

Yet Another Chaotic Train Ride Across Java...!

By Farah "Fairy" Mahdzan
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A story I wrote about a hectic 12-hour train ride from Jakarta to Central Java's Jogjakarta drew lots of excited reaction from people. My Indonesian readers screamed with laughter after reading about the train ride since some of them can relate only too well to the experiences of riding the very questionable "business class" of the *Senja Utama* train. My non-Indonesian readers however held their breaths while reading the piece, occasionally gasping with horror. I may have caused some sense of apprehension for this latter group of readers about ever taking an Indonesian train ride!

Not long after my *Senja Utama* train ride, I endured yet another train ride that is worth mentioning. This other ride was on a different train and entailed a more expensive fare. The environment onboard the train was inevitably different but my experience on it was still quite rib tickling and no less eye opening.

We were on our way back to Jakarta after a few days of holidaying in Jogja. Traumatized with our *Senja Utama* train ride to Jogja, my Indonesian friends and I bought Executive Class tickets for a different train called *Taksaka II* which promised to deliver us to



Jakarta's Gambir station in approximately 7 hours, a good five hours less than the time *Senja Utama* took to reach Jogja from Jakarta. Of course for the lessened amount of travel time, the price for the ticket was three times more than the price we paid for the *Senja Utama* train: Rp.150.000. I was also informed that the *Taksaka II* had seating arrangements that were more comfortable. In addition, a Godsend for some of us heavy-sweating folks, the train also came equipped with air-conditioning.

Now bursting with confidence and hope, I was sure that I could handle this higher-class *Taksaka II* train ride to Jakarta with no problems at all. *No problem at all...*

Boarding the *Taksaka II* Train

Indeed, the classier *Taksaka II* was a world of difference from the dingy *Senja Utama*! Brightly lit, clean and air-conditioned, the coaches had large plush, cushiony seats that could recline in comfortable

sleeping angles with just a touch of a button. There were loads of legroom and mounted television sets with shows to entertain passengers throughout the entire ride. The windows had soft curtains that you could pull across to shield your seating place from the blinding rays of the sun from the outside.

With that said, embarking a *Taksaka II* train felt like walking into a Ritz-Carlton hotel when compared to boarding a *Senja Utama* train! As I sat myself down on my comfortable seat, I was certain that I could fall asleep at any minute; I felt that relaxed and happy with the *Taksaka II*.

Oh, what's this? I wondered as I saw several people walking up and down the train aisles in spiffy green uniforms, looking extremely bustling and important with their designated chores. (Queen Nyai Roro Kidul would be pleased to receive a visit to Parangtritis Beach by these green-suited people, wouldn't you say?) *Wonderful, we even have train attendants to wait on us!* I thought happily. And indeed these folks in green were to serve us our meals and wait on us hand and foot as the train rumbles from one end of Java to the other. The *Taksaka II* was already leaving a big impression on this one contented Malaysian traveler.

Our train was set to move and off we were! I looked out of the window and waved a silent goodbye to Jogja, the little Javanese city which I had grown fond of over the last few days, Jalan Malioboro and all. My seating arrangement in the train was such that I was right in front of my assigned train carriage, meaning that I sat closest to the exit and nearest to the

restrooms. Before the train moved, I ran to the restroom just to do a check run of the facility: satisfactorily clean! This was of course before everyone started using it throughout the ride, thus reducing its cleanliness level dramatically.

We left Jogja around 10 or 11AM, which meant that we were supposed to arrive in Jakarta by 5 o'clock that one January evening. However things didn't quite turn out as planned...

Breakdown in Purwokerto!

As we entered Purwokerto, a town about an hour away from Jogja, our good luck didn't last. When we stopped at the station to pick up more passengers, I noticed that the pit stop took a lot longer than usual. One green-suited attendant later informed us that the train was having a breakdown and we would have to remain in Purwokerto until the technical issue could be resolved. Thinking that the problem could be fixed in an hour or so, we sat and wilted in the train for almost 4-5 hours!

Trying not to focus so much on our misfortune, I drew my eyes to my surroundings and began to mentally take down notes on what was going around me. I couldn't help feeling a little beguiled at the group of people who were crowding at the mouth of the train entrances at a swelling rate. These people were not passengers boarding the train: they were *tukang-tukang jual*, peddlers selling food and various snack items. Sometimes if you're lucky you'll even find them selling locally made souvenirs.

I had quite an encounter with these *tukang-tukang jual* folks during my train ride to Jogja when I spent an entire sleepless night enduring their constant pacing up and down the train aisle with their incessant calling of whatever they were selling. To add to the frustration, at every train station we stopped along the way, more of these peddlers seem to jump onboard. Well, here they were again, ready to pounce on the opportunity of honest moneymaking with their goods. My heart took a hurried leap down to my stomach.

In what I considered a bizarre twist of fate, the hawkers made no attempt to scuttle into the coach to sell their products; they however kept their distance by just lingering at the train doors, as though an invisible electric fence was keeping them at bay from entering into our carriage. What gives?

Why the Hawkers Didn't Come Barging In, Initially...

This whole situation was a little bit unbelievable to me because when I took the *Senja Utama* train ride to Jogja, at every station stop we made across Java, peddlers would literally flood the train and shove their products up our noses in hopes that we'd be tempted to purchase a nice hot packet of homemade *nasi ayam* (chicken rice) or a few bottles of thirst-quenching *Aqua*. And now here I am in the *Taksaka II*, and not even one hawker dared step into the train. Why was this?

After a minute or two of casual observation, I learned that if these peddlers were to board the train, the faithful and hardworking train attendants would chase them out. Our green attendants would stare quietly but warningly at the hawkers who even so much as dared step one foot into the train. I was slowly beginning to learn that being in a high-class train had its subtle benefits.

However if you really wanted to buy something from these hawkers, it didn't hurt for you to approach them. But you'd want to do it ever so inconspicuously (if *that* were ever possible!). Volunteering to buy something from these *tukang-tukang jual* is like walking towards a pack of hungry lions; they'd be pawing you endlessly for some spare of your *rupiah* in exchange for their goods. Once you buy something from someone, it almost seems like you have to buy something from *everyone*, just to get away in one piece, *hehe!* Okay, I might be exaggerating, but it sure seemed like it.

Because I was sitting nearest to the train entrance where these hawkers were peddling food, snacks, drinks and what-have-you, I was constantly being eyed and called out by these *mbak-mbak* (women) and *mas-mas* (men). It got to the point where I got embarrassed and would literally scrunch into my partner's seat which was next to the window because I did not want to be seen!

Since our train stop was taking forever, the hawkers got restless of hanging by the door and eventually came gushing impassively into our carriage. The train attendants had somehow grown weary and oblivious

to chase these intruders away. One pretty young lady who was sitting next to our friend Rere was being pursued by one peddler in particular who was selling some sort of *kuih*. Because the man was so persistent, the lady (whose name I found out was also Farah) gave up and helplessly bought a box of lord-knows-what from the man.

As the man went away smirking and counting his money, Farah smiled sheepishly at Evi and me from across her seat holding up the box. She gestured me to take one *kuih* from the box; Evi refused, I politely took one and bit into the soft cookie, not quite sure if I liked it. I would have gladly taken a *salak* fruit, an oddly-sweet beige fruit encased in a maroon, armadillo-like shell- the sweetest being from Jogja than from any other part of Indonesia, which Farah had by the bunch underneath her seat; I eyed longingly at them but did not want to ask for one. Farah saw my stares and smiled at me as she handed me a few *salak* fruits. *Ah* bless her soul, so kind was she to spare some *salak* fruits to this one *salak*-eating Malaysian girl. She grinned even more broadly when I told her my name was also Farah.

By the way, I hear eating too much *salak* fruit can cause constipation, so beware! They're irresistible and highly addictive fruits!

Some Yummy and Cheap Siomay Dumplings!

As Rere continued to flirt and chat with his neighbor Farah (*dasar cowok* - men!), Evi and I were beginning

to get restless. It was into our third unproductive hour of stopping at Purwokerto that I began to feel hungry again. After forcefully prying him away from *Mbak Farah*, I stepped off the train with Rere and crossed the rail tracks, despite the potential dangers of being mangled by an incoming train. I didn't care; I was too hungry and delirious!



I saw a man selling something from a big metal container that reminded me of those containers Malaysian *pau* sellers use to keep their *paus* warm (*paus* are local white buns with all sorts of fillings inside: *srikaya*, red bean, chicken, etc). When the man lifted the container's lid, there were many odds and ends of food in it. You get to choose what you want, among them: meatballs, boiled potatoes, and dumplings made from flour and steamed cabbages.

As soon as I picked what I wanted, the man took my bowl of chosen items and began cutting them up with a pair of scissors and spread some sort of thick dark brown/black sauce over them. This whole concoction became my bowl of *siomay*, a dish that vaguely reminded me of the Malaysian Chinese *yong tau foo*. I started to eat my dish hungrily while Rere paid roughly Rp.3000 for the tasty items. Whether the food preparation was hygienic or not, I no longer cared. Good ol' Rere also purchased a bottle of ice-cold *teh botol* for me as well to quench my thirst and wash my food down.

We decided to board our stalled train with the bowl of *siomay* and promised the old man that we would bring back the ceramic bowl to him when I was done. The aromatic smell of steaming *siomay* eventually awoke Evi, who was sprawled over both my seat and hers, from her nap; she sniffed the air hungrily and looked at my bowl longingly. I chuckled as Evi swiftly dug a fork into a piece of potato dripping with gravy; earlier she had haughtily told me she didn't want anything to eat when I asked her if she wanted me to buy food from outside!

Rere decided to return the empty bowl for me when we were done eating. I decided to leave the train to stretch my legs for a little bit. As I came down the train stairs, I heard a sickening trickle of water that seemed to be coming down from where the train toilet was located, dripping onto the train tracks; it emitted a revoltingly familiar stench. I now realized why train passengers were only allowed to utilize the onboard restroom when the train is in motion!

Finally, On the Move Again...!

In an announcement which I regarded as being a miracle call from the heavens, we were informed that our train was set to move again, after sweating in it for the last 5 hours at Purwokerto's station! Were we ever so thankful! The train huffed and puffed and picked up speed as we traveled across the Indonesian countryside. It was already 5 o'clock and with any luck, we would reach Jakarta by 10PM.

We were quite annoyed that *Taksaka II* did not compensate us in any way for the excruciatingly long

delay other than the fact that it ordered its attendants to hurriedly serve us our dinner of *nasi goreng* (fried rice). The train company also decided to air Rowan Atkinson's *Mr. Bean* shows on its television sets while we rode all the way to Jakarta; I suppose the management was trying to cheer us weary passengers up with silly antics specialty of the silent British comedian. It worked I suppose, in some sense, as I heard some people laugh weakly with their eyes glued to the TV sets in front of them while mindlessly spooning warm *nasi goreng* into their hungry mouths and stomachs.

Just when I thought things couldn't get any more unfortunate for anyone, I saw a man being ushered out by two train attendants onto the platform that adjoined my train carriage with the next one. Judging from facial expressions and hand gestures of the men outside, I suspected the man who was carried out was found guilty of hitch riding on the train without a ticket. As a result he was asked to sit outside for the remainder of the trip! The man took his sentence silently and just squatted on the platform.

Never felt gladder to see Jakarta!

At long last we came to arrive in Jakarta. Instead of disembarking at Gambir, which was the final destination, my friends and I decided to hop off the train at an earlier station in Jatinegara because we couldn't stand another minute longer on the train! So we jumped out of the train so fast, it was still moving slowly when we scrambled off it! With blood-shot eyes, we smiled feebly at each other, feeling

extremely blessed that we had arrived in the big metropolitan capital before the next day!



We all laughed cheerfully as we walked away from the station and onto a busy street. I for one was amazed at the level of tolerance and high-spirits my Indonesian friends demonstrated that exhausting day. They displayed much patience and kept each other from going insane while waiting in Purwokerto for nearly 5 hours. Like one friend commented, "you're only wasting your breath and energy by getting angry over something you can't control, *nyantai aja men* (relax, man)." What wise words they are. I think we should all learn to be patient like my Indonesian friends.

Whatever the case may be, I think I will ponder long and hard before I decide to board an Indonesian train ride to and from anywhere as far as Jogjakarta!

Pictures of items: Saved from my train ride and scanned

Relevant Stories

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(Fairy's Prequel to this story)
- [Taksaka to Yogya](#)
A Story by Indahnesia.com's Jeroen van der Linde
- [PT. Kereta Api \(Perseero\)](#) - The official website of Indonesia's railway management; has train schedules and ticket rates, company history, train photos and more
- [Kereta Api Indonesia - Indonesian Railway](#) - a train enthusiast's website, even has an Indo train fans mailing list
- [Indonesian Train Schedules on Jogja.com](#)