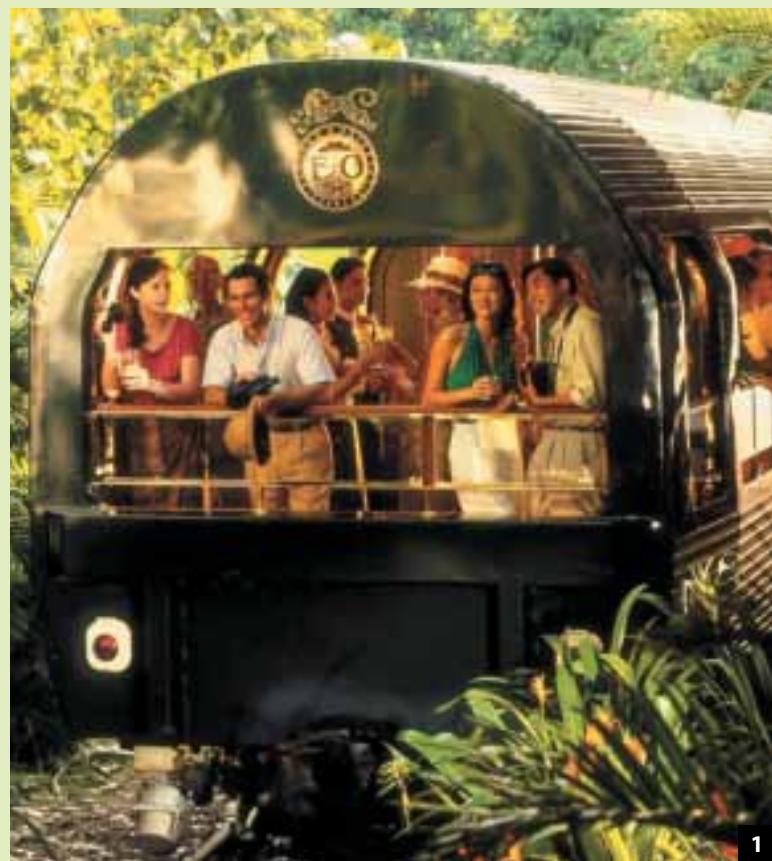




TAKE THE 'A' TRAIN

Vicki Williams climbs aboard the world-famous Eastern & Oriental Express to experience a traditional, tailor-made incentive charter with a difference



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Incentives often involve travel, whether it be a nearby post-meeting excursion or an extended trip that rewards those whose targets have been met. Increasingly companies are seeking out something a little unusual, especially if incentive trips are regular. Employees are less likely to be motivated if each year the company arranges the same old thing. Customisation these days is key.

According to Ulf Buchert, senior train manager, Eastern & Oriental (E&O) Express, the desire to provide its employees with a unique, luxury, customised incentive trip, is the reason that two Australian companies chose to charter an entire train. The trips, taking place in June, will see one train playing host to a group of 35, and the other 65 people.

TO KEEP THE AMBIENCE, DRESSING FOR DINNER IS A PREREQUISITE

Two common charter options – suitable both as an incentive or for corporate entertainment – are a six-hour hire, or taking the train for a longer trip, such as the popular Classic journey which is a two-night/three-day trip from Singapore to Bangkok. The latter option is what one of the Australian companies has opted for; the other is making a journey from Singapore to Hua Hin in Thailand.

A JOLLY JAUNT

The six-hour hire provides a moving location with a difference for a dine-out incentive, departing from either Singapore or Bangkok and returning to the same departure point. Time on board can be about enjoying the "olden days" ambience, when train travel was glamorous. Dressing up is encouraged and for dinner, a prerequisite. The evening could start with a pre-dinner cocktail in the bar car or a glass of champagne in the observation car, with its outdoor area providing uninterrupted views of the verdant passing scenery. Fine dining takes place in one of the elegant dining cars, with a multi-course gourmet meal prepared by French chef de cuisine Yannis Martineau, whose signature is European with an Asian twist. You finish with a post-dinner tipple in the bar car and entertainment from the talented Peter on piano – who takes requests and encourages guests to join him in a duet or solo performance.

Buchert says: "Alternatively you can work with an E&O consultant on creating a themed evening." For example, the ever-popular murder mystery sees guests provided with an advance invitation detailing the character they will assume. This allows them to source the appropriate outfits before the evening. Another is to pick up on eras past, again asking the guests to dress for the occasion. A current hot pick is the Roaring 20s, thanks in part to the release this year of the latest film version of *The Great Gatsby*.

RIDING THE MALAY PENINSULA

The Singapore-Bangkok trip begins with check-in at Raffles Singapore. The historic hotel is a great complement, sharing the same sense of timeless luxury as the train. Check in early to take advantage of the 30 per cent dining discount voucher given to all E&O guests for use in one of the hotel's many restaurants. Guests are also given coffee, tea and cookies, and one Singapore Sling (invented at the hotel).

ANDREA FILIPPI EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WORLDWIDE SALES ORIENT-EXPRESS HOTELS

"In recent years, we've placed a lot of emphasis onto the meeting and incentive market. We want to stay true to what we can do. We know that we're not a company that can organise a major conference but we realised that we're very good at throwing memorable parties. You might not host an executive meeting on board a train, but it's an excellent space for a think tank or an incentive.

"Once you charter a train, you own it. It's a very unique proposition because, unlike a hotel or an airplane, travelling in this manner is viewed as a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We treat every guest as a brand new passenger because, even if they're a repeat customer, it's unlikely they'll have taken the same train or the same route.

"We really want to be the first company that meeting planners think of when they want something with real 'wow' factor."

On board, their personal compartment is the first thing guests experience, and it sets the tone for what's to come. The space is defined by wood inlays, hand-cut marquetry, hand-tufted carpets, Bulgari bath products and is serviced by a highly professional, dedicated steward on call 24 hours.

What comes next is determined by the customised programme of onboard and off-train entertainment and excursions. Onboard entertainment may include a Thai dance performance, local musicians, fortune tellers, astrologers, foot reflexology sessions, jazz singers or string quartets. Off-train excursions are guided to ensure guests get the most out of the experience, with popular choices being a tour of inner city Georgetown in Penang, a Unesco World Heritage Site; a food tour of Penang; the historic bridge on the River Kwai and river cruise; and the Cameron Highlands, for either a pampering session at the famed Spa Village, or a walk through fragrant tea gardens.

Buchert says: "There are so many personalised choices we can provide, even such things as fireworks, sunset cocktails off-board, beach breakfasts, guest speakers, and the company's corporate logo on the train can be arranged."

The passing and constantly changing scenery is a complementary – and complimentary – highlight of the journey that can prove to be extremely relaxing, naturally de-stressing and provides opportunities for some stunning photos. Buchert says: "A journey on Asia's only luxury heritage train is to travel in style, it is truly a unique travel experience, made more so as we work closely with each client to put together a programme that suits them." ■

SAMPLE CUSTOMISED CHARTER ITINERARY

DAY 1

- Guests depart Hua Lamphong Station
- Lunch on board
- Arrive Ayutthaya for excursion
- Afternoon Tea in compartment
- Dinner on board

DAY 2

- Continental Breakfast served in compartment
- Arrive Vientiane, Thanaleng Station – Welcome performance
- Full-day tour in Vientiane, with lunch
- Afternoon Tea in compartment
- Dinner on board

DAY 3

- Continental Breakfast in compartment
- Arrive Pak Chong Station to Visit Khao Yai National Park
- Lunch on board
- Arrive Bangkok



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1. The train can be hired for a short, six-hour dinner experience
2. Longer excursions allow for visits to other destinations
3. Onboard there are a number of additional incentive options alongside just enjoying the travel

STARTING COSTS

Six-hour trip (up to 70 persons): S\$40,000 (US\$32,400), cost increases if more than 70, includes food but not drinks.

Singapore-Bangkok trip (up to 100 persons): US\$170,000. Included in the cost is the train charter, accommodation, meals, some onboard entertainment and off-train excursions; drinks extra (complimentary tea, coffee and water).

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