

In Yangon, a Railway Runs Through It

Yangon's Circular Railway transports **Wahyuni Kamah** on a journey across the city's thoroughly Buddhist train line

Yangon Central Railway Station is situated in the downtown of Myanmar's former capital, Yangon. The city's largest railway station wasn't crowded when I arrived on a recent sunny morning; the parking lot sat empty.

Paint on the station's exterior appeared faded and cracking, but belied its beautiful Burmese architecture below. This indigenous style is distinctive for its traditional tiered roofs and was designed by U Tin, a prominent Burmese engineer.

As soon as I entered the vast station, I approached a uniformed man and asked about the Circular Train.

"Up to platform seven," he said, pointing upstairs. This ride, I am told, offers a "real" picture of the city and its life.

I went upstairs to the bridge that connects one platform to another. The whole station looks very antique to me, like Jakarta's Manggarai of yesteryear.

On the bridge, there are numbers written in both Burmese and Latin script identifying the platform. When I reached the last gate, number 7, I went downstairs.

The platform looks old fashioned, but clean; the announcement board for the train schedule is a digital screen with the Burmese alphabet.

Oh, goodness, everything is written in Burmese!

The man at the ticket counter spoke enough English for me to buy a ticket.

In fact, to my surprise, he asked me to come behind the ticket office counter, where he explained the train's route, schedule and option for an air-conditioned train.

I ended up buying the non-AC train ticket for just 200 kyatt (20 US cents) that would entitle me to ride the circular train for as long as it runs.

Outside, the station's atmosphere seemed to bring me back into a simpler time. The rhythm of life was slow and very relaxing. Many here still stick to their traditional lifeways. Many men and women, young and old alike, wear



The Yangon Circular Railway evokes scenes that may be likened to a Jakarta gone by, and is a cheap way to explore the city as well as an authentic way to encounter the lives of Yangon and its people. JG Photos/Wahyuni Kamah

sarongs as their everyday outfit.

In contrast to Jakarta, cigarette smoke on the station platform was a non-issue; nobody smoked. Instead, they chew betel leaf.

Men and women of all ages also wear *thanaka*, a yellowish-white cosmetic paste made from ground tree bark, on their cheeks — some even go so far as to wear it as a full-on mask.

Being traditional doesn't mean that they are not touched by modern technology. Gadgets such as mobile phones are increasingly common.

Still, though, it's easier to pierce people's tech bubble here; Burmese people are friendly and easy to chat with them despite of the language barrier.

Populated by around six million people, the city's lower income residents depend on the double-track, 45.9-kilometer Circular Railway, which connects Yangon's suburban and metropolitan areas, to get around. As soon as the passengers got

off the train, I could see some of them carry big baskets and packs. The train not only transports people but commodities.

A diesel engine and four passenger cars connect the looped rail line's 39 stations. The windows in all the cars have no glass.

The officer in the ticket booth usually put all foreigners in the same wagon.

To get a full view of Yangon Circular Railway, I got a seat by the window of a car that I shared with both tourists and locals.

I was excited when the train embarked to glimpse metropolitan and suburban Yangon.

In fact, the picture is not so different from what I see in Jakarta, although some scenes have changed in the greater Jakarta railway network.

From my perch, I saw people drying their laundry on the railway. Most stations where the train stops are clean; only some of them have names written in

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Latin script.

Some stations provide an extra amenity: earthen drinking water containers, along with the plastic cups for any thirsty passengers.

Life in Yangon's urban areas is very humble. The housing stock is a mix of working class apartment buildings and the occasional luxury high-rise.

As traditional market is my interest, I left the train after 21 stations at Danyingon, a traditional marketplace — plucked down in the middle of a train station.

During the day, the platform was changed into a "wet market" where vendors, mostly women, offer up their vegetables and fish to shoppers and passengers.

After having not seen any women smoking until that point in my trip, I noticed a number of Danyingon's ladies hawking their goods and puffing away.

All the vegetables they sold I could name in my native language, since they are similar to what I find in traditional markets in Indonesia.

And they all looked fresh. The train's schedule appeared ingrained in the rhythms of this market's life, as vendors seem comfortable put their vegetables right on the rail track and conducting business there.

The station is also a place to eat and drink. It is, in fact, the place to find the original, local food.

As Danyingon is a big market, I only wandered its areas near the station. Navigating back to where I originally departed was as simple as hopping on the next train. A complete loop of train travel without stopping by takes about three hours.

Taking this circular train did, as promised, offer a complete picture of Yangon.

Not only is it a cheap way to explore the city but also authentic way to encounter the lives of Yangon and its people.

London Gallery Switches Out Old Master for Chinese Copy

Alice Ritchie

Visitors at Dulwich Picture Gallery peer at the Old Masters on the walls, trying to spot the \$120 Chinese replica hung among paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and Gainsborough on Tuesday.

"I think it's that one. It's just looking so pristine," said Ian Mortimer, a 60-year-old from northwest England, pointing at a portrait from 1820 by English painter James Lonsdale.

In an audacious move, the London gallery has replaced one of the 270 paintings in its permanent collection with a work knocked up in a few weeks in a studio in southern China. Hung among a world-class collection that also includes paintings by Van Dyck, Constable and Canaletto, the goal is to make people re-examine the artworks around them.

"It suddenly raises everything to doubt, they have to look around and look at every single picture properly," said Xavier Bray, curator of the Dulwich Picture Gallery.

"When you look at an Old Masters painting you've got the varnishes, you've got the brushwork, you've got the type of canvas that was used, the cracking of the paint. This is a Chinese replica that was made in 2014, so it is pretty obvious when you find it. What's fascinating is to see it in the museum context."

After Mortimer recorded his choice on the gallery's iPad, his wife Sue took her turn, picking a portrait of a woman the other side of the room, mainly "because I loathe it."

The 59-year-old praised the concept, said: "As soon as you hang something in an art gallery, you presume it's good. I should be able to say what I think is good."

But she mused: "If nobody gets it at all, what does that say about what we are



Artist Doug Fishbone launched his project 'Made in China' on Tuesday. AFP Photo/Ben Stansall

looking at?"

Not everyone was so enthusiastic. "It's impossible," said one regular to the gallery who asked not to be named, and looked rather downbeat at the prospect of having to choose.

"The project is going to destabilise how you feel when you look at a piece of art," acknowledged Doug Fishbone, the American artist who came up with the idea.

He said his intention was not to fool people but to strip away the certainty that something is worthwhile just because it is in a gilded frame and in an art gallery.

"I'm hoping that it will throw down the gauntlet a bit in terms of giving them a challenge," Fishbone said, adding that he also hoped it would be fun.

The idea of replicating the work of top painters is nothing new. In the time of Rubens, "if you want a copy of his beautiful Venus and Mars, you would just contact his studio ... and order one," Bray noted. "What we're doing here is just showing that the practice has moved to China."

Millions of replicas are produced every year in China for a global and also domestic market, focused around the studios and workshops in the southern village of Dafen.

The Dulwich replica was ordered from Meisheng Oil Painting Manufacture in Xiamen, in Fujian province.

The gallery e-mailed a JPEG of its chosen picture, paid \$126 including shipping via PayPal, and received the rolled-up replica within three weeks by courier.

Both Fishbone and Bray praised the replica's quality, but insist there really is no comparison, as the public will be able to judge when they show side by side.

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