The Train to Nowhere

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THIS picture was not taken in India, nor was it taken in Indonesia or anywhere in Africa. It was actually taken in Ecuador, South America.

My wife and I boarded the train in a little place known as Alausi, high on the Andes. Earlier, we had made a round trip to the upper Amazon Basin to see how the Amazonian tropical rainforest differed from ours.

From the scenic village of Lagunas de Atillos in the Sangay National Park, which is a world heritage site, we had travelled by bus to Riobamba, and thence to Alausi. In hindsight, perhaps we should have put up a night in Riobamba and boarded the train for Alausi the following day.

That was what most of the people you see in the picture had done. But then the 85km journey from Riobamba to Alausi took five hours and sitting on the roof of a wobbling, shaking and crawling train under a hot sun for such a long time might not be everybody's cup of tea.

Of course, we were not the only tourists to have come to Alausi just for the train ride. As a matter of fact, the train is about the only attraction that pulls tourists to this little mountain town. We found the town quite pleasant to stroll around though, and the authorities had obviously put in some effort to beautify the streets, especially the main street that ends right in front of the tiny railway station.

The train only runs on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Tickets to Sibambe and back cost US$7.80 each. The ticket seller, one of very few Ecuadorians who were able to speak a smattering of English, told us that the train was expected to arrive from Riobamba at 1100 hours. It eventually pulled into the station at 1210 hours.

The diesel-engine powered locomotive had two wagons and a coach behind it. Except for a handful of elderly people who opted for the shelter and comfort of the coach, all the passengers scrambled up the cat ladder to the roof of the wagons.

Small square cushions for the bums were available for rent at US$1 each. It was amazing to see the top of the train turning into a marketplace with peddlers trying to sell their stuff among an excited, unruly crowd still in the midst of looking for a spot to sit on.

The train pulled out from the station and slowly moved towards the valley beyond the town. From an altitude of 2,300m a.s.l., it gradually descended to the valley floor beside a small river, going around several steep mountainsides and making two zigzag shuntings.

There was a 30-minute break in the valley for passengers to get off the train to stretch their legs. Except for two or three uncompleted buildings, there was no sign of any human settlement in the valley. But that place has a name: Sibambe.

There, the locomotive broke away from the wagon it was coupled to and moved over to the other end of the train to begin our return journey to Alausi. The two-hour journey from Alausi to Sibambe and back, sitting on the roof of the train throughout to soak in all the beautiful sun and stunning Andes mountain views, was certainly the most unforgettable experience for me. ■

HEARTIEST CONGRATULATIONS

The Council and Management of IEM would like to congratulate Y. Bhg. Dato' Engr. Prof. Abang Abdullah bin Abang Mohamed Ali (F03093), Past President of IEM, on being conferred the Darjah Kebesaran - Dato' Paduka Mahkota Selangor (D.P.M.S.) by DYMM Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah Alhaj Ibni Almarhum Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Alhaj on 11 December 2008 which carries the title 'Dato'.