

# The Taste of Train Travel

*As your train winds through unknown lands, exploring the culinary offering on board can be just as exciting as the journey.*

One of the best aspects of train travel is discovering the food available on board, at the stations, and in the baskets of vendors hawking their wares up and down the aisles. On long journeys, it is the arrival or even the prospect of food that structures the day, with everything else fitting around it. But greater than the thrill of crunching into hot samosas on a Kolkata commuter train or slicing into plump scallops on The Ghan, is what these dishes and habits convey about a country's culture. For example, attendants on the Caledonian Sleeper rouse passengers with tea and a piece of shortbread, while Italian rail attendants bring espresso. Indian Railways serves cornflakes with hot milk—a colonial hangover—and in Russia, every dish is draped in dill.

If you find yourself roaming a Japanese station, you will notice bright displays of *ekiben*—a hybrid of *eki*, meaning station, and *bento* meaning lunchbox. Bound in bamboo or ceramic boxes, and tied with pretty bows, these gorgeous creations are unique to each station and made from local ingredients. Packed with rolls of rice, pearls of salmon roe, and ribbons of pink radish, they reflect Japan's unique brand of perfectionism.

On my own travels, I found that Chinese dining cars offered the best of communal dining, even if it was impossible to decipher the menu. With multiple passengers wedged in at tables strewn with chewed bones and cartoon-like fish skeletons, and glugging from small bottles of

whiskey, the experience offered a fabulous insight into a people who take the greatest of pleasure in food. The roar of woks followed by great clouds of smoke that spread around the car signaled how fresh the dishes were, with trolleys of precooked food also coming up the aisles. Here, the best option is to point to what your neighbors are eating and hope for the best. Another tip is to have “beef,” “chicken,” or “vegetarian” written on a piece of paper in Chinese script to show to attendants as they come round.

The truth is that trains in Asia offer the freshest, highest-quality food that I have found around the world—at least on regular passenger trains. Thai dining cars offer set menus featuring duck curry, fried sea bass, steaming bowls of jasmine rice, and fresh pineapple for dessert—all for under \$3. Indian Railways is famous for its onboard catering that is managed by one central company. For passengers unsure about what to buy when the train rolls into stations, play it safe and order anything that is deep-fried or cooked in front of you on high heat, especially if there is a long queue and local passengers are eating the same. Fried *dosas*, *uttapam* and dal-filled *kachoris* will all satisfy your hunger until the next hawker calls up the aisle with a tub of new goodies. On the newer, classier trains, you will be offered a tiny plastic tray with tomato soup, breadsticks, and packs of butter, followed by a new tray and a variety of foil-wrapped packages containing rice, tightly wrapped rotis, vegetable curry, and ice cream. Always carry a stack of small-note denominations as vendors are unlikely to be able to break large notes.

On the other side of the world, dining comes with its own charms: American mealtimes clamor with conversation between passengers who would usually never meet, revealing a universal need to connect and communicate across boundaries; and in Canada, you are sure to find a bison steak on your plate, while others dot the prairies outside your window. If you are uncertain about what to try, ask your neighbors, who will usually be happy to advise. But above all, be brave and get stuck in. ♦

