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Pith helmets and rotary-dial phones: Penang, Malaysia hotel's colonial splendour

- Treat yourself to a rainy-season bargain stay at Eastern & Oriental Hotel, the grande dame of Penang properties and brainchild of the Sarkies Brothers
- The hotel is one of a quartet opened by the indefatigable Armenian hoteliers across Southeast Asia in the late 19th century

BY [FIONNUALA MCHUGH](#)

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Do you mean the world-famous E&O? Yes. Or the Eat & Owe as it was known in its colonial heyday, when nobody paid cash for their stengah (a drink made of whisky and soda water) and the chits piled up behind the counters. Manager Arshak Sarkies was famously hospitable, not always an ideal trait in a hotelier.

His name rings a bell. It should. He was one of the indefatigable Sarkies, originally an Armenian family in Iran who, in the late 19th century, studded Southeast Asia with upmarket hostelryes. Raffles, in Singapore, The Strand, in Rangoon (now Yangon) and the Majapahit, in Surabaya, were all created by various Sarkies.

[Behind Asia's heritage hotels, there is a Sarkies](#) →

The E&O – which was established in 1885 but not called that until 1889 – preceded them all. *Hot spot*, having inspected the family's famed quartet over the years, thinks the E&O has the loveliest location of them all.

Go on ... It's right on the seafront in George Town, Penang's state capital. Apart from being within walking distance of pretty much anywhere you'd want to visit in the Unesco World Heritage Site, it has wonderful views across the Malacca Strait to Butterworth, in the mainland section of Penang. During the rainy season, you can see the afternoon thunderheads mass up from the sea in satisfyingly dramatic fashion. Lounging round either pool, sky-watching, is a form of tropical meditation.

So there are two pools? The initials E&O originally referred to two Sarkies hotels that were combined into one. But just before Armistice Day 1918, Arshak Sarkies bought a nearby property and created the hotel's Victory Annexe. That expansion, along with his freewheeling generosity, eventually led to the fall of the House of Sarkies and the E&O has had several owners since.

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Staff dressed in colonial shorts, socks and pith helmets greet guests at the door. Picture: Eastern & Oriental Hotel, Penang, Malaysia

These days, the existence of a new Victory Annexe next door to what's called the Heritage Wing gives the odd sense you're staying in two completely different hotels, each with its own pool and restaurants.

Does that work? Surprisingly well. For a start, it means there's a long, shared waterfront, which includes cannons from Penang's Fort Cornwallis and a stately Java olive tree that's older than the hotel itself. Facilities are shared so guests can use either the saltwater pool in the garden of the Heritage Wing or the infinity pool on the 6th floor of the Victory Annexe.

A generous breakfast buffet is available in Sarkies, in the Victory Annexe, where you can eat outside under rustling palms and squawking crows; afternoon tea is served within the hushed twilight of 1885, the fine-dining restaurant of the Heritage Wing.



The Eastern & Oriental Hotel in Penang, on the shores of the Malacca Strait. Picture: The Eastern & Oriental Hotel, Penang, Malaysia

When the German writer Hermann Hesse stayed here in 1911, his tea was served by a waiter “with the eyes of a philosopher and hands of a diplomat” and, although their eyes and hands perhaps have less character nowadays, the staff are exceptionally pleasant.

What else? The original Victory Annexe was demolished in 1981, then reincarnated in 2013. That means its 132 sea-facing suites, all with balconies, are ideal for those who like their traditions (claw-footed baths, ceiling fans) served up in contemporary style. We have a soft spot for the past, however, and booked into the Heritage Wing.

Although its 100 suites were updated in 2001, the dark furniture and net curtains still look as if they were carefully curated by your grandmother; yet the stained-glass doors leading into huge bathrooms, all with two basins (a Sarkies design trait), the quiet spaciousness and the exceptionally comfortable beds have popular appeal, especially – according to the hotel – among Japanese, Korean and, ahem, older guests. We were pleasantly reminded of the Galle Face Hotel, in Colombo (established 1864), before its recent renovation.



A buffet breakfast can be enjoyed in Sarkies, in the Victory Annexe. Picture: Alamy

Anything else? Heritage Wing guests are greeted by staff in colonial shorts, socks and the sort of pith helmets favoured by Melania Trump, which is possibly a retro step too far. But you'll love the rotary-dial phones. And you can buy mugs featuring the Sarkies brothers' magnificent moustaches in the hotel shop.

Pricey? Depends on the weather. We found an excellent rainy-season deal online. The hotel's official rates currently start at 1,160 ringgit (US\$280) for a Heritage Wing suite and 1,180 ringgit for a Victory Annexe suite, both excluding taxes.

Getting there

Cathay Pacific, Cathay Dragon and Malaysia Airlines fly direct to Penang from Hong Kong.

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