



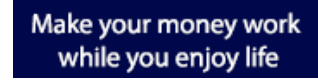
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Penang: where cultures blend and living heritage keeps evolving

by Joakim Persson, Managing Editor ScandAsia • February 18, 2018 • 0 Comments

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The first noteworthy thing when arriving for the latest visit to **Penang** was to find only one plane parked at the gates at the airport – nearly unheard of these days at any airport of this size! But, actually, Penang International Airport has capacity to welcome more airlines and flights. And the visitor numbers, based on the island's expanding sectors, are all set to grow (with nine more hotels to open in 2019 and the island state staking drawing in more meetings.)



And Scandinavia welcomes! Inside the terminal huge ad display promotes the upcoming **Ikea** store. To think back on when Nordic people first set foot on the island we have to go way back in time. A few years ago, ScandAsia actually investigated when the first Swede had set foot on Malaysian soil. A book about the **Dutch East India Company, (VOC)** reveals astonishing information that some 15 000 Scandinavians went to Asia during the period 1633 – 1687 on board Dutch ships alone. Many more travelled with the **Danish East India Company** and on other ships.

Penang (Pulau Pinang) island, situated at the northern entry point to the Straits of Malacca was for instance a natural harbour during the monsoon months for Danish and Dutch ships so many, for certain, came on shore there.

One can come here time and again and still find great discoveries.

From the mid-century onwards 4-8 per cent of the crews on board the Dutch East India ships were of Swedish origin in the second half of this seventeenth century. To these should be added the many more travelling with the Danish East India Company, founded in 1616, and

those travelling on the ships of other companies.

Then, in the early 1800's other travellers stepped ashore. Among other nationalities Indians, Hokkien Chinese and Portuguese came to play important roles, along with George Town being part of the **British Straits Settlements** (1826 – 1957), for Penang

remaining a meeting point of East and West today.



How life conditions were way back in time one can get insights about through various books about Penang's early days, as well as at the **Penang State Museum**, offering an insightful introduction to Penang's culture and social history. And the Penang Islamic Museum presents Arab and Malay architecture in a restored villa from 1860. The first recommendation is for also books where the **Areca** store and café is your go-to place for interesting books on local history and culture. And add to that, the shop at the **Eastern & Oriental hotel** is also a must for their unique books and great selection (in addition to excellent souvenirs, clothes and other textiles!

In this theme we just give enticing hints and observations about it all, and to not overwhelm you. Let your love affair with Penang begin; an exotic mélange of the old and the new, a bustling port, a heritage city and an industrial base! And while enjoying Penang's rich amalgamation it becomes evident that it is the various flavours from Penang's long history that have paved the way for the island's rather unique characteristics and fundamentals.

Several trips are required to get to grips with the island. One can come here time and again and still find great discoveries. Its multi-faceted cultural blend is manifested in many ways (food, languages, churches) – where both rainforest and thousands of manufacturers share the island's surface.

ScandAsia too could write a whole book as your guide to Penang, but this is a theme that is about giving a hint of it all, teasers. In this context it is also timely to give the first recommendation; that when it comes to books the Areca store and café is your go-to place (also a book publisher run by a well-known heritage activist and the President of the **Penang Heritage Trust**, called Khoo Salma) for interesting books on local history and culture. And add to that, the shop at the Eastern & Oriental is also a must for their unique books and great selection (in addition to excellent souvenirs, clothes and other textiles!

So, ScandAsia gives a selection of observations and suggestions, not to overwhelm you; actually several trips are required to get to grips with the island. One can come here time and again and still find great discoveries. Its multi-faceted cultural blend is manifested in many ways (food, languages, churches) – where both rainforest and thousands of manufacturers share the island's surface.

To get into **George Town** or over to beaches one can take the airport bus for close to nothing. Otherwise using the app and booking Grab taxi is also affordable. Grabbing a taxi along the roads is nearly impossible except downtown, and costs much more. No, they won't use the taximeter but might give you a receipt.

When it is time to venture outside the **Link bike** sharing system is a welcoming addition that one can sign up for via an app or a website. There are stations throughout the city, including its **UNESCO World Heritage Site**, as well as suburban places like Queensbay and the

cost is 1RM per hour only! One should be aware that the heat gets pretty unbearable during the day and the low-rise buildings give little or no shade for bikers. Pedestrians can use the five foot ways to some extent (one of the distinct, local features). But it gives more freedom than being stuck in the island's ubiquitous traffic jams.





Or take a Thrishaw ride (tricycle pedicab; an endangered means of transportation from yesteryear) touring the heritage sites of downtown George Town. You'll need lots of drinking water!

Those who like photography have really come to the right place: any seemingly dull backstreet may hide some gems waiting for one to discover, such as history-filled old buildings with distinctive architectural features, and ornamented Chinese or Indian temples.

Of course one can feel surrounded by tourists, but it does not take much of an effort to get beyond the well-trodden paths that draw the crowds in the now heavily promoted and frequented by visitors. Getting lost in Penang – is a good thing to do! You might stumble across amazing architectural discoveries. Especially at dusk and during the night, when lights are on and the white-washed colonial buildings and churches are illuminated, is a different experience altogether.



One trend that has become something of a sport is to tour the town's street art that have become renowned and has spread across the state as a phenomenon. Artists have even been commissioned with art as tool to give more life to the town. There is even a brochure about these uniquely painted walls mimicking life in the city and the wrought-iron caricatures.

The entire old quarter of George Town is made up of rows upon rows of shop houses (the largest number of pre-war shop houses and buildings of any city in SEA), some still inhabited by extended families that have lived there for three or more generations. And that formed the basis for a for Penang catalyst event: the listing in 2008 of the historic city as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

This has had all kinds of consequences and anyone who visited prior to the Unesco listing will visually notice the many changes and improvements it has had – while this kind of listing can be for good and for bad.

Well aware of the risks **Penang State** government established **George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI)** to spearhead efforts to ensure that George Town's legacy would not be lost. It is "a living legend, but it will disintegrate before our very eyes should we fail to nurture it," states the agency.

We have yet to see if George Town can retain its status when it is up for renewal by Unesco in 2018. The outcome is a crucial issue for Penang, and an interesting topic to follow in 2018. A report by Khazanah Research Institute (KRI) points to that it is at risk, stating that some 8,500 residents from 591 households had left already two years after its nomination as a World Heritage site. Many either were forced to move out due to their inability to cope with the increasing rent, or reaped the benefit of skyrocketing property prices.

Between 2009 and 2013, some 231 residential properties have been repurposed to accommodate other commercial activities. Within that time, hotels and tourist accommodations in the area had grown from 61 premises to 97. This situation has led to the change in the social fabric of the site, which was the main criterion for the bestowal of the coveted title.

While the status has helped the restoration of heritage buildings there are still many dilapidated shop houses. KRI is pushing for a more inclusive approach to fix the deteriorating homes and premises within the site.

The world heritage status has meant a lot of improvements to George Town and its visitors. Whole blocks have been wonderfully refurbished in keeping with the heritage zone's traditions. An abundance of interesting lodgings, cafes etc. have sprung up.

Historic facts and heritage facts on signboards have been put up all over the heritage area. One can grab several brochures/maps that are perfect guides to what there are to discover. One map displays the Cultural Enclave with mosques, temples, Kongsis (clan associations dating back over 200 years), mansions and churches; the Waterfront with the Town Hall, City Hall etc.; the Business



District; the Leisure Zone in which legendary Eastern & Oriental Hotel (E & O hotel) dating back to 1885 is situated; and finally the Heritage Traders (including joss stick maker, pastry baker, signboard carver, spice merchants, coffee roaster, rattan weaver, sarong traders etc.)



Meanwhile, an application is in the works for another listing, namely the **Unesco Biosphere Reserve. Penang Hill** and a 130-million old undisturbed rainforest older than the Amazon on the island holds strong potential to be listed. One objective is also to turn Penang Hill into a Centre for Excellence for Rainforest, Conservation and Academia, with world-class research facilities.

Two cultural names one cannot avoid noticing in Penang, and that might be completely unfamiliar, are 'Peranakan' and 'Nyonya', both also the name for a specific cuisine. The Peranakan culture was born out of Chinese settlers who immigrated into northern Malaysia and spread also to Indonesia, Malacca, Singapore and even Phuket. George Town boasts places of interest for this culture and no one more so than the **Pinang Peranakan Mansion**, well worth a visit for its architecture alone. Situated along Church Street this museum mansion with its green façade and characteristic window shutters does not go unnoticed. Mansions like this one are virtual palaces built by rich Chinese of the Straits Settlements.

Around the heritage area there are whole blocks with Peranakan homes in the form of shop houses with their unmistakable colourful and ornamental street front facades, also influenced by European architecture – some them derelict and up for sale.

As for the cuisine the **Nonya Breeze Desire restaurant**, situated at **Straits Quay Mall**, is recommended as ideal to try eating Nonya food proper! It's also a nice excursion to this colonial-inspired mall and to get to try out Penang Nyonya food proper (a fusion of Chinese, Malay and also Thai influences.)



Unesco aside, the island has been famous for a long time as a mecca for food lovers, especially hawker food. Here one can find unique dishes, which reflect the intermingling of nations that took place here. The **Mamak Mee Goreng** is a dish with flavours from China, Penang and Southeast Asia but cooked by the Indian Muslim community. You cannot leave the island without having tasted some of these! Some hawkers serve food in the mornings, and some only in the evening.

When it comes to the quality a previous food critic friend however says she thinks it has deteriorated, disappointing to the extent she has stopped writing.

But it is quite an experience with these street hawkers, some of them having been in exactly the same spot for three generations and kept the business within the family!

Try the **Penang Hokkien mee**, a prawn-based soup, and **Char kway teow**, a stir-fried noodle dish. As you hear servants loudly shouting out drink orders, make sure to place yours – it is mandatory!



Restaurants come and go quite rapidly, so don't believe blindly in Google maps! Don't expect if your favourite café is no longer on a future visit While looking for a new café that can satisfy people from the Nordics with great fresh brew and Danish pastries there is a new superb one: **Black Kettle Bistro**, Patisseri & Café on Chulia Street. Here you find what you are looking for and more: all sorts of coffee paired with almond croissants, orange cranberry scones etc. and also a food and wine menu!

Italian cuisine is showcased at its best at downtown **Via Pre Penang Italian Restaurant** as well as the classic and reasonably priced **Bella Italia**, situated closer to **Gurney Plaza** on Burma road. Try Mozzarella in Carozza sandwich with Minestrone soup, and Fettuccine salmon pasta or Spaghetti con pollo alla pesto!

From there it's walking distance to the island's best shopping malls **Gurney Paragon** (the newest and more upscale of the two) and Gurney Plaza (in the district where high-rise buildings line the seafront) and a few top tips for a long and pleasant afternoon and evening. On route take a small detour to look at the two privately owned really old houses along Kelawai road!

In-between shopping, heading up to the pool bar of **G Hotel Gurney** (now with completely refurbished rooms) to enjoy 'Infinity Hours' which meant 50% discount on drinks between 3 pm – 7.30 pm do not leave much else to yearn for! And it's possible for paid access to use the pool.



Towards the evening nearby sister property **G Hotel Kelawai's Spoon restaurant** offers a splendid international buffet, Sundays – Thursdays, with cuisines from around the world, and where a free flow of house beer and wine (had a nice Tocornal Sauvignon Blanc from Chile) lands at RM 150 Nett! The meat flame-grilled to perfection is sublime and the selection of the spread enough for the four hours it can be enjoyed! Smoked mackerel, Seafood, Pan-fried chicken with rosemary and garlic jus, Braised mussel with light cream dill sauce, and a way to many delicious desserts – since the apple crumble with vanilla sauce is to die for...

Back to the heritage zone, we highlight one tried and tested place for its unique design and you get to experience staying in one of those town houses. **Mango Tree Place – Hideaway** has just five rooms (one suite) so it feels very exclusive, each with its differentiating colour and accessed via secret entrances (the colour is the code to find the way). Already the cosy out-of-the-ordinary living room-style lobby here is quite something! Interiors with blonde four-poster wood beds feel Scandinavian in design.



Depending on where one stays, the call to prayer from the minarets can cause an early wake-up. In contrast, guests of the legendary **E&O Hotel** can press the vintage style 'Call Butler' button in the room! Breakfast please! A visit to Penang is not complete without at least having afternoon tea at **1885** or drinks in **Farquhar's Bar** at this hotel legend. It's affordable! Also, this grand dame of heritage hotels has its own museum where you can learn more about its fascinating history and legendary guests (whose portraits also adore the walls in the Heritage Wing). It is rather out-of-the-ordinary, elegant and boasting a huge seafront with pool. E & O also has a recently built Victory Annexe, where the classic timeless design of the hotel is reflected.

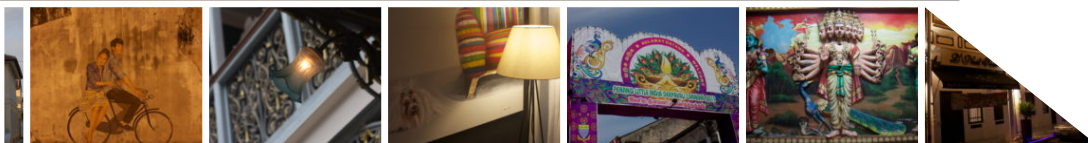
Immerse yourself in history by going all the way with a stay there, each suite offering the perfect invitation to step back into the refined elegance and colonial grandeur of a golden age, and which continues today as Penang seems to be facing a golden future.

Also for entrepreneurs Penang's combination of work and various leisure options are clearly attractive. So called Digital nomads now frequent Penang, where downtown's **@CAT** is the main place where one can rent a desk with internet access 24/7 – and meet peers. Initiated by Invest In Penang this collaborative co-working space also offer accelerator programme, including the Founder Institute Programme.

Managing Director **Howie Chang** explains it was started with the recognition that start-ups generate a lot of innovations, as a way to identify potential alternatives to the core industry here in Penang, plus the fact that potentially everywhere in the region is focusing on start-ups.

"@CAT exists to be the catalyst to grow the start-up and technology eco-system in Penang. I believe in the potential in Penang. We have bright people but a lot of them are leaving Penang. So we need to have exciting start-ups here, and @CAT is trying to make it easy for people to create start-ups, businesses, but more than that to also attract exciting start-ups to be based here to provide incentives for bright talents to stay on."

All photos: Joakim Persson



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