

E&O Hotel History PART 1/3 - THE RISE

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Malaysia has a beautiful island, which is full of history, nature, and amazing food. The island, which was originally named Pinang has a strategical position with Port. The name comes from the betel-nut palm which was in abundance here. English changed it to Penang and today it's a popular touristic stop. It has rich tourist offer of accommodation, no matters how deep you want to get in your pocket. But it wasn't always like that.

The British flag was raised on Penang, on 11 August 1786. At first the British weren't really interested in this island. The businessmen of the island were mostly Chinese immigrants. They were the leading industrious and entrepreneurs. Even today the Penang is the only Malaysian state with

Chinese majority. This localized Straits-born or Peranakan Chinese were referred as Baba (males) and Nonya (females). Nonyas are also crucial for the birth of Yonyas kitchen, which is still very popular. Among the tenacious new migrants were Armenian merchants. Part of their community were also the Sarkies brothers, the founders of E&O Hotel in 1885. At first, they bought Penang's former Hotel de l'Europe and named it Oriental Hotel. Not so far from there was already established Eastern Hotel, whose landlord was Khaw Sim Bee. He was also the landlord of new Sarkies Brothers hotel – Oriental Hotel. Sarkies presented to Mr. Khaw a vision of luxury hotel in Penang. Back then the luxury accommodation was not an option, even though the tourism was more and more attractive, due to the Suez Canal (1869). Sarkies subsequently took over both buildings.



Penang Clan Jetty

In 1889 they completely refurbished Oriental and surrendered the Eastern at this point. The refurbished Oriental Hotel was known now as Eastern and Oriental Hotel (E&O). At this point, E&O was a 30-bedroom lodging house with a dining room holding about 12 tables. At that time Sarkies brothers had another bigger project – Raffles hotel, Singapore. Eastern Hotel, was run by Sarkies Armenian fellow Gregory Mackertich Seth Nahapiet. The youngest brother Arshak was in restless search of constant improvements and upgrading. To stay ahead of the competition was

crucial as tourism rapidly became a booming industry in Penang. In 1901 he refurbished the hotel with teak furniture. The bedrooms were reckoned by the standards of those days. Only six years later he made new two-story block housing 45 bedrooms, as the hotel's north wing. There was a new seawall, a dining room, dance floor, a bar, fans and electric light throughout. In 1908 he expands across the road. Leasing adjacent building, his one-time competitor, the old International Hotel. International Hotel morphed into a luxurious annexe with the roller-skating rink, marble-floored dining room, and motor garage. He connected annexe to mother hotel E&O with Moorish arches veranda and a similarly domed garden gazebo. In 1910 the new E&O was the 70-room establishment, but not for long. Only three years later Arshak decided to buy the neighboring Penang Hall for further extensions. Now was E&O equipped with 100 rooms and 200-seat dining hall. In this action, he also enlarged the bar, made a front driveway and new porch, including the first ladies' 'cloakroom. Not so far from E&O was Runnymede Hotel, which was fast becoming E&O's most serious competitor. The answer to this was a new E&O's Victory annexe, which was built at the conclusion of world war one in 1918. However, it no longer stands today, having been demolished in 1981.



E&O. Credit: History

E&O was titled as the luxury class hotel in 1923. The new three-story, 40-room Victory Annexe with its domes and minarets of British India was the icing on the cake for Arshak. The annexe had a commanding sea view for every bedroom, and it was attached to the bathroom with English long baths. There was also hot and cold running water, telephone in every room, electric fans and private balconies. For this renovation was chosen Keys and Dowdeswell architecture firm, from Singapore. Now, this hotel claimed to be the largest and the best hotel in Penang. By 1927 guidebooks were describing it as “The Premier Hotel East of Suez”. It has the longest seafront, of any hotel in the World, at 256 m of a seawall. In front of the seafront wall was the most beautiful garden. E&O’s novelties were also a billiards room, hairdressing salon, curio and jewelry shop, post and telegraph office. Hotel was operating with about 130 rooms and a 300-seat dining hall. The biggest pride of hotel was new ballroom, generally reckoned to be on a par with this one at Singapore’s Raffles.



E&O restaurant. Credit: History

In 1920's the business was blooming. E&O was hosting the main social events of the year. There you could see as many as 500 people mingling around at the same time. Every Tuesday and Friday night there were dancing events with various musicians. The new dances like the Black Bottom and the Charleston were on the horizon at that time. Let me just

add that a dance wasn't an easy task in Penang back in time. The dress codes were still elaborately formal. For men clad in boiled, starch-stiff shirt fronts and short mess jackets were in order. If that wasn't an option the alternative was black dinner suits. By that time E&O was Penang's premier social venue.



Chair-E&O

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Source: Ilsa Sharp: The E&O Hotel: Pearl of Penang

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Such an interesting article. Thanks for the information. The hotel reminds me a bit of the Oyster Box in Durban.

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You are welcome. Will check, that one for sure. In next weeks there will be other articles about history and in the end the review of this amazing hotel. Thank you for stopping by



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