

ISSUE 132

ELITE TRAVELER

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New Horizons

From Malaysia to Monaco, Ravello to Riyadh, it's time to think different





A vintage train with a white roof and dark green body is seen from a side-on perspective, moving along a gravel track. The train is surrounded by lush tropical vegetation, including large banana leaves in the foreground and dense greenery in the background. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The overall mood is nostalgic and serene.

THE GRAND TOUR

There's a decadence to luxury train travel that's hard to resist.
On Belmond's rich immersion into the Malaysian jungle,
Ellys Woodhouse experiences the charm of a bygone era

SHANE ARROLD/WATT HIND

There's no need to take the languorous, four-day trip up the Malay Peninsula from Singapore's Woodlands station to the border of Thailand and back. After all, a flight would take a couple of hours.

But that's the point: Sitting with a glass of champagne on the newly relaunched Belmond Eastern & Oriental (E&O) Express train as it pulls away from Singapore is a chance to linger in the moment and lean into the luxury of time. The train might be fast — at least, it can hit 60 mph or so — but the trip is slow, a chance to relish the journey as much as, if not more than, the destination. It's an experience that trades efficiency for indulgence.

It's also a timely reminder that slow travel of this kind is increasingly popular. Take slow safaris, which emphasize walking rather than speeding over the landscape in a 4x4: off-road walks at South Africa's Londolozi and Chem Chem in Tanzania, perhaps, or a 10-day hike up the mountain with Ultimate Kilimanjaro. The operator introduced these longer luxury itineraries, up to double the typical timeframe of the past, in response to guests' requests. Yacht charters are slowing down and extending, too. Historically, most might have booked a vessel for a week, but that default stint is now extending to two or more weeks. Indeed, 5% of clients of one brokerage in 2019 booked for more than a month, but that figure has tripled in Covid's wake. Travel agents have seen this shift, too. "Our pre-pandemic clients wanted to travel to multiple places in one trip, ticking off a lot of boxes and seeing as much as possible," says Catherine Heald of Remote Lands, which has particular expertise across Asia. "They now want to go deeper and truly immerse themselves into a destination to learn about the culture. We're seeing clients booking trips that are 20% longer."

Slower and longer are luxury travel's two mantras now, and that primes E&O's operation for success. There's been great fanfare around the relaunch of the train, arguably the most luxurious in Belmond's fleet. That includes the storied and beloved Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, which might ooze cachet but was designed without private bathrooms — less than ideal. It was Belmond founder James Sherwood who spotted the potential in a journey around southeast Asia, snapping up retro-looking trains that were actually secondhand and modern, built originally in Japan in the 1970s for journeys in New Zealand. In the wake of the pandemic-induced service suspension, the entire brand underwent a \$5m makeover. The trains were rebooted in the image of the Orient Express from the 1990s courtesy of the deep pockets of Belmond's corporate parent, LVMH, which snapped up the five-star hospitality company to broaden its experiential portfolio in 2018. (Corporate synergy explains why there's now a Dior spa on board.)

The new iteration of the E&O offers three categories of accommodation across its 15 carriages, for up to 64 passengers. The 10 compact Pullman Cabins — all burnt orange and warm red, and a very snug 62 sq ft — come with two bunk-style berths, one of which becomes a cushioned banquette during the day. State Cabins — there are 20 across the train — come dressed in rich peacock greens and blues, with twin beds and a little more room to exhale at 84 sq ft. For the most relaxing option, book the Presidential Suite. There are two of these on board, and



NICOLAS QUINIOU, STEFANIE MOSHAMMER



at 125 sq ft, they offer two twin beds, large en-suite bathroom, separate sitting area and well-stocked minibar (the caviar on arrival and Champagne on tap are appealing flourishes). Across the train, there is decent Wi-Fi, but be warned: No cabin has a television — the views out the window are distracting enough — and the furniture can feel less than substantial (not everyone will find the occasional jerky movement over decades-old tracks consistently restful).

When it was first launched in the 1990s, the Eastern & Oriental Express traced a different path: gliding north from Singapore, over one Malaysian border and crossing another, all the way to Bangkok. The post-pandemic iteration is deliberately different — more manageable and focused on quality rather than quantity. It runs mostly through Malaysia with one of two itineraries, each of them three nights long and seasonally adjusted. The Essence of Malaysia, the summertime route, connects Kuala Lumpur, Langkawi and Penang, sprinkling snorkeling, boat rides and picnics into the itinerary. The winter option that runs from March through October is called Wild Malaysia, and it's this itinerary I'm following. It heads north along the country's quieter eastern coast to the ancient rain forests of Taman Negara, then loops westward toward the island of Penang before returning to Singapore. Watching from the window, I see the train pass endless greenery, kampung villages, tin-roof towns and mirror-flat paddy fields — at least once I've passed through the concrete city of Johor Bahru.

It's hard to leave this jungle without seeing its most famous asset, yet few can hope to catch a glimpse of the Malayan tiger, the smallest of the big cat species

One undoubted highlight of this journey is Taman Negara. It's a huge swathe of lowland forest that's around twice the size of Singapore, and there are myriad options to explore its almost 1,700 square miles; the E&O team decants the passengers into Jeeps so that every experience is small-scale and intimate, even amid that vastness. Travelers can opt to experience that 130-million-year-old landscape any way they prefer, via jungle hikes, limestone caves or — my choice — a morning of slow, leafy wellness. As the Jeep trundles off deep into the forest, the dense, orderly lines of palm trees part to reveal a clearing turning off into a fruit orchard, where the yoga teacher is waiting to greet the small class. She leads a gentle vinyasa practice, set to a soundtrack of cicada calls and the cool jungle breeze drifting down from the towering caves above. The class concludes with sweet tea and freshly cut mango, as a troop of long-tailed macaques scale the limestone cliff face in the distance. Then, it's back into the Jeeps to head deeper into Taman Negara. The jungle thickens again, ready for hikers. Yet I'm primed for an alternative immersion: Beds have been set up above the rushing water of a nearby river, where instructors stand knee-deep in the stream with singing bowls, chimes and gongs, and hand everyone weighted masks for a meditation session like no other.

It's hard to leave this jungle without seeing its most famous asset, yet few can hope to catch a glimpse of the Malayan tiger, one of the smallest of the big cat species. It's still an impressive beast, though, with adult males reaching up to nine feet in length. It's also critically endangered: In the 1950s there were 3,000 of them, but by 2022, the World Wildlife Fund was able to confirm just 150 remained, thanks to the twin pressures of poaching and development.

The remaining Malayan tigers are skittish and elusive, but some locals are working to protect them. And E&O offers guests the chance to meet local activists whose mission is to safeguard and bolster that population.

The itinerary's northernmost point offers the chaotic, delicious urban hub of Penang Island and its artsy capital, George Town, reached by ferry. It's an area renowned for its food culture so, among the various excursions offered (including sightseeing on a tuk-tuk and an artist studio tour), I've resolved to roll up my sleeves and learn about that culture firsthand via a cooking class.

Penang, like much of Malaysia, is shaped by its cultural confluence. Founded by the British East India Company in the late 18th century, the island's strategic location on the Malacca Strait made it a crossroads, a legacy reflected today in its mix of Malay, Chinese and Indian communities. The dishes taught to my class reflect that melting pot: Deep-fried Pani Puri shells stuffed with masala potatoes nod to the Indian overlay, while the herb-spiked rice salad with a generous jolt of lime juice clearly derives from the paddy-filled countryside nearby. Belmond's culinary head for the train is appropriately eclectic, a chef whose own cooking style spans continents and culture: Taiwanese-born, Paris-trained André Chiang. The team works out of two restaurant cars on board, producing fine dining from closet-sized kitchens. One standout: a delicate noodle soup made with Malaysian black chicken, or *Ayam Cemani*. The name is no misnomer: the meat is entirely jet-black to the bone.

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There's also a Piano Bar, with throwback-ish entertainment like lounge singers, and an Observation Car that allows anyone to immerse themselves in the passing countryside, or enjoy a cigar. Even if you're not there to share a smoke, over three nights you'll end up in conversation with many of your fellow passengers. As the piano player bashed out the last song on the third night, I danced down the aisles with partners I hadn't known three days ago, arms linked, feet barely remembering the steps.

On my journey, I met a couple from England who had vowed to ride a train like this on their wedding night. That was 25 years ago, and they're relishing the chance to finally fulfil that promise and are already resolved to ride on every other Belmond train. It's easy to see why, and it's also a reminder that the E&O is arguably an outlier in the fleet. Belmond wasn't always planning to relaunch this train after the pandemic — general manager Valentin Waldman says that even at the start of 2023, there were no firm plans, but eventually the LVMH team agreed to that gut renovation. It's easy to understand the hesitation as there's an innate challenge to the operation that others among Belmond's train fleet don't face.

The E&O follows a route that can be gorgeous at times, but isn't anchored by any world-famous site in the way some of the other offerings are — Peru-based Hiram Bingham train, for example, is a compelling add-on to any Machu Picchu visit, while the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express ricochets between European capitals. Here the experience is sumptuous, but standalone. Still, the ability to disengage and recharge is arguably the most compelling aspect of this journey, beyond the superb food or chance to explore that vast national forest, with or without sighting a Malayan tiger. Perhaps the tantalizing opportunity to set eyes on one is a good reason to come back. **E**

