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Ode to heritage and the Grande Dame of Hospitality

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Before Penang's grande dame hotel – the Eastern & Oriental (E&O) – closed the doors of her Heritage Wing for a facelift earlier this year, works were already in place by her design professionals on doing all they can to honour the spirit of the Sarkies Brothers who opened the hotel in 1884.



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Datin Tham Oi Wah is no stranger to the hotel nor is her work within the group, Eastern & Oriental Berhad.



Years ago when taken on a tour of E&O's Seri Tanjung Pinang development on Penang island, I asked who the designer was behind the show units. "Oi Wah" was the response and I was amazed by her exquisite taste in the choice of soft furnishings as these and the designs were definitely different from other property show units in Penang.

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Prior to the refurbishment of the Heritage Wing this year, Tham and her team had worked on E&O Hotel's adjoining Victory Annexe building. She has also had a hand with the group's projects in the Klang Valley.





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"The historical structure and location of the Heritage Wing are the most ideal inspiration for our work, and it has helped me in coming up with the perfect concept and design for its new look," says Tham.

"We strive to evoke the elegant charm of the early period of the hotel when prominent figures like Somerset Maugham and Rudyard Kipling passed through the doors of the Grande Dame.



"It is quite challenging as we have to maintain the historic integrity of the 19th century structure while upgrading its amenities to the 21st century," Tham notes.

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With the Heritage Wing recognised as a historical building, Tham emphasised that they had to be very careful and strictly adhere to the guidelines set by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation on the dos and don'ts.

“Structural challenges might also arise throughout the refurbishment which our team of architects, contractors and designers must solve with a high degree of flexibility and capability,” she added.

On managing the public's expectation from the revamped Heritage Wing, Tham said guests strolling along the walkway would feel themselves being transported back to the olden days.

“It's just like revisiting an old friend where they can reminisce the past while discovering the delights of its refreshed outlook.

“I also believe that the cherry on top would be the familiar faces of the E&O staff, whose friendly service are sure to complete the legendary experience, greeting the guests with their unmistakable brand of warm hospitality,” she said.

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The E&O Group hopes that when the doors of the Grand Dame reopen in December with fully refreshed suites and new dining concepts, it would represent a new level of hospitality that would make the Sarkies Brothers proud.

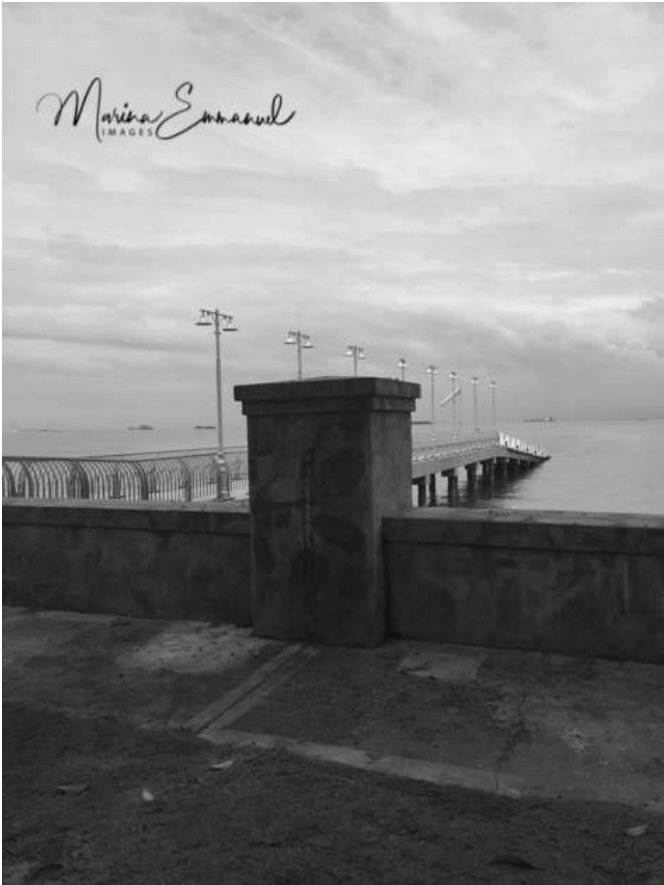
Meanwhile, the hotel's custodian and general manager Alison Fraser promises the time-honoured tradition of the signature English Afternoon Tea at the hotel as one feature which will stay put, and served at its new Palm Court outlet, where a collection of Asian favourites will also feature in its all-day dining menu.



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“Other new outlets will include ‘Java Tree’ where classic heritage flavours will feature,” says Fraser.

“The name ‘Farquhar’s Bar’ has been maintained, but the concept is modelled on more of a vintage cocktail bar.”



Can't wait to try whistling again under the main dome of this heritage jewel and to check out the magic Tham and Fraser and their teams have woven!

(images courtesy of E&O Hotel)