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E&O HOTEL HISTORY PART 3/3 – A NEW START

July 5, 2018

The E&O building survived World War II. However, there was no crockery, glassware, cutlery, silver or linen left. Also, the furniture looked tired, but considering the war, it was in decent shape. To cover the expenses of repairing the Runnymede, E&O, and Crag, the new owner claimed a 409,431 Malayan-dollar. This claim was settled in 1955 with only 69,000 Malayan-dollar, which was a huge disappointment.

The life in Penang was getting back into old lanes. Peace and guests returned to the city and hotels did notice some profit. In 1951 The Choong family (Rich family in Penang) who had a major stake in Runnymede offered to pay other shareholders and took over the hotels. Their only counterweight was the biggest individual shareholder Frank Duxbury. After a few meetings, the offer was positive and Choongs paid around 1.7 million Malayan dollars to shareholders. Around 3000 shares remained untraced, owing to the loss of records during the Japanese occupation.

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E&O Hotel

The Malaysian independence and the fact E&O was now in local hands was a pride for Penang's' people. For Choongs that was a jewel in a crown of their family business. E&O was getting a more oriental touch, but European management was still important. The need to emphasize European standards in the hospitality trade was still alive. The hotel restaurant became famous for their Chinese food, as well the grill with both Chinese and western style food. The weekly dances were again on the repertoire and some of the rooms got a new improvement – air condition. Penang became a hot tourist spot again and income from foreigners was getting higher. That was a good news for owners, but there was a new problem – A strike of hotel workers. Choongs saw a huge chance to turn this into a business – sell the E&O and pour cash into the family business. After 10-days standoff with the striking workers, Choongs made the announcement to sell the hotel. On 1 August 1965, the E&O fell silent in dark. Some described this even the bigger catastrophe for a hotel, than Japanese occupation.



E&O Hotel Farquhar's Bar

In late September 1965, the businessman Chan Eng Hock bought the hotel from Choongs for just under three million Malayan dollars. The decision for selling wasn't related to money problems. To emphasize that Chan Eng Hock had to borrow one-third of the money from the company belonging to Choongs. Just as a statement that this sell wasn't driven by desperation. They re-hired old staff, and the swimming pool on the seafront lawn was in the

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plan. Very quickly the hotel settled back into a routine. Soon there was a three-week waiting list for a table in the restaurant. The hotel was very popular also for wedding celebrations, couples got married there every weekend.

Almost everyone on Penang island can remember their celebration in E&O.

The tourist boom brought more competition. New more modern hotels opened in the city, so E&O desperately needed some improvements. Chan Eng Hock struck up an alliance with the cash-flush Jack Chia-MPH Ltd group, which later in 1973 controlled 87.5% equity in the E&O. The deal was heavy seven million Malaysian-dollar. One of refreshment is a new casual coffee house, Sarkies Corner, operating 24 hours. In 1981 Victory Annexe, once Arshak Sarkies pride and joy was demolished. There was a brand new “the biggest ballroom in Malaysia” boarded up. Extensive renovations to the hotel began in 1982 under Chan Eng Hock’s chairmanship. This action was more restoration than a renovation. Due to the recession, the huge development plans went to pending. The reviews were bad and the hotel fell into red numbers. This accommodation was described as a nostalgia lovers place.



E&O Hotel and Sarkies gun

Jack Chia got a lot of mail from interested buyers. They were all denied, only one found its place – it was an offer by a local consortium led by property developer Terry Tham. After tough negotiations he bought 90.7 % stake in E&O. Today it looks like a good investment, but at that time he got a lot of questions about this seemingly mad decision. But luckily Tham believed in long-term investment and he saw a much bigger picture.

In 1996 E&O closed their doors for major renovation. Anticipated 18-month restoration program become a painful 5 years project. There was no extension planned, due to their vision of smaller boutique hotel. Among heritage lovers, a renovation was a big concern. They were afraid the hotel will become a modern one and they will dispose of the valuable old pieces of furniture. Somehow, they were right. Management decided to sell original bathroom fittings, pattern floor tiles, teak doors and casement windows, crockery and so it was rumored, even the grand lobby staircase. Hotel management also shows some generosity, as they gave the hotel’s Yamaha organ in recognition of personal contribution to a couple of entertainers, who were playing and singing in the hotel for 47 years. Penang at that time was fronting to some amazing title – UNESCO heritage site. This title they got later in 2008 and E&O hotel is positioned in its buffer zone. Francesco Bandarin a former director on UNESCO World Heritage Centre said: “Buffer zones are an important tool for conservation of properties inscribed on the World Heritage List. All along the history of implementation of the World Heritage Convention, the protection of the “surroundings” of the inscribed properties was considered an essential component of the conservation strategy, for cultural and natural sites alike”.



E&O Hotel room

In early 2001 the hotel finally opened their doors again and it came out more than fantastic. From now on it's positioned as "luxury heritage hotel". The gardens and the coconut palms were still there only the swimming pool got bigger. In the reception lobby missing centerpiece, the grand staircase, has been replaced and the dome looked younger. The rooms got new furniture. New reproduction, but genuine antique pieces. The style of rooms was declared as "East-meets-West" and were decorated perfectly. All 100 rooms are in fact suites, offering the largest average room size available in Penang. A true elegance was preserved also in the ballroom with its timbered wood floor, concert stage, upper gallery, and royal box. The modern approach was related to the business center. Boardroom to accommodate groups of 20 to 150. In all aspects, they managed to preserve history and style!



E&O Hotel bathroom

The business is good, and not only for the hotel. In Penang, the tourist industry is having a blast. In 2000 there were around 10 million arrivals of tourist, while in 2012 around 25 million of arrival. The E&O didn't want to stay without a share, so the new investment was planned. In 2013 they opened a new wing called Victory Annexe, after once Arshak's "parade horse". This new 16-storey building (without 13 and 14 floors as those are unlucky ones) has 117 Superior rooms and five Corner Suites. On the 6th floor is rewarded Panpuri SPA, Planters Lounge private lounge exclusively for guests and its poolside terrace with infinity pool. The rooms are equipped with all modern

conveniences yet in great colonial style. The corridors are wide, just like in the old building. And when you are walking in this new building you easily got deceived about its age. Only a few drinks and you will think you are back in colonial time. All furniture is made in a similar style as it is in now called Heritage wing. The bathroom is floored with same black and white colonial tiles and equipped with four-legged English style baths – an imitation of those controversy sold in the first renovation. With all this effort, I think they did make up for those baths.



E&O Hotel's New Wing

As true historic place lovers, we stayed in Heritage wing and reviewed our staying there. So please feel free to read how is to stay in this iconic hotel today.

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