



Dining *à la*

E&O

For three days, **Maida C Pineda** experienced world-class meals onboard the *Eastern & Oriental Express*. She relives the delicious memories of her tastebuds

How far would you go for a good meal? More and more people are choosing their holidays with food on their minds. Travel has become the means to acquire the richer, better and more unforgettable food experience. Many travel to Spain just to dine at El Bulli, ranked four times as the world's best restaurant, to Italy to learn how to make fresh pasta from a contessa in her family kitchen, or even to partake in exotic delicacies like the deadly Japanese *fugu* (blowfish) or *balut*, a fertilised duck embryo devoured in the Philippines.

I was craving for that decadent dining experience like no other. My intention was not to travel to a place to eat, but rather to indulge in a food trip with view. That opportunity presented itself when I flew from Singapore to Bangkok – not for my fix of *Phad Thai* – but to go on the *Eastern & Oriental Express* (E&O) for a three-day/three-night train journey. My goal was to eat my way through a 2,030-kilometre peninsula, covering



Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. After all, travelling on the Orient-Express is about the journey, not the destination.

And that journey beginning from bustling Bangkok (at the time still not on the verge of civil protests) would take me through the sugar and rice fields of the Thai countryside, the mountains and rubber plantations of Malaysia and finally ending up in the urban canyons of Singapore. Passengers share this magical experience in 22 private carriages, two dining cars, a bar car, a saloon and an open-air observation car.

Dining on the E&O is a serious matter. It is an art form in a luxurious setting, evoking the romance and nostalgia of train travel of the yesteryears. Dinner time merits no less than a suit and tie for gentlemen and cocktail or evening dress for women. I came not just with a healthy appetite, but also my little black frocks and pearls.

Only minutes after departing from Bangkok's Hualampong train

station, the maître d' was already extending the invitation for those in the first seating to head for the restaurant cars. Guests were seated in tables of twos and fours. The Singapura dining car exuded elegance, aided in large part by the decorative lacquer panels inlaid with delicate Chinese flowers and velvety soft black chairs, while the Malaya dining car featured elm panels with light wood design inlays. These provided the perfect backdrop for the tables set with twinkling china, silver cutlery and crystals. While meals were certainly one of the highlights of the voyage, so was socialising with fellow passengers, which was, in fact, highly encouraged. The maître d' seated strangers together during the meals, with the awkwardness immediately replaced by warm smiles after the initial course. After all, nothing binds people more than breaking bread together.

On the first meal, I joined a top American hotelier and his two sons, aged 11 and nine. These young



passengers were attired in buttoned up collared shirts – a dollop of shiny gel on their locks – and on their best behaviour. Despite the set menu, the waiters still enquired if the dishes were acceptable to the diners. The Tiger Prawn Terrine and the Salmon Trout with Panfried Greens on Laksa Sauce with Avruga Eggs may have appealed to us, adults but not to the boys, who requested for more kid-friendly selections. The chef managed to serve them chicken nuggets, fries and a salad in minutes.

The dinner service usually has four courses, capped off with *petit fours* and coffee and tea. Meals on

Opposite page: Rolled Masala Chicken on Lemongrass Risotto; Above: Chef Yannis Martineau and his panfried seabass laksa and tea set up



A unique experience is having breakfast carefully matched to the scenery outside, or the indulgence of getting every single dish exactly the way you want it

the Orient-Express are meant to be savoured and consumed with a healthy portion of stimulating conversation. With all the passengers on the E&O usually being seasoned travellers from at least a dozen different countries, it becomes a never-ending opportunity to swap travel tales and tips, or even just share life stories.

Every meal attempts to outdo the last. But several stand out. The lunch on the second day was phenomenal.

After a scenic raft ride on the River Kwai, an emotional history lesson in the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre and remembering the prisoners-of-war in the Don Rak War cemetery, we had worked up an appetite. As the train windows were filled with picturesque views of Kanchanaburi, they brought out the Rolled Masala Chicken on Lemongrass Risotto, accompanied by Fragrant Siamese Yellow Curry Bouillion. The technique and plating was distinctly French, but the chef (who also happened to be French) successfully highlighted Thailand's manifold flavours. The coolness of basil on the chicken roulade impressively matched the bold yet refreshing

tangy lemongrass risotto. The dish was brilliantly conceptualised and executed to match the tropical panoramas rushing past. My table companions, a Scottish couple, couldn't help exclaiming over each mouthful. Apparently, this portion is a consistent favourite of E&O passengers.

With a sense of great timing, the chef planned for another of his notable creations to grace our last night. We can only describe the Wonton of Goose Liver in Truffle Bouillion with Crisp Fresh Fennel Salad as a most glorious burst of decadence. The seduction of the tongue by the delicate wonton skin, tender liver and rich sauce broken only by the unexpected crunch of fennel – what a sensation. Be warned – the memory lingers for days!

The E&O naturally attracts individuals who seek the finest things in life. On this trip, our exclusive band consisted of top hoteliers, world-class journalists, retirees, psychologists and businessmen, all demanding the highest food standards. And catering to their various gustatory

predilections was 36-year-old executive chef Yannis Martineau.

From little boys to the most senior passenger, Chef Yannis took them on, managing not only to satisfy their appetites but impress them with his attention to detail. The staff were especially well trained to address each guest's preference. A lady, who was highly allergic to wild mushrooms, always had her meals sans the fungi. The husband, who was not fond of sweets, received a platter of fine French cheeses for dessert.

I witnessed the most impeccable service during my last meal, which was the dinner from Penang to Singapore. My companions were a retired Singaporean couple and a German gentleman. The lady and her spouse chose the traditional Malaysian Fried Rice served with Nonya Curry and Grilled Satay, while the gentleman and I ordered the Medallion of Beef with Fricasse of Vegetables and Gnocchi in Fragrant Vindaloo Sauce.

Our female friend announced: "I'm going back to my Asian roots. I'm tired of western food." But when the waiter served my rosy beef, she

Above from left: breakfast in bed, madam?; Risotto of Asian Mushroom



was immediately filled with intense food envy and forgot her earlier preference. Without missing a beat, she asked the waiter to change her main course, and just as coolly, the waiter asked how she wanted it done. She then insisted we go ahead eating our food before it got cold. But it was not even five minutes and the object of her desire was presented to her. She ate her meal with gusto.

Chef Yann is responsible for this seamless orchestration. This Frenchman seems to be a perfect match for the job. He marries his European culinary experience with the traditions of Southeast Asia.

No stranger to impressing VIPs, he has worked in Paul Bocuse's Florida outpost and the prestigious restaurant of the French President's Councillors at L'Elysee, besides serving as sous chef at the legendary Venice Simplon-Orient-Express train and executive chef on the *Road to Mandalay* river cruiser in Myanmar before joining E&O in 2007. Fussy eaters are the least of his problems.

The biggest challenge for this talented artist from La Roche-sur-Yon in western France is preparing quality meals within the confines of two very narrow kitchen alleys of about 2sqm each, with a total of 12 kitchen staff including the dishwashers. Even the space in the freezer and refrigerators are extremely limited, forcing him to be obsessive about the purchasing, packing and preparing the food he brings on the train. He is meticulous about how the food is stacked, with ingredients arranged in the chronological order they will be used. He is notorious for taking photos of the food he sources from his suppliers, making sure they are exactly consistent in every single delivery.

While food is central to the Orient-Express experience, it is not limited to fine dining in the Singapura and Malaya cars. The eating can begin right in your own cosy compartment with breakfast in bed, delivered when you want it by your compartment attendant. Awakening to the scent of warm

bread and Danish pastries and freshly brewed coffee is how each glorious day should begin.

There is a gap of a few hours to digest the feast, before the first seating of lunch at 12.30pm. This is followed by ample time for a nap, a brief palm reading session by a Thai fortune-teller and a foot massage before afternoon tea. Then, you are again left at leisure to soak up the scenery and dress for the dinner service. Somewhere in between the lunch service and tea time, there is even a fruit presentation, introducing tropical treats like mangosteen, pomelos, bananas, guavas, rambutans, longans, dragon fruit, and a less potent version of the King of Fruits, durian chips.

On my last day, I rose to find the train nearing the Malaysian border. I lingered in my cosy bed, studying my breakfast tray. It would be difficult to surpass this unique experience of tasting concoctions carefully matched to the scenery outside, or being served every single dish exactly the way you want it, or how waiters catered to your every whim. I made sure to savour every bite of the buttery croissant as I joyfully poured the coffee from the silver carafe. One could so easily get used to being spoiled and pampered.

But dining on the E&O is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It is a special treat consumed and treasured, remaining etched forever in your memory, leaving you longing and craving for more. ■

From top left: Malaya dining car and gift shop onboard

Where does the Eastern & Oriental Express travel to and from?

The E&O operates between Singapore and Bangkok, passing through Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. There are additional departures on selected dates between Bangkok and Chiangmai.

How long does the journey take?

The journey between Singapore and Bangkok takes three days/two nights and the journey between Bangkok and Chiangmai takes two days/one night. Passengers may also join the train in Kuala Lumpur and Butterworth.

Does one have to take the full journey between Singapore and Bangkok?

No. The E&O also stops at Kuala Lumpur and Butterworth. One can travel from Kuala Lumpur to Bangkok, Singapore to Butterworth, Butterworth to Bangkok or any other combination.

For more details, visit www.orient-express.com