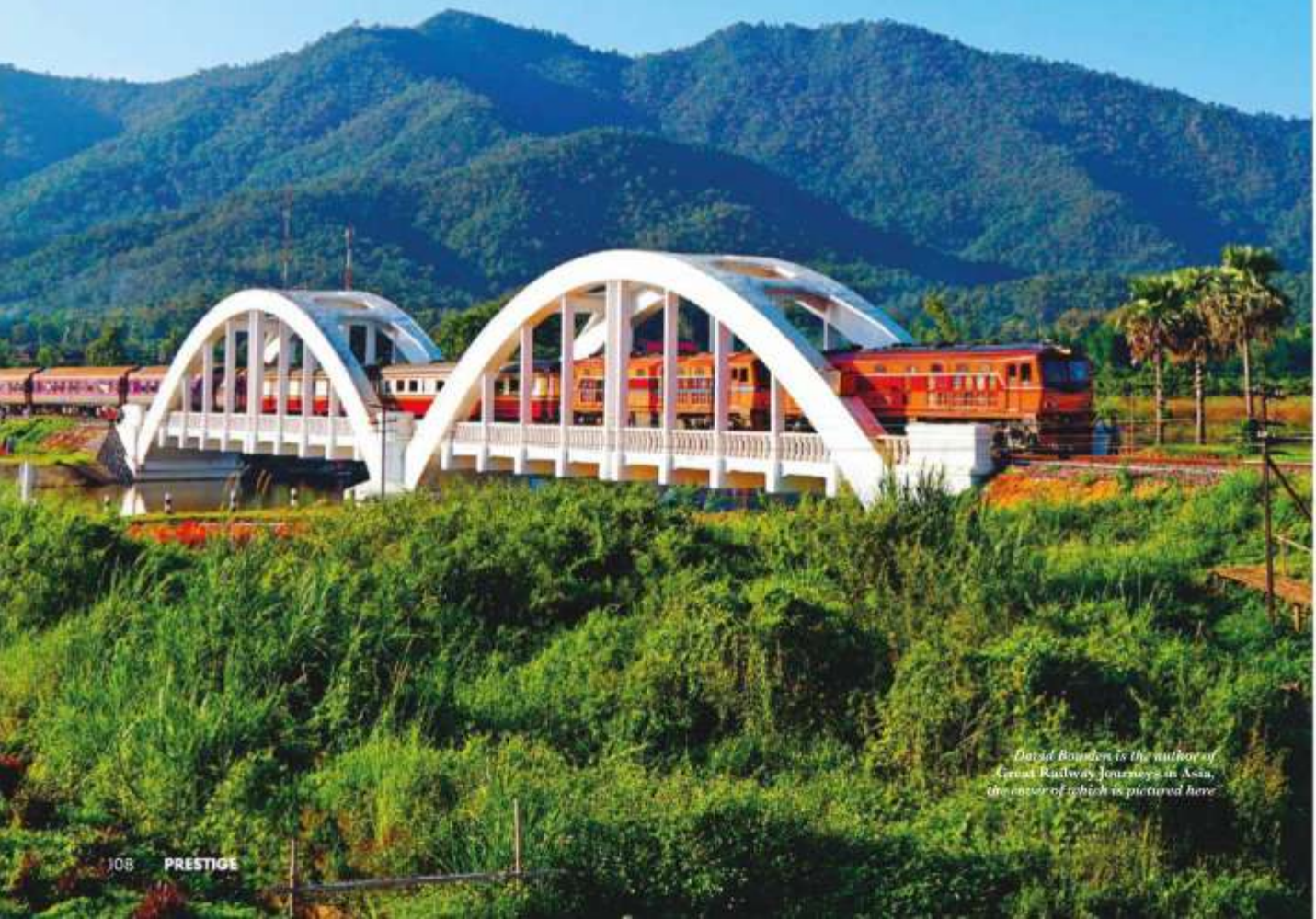
LIVING THE LIFE PRISMATIC

WHERE THE WILD JEWELS ARE | FANTASTICAL TIMEPIECES | TRAVELS TO WONDERLAND

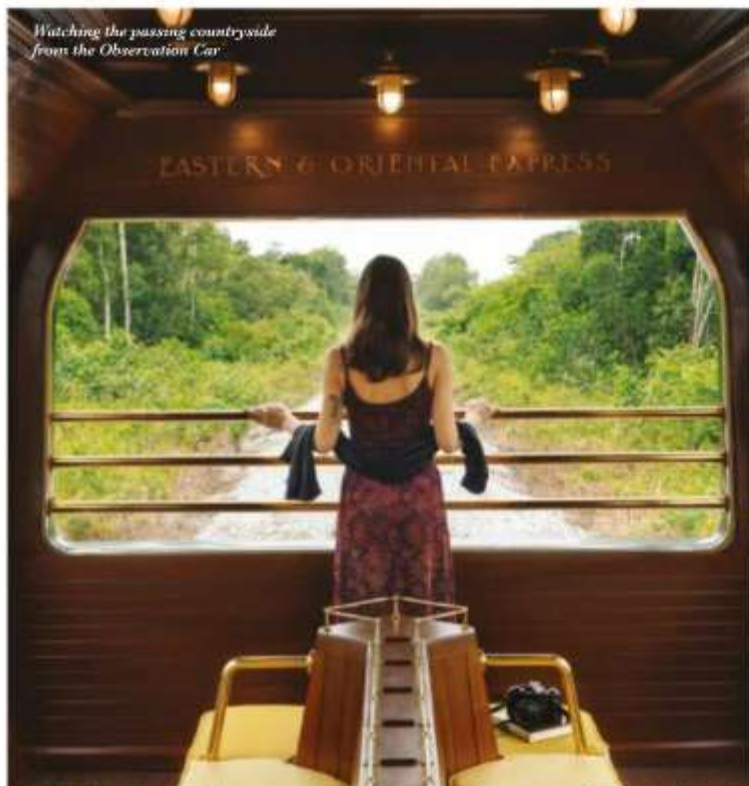
TICKET TO RIDE

Luxury train travel is back in vogue. We head off on two enchanting rail journeys through Malaysia and Vietnam that revive the nostalgia and romance of the golden era in train travel.

Words: DAVID BOWDEN



David Bowden is the author of Great Railway Journeys in Asia, the cover of which is pictured here



Watching the passing countryside from the Observation Car



Afternoon tea on the Eastern & Oriental Express



Bar Car of the Eastern & Oriental Express

Train travel is all the rage again with luxury train journeys across the globe, including overnight sleeper trains in Europe, and multiday excursions that include indulgent dégustation meals, vintage wines, and sleeping arrangements befitting renowned hotels.

Forget any preconceived ideas you may have of travelling on trains, as many now offer luxurious services for passengers seeking to travel in style. Trains such as the elegantly furnished Eastern & Oriental Express and The Vietage by Anantara offer the highest levels of panache, recalling classic rail journeys of yesteryear but with contemporary amenities.

While Asia is underserved by luxury trains, they do exist, and recently, I travelled on these two trains to be immersed in opulent surroundings complemented by five-star service. The Vietage in Vietnam and the Eastern & Oriental Express in Malaysia are two of the most indulgent travel prospects in the region, although they are very different propositions. The former journey lasts from half a day to one day, while the latter typically offers a longer four-day, three-night journey.

MEANDERING THROUGH MALAYSIA

On my first evening on the train, plump rain droplets trickled down the windows of the restaurant car as I dined on a dish of roast duck and pineapple, green grapes, baby aubergine, and tangy sauce while sipping a vibrant Joffreau-Hermann Cahors Clos de Gamot wine from the finest crystal glassware. There was little to see in the Perak darkness, but the gentle movement of the train added a new dimension to Chef Andre Chiang's localised dining experience. Just beyond my elegantly set table, I caught glimpses of the kitchen staff and was impressed that such sumptuous meals could be prepared in the confined space.

Fresh orchids, a petite table lamp, silverware, and linen serviettes adorned my table, making it the envy of any leading restaurant around the world. Glamour and style are important, and dressing up is encouraged. The daytime dress code is smart casual, but in the evening, most guests dress to 'dress to kill' but not in the Agatha Christie *Murder on the Orient Express* sense.

The Eastern & Oriental Express is operated by Belmond, whose prestigious portfolio includes other famous trains such as the British Pullman, Royal Scotsman, Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, Andean Explorer, and Hiram Bingham. London-based Belmond was established as a luxury travel pioneer and is now an essential pillar of the Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH) stable. Belmond also manages luxury hotels, resorts, boats, and safaris in fabled destinations.

The train's carriages were shipped from Japan in the 1970s for service on New Zealand's Silver Star sleeper train. In the 1990s, after this service ceased, the carriages were relocated to Singapore to be remodelled and reincarnated in regal green and cream livery, as the Eastern & Oriental Express. It operated scheduled services between Singapore and Bangkok for almost two decades. Reintroduced in early 2024, it now operates scheduled departures from Singapore into Malaysia.

Attention to detail is all important in each cabin with luxuries such as air-conditioning, toilet, shower, and

comfortable bedding. Upholstery with exotic Asian motifs, brass fittings, antique lights, and a decorative table recreate a bygone era. Exquisite and intricately patterned tropical hardwood marquetry lines the walls, and plush carpet provides a spring underfoot. The cabins are also efficient in their use of the limited space available—it didn't feel too tight.

My Pullman cabin could accommodate two: an upper bunk pushed to the wall during the day and the bottom bunk serving as a two-seater couch. The polished teak and red velvet couch was converted by my cabin attendant to a linen-sheeted bed each evening. The ensuite of shower, sink, and toilet was compact, but a welcome luxury to the public trains that I've travelled on. Exclusive toiletries, robes, and slippers are provided, as is an abundance of plush towels. Smartly attired cabin attendants are at the ready to attend to the needs of their passengers.

There are several public cars on the train, including two bars, two restaurants, a boutique, and the indulgent Dior Spa. Both the observation bar car and the piano bar are elegantly appointed with golden timber, rattan detailing, plush fabrics, comfortable lounges, and timber floors punctuated by plush carpet. Evening entertainment is provided in the piano car with a jazz singer, pianist, and a magician.

During the colonial era, the train was the principal mode of transportation from Singapore northwards along the peninsula through Malaya (Malaysia) and into Siam (Thailand). While planes now make these journeys in a few hours, there are many who seek comfort in the 'olden days' by slipping back into the nostalgia of train travel.

The journey begins and ends at Woodlands in Singapore, but for many passengers, I soon sensed that it didn't appear to matter too much where they were heading as their immediate surroundings and the experience were more important. However, for those planning a trip, the train makes two main scheduled stops on its journey—Merapoh (for Taman Negara) and Butterworth (for Penang).

The train passes through Peninsular Malaysia on a four-day, three-night trip, and

the name 'express' is a misnomer as the pace is quite leisurely with extended halts on railway sidings on the single-track traversed along some sections of the route.

For much of the journey, the train passes through lowland rainforest, agricultural land of rubber and oil palm estates, or verdant fields of rice. The open-sided observation car at the rear of the train is the preferred location for admiring the scenery. In his celebrated book, *The Great Railway Bazaar by Train Through Asia*, published in 1975, Paul Theroux observed, "... and more frequently rubber estates intruded on jungle, a symmetry of scored trunks and trodden paths hemmed in by classic jungle, hanging lianas, palms like fountains, and a smothering undergrowth of noisy greenery all dripping in the rain."

I noted that Malaysia's palm oil estates never looked more impressive than from the train's panoramic windows. They were made more enjoyable while sipping wines from leading global estates such as Veuve Clicquot, Dog Point, Château Minuty, and Bodega Ca' Di Mat.

Passengers are offered several land-based activities in Merapoh and Penang. At Merapoh Station on the morning of day two, passengers disembark for a choice of excursions to explore the lush lowland forests of Taman Negara, master their skills in nature photography, or ride on e-bikes through small villages and rubber plantations to admire two limestone caves. Expert and informative guides lead all excursions.

The next morning, I enjoyed a Champagne breakfast as the train pulled into Butterworth Station. From here, we boarded a ferry to Penang Island for Vespa or rickshaw rides around George Town. I chose the Vespa tour to admire some creative art and artisanal projects, and finished all the wiser for the experience.

This indulgent multi-day journey offers guests the opportunity to sit back and be pampered with all-inclusive meals, beverages, and off-train excursions while taking in the ever-changing Malaysian countryside. Different packages plus pre- and post-train tours are available. belmond.com

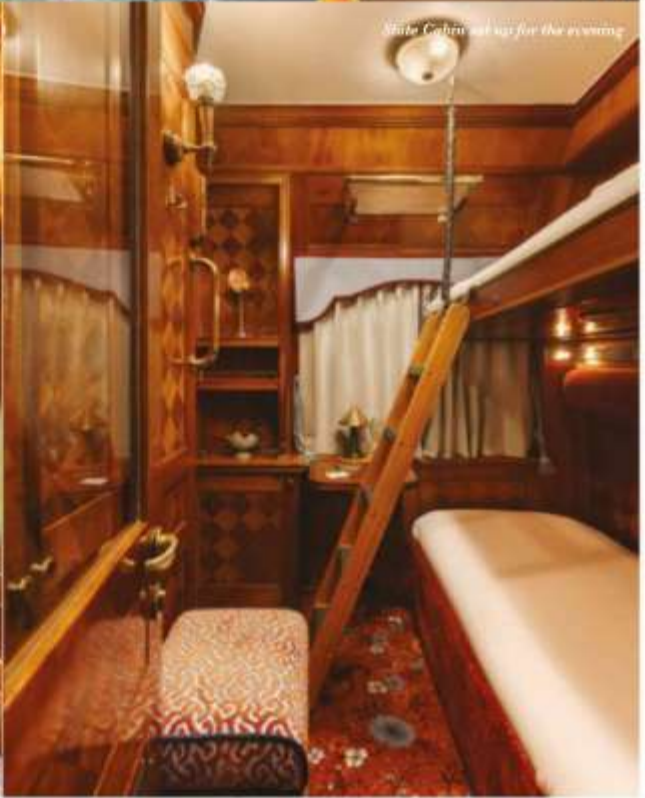




Cabin interior



Single Cabin set up for the day



Single Cabin set up for the evening



The Vietage carriages are positioned at the rear of the train



Indulge in an upper body massage



Private environments with panoramic windows are a feature of The Vietage



Bubbles at the bar



Passengers enjoy luxury amenities on The Vietage

VENTURING THROUGH VIETNAM



Cycle ride from the Anantara Hoi An Resort

The north-south railway line in Vietnam travels close to the country's elongated coastline. In recent years, trains operated by Vietnam Railways have become a popular mode of transport for exploring this vibrant nation.

Those travelling between the popular tourist destinations of Hoi An and Nha Trang can now enjoy the luxurious and stylish The Vietage by Anantara. Anantara's service was launched in 2020 as an efficient way of transferring guests from Anantara's Hoi An Resort to its sister property, Anantara Quy Nhon Villas.

My journey began at the delightful riverside Anantara Hoi An Resort, just a short walk from the epicentre of this vibrant and historic port town. Like Macau and Melaka, the Portuguese arrived in Hoi An and began trading products and treasures. Protected as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Hoi An retains many of its old buildings that have been repurposed as smart restaurants, cafés, bars, and boutiques that proved popular with the countless tourists who descend on the small town, especially at sunset, to enjoy lantern-lit river cruises.

The Anantara property appeals for its urban location but resort-style living that includes lush tropical landscaping, a pool, and a spa. I especially enjoyed lunch in the resort's Art Space and admired the food, the inviting wine list, and the local art. The resort made an ideal base in which to discover Hoi An and then escape the evening crowds while relaxing over dinner in the resort's riverside restaurant.

While I departed Hoi An early in the morning, the experience was enjoyable as the sun rises early in this part of the world. The Vietage began operating with just one lavishly appointed carriage hooked up to the rear of the regular train service, but it now offers two carriages for discerning travellers.

Each of the carriages features six private compartments with two seats (or one sleeper on the night journey) to accommodate up to 12 passengers.

Expansive grey upholstered seats are framed by honey-coloured timber with rattan detailing. A blanket, neck pillow, and slippers are provided along with fast complimentary Wi-Fi.

The Vietage provides access to the Central Vietnam destinations of Hoi An, Quy Nhon, and Nha Trang. Through panoramic windows, I admired the ever-changing landscape of the emerald green countryside of padi fields dissected by the occasional river or small farming settlement. Farmers wearing their distinctive conical straw hats toiled in the fields, while semi-forested mountains lined the distant horizon.

On my morning departure from Da Nang to Quy Nhon, I enjoyed a light breakfast of fresh pastries served with local Dalat coffee. A few hours later, a three-course lunch, with mains selected in advance, was served with a selection of premium wines.

Regional ingredients and recipes, such as Quy Nhon seafood salad with green papaya, carrot, mint, and fish sauce, are featured. Chefs source ingredients from within Vietnam, along with luxury imported produce such as Wagyu beef and salmon. Other possibilities included sturgeon caviar, a cheese platter, Champagne, and a couple of wines, all of which are available but come with an additional price tag.

As there is no kitchen in the carriage, passengers place their meal preferences days before they board the train. Yet, even in the absence of a kitchen, the onboard team plated some amazing dishes. My main dish was braised Wagyu beef accented with local vegetables and accompanied by a green tea and sesame jus. The dessert of strawberries from Dalat in the Vietnamese mountains, accompanied by coconut yoghurt and local basil, was masterful in its simplicity.

The well-appointed bar car features a semi-circular basalt-topped bench and black leather stools. A butler enthusiastically refreshed my sparkling Taltarni Brut wine sourced from cool climate locations in

Australia. Other wines by the glass included a New Zealand Sauvignon Chardonnay from Chile and an Italian Primitivo. Specialty cocktails and Vietnamese gins were other options that I sampled for research purposes. The selection was superb, but I noticed that fussy travellers could order premium wines for a surcharge.

A therapist, operating within a small massage room, provided a soothing 15-minute shoulder and back massage.

The Vietage makes two trips daily, morning and return evening runs between Danang and Nha Trang. I opted to just travel to Dieu Tri Station near the port town of Quy Nhon, as it provided the perfect connection between the Anantara Hoi An and Anantara Quy Nhon Villas Resorts. Some of my fellow passengers opted to continue on to Nha Trang, arriving just after dark.

The train pulled into Dieu Tri Station mid-afternoon, with my transport to Anantara Quy Nhon Villas waiting for the short transfer to a coastal stretch of Vietnam that has yet to be discovered by mass tourism. This resort of just 25 spacious and luxurious villas is located along a stretch of golden sand overlooking a few small islands. Guests are guaranteed near privacy in exclusive landscaped surroundings along a private beach, with superb services including gourmet meals served in the solitary restaurant. While the resort has a pool, most guests choose to relax in their own private plunge pool.

The Vietage by Anantara is a ride that is impossible to replicate anywhere else in Central Vietnam. While it is a slower way to travel, passengers enjoy attentive service, superb facilities, and indulgent dining while views of rural Vietnam unfold through the panoramic windows.

If you are a traveller who wants to get to their destination ASAP, train travel is not for you. Both these classy trains will appeal to discerning travellers who relish in the journey as much as the destination. thevietagetrain.com