





## A Ride to Remember

Thailand's "Death Railway" tells an unforgiving story from the pages of history.

By Kevin Revolinski

Mountains and river valleys, picturesque waterfalls and caves, elephant rides and monkey shows – Kanchanaburi Province, just northwest of Bangkok, has plenty to offer visitors. But its most famous attraction is a train ride across a dark page in the history book.

The Thailand-Burma Railway is more infamously known as the Death Railway. It originally ran 258 miles (415 km) from Bangkok to Burma. During World War II, the Japanese Empire needed to run supplies to support its troops in Burma, and so the merciless construction program began.





The Japanese had already been eyeing this idea in 1939 and the engineers had estimated it to be a five-year project. Work began in June 1942 and was completed October 17, 1943 – a mere 16 months. By luring thousands of Asian workers with bogus “dream-job” offers and often simply rounding up village men as far away as what is now Indonesia, the Japanese were able to put together a massive workforce. The Thailand-Burma Railway Centre, located next to the Kanchanaburi War Cemetery, gives an estimate of 240,000 conscripted laborers including Malays, Tamils, Chinese and Burmese, sometimes with their bewildered families in tow. Their stories often go untold as they were poor and illiterate. But the more than 60,000 prisoners of war who were similarly used as slave labor preserved the horrors of the story.





The terrain was unforgiving. The heat and humidity of the jungle were lethal. More than 600 high bridges and numerous cuts through solid rock had to be undertaken. Everything was done by backbreaking physical labor, and yet there was no rest for the workers. In many cases they would work 14 hours straight with only a short break for sleep. Food was limited to meager rations of white rice. Dysentery was arguably the norm, and cholera epidemics were frequent. Malaria and beriberi as well as starvation and pure exhaustion also took a toll on laborers. The POWs at least had some doctors in their midst who could attempt to tend to the sick and injured. But the brutality of the Japanese and Korean guards and engineers was intense, especially toward the end when expectations from the military superiors pushed them to finish the project on time. Beatings even unto death were common. By the time the railway was completed, more than 13,000 POWs had died. Geneva Convention rules compelled the Japanese to keep documentation of the movements and fates of these prisoners, but records for Asian workers were scarce. The best estimate is that close to 100,000 met their deaths here.

Kanchanaburi's JEATH War Museum – which takes its name from Japan, England, Australia/America, Thailand and Holland, the nations most commonly associated with the railway's construction – is set up like one of the work camps with a couple of watchtowers and bamboo and thatch quarters. Photographs, texts and a series of sketches and paintings inside reveal the shocking conditions for the workers and the brutality of the Japanese soldiers toward those who disobeyed or simply no longer had the strength to continue working. Inside the bamboo hall is a long shelf that would have functioned as the sleeping surface. There were no proper toilets and the unsanitary conditions led to the outbreaks of cholera. Near the exit is a surprising bronze statue commemorating a former Japanese soldier who had served on the Death Railway project. After the war Takashi Nagase was part of a grave-searching project and was so affected that he became a Buddhist monk and started a peace foundation.



Two local war cemeteries lie in the city of Kanchanaburi where visitors come to pay their respects. The largest holds the remains of around 7,000 men. But a visit to this historical site is not complete without a ride on the rails.

Starting from Nam Tok station, north of Kanchanaburi, one can see how difficult the construction would have been even without the harsh working conditions. The line passes along rocky cliffs at many points on tall trestles. The current train passes over the longest of them, Wampo Viaduct, which winds high above the Kwae Noi River. Today's riders dangle out the windows with their cameras and look more than 100 feet down to where workers had to begin raising wood beams up the cliff face.

*Seabourn Spirit* visits Thailand on voyages departing December 20, 2008, and January 3, 17, 31\*, February 14 and March 16, 2009.  
*Seabourn Pride* visits Thailand on voyages departing December 5 and 19, 2009.

\*JANUARY 31, 2009,  
 SPECIAL PRESIDENT'S CRUISE,  
 HONG KONG TO SINGAPORE  
 This cruise includes a special President's Event in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, on the rooftop patio of Saigon's Rex Hotel, scene of the infamous "Five o'clock Follies" U.S. press conferences during the Vietnam War.



Rock outcroppings and mountains had to be cut through by hand as well. The shadows of the suffering men cast on the rock walls gave the ominous nickname Hellfire Pass to what was officially known as the Konyu Cutting. Here, men worked through the night by the light of torches, wielding sledge hammers and large chisels. Dozens were beaten to death during construction of the pass; in total, 700 men died during the three-month effort. The rails no longer pass through here, but it makes for a good day of hiking and there is another museum nearby dedicated to the site.

The railway is perhaps best known for Bridge 277, made famous by the novel and subsequent film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. There were actually two bridges crossing what was originally the Mae Khlong River (it is now Kwae Yai, or "Big Tributary"). One was built of wood; the other was constructed with steel segments brought by the Japanese from a bridge in Java. Today, a remnant of the wooden bridge rests on the river bank within the World War II Museum (which also

bears the name JEATH Museum). Not far away is the steel bridge with much of its original material and repairs done by the Japanese after the war. For visitors who don't want to take the longer ride along the railway, a small tourist train crosses Bridge 277 frequently throughout the day. But the long lead up, passing over the dizzying views of the Wampo Viaduct and a couple of rocky passes, gives a better idea of the enormity of this project.

In the movie story of the bridge, commandoes blow it up. In reality, however, this never happened. Most of the prisoners were sent on to Japan after the railway's completion. In June 1945, American B-24s destroyed the steel bridge, but the wooden structure was made operational soon after to continue the Japanese war effort.

Peace has long since returned to the land and there are many alluring natural attractions that bring visitors to Kanchanaburi. But the railway's combination of human brutality and human endurance creates a story that shouldn't be missed or forgotten.

## Elephant Trekking

Elephants have long been a part of Thai culture. Their role has ranged from common labor to royal and spiritual significance. The King of Thailand himself traditionally keeps a rare, white elephant. Around 400 elephants were used during the construction of the Death Railway. Even today these gentle giants are employed to haul wood from the jungle. In Kanchanaburi, travelers are able to see these magnificent creatures up close – very close!

Elephant trekking is a popular activity that takes tourists on a ride in a specially made saddle atop a well-trained pachyderm. Riders get a tour of the jungle (where elephants still live in the wild) and have a chance to feed the animals. In some cases, travelers ride into the water with the elephants as they have a bath. The cool water is a relief from the tropical heat for both the rider and the elephant.

–K.R.

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