

COMMENT

The ETS, a refreshing change

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TICKET TO RIDE: Barring some teething problems, the train is fairly pleasant

FOR someone who grew up riding the train at the start and end of each school holidays, I find the inter-city electric train service (ETS) introduced a few months ago by KTM Berhad a great big leap in rail travel in the country. What joy. With the train touching 143kph — and absolutely no worry about AES speed traps — it has cut travel time by half.

• Still in its inception stage, the double-tracking system is bringing to an

during peak periods, tickets were oversold, resulting in some passengers having to stand along the aisles all through.

The ETS, as I discovered, was refreshing. The coaches, fully air-conditioned, were bright and clean, the reclining seats fairly comfortable and there were power toilets like the ones in a plane. Passengers were only allowed on the platform following a public announcement to board, like in airports, very much the practice in many other countries which normally have huge boards displaying arrival and departure times.

Another great stride was the time schedule set to the precise minute. For instance, the departure from Sungai Petani was fixed at 5.14pm. This was a new world with a Shinkansen-feel about it, although that was as far as it went because delays somehow crept in, as seen from my departure from Sungai Petani that day, when the train only turned up more than 10 minutes later and finally arrived at KL Sentral 35 minutes late. So, what good do impeccable timings like 1714hrs or 1403hrs really do?

Much of the delays had to do with the train slowing down or stopping altogether to wait for “signal clear-



An ETS train arriving at the Sungai Petani station in Kedah. The train from KL Sentral makes only nine stops before reaching Sungai Petani.

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end the dawdling clanks of old train rides when delays were the norm and manual signals were the order of the day. The ETS is available for travel between Kuala Lumpur and Padang Besar and in my quest to find out how much had changed after more than 45 years, I booked a return ride to Sungai Petani recently and the fare was RM37 one way (senior citizens' rate). Except for one or two hiccups and the relentless loud chatter in the coach, the journey was pleasant.

It brought a deep sense of nostalgia as I began to recall my seven-year stay at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, when going back home to Alor Star for the holidays meant nothing else but taking the train. Those days, the trains were powered by steam locomotives and it was only later that diesel trains came by. They were slow, dusty, bumpy and noisy. Seats were not numbered and

“ance”. There was too much of this in the journey, which caused the speed to be erratic and that puzzled me. I thought the whole purpose of a double-tracking system was to synchronise trips and do away with the “waiting time” when one train has to allow another to pass.

The National Rail in the United Kingdom, for instance, has 10 to 15 trips departing a London station in one hour, and the trips are smooth without these kinds of pit stops.

But unlike the old days, the ETS only stopped at nine stations before it reached Sungai Petani — Tanjung Malim, Tapah Road, Kampar, Ipoh, Kuala Kangsar, Taiping, Parit Buntar, Bukit Mertajam and Butterworth — halting for hardly two minutes at each. Which was wonderful. The only thing I missed was the clutter and noise of platform activities of the old days — the hawkers shrieking *kacang putih*, *karipap* and *kopi O*. I felt

it the most for understandably nostalgic reasons when the train stopped at Kuala Kangsar and Taiping.

Talking about food on the train, the cafes on board, termed buffet cars, used to serve excellent food prepared by old-fashioned Hainanese cooks. The *mee hailam*, thick black coffee and *roti bakar* would put modern-day *kopitiam*s to shame. Those days are gone. On the ETS they serve overpriced sandwiches and pre-packed noodles in the crowded buffet cars.

Some sentimental pieces of the past, mostly linked to the small stations along the track, have become history. The smell, sound and sight emanating from the wooden stations in the all familiar brown and yellow colours are no more. Taking over are frigid metallic and plastic structures jutting overhead.

These stations appear less friendly

for sure. At Sungai Petani for instance, the facilities are grossly inadequate. Perhaps it is teething problems, but there was no cafe or proper signboard. There is a passenger waiting area but it wasn't utilised. So, intending passengers have to wait in the small, dimly-lit foyer until they were allowed on the platform after an announcement.

There is no toilet in the foyer but there is one on the platform, so if someone has to go before the platform opens, he has to ask permission from the guard who, at that time, also appeared unfriendly.

Hopefully, there will come a day when the frequency of the ETS is increased to one every half hour, like in the UK. The demand is there. Other than that, the ETS is pleasant. And that's a start.

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