

Training season

Multigenerational trips are on the rise, but how easy is it to keep grandad, mum and son happy on a rail trip to remember? **Phoebe Smith** finds out

“Like being in a Pink Floyd music video.” That was how my 75-year-old dad described lying in the middle of Singapore’s Gardens by the Bay, watching as the high-tech ‘Supertrees’ flashed with petals of twinkling lights beneath the evening sky.

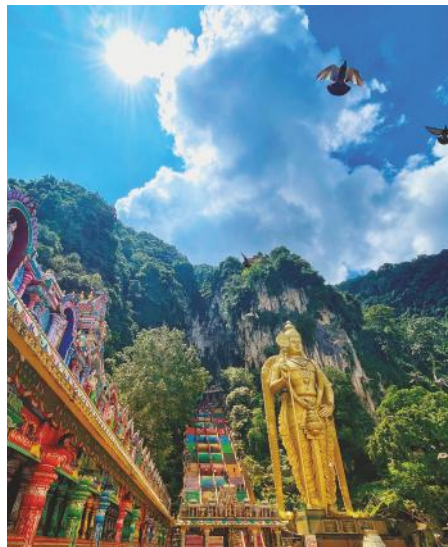
“No, like a helter-skelter,” countered my three-year-old. I smiled. To me, with the rousing music and neon colours, it was more akin to being immersed in the

Sonic the Hedgehog game I used to play on the Sega Mega Drive console as a kid.

My son was born during lockdown, when my dad had to keep away from us due to his age and health – so this trip to southeast Asia was about us getting to know each other again and to give my son time to bond with his grandad. Inspired by the reintroduction of Belmond’s Eastern & Oriental Express and the proliferation of trade-friendly rail programmes ➤

DESTINATIONS

FAMILY HOLIDAYS | SOUTHEAST ASIA



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Batu Caves, all Malaysia; writer Phoebe Smith and family
PREVIOUS PAGE: Gardens by the Bay, Singapore PICTURES: Shutterstock/Awan Media, RSChan, Peter G Unger; Four Seasons; Belmond/Ludovic Balay

across the continent, we would travel from Singapore to Bangkok by train, together.

After a couple of days exploring Singapore's myriad districts, hawker centres and elegant architecture – exemplified by the gold-topped Sultan Mosque and colonial-era Raffles hotel – we headed north to reach Johor Bahru in Malaysia, where we would board our first train. Dad couldn't hide his nerves, particularly when we passed by street food stalls selling unfamiliar, stinky durian and bright green pandan-based snacks, but once we got on board our second-class, air-conditioned cabin, complete with Wi-Fi and reclining seats, he relaxed into it, remarking how it was "better than the trains at home".

MALAYSIAN MEANDER

Over the eight hours and two trains it took to reach Kuala Lumpur, we dozed, strolled up and down and sat in the dining car watching the verdant Malay jungle pass by. "Multigen travel has always been popular in Asia," said Blaise Montandon, general manager of Four Seasons Kuala Lumpur, when we checked in that evening. "I think it has become more popular [with Europeans] because people were separated for huge lengths of time, and now they are realising that we have much to learn by spending time together. It keeps the

“Multigen travel has become more popular [since the pandemic] and people are realising that we have much to learn by spending time together

older guests young and teaches the kids good values.”

We certainly did spend time together, visiting Batu Caves with its colourful Hindu temples, Kwai Chai Hong district with its huge murals depicting scenes of old Kuala Lumpur and had afternoon tea at the Banyan Tree, where we watched a thunderstorm roll in. Later, when Dad was tired and my son was in bed, I was free to have a drink and explore the city without the worry of organising a babysitter (a key perk of multigen holidays).

TROPICAL FUN

However, multigen travel is not without compromise. While I wanted to explore the tea plantations and walking trails above Ipoh in the Cameron Highlands, I instead had to go to The Lost World (a water and theme park) to placate my son. Dad and I were reluctantly ➤

THE EASTERN & ORIENTAL EXPRESS



Belmond – the luxury rail company known for operating the renowned Venice Simplon-Orient-Express between Paris and Venice – also operates in Asia, with the gorgeous Eastern & Oriental Express. It restarted in 2024, offering two seasonal journeys between Singapore and Malaysia.

On board, clients can expect old-world glamour, with teak-panelled interiors competing with countless views of banana plantations by the tracks. The dining car serves up scrumptious Malay cuisine cooked by Michelin-lauded chefs. Clients will also adore the train's spa treatment room offering the first Dior Spa in southeast Asia.

Book it: Abercrombie & Kent offers a five-night trip from £6,995 per person, based on two sharing. Includes a two-night stay in Singapore, followed by a three-night Essence of Malaysia journey on the Eastern & Oriental Express. Includes breakfast, named excursions, transfers and flights.
abercrombiekent.co.uk



DESTINATIONS

FAMILY HOLIDAYS | SOUTHEAST ASIA



ABOVE: Scenic rail route through Perlis in Malaysia PICTURES: Shutterstock/Huzairi Halim

resigned to it at first, but ended up having a great time on the waterslides amid limestone karsts – and even managed to take turns having dips in the hot springs.

We boarded the spacious train to Alor Setar (from where we'd catch the ferry to the island of Langkawi) as a trio of seasoned commuters. On the tropical island, I'd splurged on a family beach villa at the Four Seasons, where my dad could enjoy the private plunge pool while my toddler and I joined a naturalist-led boat trip to the Unesco-listed Kilim GeoPark to see wild monkeys and eagles.

THAI TIMES

Our final segment of public transport came after Langkawi, when a cab took us to Padang Besar, on the Thai border, to board the sleeper train to Bangkok – a 15-hour ride. "I haven't been on a sleeper train for about 50 years," said Dad as we were shown to our ultra-wide seats. We collectively watched in glee as the guard made his way along the aisle an hour later, transforming each seat into a spacious bunk bed. Having been swayed to sleep, my dad and son disembarked in Bangkok sporting huge grins, feeling like proper adventurers.

For our final stop at the Four Seasons next to the Chao Praya River, we opted for

“Dad said: ‘What I’ve loved, apart from the sights and the trains, is that I’ve got to know you better [thanks to] this holiday’

separate rooms to give my dad a night to himself. “That was a huge holiday,” said my son as we once more lay on our backs – this time on the hotel sunloungers watching the sky turn a dusky pink.

“We’re the same family, but we each bring something different,” said Dad, laughing.

“What I have loved the most, apart from the sights and the trains, is that I’ve got to know you both better. I don’t think we would have got to this stage had it not been for this holiday.” **TW**

BOOK IT

Wendy Wu Tours sells a private 17-night Singapore to Bangkok by rail tour from £6,595 per adult and £3,925 per child. Includes breakfast and some lunches, excursions and flights in November. wendywutours.co.uk



MULTIGEN TRIPS IN ASIA



Gary King
head of trade sales,
Wendy Wu Tours

“For travel agents, multigenerational travel presents a significant growth opportunity, especially when selling destinations like Asia, which can seem daunting due to its vastness and logistical challenges. Specialist touring offers a fully inclusive experience that allows agents to reassure their clients that every aspect of the journey is meticulously handled, making it the perfect fit for families.”



Farzana Dobbs
founder, Travel Gallery

“Sri Lanka is the perfect multigenerational destination, offering something for everyone. From unforgettable wildlife safaris and surfing to cultural experiences and iconic train journeys, families can bond over diverse adventures. With family-friendly boutique hotels and easy travel access, it’s a safe, affordable and fun option for families of all ages.”



Rebecca Barry
South Korea senior product executive,
InsideAsia Tours

“Travel is not always about the destination, but the journey itself. In Korea, most of our journeys are done by train and the high-speed KTX. The experience ticks all age group interests – kids love them, and adults appreciate them when they work as intended. Train travel, instead of being in a ‘tourist bubble’ [as with] cruise or coach travel, also shows a slice of local life.”