

Cuti-Cuti Malaysia: Rediscovering Historic George Town

BY DAVID BOWDEN

While I usually carry a map on my travels (hardcopy, not on a hand-held device), I prefer to just wander around some destinations with no preconceived plan. George Town is one such place, and while I have been to Penang many times and always enjoyed my time on the island, I am happiest just hitting the streets and, invariably, 'getting lost'.

In 2008, George Town and Melaka attained joint UNESCO World Heritage status (Historic Sites of the Straits of Malacca) and both then took on a new lease of life with the important UNESCO inscription. George Town has really taken its heritage to heart to ensure that it is now one of the most exciting and vibrant island destinations in the region. With domestic destinations providing the only travel options for now, many Malaysians are rediscovering all the many enjoyable places to visit in the country, or in some cases, exploring them for the first time.

Of course, Penang is well-known to most residents in Malaysia, but there's so much more on offer here than just great street food. As has happened elsewhere in the world, things changed for the better with the UNESCO seal of approval. Tourist numbers increased and the locals realised that heritage meant money and that the dilapidated and abandoned buildings had value. George Town is now very much a work in progress as refurbishments and renovations are in place at many sites that were once derelict.



Old trishaw



An ornate rooftop adorns one of the many Chinese temples in George Town

IN THE ZONE

The UNESCO core heritage zone includes many historic buildings and guarantees that at least the original façades of what are in many cases derelict buildings are to be preserved. Old shophouses have been converted into cool cafés, restaurants, funky bars, and retail outlets while more substantive buildings are finding a new lease on life as boutique hotels and guesthouses.

When Chinese immigrants first arrived in Penang they sought refuge

in clan or family houses (called *kongsis*), which assisted with the immigrants settling in. Part defensive and part cultural, these enclaves include terraced houses, a central square, and a temple. Khoo Kongsi is the best preserved clan house within a large extended family compound.

As I wandered, I discovered a variety of heritage trades still being carried out. It is possible to see signboard carvers, calligraphers, rattan weavers, Nyonya beaded shoemakers (Penang-born Jimmy Choo learned his trade here), and *songkok* makers among a host of other old trades. These activities are still being done by mostly older people who are usually sensitive to visitors thrusting cameras in their face without asking. However, show some interest in what they are doing and only then are they happy to pose for your photographs.

ART VS GRAFFITI

One of the exciting street-front activities has been the installation of interactive art and unique wrought iron caricatures with anecdotal descriptions of the various historic locations.

The street art of Lithuanian-born artist Ernest Zacharevic has injected renewed vigour into many historic spaces. The thing that is fascinating is just how much tourists love interacting with these pieces of art, with numerous selfies being put on social media to generate even greater tourism appeal for Penang.

Armenian Street is the focus for many tourists, and one of the most



One of the most famous pieces of street art in Penang

visually exciting art pieces is a wall-mounted antique bicycle with two children painted onto the wall. Around the corner, there is a motorbike, which incorporates art and an actual bike. Other larger-than-life works are found throughout the heritage zone and can be located using a brochure produced by the tourism authorities.

FROM HAWKER FOOD TO HAUTE CUISINE

Penang offers almost every culinary style on the planet, ranging from simple but tasty hawker dishes, to global cuisines and wines. Penang's hawker food, especially that served along the open-air hawker precinct on



Entrance to temple in Khoo Kongsi



Cakes in China House



Rattan weaving, George Town

Gurney Drive, is well documented, and useful tourism brochures can guide the uninitiated.

However, it is the new wave of dining that has captured the imagination, especially with young visitors, many of whom are just as happy sipping on a cheeky Marlborough Pinot Noir as a *teh tarik*.

China House sets the benchmark that others aim to emulate. The

restaurant/bar/gallery/bakery/shop (and live music venue) sprawls over three heritage shophouses between Beach and Victoria Streets and it is the place you can sit in from breakfast to late evening and enjoy its modern Australian-style food, dreamy selection of cakes, vintage wines, creamy ice creams, art displays, and live music on most nights of the week.

Farquhar's Bar at the E&O Hotel

delivers colonial ambiance and impressive Straits of Malacca views. The barman informed me that the beverage of choice from the colonial past was whisky *stengah* (a half shot of whisky with soda and ice), so naturally I ordered one while relaxing in a large rattan lounge (purely for research purposes, you understand). The 'six-star' hotel used to boast that Farquhar's was the finest bar, in the finest hotel east of the Suez Canal and I wondered if such a claim meant anything to travellers these days ('The Suez Canal?' many would surely say).

There are other funky bars and quirky coffee shops from which to choose. For coffee and snacks, seek out Junk Café, The Twelve Cups, Mugshot Café, and Pk Nik Café. After dark, discover bars such as Mish Mash, Canteen, and C & J Alabarna Shake. Love Lane is very popular with young travellers and a good place to start enjoying some after-dark, cool happy hour beverages. If you're looking for one of the best specialty shops in George Town along these lines, meanwhile, check out Dram & Leaf, purveyors of whiskies, gins, fine cigars, and even luxury chocolates and caviars, too.



Old building facade

DISCOVERING GEORGE TOWN

There are alternatives apart from walking, and with a free, hop-on bus that stops at several locations in George Town, it's a great way to get oriented in air-conditioned comfort on buses that depart from Pengkalan Weld.

Parts of downtown George Town are now car-free on Sundays from 7am to 1pm. Bicycle hire is booming and there are also metrobikes available from stands located around the heritage precinct. Alternatively, hire a trishaw for a slow meander through the streets and some lively patter from the trishaw-rider.

ACCOMMODATION: FROM GRAND TO QUIRKY

Penang's rejuvenation has witnessed the opening of many new hotels, with the most stylish being renovations and conversions of shophouses into boutique properties. Landmark heritage conversions to hotels include The Edison, Hotel Penaga, Yeng Keng Hotel, and Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion.

Penang's Eastern and Oriental Hotel (E&O) is Malaysia's only grand heritage hotel, once an essential stop for seafaring travellers on Asia's 'grand tour', the E&O continues a tradition



Seaside grounds of the E&O Hotel

of hospitality that dates back to 1885. The hotel was built by the three Sarkies Brothers who hailed from Armenia, and who were responsible for opening Singapore's Raffles and The Strand in Rangoon (now Yangon). Despite several renovations, including the incorporation of modern conveniences, parts of the hotel retain much of its original charm.

Now is as good a time as any to *cuti-cuti* Malaysia and rediscover the abundant culinary and heritage pleasures of George Town, the heart of Penang. ■



Junk coffee shop, Penang



Entrance to Yeng Keng Hotel