

Roll through the jungle

Stella Martin has time to admire the scenery on a slow trip by train along Peninsular Malaysia.

I thought seven days on the Trans-Siberian Railway would cure me, especially when the trip was scheduled to take five. But here I am again, dragging my doubting husband on board a train for another long trip.

This time we are going on the track that cuts diagonally across Peninsular Malaysia: from Singapore in the south, to Kota Bharu in the north-east, near the border with Thailand. A plane trip would take just a couple of hours but we would miss so much, I tell him.

Finding the railway station in Singapore is our first challenge. It doesn't feature on city maps because this decaying relic of colonial days belongs not to Singapore but to neighbouring Malaysia.

Having opted for the slow train (the slightly faster "ekspres" travels at night) we are pleasantly surprised to find it has soft seats and air-conditioning. There are few passengers but this changes once we have crossed the causeway that joins Singapore to Malaysia. (Most people take the cheaper bus across the causeway to Johor Bahru.) The train fills up here and chugs off at a modest pace.

I have always loved trains. I love the way they allow you to look not at the manicured facades that are turned to the street, but at the backyards: the washing, the chooks, the sheds. Instead of the packaged product presented to tourists on bus tours, a

Worth the wait ... Gua Musang station. Inset: the stop at Tembeling.
Photos: Stella Martin
Map: Robert Parkinson

train journey allows an unrehearsed, unedited insight into a country.

After clean, modern Singapore, Johor looks rundown. Abandoned follies are abundant, concrete aspirations left unfinished in the wake of the Asian currency crisis. The tropical climate is hard on concrete and it's not a good look.

Fellow passengers reflect the racial mix of the peninsula: behind us a family of Indians converse in linguistically acrobatic Tamil; poised Malay women peer demurely out from under the tudongs that envelop their heads; in front of us a little Chinese girl, a china doll dressed in pink, plays peek-a-boo, hiding behind the hideous Barbie on her bag. She, and all the other children we encounter on the train, behave impeccably for hours on end.

Johor is a state of oil palms. These gloomy plantations stretch across the landscape harbouring little wildlife other than rats and cobras. In

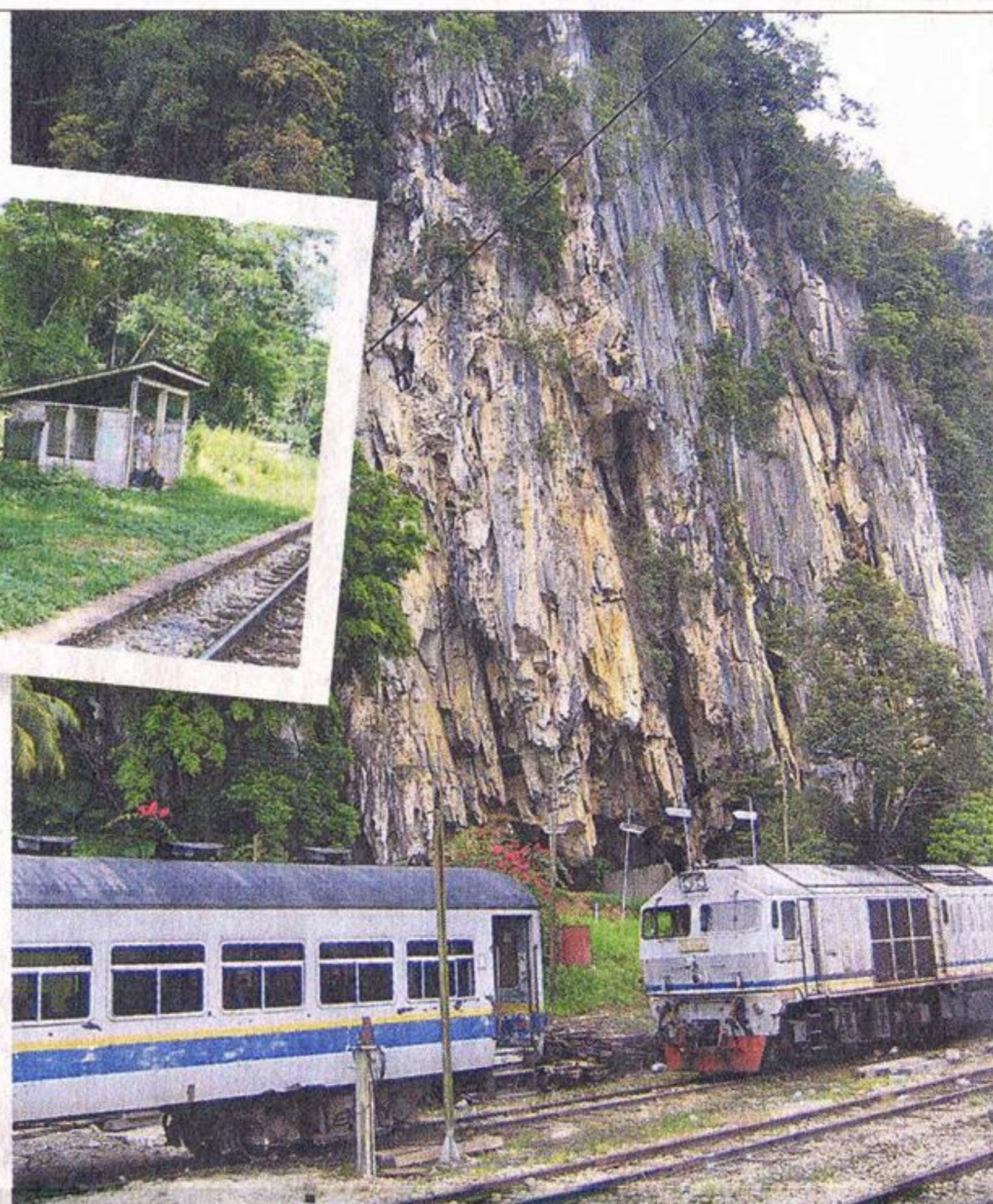
Willing hands reach down and haul us and our bags up from the tracks.

places, young palms sprout up between the skeletons of felled rubber trees, although we are told that this former mainstay of the economy is making a comeback as rising oil prices make synthetic rubber more expensive.

At Gemas we leave the main line to Kuala Lumpur and head off towards the heart of the country. Small towns, enlivened with garish Hindu temples and modest domed mosques, present us with flower beds and platforms. Occasionally the train imposes itself on this parallel universe: urgent, clanging sirens and lowered gates momentarily halting a swarm of motorbikes and then we pass and life continues.

It's late afternoon before we see signs of rainforest. At first just a few dead forest giants stand over the new, upstart oil palms. Then the forest becomes more dense. A hornbill glides across the sky and a group of monkeys is silhouetted against the sinking sun. Durians hang like enormous Christmas baubles from high branches.

We leave the train in Jerantut to take a boat up the mighty Tembeling River to Taman Negara, the national park that sits astride the mountains of the peninsula, an area of protected forest among the encroaching plantations. Four days later we come back to the rail tracks again. Rather than double back to Jerantut, we have decided to catch the mail train at Tembeling, a few kilometres from the Taman Negara boat jetty. Our taxi stops next to the tracks. Puzzled, we



look for the station but there is none: no platform, no ticket office, no waiting people. The taxi driver points to a concrete shelter next to the track, surrounded by banana plants and jungle. He helps us lug our bags along the tracks towards it.

The arrival time passes. Five, 10, 30, 40 minutes elapse. It is hot. We hear an engine. A young woman on a motorbike mounts the tracks, crosses and disappears. We hear chopping and she returns with a bunch of bananas. Then, as we privately wonder who will start the "how do we get out of this one?" discussion, the M92 suddenly looms out of the tunnel. It is approaching quickly. We wave and jump up and down. Squealing, clanking and shuddering, it grinds to a stop. Willing hands reach down and haul us and our bags up from the tracks and the romance of train travel overwhelms me once more.

The train chugs off into the forest tunnel and we rattle through a green landscape, skirting the national park through the mountainous centre of Malaysia. We ask the ticket collector why the train was late. "Yes, late," he replies. Then as an afterthought he tells us it was waiting for another train. With single tracks, from time to time each must wait for the one coming in the opposite direction to arrive at a station before continuing. One problem and the entire network of Malaysian trains is affected.

This train has no air-conditioning. It's midday and stiflingly hot. Some windows will open and others not. We stop in Kuala Lipis, waiting for the opposite train. Which is also late. The temperature rises. We are sweltering and start to doze in the soporific heat. I marvel at the Malay women surrounding us; most wear long, polyester skirts and shirts with tudongs swathed around their heads yet they retain their calm poise, appearing not to sweat at all.

Suddenly at Kubang Rusa, the landscape erupts. Great jutting crags of limestone appear, vertebrae in the backbone that runs right up the peninsula, eventually expressing itself in the spectacular scenery of Phang Na, near Phuket, in Thailand.

Rather than complete our journey in the dark, we leave the train at Gua

Destination Malaysia by train

GETTING THERE

We started from Singapore railway station, Keppel Road, Tanjong Pagar. The LT (Lambaian Timur) 58 leaves Singapore each morning at 6, arriving at Wakaf Bahru (also spelled Bharu), the stop for Kota Bharu, at 8.17pm. If you want to stop en route, you can also catch various mail trains; see www.ktmb.com.my.

The overnight express train (Ekspres Timuran) leaves Singapore at 6.15pm, arriving Wakaf Bahru at 8.42am the next morning.

WHAT IT COSTS

Train travel in Malaysia is very cheap. The LT58 costs RM30 (\$10) for an economy seat and RM41 for a superior seat from Singapore to Wakaf Bahru. Seats on the express train cost RM32 and RM41 and berths RM49 and 54 (upper or lower). Express trains can be booked on the internet, but not the LT58 or mail trains. We bought our tickets in Singapore the day before. But it is much cheaper to buy tickets in Malaysia.

Musang. Overshadowed by an enormous limestone crag, this utilitarian town has, to our surprise, a three-star hotel with an intriguing name: the Fully Inn. It is a hotel with pretensions in a town with none. Even the porter eventually asks us, with a puzzled air, why we are there; we seem to be the only guests.

At 5am the next day we trudge back to the station in pitch darkness. When planning to complete the trip in daylight, I hadn't taken into account a tardy rising sun, but Malaysian railways is on our side. The train has been delayed by two hours. Dawn breaks just before it arrives. Forest gives way to oil palms and rubber plantations, then to houses and roads and we are in Kota Bharu. I'm glad to get off. That's enough of trains for now.

Ten minutes later, we are in a traffic jam. Suddenly the single track, leading off into the forest, has renewed appeal. I still have the train bug.

