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Myanmar's Vintage Trains Rattle & Bounce Nationwide

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Train travel in Myanmar is a throwback to a virtually forgotten time.

Photo by Edward I. Placidi

Clickety-clack, clickety-clack...the repeating sound of metal on metal from the turning wheels moving down the track was a constant that didn't let up throughout the trip except when slowing to a stop at a station. And that was the smoothest part of the train journey.

Train travel in [Myanmar](#) is a throwback to a virtually forgotten time. The vintage cars, tracks and stations largely date from the colonial days of the British Raj.

[Trains](#) are slower than buses and scheduling and conditions are a toss of the coin: the overhead fans stopped spinning decades ago and the heat is unlikely to work; seats may not recline and be locked straight up; cars may not have windows; one car may be clean, another not so; departure times are unreliable and a trip taking seven hours one day may take 10 the next. But for many

travelers this is the joy of journeying by iron horse in Myanmar – even when the clickety-clack is accompanied by bouncing, lurching and jarring.

The antiquated system, constructed in the 19th-century by the British, is unable to absorb shock. The cars rattle, rock and bounce, at times launching you out of your seat a foot into the air. There's never a dull moment on Myanmar trains – starting with the involved, but charming, process to just buy your ticket.

Searching for an open window to purchase my ticket in the train station of the town of Bogo, I was directed to a doorway by a pointing young man. I entered what turned out to be the Stationmaster's office. The chief asked where I was going – in halting English – and gestured for me to sit down. I spent the next 30 minutes sitting opposite the Stationmaster at his desk watching him call out orders, make calls on a phone that he had to crank to operate and track gauges from the 19th century. At one point he put down the phone and announced to me that my train was on the way. An assistant then took my passport and disappeared. He returned 10 minutes later with my ticket – which cost 75 cents in Upper Class for a three-hour trip. A couple of minutes before the train arrived in the station, I was escorted from the Stationmaster's office to the track; probably no where in the world will a traveler enjoy such service and attention, especially considering that the fare was under a buck.

Ordinary Class is usually very crowded with simple wooden seats, but if you want to brave it you can travel cross-country for a few dollars. Some trains have First Class cars where the wooden seats have cushioned bottoms. Then there's Upper Class with large, comfortable (though faded and often threadbare), reclining (if you're lucky and the mechanism works) seats. At one time, Upper Class must have been considered quite luxurious, cooled by overhead fans that stopped whirring decades ago. On longer routes, there are also Sleeper Cars and Special Sleeper Cars with cabins with a private toilet.

Vagaries and the bouncy voyage aside, train travel was relatively comfortable and enjoyable. I melted into the old seats, which were topped with clean white cotton slipcovers, watched rice paddies and bullock carts slip by through open windows that air conditioned the ride, exchanged smiles with friendly fellow passengers (but not a one spoke a word of English unfortunately), and bought tangerines and cooked quail eggs from the polite food vendors that flowed through the cars at each stop.

At one point, I closed my eyes and imagined its heyday when they were new luxury trains rolling smoothly down newly laid track, filled with British officers, colonial administrators, businessmen and their wives sipping tea and chatting as they voyaged to Pyin Oo Lwin hill station where they encamped for the summer to escape the searing heat below.

Today there is a new reality that looks beyond the faded glory. Myanmar was bequeathed a national train system that, though it may have its challenges, provides the people an affordable and viable transportation network. And for visitors, riding the rails in Myanmar is to experience a delightful slice of life in this impoverished but gentle, welcoming and engaging land.

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