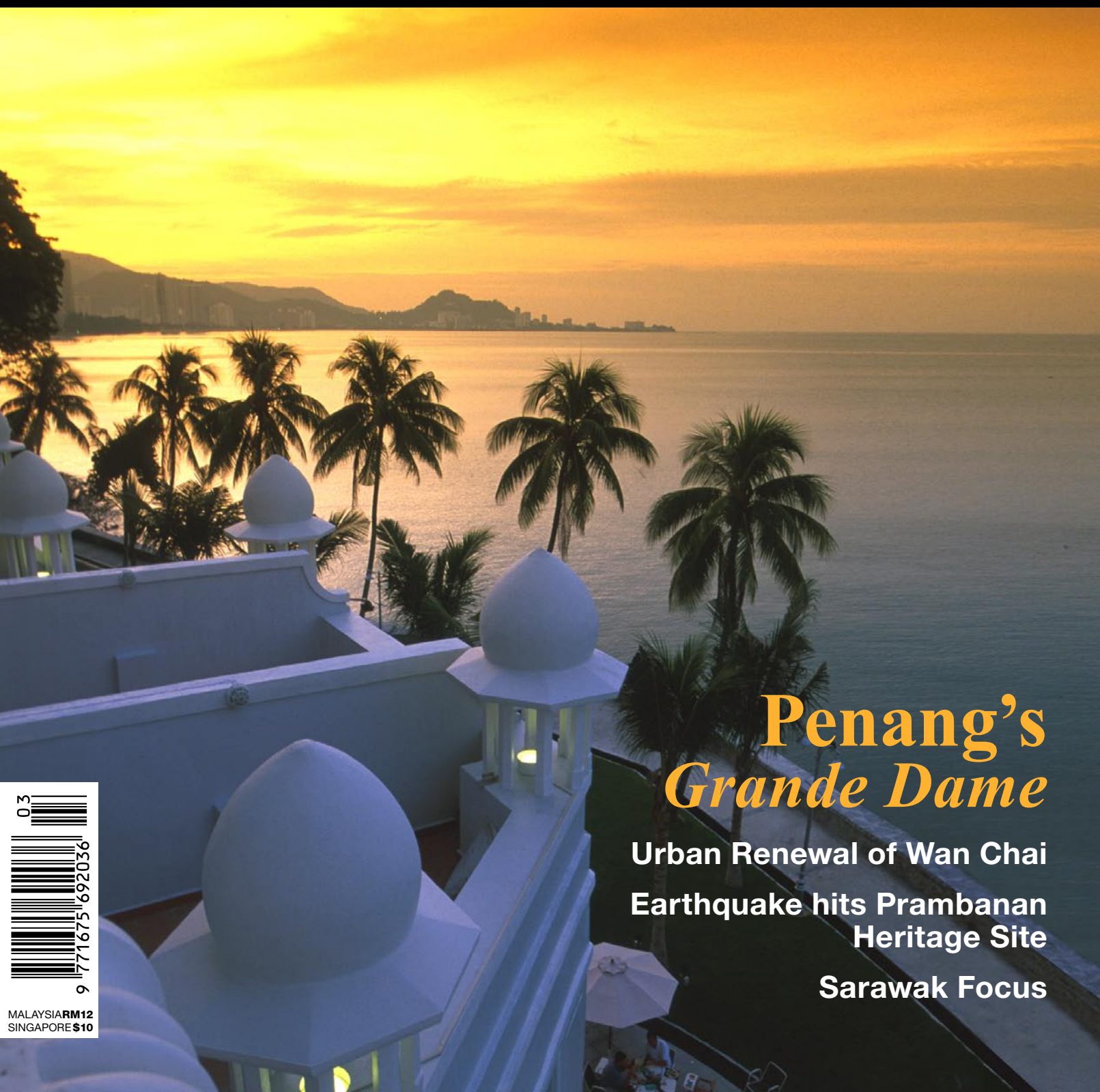


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Penang's *Grande Dame*

Urban Renewal of Wan Chai

Earthquake hits Prambanan
Heritage Site

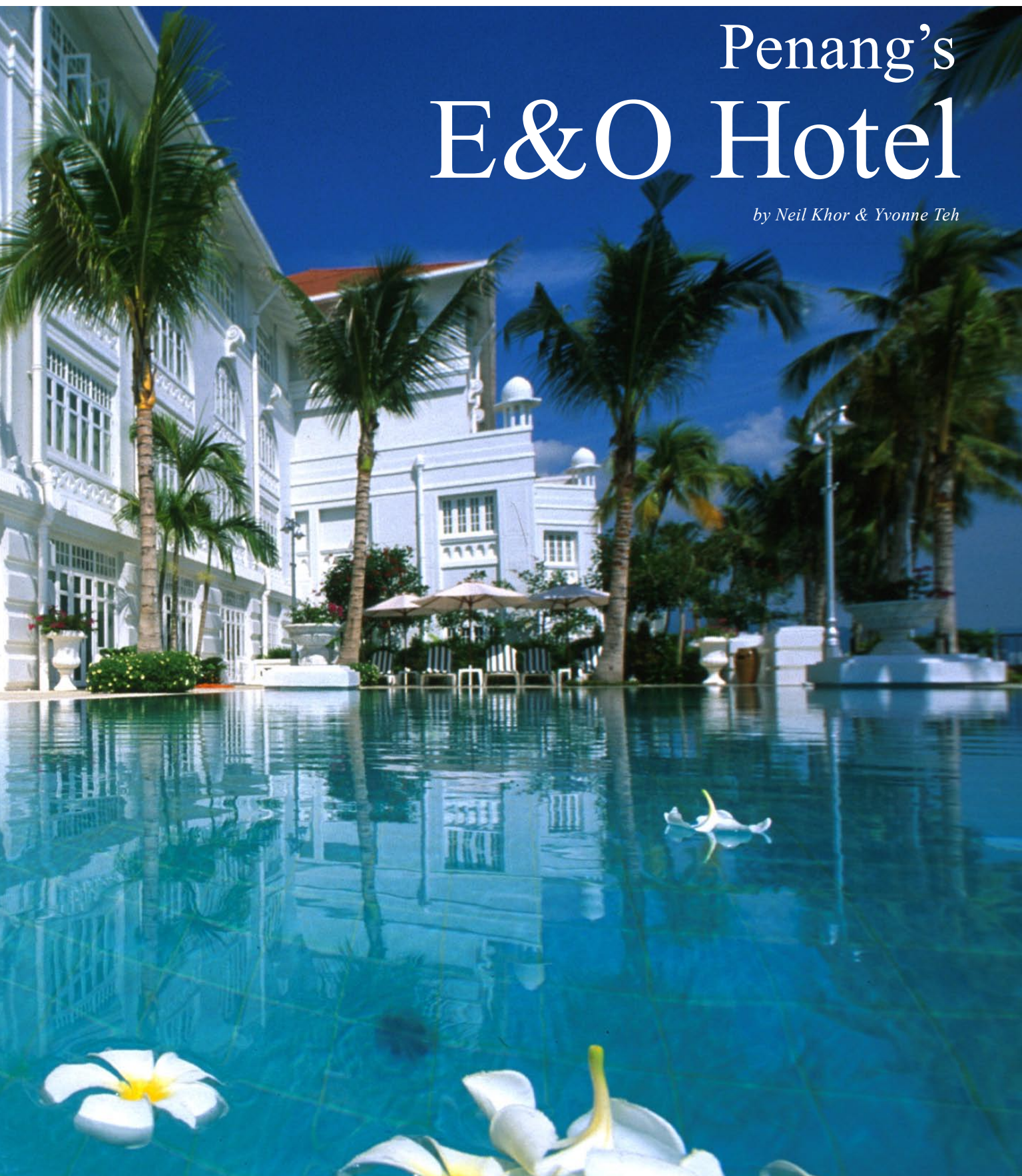
Sarawak Focus





Return to Opulence: Penang's E&O Hotel

by Neil Khor & Yvonne Teh



THE PEARL OF THE ORIENT AND ITS *GRANDE* *DAME*



A stay at the E&O transports you to another era.

Imagine yourself an early 20th century traveller on board a steamship sailing through the busy Malacca Straits - a trade and travel crossroads between East and West for centuries. Glancing at the itinerary, you note that the steamship will be stopping at Penang, 'the Pearl of the Orient'. As your vessel approaches this port of call, the waters are as smooth as glass. From the island's interior, the slopes of verdant hills fan down onto an open plain. But what really catches your attention as your steamship swings towards the eastern cape of the island is the fascinating East-West mix of buildings which characterizes Penang's capital, George Town.

Once the ship docks, you are only too eager to set foot on terra firma and to venture onto Penang. Disembarking from your vessel, you find yourself among people from all corners of the globe, many of whom have made a home for themselves on this turtle-shaped island. As if to underline the community's cosmopolitan nature, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, Chinese and Hindu temples, and Malay and Indian mosques line, or lie adjacent to, a street named after William Pitt the Younger, Britain's youngest prime minister and that office's incumbent when Captain Francis Light took formal possession of



Bringing back the tradition of excellent service.



The famed 'echo' dome lobby welcomes hotel guests with elegance.



The pool at night.

the island for the British Crown and the East India Company.

Seeking somewhere to put your feet up and rest, you consult a friendly local who tells you about a fabulous hotel. It boasts the longest sea frontage of any hotel in the world — 842 feet, or 256 metres in length. Furthermore, the individual assures you, the place happens to be the centre of Penang social life and offers facilities which are sure to please those accustomed to living in the lap of luxury. You are slightly sceptical about this advice until, that is, you arrive at the door of the Eastern & Oriental Hotel.

The *grande dame* of Penang's hotels, the E&O, as it is popularly known, was established in 1885 by the Armenian Sarkies brothers, Martin, Tigran, Aviet and Arshak, who went on to found Singapore's celebrated Raffles Hotel and the famous Strand in Rangoon. The result of a merger of the Sarkies' more modestly-sized Eastern Hotel and the Oriental, this magnificent establishment was considered one of the finest hotels in the British Empire and, in the words of a 1909 advertisement, "Absolutely the Best in the Island".

"THE PREMIER HOTEL EAST OF SUEZ..."

By 1927, the E&O Hotel was proudly

proclaiming itself to be "The Premier Hotel East of Suez, boasting more than a hundred rooms, baths with hot and cold running water, individual telephones and the world's longest sea-front lawn at 842 feet". As we 21st century denizens can sometimes forget, travellers of yore prized luxurious amenities for their 'modernity'. Consequently, the triple-storey Eastern & Oriental Hotel "facing the Esplanade" was considered very special, not only because it had a grand ballroom (built in 1903) and flamboyant architectural features, like majestic Moorish minarets on the roof and a famous 'echo' dome lobby, but also because every room in its 'new' wing (constructed in the 1920s) came complete with an English-style long bath with running hot and cold water, two hot-and-cold water basins, 'modern sanitary conveniences' and two comfortably large beds!

The icing on the luxurious cake was at the back of the new wing — a garage for about six cars. "...certainly an ample stabling accommodation", pronounced a writer for the, then, flourishing *Penang Gazette*. Furthermore, the hotel's interior furnishings, by Messrs John, Little & Co and Messrs Pritchard & Co, were all made of teak. Still, the malaria-fearing colonial-era occupant of an E&O Hotel room would have derived greater peace



Men in colonial uniform guard the hotel's entrance.

of mind from discovering that the beds in it were fitted with “a patent mosquito remover which will ensure absolute freedom from mosquitoes”.

To say the least, the E&O Hotel is a legendary part of world hotel tradition. Fabulous facilities, quality service and top-class management aside, it also has a star-attracting ability that sets it apart from other establishments in which people lodge when away from home. “Movie stars, playwrights, novelists, colonial administrators and all sorts of famous people use to park themselves at the hotel,” recalls Dato’ Mushir Ariff, an octogenarian Penangite and a founder-director of Bank Bumiputera.

In the 1930s, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford visited. English playwright, Noel Coward also stayed at the hotel with his noble friend, Lord Amherst. Novelists, Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham, have also been guests at the E&O Hotel, as has Nobel Prize-winning German author, Herman Hesse. Additionally, as Dato’ Munshir Ariff recalls with some fondness, “It was where I met Rita Hayworth, a screen legend of the 1950s who was passing through [Penang] and staying at the grand hotel.”

LEAN TIMES FOR THE E&O HOTEL

The decade after the Roaring Twenties was a hard one for many all over the world. Before the Great Depression struck, Arshak, the youngest Sarkies brother, had embarked on an extravagant expansion of the E&O Hotel that included the construction of a ‘Victory Wing’ to celebrate the end of the First World War. Later, the price of rubber fell and, with it, many individual fortunes evaporated.

At this point in its history, the E&O Hotel had become a home away from home for many individuals who were no longer as wealthy as they had previously been. Reluctant to turn these long-time patrons away, Arshak would generously waive friends’ hotel bills and even provide passage home for planters whose businesses had failed. Soon, the grand hotel came to possess the nickname of ‘Eat & Owe’! On a more serious note, Arshak Sarkies’ fabled munificence probably played a part in driving him to bankruptcy.

Somehow, the E&O Hotel managed to stay afloat through the depression-bound 1930s. It also withstood the vicissitudes of World War II, including the Japanese occupation of Penang and the rest of Malaya. However, after independence





The scenic view of Penang's north beach.



Arshak Sarkies, founder of the E&O Hotel.

from the British was achieved in 1957, and Penang became part of Malaya, then Malaysia, the hotel endured a period of neglect and gradual decline.

By the 1960s, the Eastern & Oriental Hotel was perceived as a vestige of colonial life. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the hotel lost its premier position to modern hotels that studded Penang's north coast. The island's nightlife also shifted away from George Town which, no longer a free port, seemed to have lost its allure. In 1996, the E&O Hotel closed its doors for renovations. It did not open them again for five years.

THE E&O HOTEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In 2001, the Eastern and Oriental Hotel finally re-opened. Its new owners were committed to reviving and nurturing this Penang landmark, and they undertook major restoration and meticulous refurbishment to return the hotel to its original grandeur. Proudly owned and operated by the E & O Group, they made every effort to retain the hotel's romance and elegance while offering the luxurious comforts and modern facilities expected by discerning guests.

If truth be told, it took some years

to rebuild the E&O Hotel's reputation, and the management invested in the hotel's historic significance to redefine its unique place on the traveller's map. Careful renovations preserved many original features while all rooms have been fitted out as suites. Now guests look over manicured lawns and lush gardens towards the busier-than-ever Malacca Straits, still one of the world's most important shipping lanes.

Putting in the new hardware was the easy part. More challenging was restoring the hotel's reputation for world-class service. The best managers were recruited and they trained personnel to the highest standards. "The E&O is the flagship heritage hotel in Penang," Khoo Salma Nasution, a local historian and heritage activist, said when asked about the hotel. "The management has put great effort into bringing back the traditions of good service that the hotel was so famous for."

More than a century after its establishment, visitors to the E&O Hotel are more likely to have arrived in Penang by jet plane than by steamship, or by vehicle, crossing Penang Bridge from the Malaysian mainland. But they will still find the island and George Town ethnically, culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse and colourful. And heritage hotel connoisseurs will be delighted to discover that the Eastern & Oriental Hotel stands at its original location and is restored to opulent glory.

POSTSCRIPT

To document the hotel's rich history, The E & O Group has commissioned a book project to celebrate this heritage icon. Researched and authored by Ilsa Sharp, *The Story of the Eastern & Oriental Hotel: Pearl of Penang* will tell the remarkable story of the hotel, from its beginnings to the present day — a period spanning more than 120 extraordinary years. The book will be published by Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Pte Ltd in December 2006.





The E&O Hotel lays claim to being the only hotel located in the heart of busy George Town that enjoys immediate sea frontage.