

To aid their effort in WWII, the Japanese government built a railroad between Thailand and Burma, enlisting POWs and Asian labourers in a horrifying and deadly race to the finish.

Kanchanaburi, Thailand — At the Kanchanaburi train station each morning, the same ritual unfolds. A woman in a smart uniform scribbles out tickets for a growing line of tourists eager to take a trip on the old-fashioned train. Then, tickets in hand, small groups wander across the street to drink tea in the cafe, waiting cheerfully for the inevitably delayed service, made worse by the need to add extra wagons at this stop, before the trip on Death Railway begins.

Built by the Japanese during WWII to connect Yangon, the then-capital of Burma, with Bangkok, the Thai Burma Rail Link was immortalized in the David Lean blockbuster *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. The film helps to draw scores of visitors to this sleepy river town year after year.

The railway earned its nickname—the Death Railway—from the suffering the tens of thousands of POWs and cheap local labour went through to construct it, surviving on meager rations, sleeping on lice-infested bamboo mats, and working with ribs clearly visible beneath their browned skin and furrowed brows.

Thousands died in the process of building the 250 miles of rail over 15 months, and their makeshift graves dotted the sides of the tracks, before being moved to neatly kept graveyards in Kanchanaburi and two other cemeteries along the route after the war ended.

Today, the history is still vivid. One can walk across the bridge late at night and imagine what it was like for those workers as spotlights cast an eerie light of ominous shadows on the green water and the wooden tracks disappear through the dark bushes, like a tunnel towards death. And even now, disaster isn't only an increasingly distant memory. On one recent morning during my train ride north, the rail's nickname took on more significance when an attaché to the Greek embassy was crushed beneath the wheels of the train, dying on the spot.

Today, only a portion of the original rail line is in operation, reopened in 1956 and taking travellers as far as Nam Tok, two hours from the Burmese border. Recently, the Burmese government announced plans to rebuild its side of the tracks, says Terry Manttan of the Thailand Burma Railway Centre and Museum, which is located in Kanchanaburi next to the War Cemetery, where scores of the soldiers who died during construction are buried.

Burma's borders have reopened in certain places recently. "There was a sign up saying they were reopening the pass in 2015 at Three Pagodas Pass," Manttan said about the original crossing between the two countries. "But it has since come down. It has been closed since the war. Since then they have gone quiet about plans."

Manttán is keen to carry out research on that Burmese side of the railway as his father worked on that section. A dam now in place on the Thai side of the line prevents the railway from being reconstructed in its entirety, he explains.

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Each year, the museum accompanies approximately 200 to 300 relatives of those who worked to build the railway on personalized trips up and down the tracks, going as far as the border, while they also conduct research along the lines. They have amassed a growing database of information on some 105,000 POWs.

Inside the two-floor space the museum, there are placards bearing facts and figures, moving images and photographs, and interesting snippets of information that tell the history of the Death Railway line. A map shows each station on the route, along with marking POW camps and other landmarks along the way.



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Riding Thailand's WWII Death Railway

Construction began in 1942 and the challenge for the Japanese was whether or not it could be built quickly enough to aid the war effort using local resources. POWs were brought in by train in dismal conditions, with 28 soldiers crammed for days into seven-meter-long wagons filled with Japanese supplies. There was no room to lie down or sleep.

That was just the beginning of the horror. By the end of the construction period, the number of deaths had reached roughly twenty percent of the workforce. Although there were fewer deaths in the first eight months of construction, the numbers grew starting in July 1942 when the wet season and furious push to finish the line began. Between June and October 1943, 4,283 British, 1,303 Dutch, 1,630 Australian, and 88 American soldiers died.

All in all, approximately 13,000 Allied POWs and 90,000 Asian labourers perished while working on the railway. While Asian labourers were hired and paid, many more died than POWs, as they did not have the support networks provided to the soldiers through the military hierarchy.

The highest number of deaths came from Malaysian workers, of which 42,000 out of 75,000 died. The Burmese had the next highest death rate, 40,000 deaths from 90,000 employees, followed by the British with some 6,904 soldiers dying out of approximately 30,131.

The POWs were allowed to bury their dead in marked graves, and their Japanese bosses would attend the funerals in the early days, providing wreaths and paying \$10 for additional mourning services.

Both the Japanese, in keeping with the Geneva Convention, and the POWs kept death records, which were handed to the War Graves Search Party after the end of the war. They recorded 10,549 graves on or near the railway in 144 cemeteries, failing to locate only 52 graves.

Today, the train chugs north out of Kanchanaburi over the famous bridge before it hits a spectacular bend in the river. The scenery that unfolds through the windows of the dusty train is unforgettable in its beauty, the pale green of the rice paddies, the mountains peeking in spectacular glory, wild trees and crumbling houses that dot the route. At the end of the line at Nam Tok, some of the tracks lead to an old waterfall where visitors can get off and splash in the cool waters.

And then, on one recent morning, the train made a stop at a small station near an especially beautiful section of the river. A Greek woman stepped off to take a photograph, and her camera strap got trapped in the train doors, which typically remain open while travelling so passengers can get a better view. The train was already in motion as she tried to step inside, and her body was crushed beneath it.

Tourists filed off the train, mostly unaware. Like the locals here, we walked along the tracks as directed, wandering over trestle bridges with no hand rails, the path bending around a sheer section of a much photographed cliff before the train resumed its journey an hour or so later. We were left behind on the river with a quiet young Thai man who fed us, unaware of what had happened until later that night when the local media reported the details. The Greek embassy confirmed the death, which has barely registered by the international press. Locals screamed as the accident happened, but tourists were mostly none the wiser and walked along the tracks like soldiers marching silently on.