

# The South East Asia rail adventure that costs just £76

Train journeys aren't the preserve of older, slower travellers – families can explore the world by train too, and it needn't cost a fortune

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'We decided to take an adventurous rail journey through Malaysia to instil a touch of excitement into this year's summer holiday'

As we crossed the causeway from central [Singapore](#) to Johor Bahru Sentral station at the southern tip of peninsular Malaysia, it started to rain. Hard. In hot, humid [Asia](#), rain isn't unusual, but our week in Singapore had been completely dry, so it was hard not to take it as a bad omen.

A direct train from Singapore to [Malaysia](#) no longer exists, and with two kids, one husband and seven bags in tow, a taxi seemed like the easiest way to avoid meltdowns before we'd begun.

We decided to take an adventurous rail journey through Malaysia to instil a touch of excitement into this year's summer holiday. My mum is from Singapore, ethnically Chinese, and grew up in

Sabah, one of the Malaysian states; so I have a strong connection to the region and wanted to introduce my daughters to their heritage.

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Plus, our route up the west coast of the country took in some of Malaysia's greatest hits and Unesco world heritage sites: Kuala Lumpur (KL), Ipoh, the Cameron Highlands, Penang and Langkawi.



The Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur is one of South East Asia's great cities Credit: Getty

We hoped our 10- and three-year-old would appreciate the destinations a little more having seen the distance travelled at ground level, but my Singaporean family was bemused: “You know, I’ve always flown to KL,” remarked my aunt at dinner the night before we left.

By the end of the week we were seasoned train pros and handled our luggage with aplomb, but that first evening it was all new. We held up the check-in gate, rushed to the platform afraid the

train would depart early, and triple-checked the destination with the train staff. But the kids were excited, prepped with snacks, and lots of activities, plus iPads – just in case.

The first night's leg was four hours long and we overnighted in the small town of Gemas before setting off again at 8am for the 2.5 hour train on to KL. Lush green jungle accompanied us the whole way. We arrived in KL mid-morning and checked into the Majestic Hotel. It's a colonial icon, and the kids were in heaven rolling on their enormous beds before we set out to explore. We managed a taste of The Islamic Arts Museum and the city's Lake Gardens just behind the hotel before the kids demanded pool time.



The Majestic Hotel: a colonial icon

Our second day brought more rain (luckily tropical rainstorms are far warmer than European ones). So we subjected ourselves to a soggy trudge around Merdeka (Independence) Square, seeing the old cricket pitch of the Royal Selangor Club, and the grand old Sultan Abdul Samad Building (now government offices) before sheltering in an excellent public library and then the National Textiles Museum, wincing as we discovered loincloths made from tree bark.

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The following morning we crossed the road from The Majestic to KL's original station for our northward journey to Ipoh. It's a marvellous building, but appears deserted as most travellers use KL Sentral, five minutes down the track. "It's like a ghost station," my eldest whispered to me, eyes wide.



Waiting for the train at Kuala Lumpur railway station

We prepped for a 2.5 hour journey, but it took three (the only delay on our whole trip) and our driver fielded worried calls from our hotel, Cameron Highlands Resort, as we slowly climbed the mountains, gasping at the views. Even the children were suitably impressed when we arrived at the verandah-ed Resort and were shown to our suite, though it was nothing compared to their excitement at the karaoke room. We managed to drag them away long enough to walk to a strawberry farm, for which the area is famous, alongside tea plantations, both gifts from British rule.



Writer Clio Wood and family enjoying a strawberry juice in the Cameron Highlands

The next morning, a cool start (how novel) awaited us as we rolled down the hill again to Ipoh station for the onward journey to Butterworth in the state of Penang.

Butterworth station connects directly to the ferry terminal for Georgetown on Penang Island via a footbridge, which we traversed slowly dragging our huge suitcases. We had plenty of time to recover in the huge queue for ferry tickets, whilst the kids got increasingly hot and sweaty in the muggy breeze. They found equilibrium on the 10 minute crossing, eating a hurriedly-purchased hawker stall lunch of nasi lemak.

Over the water, we arrived at the grand dame of colonial stays – the Eastern and Oriental Hotel. This landmark, built by the Sarkies brothers (of Raffles Hotel fame) has been around since 1885 in various guises, and you can even see one of the original hand-cranked lifts on display in the lobby.



The ferry crossing from Butterworth to Georgetown takes around 10 minutes Credit: alamy

The main entrance features an echo dome, amusing our daughters very much, less so our fellow guests, I suspected. Luckily they were easily distracted by a walk out to Fort Cornwallis (built by the East India Company but never used in combat), touring Georgetown's famous shophouses and famed street-food scene, and the two hotel pools which overlook the sea for flamingo pink sunsets.

Our final leg from Penang to Langkawi (level with the Thailand/Malaysia border) was a 20 minute hop by air, as the ferry between the two islands no longer operates. We wound along roads with families of monkeys hanging out on the verge to reach The Datai, our final stop.

The Datai has a glorious setting on a pristine beach in the middle of rainforest. We slept to the sound of jungle creatures, and one morning I watched in amusement as a monkey made off with a jar of cookies from the lobby bar. The welcome was faultless and our daughters easily made friends with other kids in the pool and at Movie Night in the Nature Centre, right on the beach. We were all enraptured by butterflies, lizards, monkeys, hornbills and stingless bees – you don't get those in London.



The Datoi hotel on Langkawi island was the family's last stop

During our rail voyage, we experienced rainforest flora and fauna, the breadth of Malaysia's history, big cities, glorious hills and warm, clear seas. And it's cost-effective: our four trains for all four people up the entire west coast cost £76 in total. A deep dive into the vivid delights of South East Asia – and all for less than the cost of a summer flight to Europe.

## Essentials

Clio Wood was a guest of [The Majestic Kuala Lumpur](#) (two interconnecting Deluxe Rooms from £170, including breakfast); [Cameron Highlands Resort](#) (two-bedroom suite from £244, including breakfast); [Eastern and Oriental Hotel](#) (Studio Suite from £135, including breakfast); and The [Datoi Langkawi](#) (Canopy Deluxe rooms from £475, including breakfast).

[Singapore Airlines](#) and [British Airways](#) fly direct from London to Singapore from £500 return.

Trains can be booked directly on [KTM](#)'s website, though be sure to do this when bookings open 30 days before travel.

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## Five other great rail journeys for children

### Glenfinnan (aka Harry Potter) Viaduct, Scotland

Sure, you can get The Jacobite steam train version from Fort William to Mallaig, where you'll be ensconced in period carriages for the full coal and sound effects experience. But it takes six hours (pretending you're a wizard can only entertain little ones for so long) and costs £65 return per adult and £36 per child. The canny might opt for the 1 hour 22 minute commuter train instead (£17 per adult), which takes the same route, and you won't mind nearly so much if they spend half of it looking at a screen.

*Fort William to Mallaig via Glenfinnan; buy tickets at [thetrainline.com](http://thetrainline.com)*



The Jacobite steam train costs £65 return per adult and £36 per child Credit: Moment RF

## Metro Line 14, Paris, France

If your kids have been inspired by this summer's Paris 2024 Olympics, then a trip to the French capital might be in order. Start by taking the Eurostar or bring the car on the Channel Tunnel to cross La Manche (both quite mind-boggling concepts for kids) and once in Paris make sure to add the city's Metro Line 14 to your agenda. It's super fast and driverless, which means you get to sit right at the front next to a full length and width window, pelting through the darkness to the futuristic stations. Never mind pretending to be a train driver, this is the closest thing to a roller coaster you'll get outside a theme park.

*Buy tickets at stations; more info at [ratp.fr](https://www.ratp.fr)*

## Bernina Express, Switzerland

It's a toss up between The Glacier Express and the Bernina Express for the most scenic Alpine train line, but the Bernina wins out for trips with families for its shorter length, cheaper price and less snotty fellow passengers, for when the kids kick off or get bored of the stunning views. It runs for most of its journey from Chur in Switzerland and Tirano in Italy via the highest railway pass in Europe at 2,253m above sea level. The route also includes the Brusio Spiral viaduct to cope with the steep inclines – if that doesn't impress the kids, hopefully the panoramic carriage windows will.

*Buy tickets at [rhb.ch](https://www.rhb.ch)*



The Bernina Express is cheaper than counterpart The Glacier Express Credit: Switzerland Tourism

## Colombo to Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka

More mountains, but in a warmer climate. The climb from Columbo up to Nuwara Eliya, an old colonial hill station, through Sri Lanka's tea plantations is easily the best train journey in the country. This train route features British style stations and signal boxes (which will amuse the kids) alongside new, mainly Chinese-built, trains: a melding of cultures and geographies symbolic of power shifts in the region.

*Buy tickets at [seatreservation.railway.gov.lk](https://seatreservation.railway.gov.lk)*

## Tren Maya, Mexico

South and Central America are largely devoid of decent trains, but Tren Maya is a new company launched in 2023 with an expanding route network. Board at Playa del Carmen and travel across the states of Yucatan and Campeche to Palenque in Chiapas, for the Mayan city of the same name (a Unesco World Heritage site). The area around Palenque also has several stunning waterfall sites.

*Buy tickets at [trenmaya.gob.mx](https://trenmaya.gob.mx)*

