

Charismatic CHOO-CHOO



**“Pardon me boy,
Is this the Chattanooga
Choo-Choo?”**

**“Track Twenty-Nine,
Can I give you a shine?”**

There’s something ineffably romantic about train travel. Not a dreary commute from suburbia to the city, but that handful of great train journeys that are on the bucket-list of every travel-lover, armchair or otherwise. The E&O Express is one of them, and it leaves from a station near you one Thursday morning soon. VERNE MAREE gets on board.

Track Twenty-nine

As the taxi draws up outside the Keppel Road railway station, two uniformed lackeys sprint out to wrestle our bags from us, and our driver’s eyes widen in appreciation. “Ah, you go E&O Express!” Yes, we’re finally doing it.

Nine years ago, I spent a couple of days as a lowly film extra on the set of a German made-for-TV movie whose plot included scenes on the E&O Express. Since then, I’ve yearned to actually go somewhere on this lovely machine. It was a box that had to be ticked.

Just a few days ago, the newspapers reported that the Singapore government was finalising negotiations with the Malaysian government to acquire the 1932-built FMRS (Federation of Malayan States) station at Keppel Road, and the railway line up to the Malaysian border.

The lofty concourse with its Art Deco architecture and original murals has a certain charm, but could certainly benefit from some Singaporean efficiency. The E&O Express is about to depart, and this is the time chosen by a desultory group of Malaysian cleaners to rope off most of the tiled concourse and slosh grey water across it.



Can I give you a shine?

In stark contrast is the efficiency of the E&O crew. Before you can say “Pardon me, boy”, we’re checked in and allocated a cabin, with seating arrangements confirmed for lunch and dinner.

It’s July and low season, so just 39 of us congregate for a few minutes in the air-conditioned waiting room before boarding commences. A friendly barman tells us later that the train carries a maximum of 132 guests in 66 carriages, and that the crew of 35 looking after us goes up to 50 when the train is full.

We can’t help gasping a bit at the dinkiness of our Superior Pullman cabin – the smallest of the three classes – but it’s

amazing how soon we adjust to its confines and begin to feel quite comfortable. Of course the attached bathroom is little, but the shower’s good, and there’s a basket of Bulgari toiletries, cunning storage spaces and lots of mirrors – important when it comes to glamming up for dinner.

Most of the crew is Thai, including “our” butler, Chayra, always available and summoned at the press of a button. Thai service is generally lovely, but the unmistakably Gallic tones of the chef in charge are extremely welcome. As it turns out, the service from all quarters is immaculate: discreet, professional, well-informed, friendly and warm.

Dinner in the diner

Before dinner comes lunch, of course. For this delicious three-course affair, we share a table with a Canadian couple, originally French. Jean-Michel and Monique are doing a side trip from Kuala Lumpur, where their daughter lives. They’re good company, despite sipping mineral water while we quaff wine.

Afterwards, we collapse in a dribbling and crumpled heap on our cabin seat, while they, no doubt, sit composed and upright, reading the *Annotated History of Malaysia*.

Once we’ve regained consciousness and spent a while watching through our picture window the jungle skimming



past, it's not long before Chayra arrives with a splendid high tea, complete with gleaming silver teapot. That it is surplus to actual requirements doesn't stop us demolishing the goodies.

Eight to the bar

The open observation car at the rear of the train is a popular spot for hanging out and watching the passing countryside. After a pre-dinner drink, we retire to the air-conditioned piano bar for another one, where a proficient ivory-tickler does his thing until the last guest retires – or so we hear.

The drinks list is in US dollars. Wine starts at \$8 a glass, Laurent Perrier champagne at \$14. Whatever you want is available

around the clock, but not until the train has crossed the border into Malaysia. We saw the barman breaking a red seal on the liquor cabinet at that important moment; it's not a Malaysian requirement, he told us, but a Singaporean one: it means the bar operates duty-free, keeping prices nice and low. And, we pointed out, keeping their profits nice and fat!

We chat to Keith and Jane, who are celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary. In line with the train's request, they've dressed up for the occasion in suit and tie and cocktail dress respectively. Most of the guests have made an effort, the exception being one casual chap whom I suspect of being a fellow-journalist.

Nothing could be finer

Of the three restaurant cars, just two are being used at present. Having had lunch in one, we dine in the other. Roy and I asked to have dinner at a table for two, and find ourselves in a dining-car with too many men. Never thought I'd use that phrase, but in truth, women are generally more festive company. Near us are two grumpy, ageing queens drinking water, and another man who studiously avoids eye contact. Never mind. We have each other's scintillating company and the meal is excellent.

While we were at dinner, the estimable Chayra has prepared our cabin for the night. A little ladder takes me to the top bunk,



where, for the most part, I sleep fairly well. It's not the rocking that disturbs me; I find it pleasantly soporific. It's when the train stops that I wake up. If you've been traumatised by spending a night on the allegedly "comfortable" Victoria Express from Vietnam's Hanoi to the hill area of Sapa, fear not: the E&O is infinitely more luxurious.

Not very far

After being served a good Continental breakfast in our cabin, we arrive at Butterworth station. Everyone piles off the train for a tour of old Georgetown, the capital of Penang; by coach, ferry and then tri-shaw. (More on this on page 265.)

Roy and I won't be returning to the train after the tour, as Penang is our destination; but the rest of the passengers will spend another night on board, arriving in Bangkok on Day Three after stopping at the River Kwai Bridge Station for a tour of this historic area. We're sorry to be missing that, but thrilled to have experienced even one night on the splendid E&O Express. **31**



For more information about this and other trips on the E&O Express, visit www.orient-express.com.

