

focus: penang and langkawi

Penang: A Walk through History

TRAVEL PHOTOJOURNALIST **DAVID BOWDEN** FOUND HIS INTEREST IN PENANG AND ITS HERITAGE BUILDINGS REKINDLED BY READING ANDREW BARBER'S INFORMATIVE NEW BOOK, COLONIAL PENANG 1786-1957. CHARGED AND PRIMED WITH BARBER'S VALUABLE INSIGHTS, HE HEADED NORTH TO RELOOK AT GEORGE TOWN'S HISTORIC ENCLAVE.





Louvered windows, Penang

Rows of two-storeyed terraced houses dominate the streetscapes of George Town, with many having received a fresh coat of paint, but you can see that this is but one thin veneer covering centuries of history. Closer inspection also reveals ornate cornices and beautiful architectural elements and proportions in many of the terrace houses.

Time has not been so kind to many of these old houses in the historic heart of the island of Penang located just off the western coastline of peninsular Malaysia. While it is now a UNESCO World Heritage City, many visitors must wonder why it took so long to protect this heritage zone, as the built urban landscape of this old spice trading port is without equal.

I'd arrived with great anticipation and expectation, as I'd been reading about the Chinese houses of Penang and how they were, in the case of many, been given a new lease on life through their conversion into boutique establishments. Most of Penang's Chinese shoplots and houses

have several common features, including an internal courtyard that acts as an airwell.

A LIVING HERITAGE

As I strolled through the living heritage of inner George Town, I passed houses that, in real estate parlance, are best described as 'renovator's delights'. While many have been given a facelift, others await new buyers and a sensitive restoration. The façades, at least in the core heritage zone, are protected by UNESCO's designation. Under this UNESCO listing, Penang and Melaka are regarded as one site and known as the Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca. (Confusingly, the city of Melaka is now spelled in the Malay style, while the international geographical feature, the Straits of Malacca, retains its original spelling.)

While entrepreneurs can't single-handedly preserve Malaysia's dwindling numbers of iconic buildings, they are showing others that there is money to be made from restoring and reinvigorating Penang's heritage buildings. Such restoration is well underway with good examples being found in Leith Street, Armenian Street, and Stewart Lane.

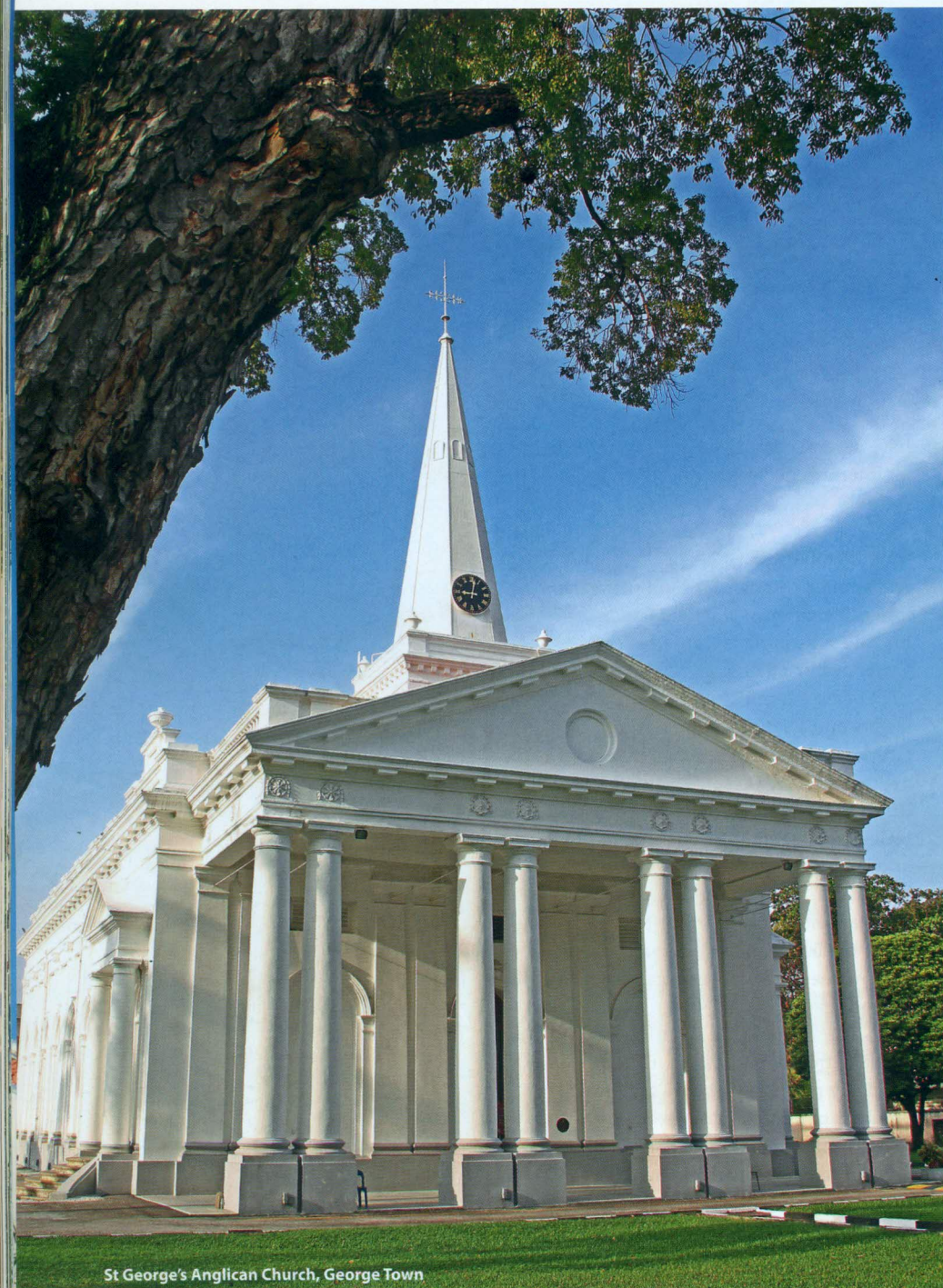


Entrance to Yap Temple Armenian St

In Armenian Street, stop by the Syed Alatas Mansion and the former house of Chinese nationalist, Dr. Sun Yat Sen. For something different, hire a trishaw and be taken around the old streets to see the historic sights of the Weld Quay Clan Houses, Fort Cornwallis, Khoo Kongsi Temple, Masjid Kapitan Kling, and St. George's Church.

One of my favourite refurbishments in George Town is ChinaHouse which is vast, covering three old terrace homes that extend from Beach Street through to Victoria Street including a spacious

open courtyard in the middle. There are 14 separate spaces here, including a restaurant, several cafés, an art gallery, a gift shop, a bakery, and even a live music venue. The whole place successfully retains the charm of Chinese architecture while offering contemporary delights such as seriously roasted coffees, chilled glasses of Pinot Noir, and some 30 different cakes each day. It's not surprising that when Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall, was recently in Penang, she dropped by for a cuppa and a slice of red velvet cake.



St George's Anglican Church, George Town



Old shoplots, Armenian Street



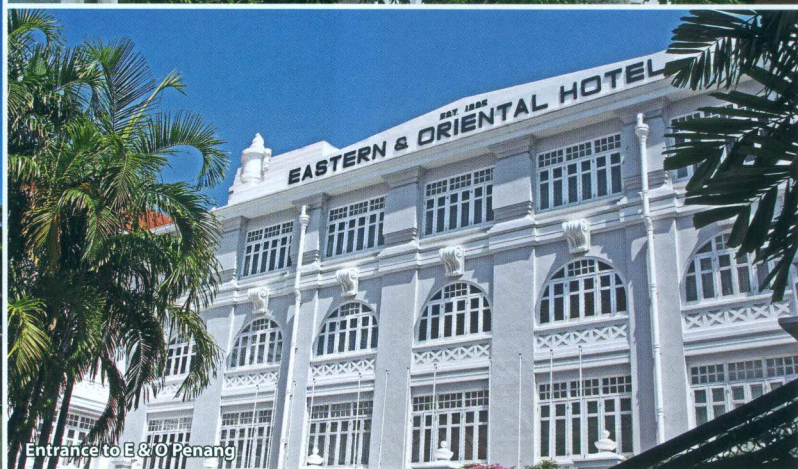
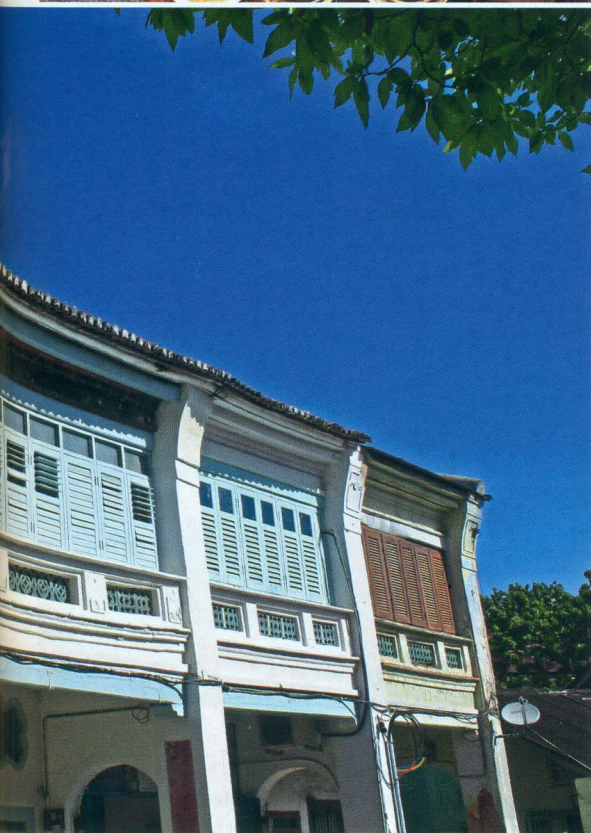
Rickshaw, fire station at Lebuh Pantai



Cake display, China House



Exterior, China House



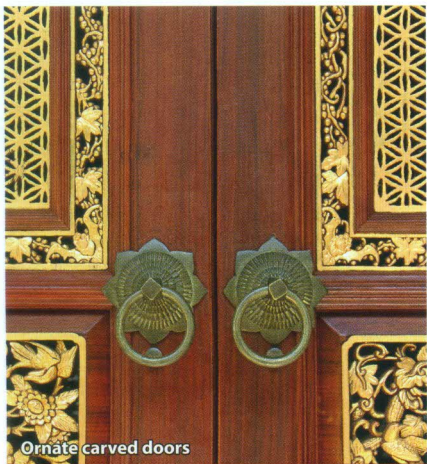
Entrance to E&O Penang

George Town is a warren of streets, heritage buildings, and narrow passageways where all the paths and walls would have a story to tell if they could talk. However, the traditional artisans such as goldsmiths, carvers, and joss-stick makers appear to be slowly fading away as youngsters are reluctant to learn what are seen as dying trades.

HERITAGE HOMES

One of the obvious signs of a walk through Penang is the growing number of boutique hotels that now occupy the former terrace houses that line the streets within the heritage core zone. When it comes to hotels, Malaysia has seemingly adopted the philosophy that, if it's modern, it must be good. There is just one grand hotel in the country with the Eastern and Oriental on Lebuhr Farquhar dating back to 1887. Once billed as the finest hotel east of the Suez, the E&O underwent a sympathetic restoration a few years back. The traditional English afternoon tea is worth seeking out, and the big bathtubs in each suite are places to splash about in. Take a stroll along the seaside promenade, and sip G&Ts in the garden to remind yourself that 'this is the life'.

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Ornate carved doors

GETTING ABOUT

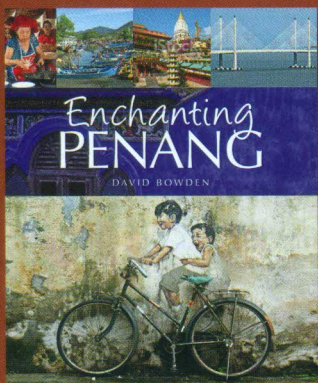
While many of Penang's historic streets have protective 'five-foot walkways', it gets quite hot walking around. Fortunately, there are cafés and bars in which to seek respite. Trishaws offer an alternative, with the bonus that the 'driver' (cyclist) can often provide a bit of commentary along the way. Penang also has a bike sharing programme, and parts of the historic down town are car-free on Sundays from 7am to 1pm.

FIND OUT MORE

ChinaHouse (chinahouse.com.my), Penang Heritage Trust (pht.org.my) and Penang Heritage Centre (penangheritagecity.com).

HERITAGE HOTELS

Eastern and Oriental (e-o-hotel.com) and Hotel Penaga (hotelpenaga.com).



David Bowden is the author of *Enchanting Penang* (see review, right) published by John Beaufoy and available in all good bookshops.



Rickshaw on streets of Penang



Fort Cornwallis



Hotel Penaga

One of Penang's landmark heritage developments is the 45-room Hotel Penaga within the buffer zone surrounding the UNESCO core zone. It offers a range of room types, with even the smallest Hutton Rooms being a spacious 40 square metres. There are various other suites with few rooms being similar as they are all located in 15 old shops and terraces that have been converted and refurbished with a mix of antique and contemporary fixtures. All rooms are decked out in period Chinese furniture, including a wooden work table with brass handles and a large black utility bench featuring landscaped paintings on the two doors. As I rest on my four-poster bed, I take in the features of the interior design, and while most of the furnishings are not genuine collector's items, the effect will nevertheless satisfy the most discerning hotel design devotee.

The hotel restaurant overlooks a small lap pool, and the seating for the restaurant extends out into a pleasant landscaped garden. The latter is especially surprising in that it is located in the middle of urban Penang in an area that was once a laneway. Several suites extend out around the garden, as does the Penaga Spa which is inspired by the healing qualities of the indigenous plants of the Malay Peninsula.

While old shop houses have been converted into smart cafés, restaurants, bars, and retail outlets – and some of the more substantive buildings into boutique hotels and guesthouses – it's accurate to say that Penang is still a work in progress, and at least for now, still offers a window into its illustrious past, complemented as ever by a vibrant slice of contemporary Asian life. ■