

Malaysia

🌴 Classic South-east Asia: tropical islands, cool highlands and colonial history

✈️ Fly UK-Singapore or Bangkok (around 12 hours), then board the local train

📅 Oct-Feb, for fun festivals



THE GREAT EASTERN

The most enjoyable way to explore Malaysia's laid-back islands, sizzling street food and historic towns is by train and ferry. Your fare? Just £95...

Words Roger Norum



Clockwise from left
Hualamphong Station in Bangkok; the Great Buddha Hall in Georgetown, Penang; boats moored on Langkawi Island; we reckon this flag means 'floor it'...



It began as every great journey always should: with a lost ticket. At 14:27 sharp, I dashed out of my Bangkok hotel room and dived into a taxi

bound for the 14:45 sleeper train south to Malaysia. When the car pulled up to the curb at Hualamphong Station 13 nail-biting minutes later, I scrambled out with my luggage onto the platform towards the old blue train braying on the tracks.

In the flurry of excitement that often surrounds international train departures – the deliberate packing of bags, the sourcing of bottled water and chocolate bars, the stealthy hoarding of hotel bath and hygiene products just before checkout – I had set aside my train ticket for safe keeping. That was wise. Only now, I couldn't remember exactly where.



That was mutton-headed. Pleading with the train staff resulted in little more than grunts, raised eyebrows and shaken heads. The crotchety conductors weren't going to let me board without a ticket, and the last berth had unfortunately been sold the previous evening – to me.

And then, just as the besuited station manager probed his pockets for the tin whistle and green flag to announce our departure, a wily man in a white T-shirt sprang across the track in front of us. Out of breath, he handed me a brown envelope. I opened it, then stood there in disbelief. There was my ticket, stamped in bright purple with the ungrammatical admonition: 'Valid Ticket. No responsibility in case of lost'. The concierge had discovered it in my room and sent a moped-powered messenger speeding after me to the station. Had the emissary arrived 15 seconds later, I would have been hitchhiking to Malaysia.

Of course, there is more than one way to get to Malaysia from Bangkok – such as aboard the coveted and absurdly lavish Eastern & Oriental Express, a British racing green luxury train with private cabins that let you pretend you're living large in 1890s Siam or Indochina. Still, the E&O's £1,330 price tag means that it's not the kind of ticket you'd want to misplace. And since an Orient Express journey is as much about spending time on the train as off it,



connoisseurs of experiential travel might rather prefer something more local.

I wanted to know what people travelling on normal trains in Asia were doing – and what their lives were like. And so I decided to shell out 1,120 baht – saving roughly £1,307 in the process – and booked a passage on the local train.

Strangers on a train

The Bangkok-to-Butterworth 'Special Ekspres' was packed with a dramatis personae of Malay monks, Thai spinsters, Emirati couples and American backpackers. I heeded the words of Bangkok-based >

'Langkawi is so alluring a former Prime Minister tried to make it the state capital'



Previous page Getty; This page: Alamy; Dreamstime; Corbis; Roger Norum

'The Cameron Highlands, at a cool 20°C, were a respite from the heavy heat'

Fancy a brew?
You can be sure of a refreshing cuppa in the Highlands
Right
Find fancy rooftops, fine temples and food galore on a train trip through Malaysia



◀ street-food guru and renowned chef David Thompson, who with a single phrasal verb had advised me on how to approach the foodstuffs I would encounter during my journey: "Dig in."

As I took my seat, an elderly woman in front of me untied several plastic bags and insisted I help myself to her modest collection of prawn crackers, fruit leather and *pau*, bulbous wheat-flour buns filled with soybean paste. Later that evening, after a train attendant prepared the beds, the train's soporific rocking motion sent me swiftly off to sleep.

The following morning, I hopped off the train at the Thai-Malaysia border and took a taxi to the coast, where a hydrofoil was bobbing in the water, revving its engines. An hour later, I was on breezy and balmy Langkawi – a handsome, luxuriant island that was a welcome change from life on the cramped rail. A short ferry ride from the Thai-Malaysian border, Langkawi is such an alluring destination that one former Malaysian prime minister lobbied (albeit unsuccessfully) to install the state capital there. Its 2007 listing as a Unesco Geopark – the first in South-East Asia – is encouraging foreign tourism while ensuring island development does not destroy its ecosystem.

On an evening rainforest trek, Khirien, a local guide, instructed us in the dangers of Langkawi's jungle and how to avoid them: poisonous pythons and vipers (make rustling noises as you walk); tree sap that can cause blindness (don't drink it); and voracious mosquitoes (some good insect repellent usually does the trick). As the sun dipped below the horizon and the air cooled, we hiked through a layered thicket of rattan trees, wild coffee plants and tongkat ali – a diminutive tree known dubiously as 'Asian Viagra'. For centuries, island aboriginal people have boiled these leaves for their testosterone-enhancing properties.

At one point, when Khirien flicked his torch up a tree trunk, a pair of reddish-brown flying lemurs (aka colugos) extended their arms from their perch, spreading a membrane of skin between their limbs to form something like a sail, and glided over to a nearby tree. Other forest dwellers soon emerged – a flying squirrel, a lime-green gecko (whose Malaysian name tok-keh comes from the sound it makes at night) and several dusky leaf monkeys.

Bearing a distinctive white brow, the male monkey can copulate up to 35 times a day. Clearly consumption of Asian Viagra is not limited to humans alone.

The next morning I ventured out by boat around the mangroves and turquoise lagoons of Kilim Nature Park at Langkawi's north-eastern tip. Protecting the coastline from erosion, the swampy, brackish area is home to the endangered white-bellied sea eagle and brownish brahminy kite – gorgeous, majestic beings if you can observe them mid-flight. From our boat we fed the birds chicken entrails as they swooped down in front of us, before our guide sped us off towards the Andaman Sea and Malaysia's best beaches on the island's southern coast.

A special blend

When I made the ferry passage a day later over to the spice-filled island of Penang, rookm south, it was the eve of Chinese New Year. Penang's streets were busily being prepared for the thousands of locals taking part in the global tradition of *balek kampong* – returning home for the holidays.

In the island's main settlement of Georgetown, I met Leslie James, a British-Canadian ex-diplomat turned local historian who offered to show me around the town's laconic streets. Here, ornate Buddhist temples stood next to simple shophouses; Bollywood hits lilted out of Tamil curry houses as aromatic smoke from joss sticks wafted by; young Malaysian men wheeled satay carts past restored buildings belonging to the island's Chinese population, descendants of 15th- and 16th-century immigrants. And everywhere, Hokkien trishaw (bicycle rickshaw) drivers slouched in their seats, their legs kicked up as they read the paper, waiting for business.

Penang was a well-known stop on the hippie trail in the 1970s, and its recent Unesco Heritage listing has resulted in a thriving renaissance of renewal and reconstruction – a garden hotel carved out of a horse stables on Muntri Street, for example, or a group of small boutique properties fashioned from clan houses on Stewart Lane. "Gentrification is definitely happening," Leslie told me, "but the important thing is that Penang does not become a museum of old buildings. It should remain a vibrant community." >



LOCAL VIEW

Maslilah Said, PhD student

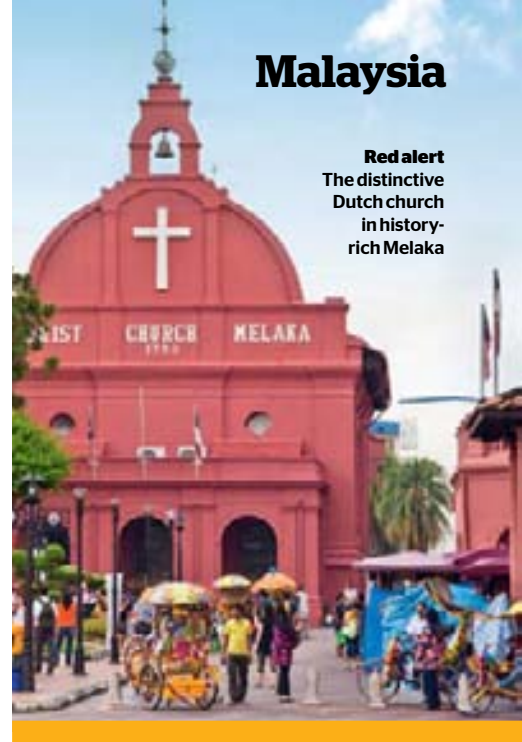
"I speak Malay with my parents in Melaka, but I'm only part ethnic Malay – my great-great-grandma is Peranakan. So we cook a mix of curries: Indian, Peranakan and Malay. But the best part about a multi-racial society is that we celebrate three times as many holidays!"



Getty; Dreamstime; Roger Norum

Red alert
The distinctive Dutch church in history-rich Melaka

'My favourite dish of all time - cheese-stuffed king prawns in coconut juice'



◀ Which it will. The island has always had a strong sense of community and civic awareness – people from vastly different ethnic and religious backgrounds have lived side by side here for several centuries.

Penang's immigrants have bequeathed something else of interest to current visitors: the best street food in Asia. The island is Malaysia's cuisine capital, and dining here is effectively like sitting down to a 100km-long Chinese, Indian and Malay buffet.

The next evening I caught up with Yannis Martineau, executive chef on the Orient Express train, who was taking a break from his routine of five-star fusionism to dig into some local grub. Yannis and I navigated the Northam Beach Café, where we sampled plates of stingray, squid, horseshoe crab and possibly my favourite dish of all time – cheese-stuffed king prawns cooked in coconut juice. "There's one word for all this food in English," I told Yannis, my mouth still full. "Yum."

A local woman sitting at our table chuckled, then whispered over to us: "Sounds like a Chinese word."

Jim fanatics

Back on the mainland, a train whisked me south to the rolling hills, strawberry fields and quiet tea plantations of the Cameron Highlands, a one-time British hill station with gorgeous vistas and temperatures that rarely rise above 20°C. The train moored in Ipoh, an old tin-mining town, from which it's a quick bus ride into the Highlands. Asia's heavy heat had caught me off-guard, but at around 1,500m, this was the perfect respite from the mugginess of the Malay lowlands.

British surveyor William Cameron was first sent here back in 1855 to explore the region by pachyderm, but the Highlands' most famous visitor arrived a century later: Jim Thompson, an American-born silk magnate and adventurer, who mysteriously disappeared on an Easter Sunday walk in 1967. On a woodlands walking tour that celebrates Thompson's memory, I learned of the legends that have arisen since his disappearance: Jim was kidnapped due to spy activities; Jim was mauled by a tiger; Jim fell into an animal trap; Jim eloped with a beautiful local girl; Jim ended up involved with Burmese drug lords. The mystery behind Thompson's disappearance

is still regularly debated in Thai and Malay national newspapers.

The next morning I awoke early to walk among the plantation fields at BOH, Malaysia's largest tea producer, where master tea taster Darrel Samaraweera was showing visitors how he does his job. "Spoon, slurp and spit," Darrel told us. "It's similar to wine tasting, except that you're looking for brightness and flashes of orange colour in the liquid."

Cameron Highlands tea is known for its light, brisk flavour – the result of organic soil and plentiful rain. Darrel had us spoon and slurp six different brews – why spit when it tastes so good? – each of which varied slightly in sharpness and savour.

The heat of the night

South of Tapah, the train passed through Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's gritty industrial capital and a place I hoped to avoid lingering in for too long. One schoolteacher I met on the train told me that by 2020, Malaysia hopes to become recognised as a 'developed' nation. But for visitors, Malaysia's most fascinating traits lie in diminutive, history-rich settlements such as coastal Melaka, south-east of KL and a short drive from Tampin railway station.

"This is quite possibly the world's most fascinating colonial enclave," exclaimed Donovan Casimir Louis, as we walked the boardwalk along the Melaka River, which cuts through the sleepy city's downtown. Born in Melaka of Dutch and Chinese

extraction, Donovan is now resident historian at the landmark Majestic Hotel. With all the aplomb of Michael Wood, he narrated the story of the city's founding in the 14th century by an exiled Sumatran prince, and of its later colonisation by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, who came for silk, nutmeg, cloves, gold and other goodies that passed through its cosmopolitan port.

We paused at the crimson Christ Church, a luminous anomaly in an otherwise

monochrome city, whose floor tiles were forged by the Dutch from the rock of looted Portuguese tombs. Today, half the city is Catholic due to the Portuguese influence.

Well after dark I strolled over to the weekend night market on Jonkers Street, Chinatown's main antique shop thoroughfare, where the city was just coming to life. A nighttime karaoke session for seniors had just kicked off at the local Hokkien Association. Just beyond, gaggles of visitors were haggling with vendors at stalls of keepsakes and knick-knacks: masks, swords, Chinese-made magic umbrellas (don't ask) and models of Portuguese war ships. And all around hawkers were frying up large woks of noodles and grilling satay kebabs on portable barbecues.

Sometime around midnight, I sat down to a plate of chicken *pong teh*, a curious mix of Malay viscosity and Chinese spice that tasted undeniably Peranakan – sweet and searing hot. This was the Asia I had longed to experience as I had sat and gazed out of all

those train windows: gritty, raw, beautiful and alive.

If you've the wherewithal and formal wear for a passage through Malaysia on the Orient Express, by all means do it – it will be the experience of a lifetime. Just make sure that upon disembarking, you have your butler carefully unload your bags from the pristine green-and-cream train and throw them onto the grotty, loud blue one waiting to depart just across the platform. That's the one holding a lifetime of experiences. ■



LOCAL VIEW

Khirien Kamarudin, naturalist

"The beach at Tanjung Rhu is Langkawi's least touristy, with soft sand that makes it great for sunset sports. And during low tide you can walk across to the islands – just keep an eye on the tide table or you might have to swim back."



Malaysia Footnotes

How to traverse Peninsular Malaysia by train and boat – plus where to stay, what it'll cost and some places you can't afford to miss

VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Kuala Lumpur
Population: 28.7 million
Languages: Bahasa Malaysia is the official language; English is widely spoken.
Time: GMT+8
International dialling code: +60
Visas: Not required by UK nationals
Money: Malaysian ringgit (RM), currently about RM4.95 to the UK£. ATMs are widely available. The US dollar is the easiest currency to change.

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

- Peak season.** Heavy rainfall in the south-west – beach lovers be warned.
- Rains begin on the west coast. The **hill resorts may drop to 10°C** at night.
- School holidays mean many local and Middle Eastern families flock to the budget and mid-priced seaside resorts.

Health & safety

No required vaccinations. Consult your GP for advice on **malaria prophylaxis** and use insect repellent.

Keep an eye on the political situation around the Thai border, which has seen recent unrest (visit www.fco.gov.uk).

Take out good travel insurance – visit www.wanderlustinsurance.co.uk.

Further reading & information

The Rough Guide to Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei (2009) and *Lonely Planet Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei* (2010) are equally comprehensive guides to the country, though the former is stronger when it comes to cultural information.
www.tourism.gov.my Tourism Malaysia

More online

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/120 for links to more content:

Archive articles

- Peninsular Malaysia drive** – issue 70, Mar 05
- Meeting the locals, Borneo** – issue 94, Mar 08
- India by rail** – issue 102, Mar 09
- South Thailand by rail** – issue 109, Feb 10



Planning guides

- Malaysia travel guide
- Asia travel guide

Getting there

Singapore Airways (0844 800 2380, www.singaporeair.com) flies direct from London Heathrow to Singapore, with onward flights to Bangkok. **Direct flights to Singapore take roughly 12 hours**; fares start from £657 return.

Jet Airways (0808 101 1199, www.jetairways.com) flies daily to Bangkok and Singapore from London via Delhi or Mumbai. Stopovers are permitted; if you wish to exit the airport you need an Indian visa.

Getting around

Peninsular Malaysia has two main rail lines that run north to south. The west coast line runs from Padang Besar on the Malaysia-Thailand border to Singapore. **Ferries connect mainland Malaysia with the islands** of Langkawi and Penang; the islands are themselves connected by ferry. All trains, ferries, buses (and necessary taxis when there was no other option) on Roger Norum's trip came to a total of £95. He travelled mostly by second-class. **For an incredibly comprehensive list of trains, times and prices around the world, go to www.seat61.com.**

Cost of travel

The author's seven-day trip, including accommodation, cost roughly **£600pp**, based on two sharing, with domestic but not international travel.

Accommodation

On Langkawi, **Bon Ton** (www.bontonresort.com.my) is a rustic gem. Villas start from RM490 (£99). In the Highlands, try the Cameron Highlands Resort (www.cameronhighlandsresort.com), with prices from US\$250 (£154). On Penang, **Straits Collection** (www.straitscollection.com) is funky and reasonable at RM420 (£85). In Melaka, The Majestic (www.majesticmalacca.com) features 24 great rooms from US\$250 (£154).

Food & drink

The staple dish of Malaysia is *nasi lemak*, coconut rice wrapped in a pandan or banana leaf. When deciding where to eat, **look for the stall with the longest queues of locals.** ■



MALAYSIA MUST-SEES

Six of the best on the west coast

1. Langkawi Cable Car

This gondola ferries passengers up to the 708m-high Gunung Machinchang conservation area, one of South-East Asia's oldest rock formations.

2. Georgetown

Penang's Unesco-protected capital is an ethnic melting pot like no other in Asia, making for captivating visits to temples, mosques and clan homes.

3. Taiping

The wettest town in Peninsular Malaysia is a good place to experience one of Asia's most tranquil urban parks, the Taiping Lake Gardens.

4. Kuala Kangsar

Kuala Kangsar maintains a strong Malay ethnic identity, evident in the golden-domed, Italian marble Ubudiah Mosque and the nearby royal mausoleum.

5. BOH Plantations

The lush hills of the Cameron Highlands are home to some of Asia's best-known tea fields. BOH offers tours of the harvest fields and manufacturing process.

6. Kuala Lumpur Craft Complex

This centre (on Conley Rd) holds an excellent museum, an artists' colony where you can try batik painting and a large boutique for picking up souvenirs.