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# Electrifying ride!

KTM is no longer chugging on the tracks. The Electric Train Service (ETS) has arrived. PHILIP LIM takes a ride to see what the fuss is all about

**I**T used to be about four hours or more on the KTM in the old days. Then a couple of years ago, the rail time dropped to three hours from Kuala Lumpur to Ipoh.

Lo and behold, it is now two hours from KL to Ipoh (give or take few minutes) with nine stops in between. Not bad, considering it takes about two hours to drive along the North-South Highway from the Damansara toll plaza to the Simpang Pulai toll plaza, that is, if you don't drive like a madman.

## Simple math

The ETS began on Aug 12. For six months from the starting date, the promotional fare is RM30.

For us penny pinchers, the road toll from KL to Ipoh is RM26. If you factor in the cost of petrol (depending on the make and model of your car), it can add up to anything from RM70 to RM100. If you can squeeze five people into your car, then it makes financial sense but as far as the ETS is concerned, it is all about comfort, speed and convenience.

There's talk that when the promotion period is over, the ETS fare per person will shoot up to RM45. In my opinion, the rate should stay at RM30 to ensure continued success. Malaysians have very efficient calculators in their heads. The moment they feel the train fare is "unreasonable", the express buses will enjoy a business revival.

Right now, with the intermittent trans-state bus crashes, passengers are a bit wary, with good reason too. Of course, there are other trains that take an hour longer to reach its destinations than the ETS but their fares are much lower too.

At the end of the day, it is all about service to the common people and the nation. You don't have to hedge your bets. Any organisation that has the interest of the people at heart will prosper in the end.

## Minus chicken and goats!

Anyway, the electric train I was on left KL at 2pm on the dot. Not bad. There was a time when even the train conductor wasn't so sure about the departure time. They used to work with estimates back then. At a top speed of 147kph, the ETS is astoundingly fast compared to the other slow coaches along the railway grid. It almost gave me a compulsive desire to laugh at the slow mules we passed along the way.

Since it is only three months since the ETS began, the coaches marked with alphabets A to E looked sparkling on the outside and were outstandingly clean in the interior. The chairs were comfortable and spacious, with plenty of leg room.

No, there were no chickens and goats onboard. You probably got it mixed up with some other Discovery channel travel programme.

Cabin temperature was much like that in a cinema. In other words, you can take a snooze if you get tired of looking at the endless kilometres of rubber and oil palm estates and jungle foliage.

## Snacks on board

Luckily for me and my son, who is an unregistered train spotter, the food lounge was just a short distance away but it's no longer run by Hainanese folk from the days of yore.

Uniformed ETS employees were arranging trays of nasi lemak, fried bihun, chicken floss buns, sandwiches and cans of beverages when I walked in.

Directly opposite the food counter were wide glass panelled windows, offering a magnificent view of the landscape beyond the tracks.

Like most train passengers who have experienced the Senandung Malam or the Ekspres Sinaran Petang, I quickly grabbed a seat vacated by a young fellow.

Two minutes later, a hot cup of Milo and a chicken floss bun were placed before me. It brought back memories of watching old kampung scenes of a young Malaysia, and an even younger me.

Even though the menu is not as classy as that of a five-star hotel or onboard the Airbus, the snacks are sufficient to fill the belly and while away the time.

For me, it was a defining moment on the rail. A great distance had flashed past and I felt quite proud that our beloved railway has finally crossed over to the age of the bullet train.

The ETS may not be as fast as a speeding bullet but it will do for now.

Much has changed in the network of railway tracks from Kangar, Perlis to Johor Baru. The ETS is a much welcomed change that was a long time coming. But it has finally arrived.

## Right on time

The electric train I was on during the recent Deepavali holiday was almost full as it made pit stops at Rawang, Tanjung Malim, Behrang, Slim River, Sungkai, Tapah, Kampar and Batu Gajah.

It was such a quick ride that it felt almost like taking a bus to town. There was a TV in each coach screening cartoons and bits of upcoming movies.

Useful information like the display of the changing speed of the train and the time, was shown on the TV as we sped towards Ipoh. Before we knew it, the train came to a halt at the grand Ipoh railway station at 4.17pm, as it said it would over at KL Sentral. I was terribly impressed.

For the first time in my entire life on board the KTM, a train had arrived on the dot. Not a minute more, not a minute less. Bravo, KTM ETS!

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A tray of snack food on sale at the food lounge



The food lounge on the ETS is very popular among passengers



Passengers boarding the electric train bound for Ipoh at KL Sentral