

# Experience Nostalgia From a Bygone Colonial Era in Penang

With its colourful and fascinating blend of colonial influences, culture, and architecture, Penang is luring a new generation

By: Anji Connell | August 20, 2020

Nicknamed the Pearl of the Orient, Penang is famous for its soft sandy beaches and known as the food capital of Malaysia. It's capital, George Town, boasts [interesting sites](#), such as 19th century streets lined with crumbling British colonial buildings and Chinese shophouses that are being restored as heritage boutique hotels, galleries, ateliers, bars, and restaurants by young Penangites. This happening city fully [embraces modernity](#) while retaining colonial traditions, bringing a heady mix of culture, art and design, and [fresh new cultural dynamics](#).





The historical core of George Town was inscribed as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in 2008 and has over 1,700 historical buildings that can be easily explored by foot, bicycle, or trishaw. A must on your itinerary is a tour of the Blue Mansion - so-called for its beautiful indigo hue. Originally the grand residence of Chinese businessman - Cheong Fatt Tze and his many wives - was voted UNESCO's 'Most Excellent' Heritage Conservation Award in 2000. The Mansion is also an 18-room boutique hotel with tranquil courtyards, Chinese carved screens, and art nouveau influences.





A walk through George Town takes you from creaking jetties to wooden warehouses, past ramshackle houses to buildings clinging to remnants of colonial splendour. Long, narrow shophouses are crammed shoulder-to-shoulder, with lacquer peeling from their wooden shutters. Leafy avenues and quaint alleys are lined with heritage houses and bungalows, temples, and mosques. The hawker centres meanwhile, are filled to the brim with moorish local favourites, such as the char kway teow and Assam laksa.





The 'Street of Harmony' marks where it all began and reflects the influence of the diverse communities that have made Penang their home. Four significant religious buildings stand prominently along the street – the Goddess of Mercy Temple, Kapitan Keling Mosque, Sri Mariamman Temple, and St George's Church.





Love Lane shophouses once teeming with brothels are now budget hostels, trendy cafes, and bars. Word has it that the rich Chinese men who lived on Muntri Street kept their mistresses here, hence its name.



The Waterfront, once the trading port, is lined with majestic colonial buildings and the Clan Jetties, a traditional village of rustic houses on stilts over the water, and homes of the stevedore and fishermen. They are a cherished and conserved part of the city's cultural heritage legacy.

### **In the Name of Art**

Street art has become ubiquitous in George Town thanks to one man known as Penang's Banksy, Ernest Zacharevic. His fun artworks are scattered around George Town, and his Free Mural Walking Trail is a fun way to see George Town. Art Lane, however, is the best place to see street art. This was built for the community by Narelle McMurtrie (co-owner of China House), who was inspired to open a space where the community could hang out and unleash their inner masterpieces while giving new life to forgotten spaces.





The Hin Bus Depot is an arts and culture hub, and one of George Town's coolest places. Contained within its old walls, you'll find an art gallery, cafes, and a range of homemade foodie spots as well as a Sunday popup market with a backdrop of commanding street art by local and international street artists.





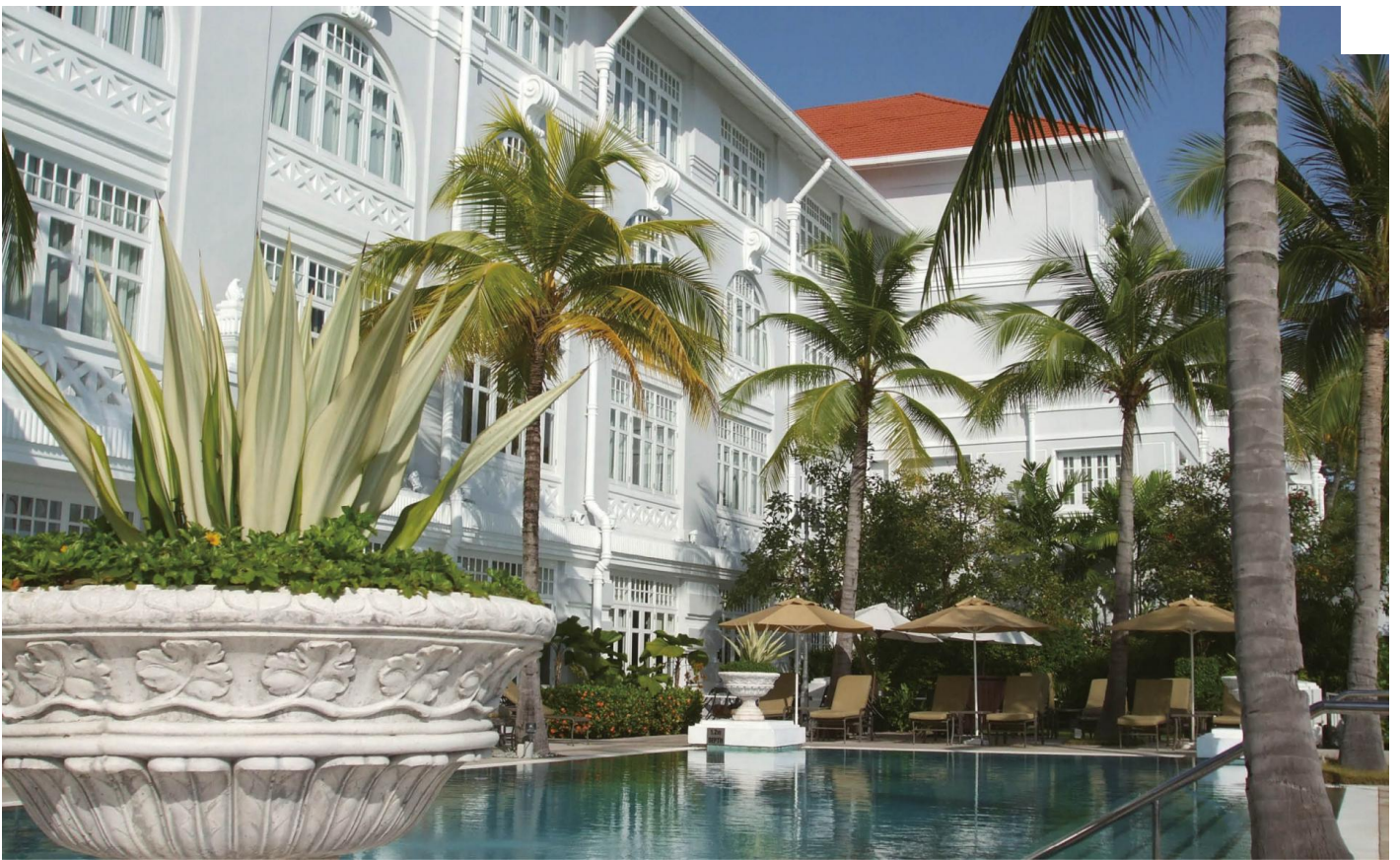
## Eat and Drink

Penangites are mad about their coffee, so there's no shortage of cool coffee spots. Kopi C in China House is the place for chocolate-lovers. At the same time, wine lovers can take a tippie of wines from around the world in the romantic outdoor Courtyard Cafe. Live bands blast out blues, rock, and reggae in the Canteen, where sublime martinis are served.



M'atural's gorgeous bonsai studio cum cafe is a peaceful place to sit while enjoying a caffeine fix. Awesome Canteen is like a sunny, plant-filled Manhattan loft, with exposed concrete walls and vintage furniture. Beach Blanket Babylon near the E&O Hotel has a mid-century vibe with a fabulous terrace on the seafront. Out of Nowhere serves up a mean cocktail, whereby its secret entrance is hidden behind an orange fridge in Hold Up Cafe. The hip 2F+ Coffee Roastery is another hip place to visit.





GAYO Coffee's is the longest cafe in Penang and has a super relaxed vibe. It's set over two levels and has a lovely verdant courtyard complete with a truly gigantic tree. Lavish is a glorious space with a massive vertical garden wall and sunlight streaming in through the glass ceiling.







Magazine 63 Chinese has a strong Chinese concept but has no visible signage other than a small white flag that says “alcohol” in Chinese. The 12 Senses bar is dark, atmospheric and always a popular spot. Manju Bar is a Penang highlight, where its sophisticated Chinese decor is brilliantly executed. It’s fun, the loos are fabulous, but the live opera every night is truly superb, providing an all-round unique experience.

Golden Shower by Chin Chin is a pink bar and restaurant, culminating in the place for fine dining and inventive cocktails. The graffiti-clad anteroom is a misleading but fun, contrast to the uber sleek interior.





## Shop Till You Drop

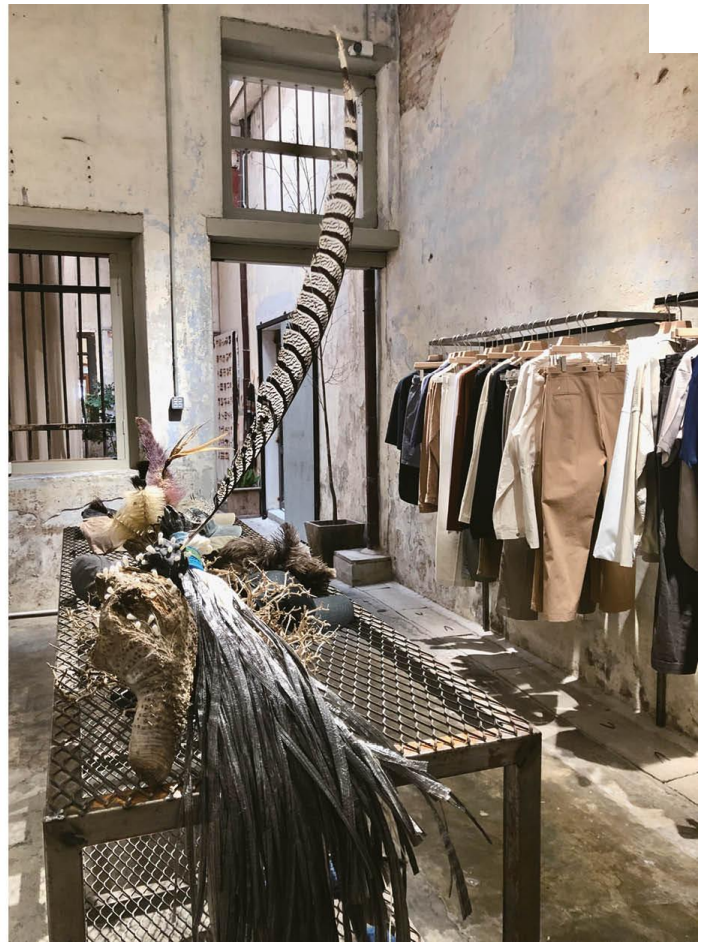
George Town is a haven for offbeat artisan boutiques, and heritage traders. Jonathan Yun's atelier is filled with his exquisite, sculptural gold and silver jewellery. Sixth Sense, on the other hand, is a beautiful space showcasing the latest fashion from local, Malaysian, Thai, and Korean designers. Mano Plus opposite is a little pocket of cool with pure, linen unisex clothing and handsome minimalist homeware. Better still, it's part of the chic Fuku Eatery & Desserts, a Japanese cafe offering sublime cakes.





Fuan Wong Gallery showcases his own exquisite fused-glass creations, colourful bowls, and quirky sculptures. Famed for his glass clouds, glass leaves, glass trees, and glass flower murals at the Art and Garden in Batu Farrangi, Fuan Wong is a doyen of the Penang art scene, and his gorgeous bowls, plates, and sculptures adorn many local homes. At the rear of the store is the second branch of Shop Howard (Howard Tan), selling his photographic prints and artworks. Also check out Sawang, which has given a facelift to men's traditional wear with its beautiful hand-made sarongs and shirts.

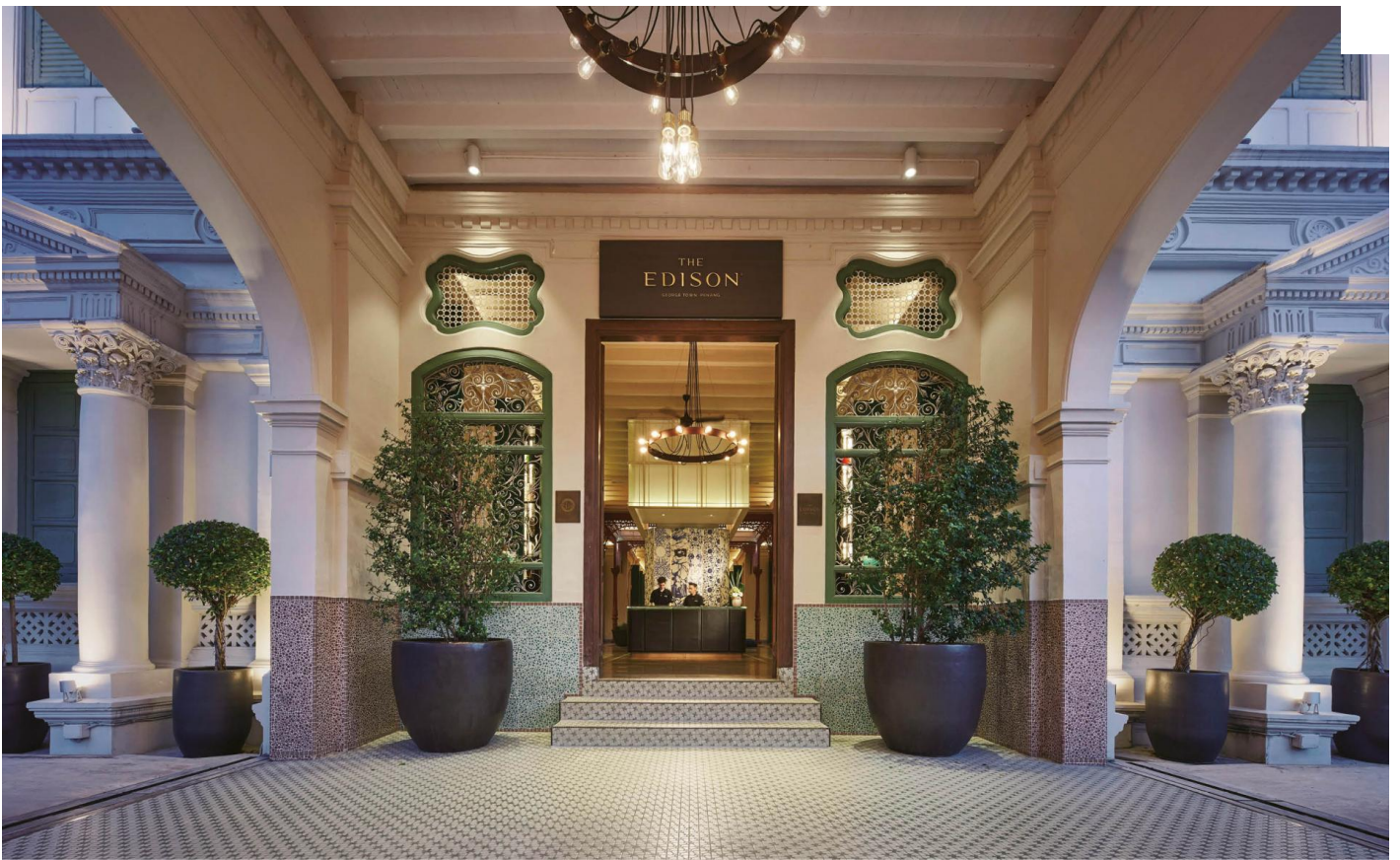




## Sleep Tight

Gorgeous accommodation is plentiful in Penang. Edison is a luxury hotel with a heart in a restored heritage mansion boasting Art Deco details. The Eastern and Oriental Hotel (E&O) on the bank of the Andaman Sea was founded in the 1800s and is a Penang stalwart – it's classic style luxe.





The Macalister Mansion is a member of Design Hotels. Its forward-looking contemporary interior is fresh, clean-lined, with an eclectic mix of Chinese, Indian, and native Malaysian influences, and a refreshing nod to Penang's colonial past. Last but not least, there's Hotel 88 Armenian - a beautiful Straits Eclectic boutique hotel in a colonial building in the UNESCO World Heritage with six rooms and suites.



