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Riding The Rails: Bangkok To Butterworth

By Cammy Wilson

The trainman's voice was agitated. "This is not third class, there is no third class on this train. This is second class." But "second class" was not the cozy, wooden compartment I'd pictured when I bought my ticket on the express train from Bangkok, Thailand to Butterworth, Malaysia, a journey of 24 hours. Yet here I was, the train about to leave, with my glancing about at the frayed, blue-plastic seats, the beans that had spilled from a parcel into the aisle and the dusty, once-red linoleum floor. And the car that I thought was third class was the one in which I'd be traveling.

I looked down at my ticket, written in Thai, the elaborate lettering indecipherable. Well, perhaps I was lucky to be on a train going in the right direction. This was the train to Butterworth, wasn't it? They won't check the tickets until we're miles out of the station. The Thai at the station office had nodded 'yes' when I asked if this were the express to Butterworth. But Thais go to elaborate lengths to avoid saying "no." He might have meant "Yes, this is not the train to Butterworth." A check with the young German seated across the aisle relieved my mind. It is the right train.

A westerner traveling in Asia --even through the streets of a city like Bangkok-- encounters the unexpected, and the inexplicable. The tenth time I take the #38 bus the driver may set out on a new route, turning left where he's always turned right. As a westerner with my own complex systems --goals, timetables, even maps to scale-- I am at a disadvantage in an operation where the arrangement bends to the moment. It's like entering a new magnetic field. The needle of my personal compass may gyrate madly, but no matter -- the compass points all have changed.

I kick off my sandals, like most of the other passengers, and pour myself two fingers of water from the bulky thermos I've brought. No chance of getting more sterile water on this train, but somewhere I was sure I'd find a beer and bottled soft drink concession. I noticed that we were moving, gaining quickly on the flame trees that line

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the boulevard near the station.

Soon we're passing people whose dwellings are built practically flush with the tracks and who use the rails like sitting rooms. Now and then children will move from one set of rails to the next, turning their feet and legs away as a train passes.

The car is crowded with young Europeans, clad in jeans and overalls and the colorful costumes of people who make the over-land trip across India. I wonder, are these teachers, vacationers, students? The derisive term "world travelers," used in Asia to describe "hippies," comes to mind. There are a few Thais and some Chinese. Luggage is stacked on racks. Other parcels tied with bright blue and pink plastic string, guitars and assorted food clog the aisles. Windows are all the way down, allowing maximum entry of air, insects and noise.

Houses gradually give way to banana trees and palms and vegetation so thick that, if the train slows, you expect a tendril or two to wind inside the window. Some of the banana trees are in bloom --the large, rosy-purple flowers soon to be the end of a banana stalk. It's sad to think that the plant will die after producing only one bunch. But even as this occurs, another tree will be half-way up its side, prepared to take its place.

An immigration official approaches, clad in a khaki uniform with a military hat and a series of multi-colored ribbons on his chest from previous train campaigns. A couple of seats away a young man, blond-haired, bearded and blue-T-shirted, hoists himself up slightly from his seat. He pulls the waist of his jeans out at a right angle and produces a thick, six-inch by six-inch leather pouch. He takes out his passport. I continue to stare as the thick pouch disappears again inside the low-cut jeans.

As the sun sinks in the sky, a light shower begins. Farmers are heading home from the fields. Boys follow mud-grey water buffalo along well worn paths. Men and women half run in quick, little rhythmic steps in time with the motion of bundles that sway at opposite ends of their shoulder poles. Day is done.

A few miles back I spotted a dark shape in a rice paddy, apparently bent from the waist as people will do when they work. I assumed that it was the figure of a woman. As we rocked closer, the shape became a water buffalo, its head down in the water, haunches forward. From a distance, you can't tell human from beast, and I suspect the fields probably work them about the same.

I think of the woman I interviewed once in Mississippi.

She was recalling the hardships of the 1930s. "I used to worry about the silliest things," she said. "We didn't have but nine dollars to our name. It was during the Depression and nobody had anything. You could (plant and harvest) a crop from \$30. We just had that nine dollars and I hid it in my bra. I'd be down in the field scared to death somebody would come and take it away from me. Of course, nobody ever bothered me." That's the way most of us worry. Before anything happens. I wonder if some Thai farmer has his 40 baht in his clothes, close to him so he can keep his hands and mind on it.

As we approach Ratchaburi, the sunset is as spectacular as any I have seen. Brilliant red sky with blue-black clouds fading into darker blue-black mountains that rise abruptly and peak sharply. In front of them stretch the rice paddies, the flooded water a running red mirror for the sunset. Here and there a single palm, small fronds at the top, stands surrounded by paddy, a dark and lonely interloper in an otherwise congruent scheme. Like us mortals.

The guy with the kangaroo pouch tucked against his groin has settled in for the evening. First he and his companion had dinner, cans of meat and V-8. Then they produced paper-backs, like New York City subway riders who hardly notice the passing people or scenes. She reads Atlas Shrugged, her hair long and dark, her big round eyes set in an Indian looking face.

"We're teachers," the guy says. "We're from British Columbia. We're the only people who can travel all summer." He holds And The Rain My Drink, a book about Malaysia, he says, by Han Suyin. It's hard to imagine Suyin, a veteran observer of Asia, traveling over the countryside with her eyes glued to the pages of a novel.

The two German guys seated opposite me have finally lapsed into silence or a pleasant stupor, their empty Kloster beer bottles on the floor next to their seats. Their loud voices had carried throughout most of the car so that all attempts at thought or conversation went on in spite of them.

There is an incongruous figure in the next car, which is mostly filled with longish-haired, youngish Australians and Europeans outfitted in everything from bib overalls to tight, purple-silk Indian pants and slippers. One plump, absolutely snow-white creature wears only his white boxer shorts and a matching T-shirt. In their midst sits an aged Chinese woman wearing purple trousers and a light blue top, a green jade bracelet on her arm. It is an altogether wonderful combination. She sits upright and stares straight ahead. Clearly she has standards to uphold. And

consorting with the riff-raff though she must, she will not be compromised. I can all but hear a few strains of the old hymn, "We shall not be moved...Just like a tree that's planted by the water. Oh, we shall not be moved." Only there it was the hard wooden benches and the enforced straight spines of bedrock American Christianity. There is a lot of slouching in this car, I see, and I don't think it's toward Bethlehem.

Shoes and sandals are stacked by the aisle or tucked under the seats and no one seems concerned at the direction in which his or her toes are pointing. Were we surrounded by Thais, who consider the foot the lowliest part of the body, we might all have our feet planted flat on the floor; pointing a toe in someone's direction, or worse, crossing your legs and waggling your foot in another's direction, is a grave insult.

At dusk, Chinese newspapers, their characters arranged in downward columns, sprout throughout the cars like rice shoots in newly planted paddy. A young, barefoot Chinese man looks up and smiles as I go down the aisle, then returns to his paper. I see no signs of "Colts Stamp Out Vikings," or "Rangers Down Bears." I wonder what the Chinese read. Without sports, to paraphrase William Faulkner, why do they read at all?

A young man, a Thai, enters the car holding his yellow tooth brush at arm's length. It carries a small swirl of white toothpaste, the perfect Crest or Colgate ad. I can hear the ditty --"You'll wonder where the yellow went when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent." Too; I wonder if advertising jingles are now part of the collective unconscious that Jung wrote about. What if the White Tornado and Mr. Clean are on their way to becoming archetypes?

At the end of the car is a latrine. This has three wash basins on one side and, on the other, two dirty toilets, each containing a seat and a small, dry basin. There is neither water nor soap nor towels nor toilet paper. To take a bath there is another train car that has a toilet-sized compartment. In it is a big, brown, golden-dragoned "klong" jar filled with water. A small dipper floats on the surface. You dip water from the jar and throw it over yourself until you feel clean. The water runs through a drain in the floor and splashes to the rails below.

It's nearly 8 o'clock and a train attendant comes by to make up the berths. You automatically get a berth, complete with clean sheets in a sealed plastic bag, a clean pillow case and a very large towel for cover. The pillow is dingy but once it's inside the pillow case, you hardly care. The lower berth I'm in has worn, green cur-

tains that slide along a metal bar. With the train window closed and the curtains drawn, the temperature soars. The young man across from me has stripped down to a skimpy black garment, possibly a pair of bathing trunks. He parades back and forth for what seems like an awfully long time before climbing into his bunk. I decide to read for a while with the curtains open to the oscillations of an overhead fan.

A fellow passenger appears in a quandary. A young, saffron-robed monk is assigned to the berth above me. It's taboo for Buddhist monks to as much as touch a woman's clothes; the prospect of sleeping above a woman -- even when four feet of empty space and a mattress intervene -- seems to cause discomfort. The monk chats with a group of other young men who occasionally laugh and nod in my direction. He leaves the car. About an hour later he returns hurriedly, bounds up the ladder and heaves himself in the bunk above me.

I get up once. Male caucasian feet dangle from an upper berth. From behind the curtains I hear what sounds like a loud kiss. Two guys in overalls deep in discussion block the aisle. The Chinese woman lies in her berth, curtains open, fully clothed, her back to the world.

It is early morning. With all the green curtains drawn down the length of the aisle, the car looks like the inside of an air evacuation plane. Outside, in single file, a dozen or so men quick-step along the rice paddy berms, long poles across each man's shoulders, bundles of rice shoots swinging from each end of a pole. A water buffalo, ankle deep in water, stands flicking her tail and slowly licking her calf, a study in contentedness. I wonder which could be enjoying it more, the calf being licked or the mother given the opportunity to do a little cleaning.

The dining car may be a third or even fourth-class restaurant but it has bunches of glorious purple orchids on each table, set in heavy bronze vases. Breakfast is a thin strip of boiled ham, two eggs that come sunnyside up regardless of how you order them, and warm slices of white bread with butter and a sprinkling of sugar. As a favorite Thai saying goes, "mai pen rai," or never mind. Coffee comes in a glass with milk and sugar. I ordered plain black coffee. I ask again for my coffee black, no cream, no sugar. The glass disappears; another arrives. This coffee has no cream but it does have sugar. The third try (and the second waiter) is a charm, and I get plain black coffee. Later, I ask for a refill and the coffee comes black with sugar. Mai pen rai. When I return to my car, the berth has been made out into seats again.

Beyond the dining car is an air-conditioned, first-class car. Doors the length of the aisle open onto a series of compartments that will seat two people. A sink in each

folds out from the wall and a train worker provides towels, soap and bottles of sterile water. At night the berths make up the same way as those in second class. Curtains draw over the windows and the doors lock.

The train makes several stops at stations along the way. Each offers a chance to sample the variety of food available from vendors who walk the platforms beneath the open windows: sliced pineapple or watermelon in plastic bags; chicken roasted on little wooden stakes, bags of cashews. The food rests on wide, round brightly colored trays that women balance on their heads, leaving their hands free to accept money and make change. Some peddlers sell rambutan, a popular red and green, furry fruit that tastes similar to litchi. One woman has fashioned her rambutan into bouquets, gathering the fruit into clusters as you might do with a bunch of daisies. The stems are all caught at the same length, a small piece of plastic tied around the bottom with four large leaves, plucked separately, making a star to cover the stems. This woman in the faded long skirt and top, plying the train route in the bowels of Asia, takes pride in her work.

At the Hat Yai station, a young woman is standing by a soft-drink concession cart on the platform. She scowls as she attacks an ice chunk on her cart. Chipping off ice, she fills large plastic cups, adding a colored straw to each. She sells Coke, Pepsi or Sprite for 3.5 baht or about 18 cents a cup.

A young woman, a "world traveler," approaches the cart. She's wearing a pair of loose cotton pants and a thin, voluminous white blouse, both Indian-made, and no bra. Her blond ringlets, once in a "natural," now sag in the 95-degree heat. To the Thais, who are quite proper, even a bit stodgy about dress, this oddly-dressed traveler must look like a freak or an apparition.

A teen-aged Thai walks toward the young woman and throws up his hands as he passes, feigning fear. The woman by the cola cart dissolves into laughter. The westerner gives them a puzzled look, smiles weakly and moves on. Other Thais along the platform giggle and nod back and forth as the young man continues on his way, the hero of the moment.

At the other side of Hat Yai, rubber plantations begin in earnest, the trees laid out in precise rows, each tree equi-distant from the next, each row the same distance from the neighboring one. Even the tree tops appear to grow to the same height.

After the rubber plantations come parched paddies plowed by oxen teams followed by darkly-browned,

sinewy men wearing turbans. This is southern Thailand, where Islam reigns, not Buddhism. It appears, too, from the looks of things, that it takes two oxen to do the work of one water buffalo.

The train lurches to a halt at Padang Besar. It is the border check point where we cross into Malaysia. Guidebooks warn that immigration authorities may "decide that you are a 'Suspected Hippie in Transit,' and put a stamp to this effect in your passport." Such a stamp may require the traveler to leave the country. After two blasts of the train whistle, we climb back aboard the train -- no one left behind at immigration. We are moving again.

Not even the rush of air through the open window can mitigate the mid-day heat. I doze, awakening finally to the sounds of people preparing to get off at Butterworth, the last stop. There, passengers destined for Penang will take a ferry to the island and those going to Kuala Lumpur or to Singapore will wait for another train. People look under the seats for their sandals, tuck their paper-backs into travel bags and pull back packs from the luggage racks.

The elderly Chinese woman in the blue and purple outfit seems to have packages everywhere. She speaks no English but motions at the platoon of young westerners in the car, each of whom apparently has tucked at least one package away for her. They pass little yellowed suitcases and dozens of oddly-shaped brown packages down the length of the car from one to another in bucket brigade style. Like the guest of honor at a reception, the elderly woman stands at the end of the line, receiving. She stacks the packages in a mound that spills into the aisle and rises slowly to a height three-quarters of the way to the ceiling. Has she been shopping in Thailand? Is she moving? Going to live with her children?

A few feet away, I am startled by the sight of the monk who'd slept above me the night before and who has just emerged from the restroom, no longer in monk's robes. Now he wears jeans and a bright yellow T-shirt. "Peter Chew's Aviation Dept.," it says. "We keep you flying." Is he a train detective? A non-traditional monk on a holiday? Someone hiding from the police?

Who can say? This is Asia, where America is the Far East and Europe is the West. Anything is possible, when you're traveling in second class.

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