

Train journey from Hanoi, Vietnam to Nanning, China

By Chin Siew Yin

I have made a few trips by air before to Nanning, the provincial capital of Guangxi, Western China, bordering Vietnam. As a matter of curiosity after hearing a suggestion from friends of a cross border train service from Hanoi to Nanning, I decided to experience it for myself since I was early for an event in Nanning.

I booked the train ticket online and was issued with a e-voucher by email.

I took off from KLIA airport with AirAsia airline one morning in 2019 and arrived at the Hanoi airport by noon. The shuttle bus service from the airport took 30 minutes to reach the centre of Hanoi city. With the aid of a handphone translation facility, I managed to communicate with a local passenger on the recommended bus stop to alight to go to the Old Quarters district of Hanoi to spend the afternoon. The area around the scenic *Hoan Kiem* lake holds a lot of attractions, such as a water puppet theatre, the Grand Catholic Church built in 1886, and the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum.

After enjoying a local popular dish, *pho*, for dinner, the shop assistant assisted me to call for a cab to the *Gia Lam* train station which is not at Hanoi city centre but at a small suburb area across the 120 year-old *Long Bien* steel bridge over the Red River. The trip took about 40 minutes going through the suburban area before reaching Gia Lam train station, an unimpressive single-storey building. The passenger hall is about the size of a classroom and there were not many passengers. There were occasional local trains making stops to other parts of the city.

As advised earlier, I bought some food stuff from a few shops in front of the station as no food would be served onboard the train. There is a small stall inside the hall where I left my luggage for a nominal fee since I was early. There is no fence guarding the railway tracks or platform and I took the opportunity to explore and took photos of the unique rail tracks and station.



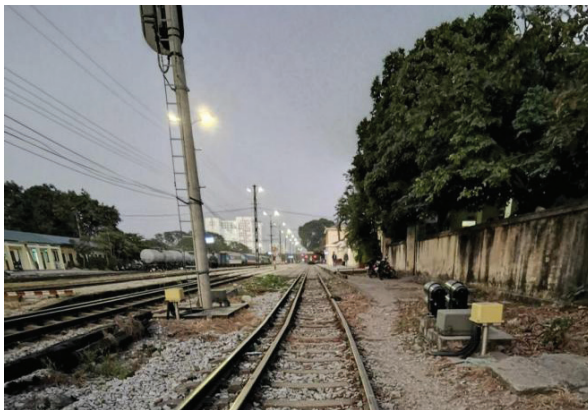
Label of destination on the side of train



Gia Lam Railway station

The train service MR1/T8702 is jointly operated by Vietnam Railways and China Railway, and is divided into two segments: MR1 service from Hanoi to Dong Dang, and T8702 service from Pingxiang to Nanning. This is an international railway service running between Vietnam and China.

One peculiar observation was the dual-gauge railway track system with three rails per track. Two rails on one side about 150 mm apart and the other slightly less than a meter away. This is to allow the use of both Vietnam trains with a narrower gauge and Chinese trains with a wider gauge, on the same railway line. One of the



The dual gauge railway track. The rail line and platform are not guarded.

reasons for the Chinese train to terminate at *Gia Lam* station instead of Hanoi city centre is because the old *Long Bien* steel bridge cannot accommodate the wider gauge rail line.

Back to the station, an agent from the train e-ticket agency was looking for me to exchange the e-voucher sent through email for a physical paper ticket with my name and particulars on it.

The Chinese train finally arrived at 8.40pm with the train attendants, dressed in military-style uniforms, standing guard at the coach entrance. There were a few coaches and each was self-enclosed, with an attendant in charge. The connecting doors to other coaches were locked, perhaps for security reasons as most passengers would be sleeping at night. The attendant was stationed at a room at one end of the coach, acting as his office. Upon entering the coach, the guard exchanged my paper ticket with berth card stating the cabin and bed number.

There were four soft beds in each cabin, two on top and two at the bottom. Each bed was given two pillows, a clean bed sheet and a pair of sleepers wrapped in a plastic bag. The facilities inside the cabin include cloth hangers, a thermos flask, plug points, a table lamp, space for luggage and individual reading lights.

There was a row of wash basins at the end of the coach and a hot water dispenser near the corridor. Chinese travellers like to use the hot water for their instant noodles.

As the train moved away from *Gia Lam* station at 9.20pm, it passed through the city neighbourhoods with the back of houses close by. One can see the families relaxing in the hall, watching TV or taking their meals. As the train



Table inside the cabin. The plug point next to the table.



Common Wash basin with soap dispenser at the end of each coach.

meandered out of the city, the buffer between the track and the adjacent bushes was very close; some just about a foot away. No wonder the train could only move at a relatively slow speed and blared the horn at regular intervals.

After four hours, the train reached the border town, Dong Dang, at 2.00am the following day where all passengers had to alight the train, bringing along their luggage for Vietnam's immigration checkpoint and custom clearance. The attendant would knock at the door of each cabin 20 minutes before arrival to remind the passengers to bring along their luggage for border clearance.

The train stopped for an hour before moving on at 2.50am for another 40 minutes to reach Chinese border town, Pingxiang by 4.30am (Chinese and Vietnamese time is one hour apart). Again, the passengers had to alight with their luggage for immigration and custom check. Here, the fruits that I bought from the *Gia Lam* station were all confiscated for crop protection reasons. Again, the train stopped for an hour.



Entrance to Dong Dang, Vietnam border checkpoint



Ping Xiang, China border checkpoint



Train passing some rural townships



As the train approached Nanning, there is marked change of skyline with high rise and modern housing

Leaving Pingxiang at 6.15am, the train made the next stop at Chongzuo town with local passengers alighting to different coaches with hard seats. This is the only train for the day to Nanning and the most convenient transportation mode between Chongzuo and Nanning.

At day break, one can see the quiet country side with farm land and villagers as the train moved towards Nanning. There is also marked difference on the standard of the track's management compared to Vietnam and the buffer between the track and the vegetation are sufficiently wide for safety reasons.

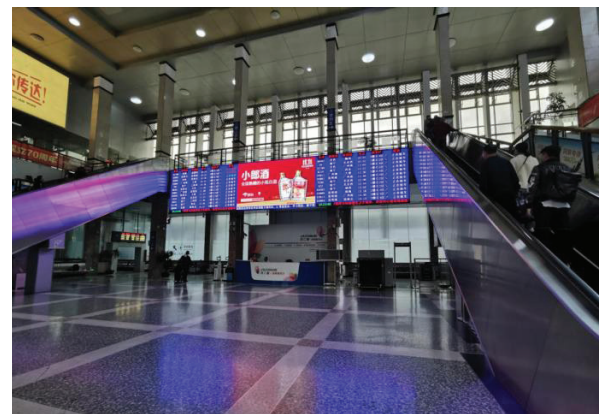
As the train approached Nanning city, there is a marked change in landscape with sights of modern housing, industrial clusters and high-rise buildings appearing gradually.

Finally the train reached Nanning at 10.10am and all passengers and staff had to alight and head to the station's terminal building. There is an electronic signboard indicating Nanning station with a welcoming message.

At the terminal, passengers departing from Hanoi would go through a special lane since they were using paper tickets. Domestic passengers using plastic tickets enter via an automatic gate.

In all, the journey took 14 hours departing Hanoi at 9.20 pm and arriving at Nanning at 10.10am the following day. To compare, the cross-border coach service only takes eight hours from Hanoi to Nanning by special bus using new highways and require less time for immigration clearance.

In all, it was a smooth, clean and comfortable train ride. Security was good with attendant guards and efficient border clearance procedures. ■



Nanning station