

## Issue #76 - Penang's Iconic E&O Hotel Prepares for Malaysia's Reopening

The UNESCO World Heritage destination of George Town awaits international tourists.



Asia Travel Re:Set

Mar 20



Welcome to issue 76 of Asia Travel Re:Set...

I spent three days this week with photographer and filmmaker [Nicky Almasy](#) in George Town on the northern Malaysian island of Penang.

In this delightful UNESCO World Heritage town (where I used to live!), I spoke to hoteliers, cafe and restaurant owners, tourism experts, historians and a festival director ahead of Malaysia's reopening on 1 April.

The overwhelming sentiment is that George Town, and the whole of Penang, badly needs international tourists to return.

It's been two long years - and although domestic demand has recovered in recent months, visitors mostly arrive on weekends and public holidays.

Broadening air access will be vital to kickstart a recovery.

The board at Penang Airport on Friday afternoon noted flights to Jakarta, Singapore & Taipei. The same day, local media reported: "The Penang government is in talks with several airlines to establish more direct flights... especially from the ASEAN region."

So today, I've included part of an interview with Alison Fraser, General Manager of the E&O (Eastern & Oriental) Hotel, which was founded in 1885. Various expansions and renovations later, it remains a cherished George Town landmark - and will be a barometer of Malaysia's tourism industry for the unfolding new era.

Thanks for being onboard.

## The Sunday Itinerary

### - "IN THE NEWS"

#### - Penang's Iconic E&O Hotel Prepares for Malaysia's Reopening

- *The E&O's General Manager Alison Fraser charts the roadmap ahead*

#### - Vietnam Kickstarts a New Tourism Era

- *This week saw Vietnam commence the return of foreign tourists*

## "IN THE NEWS"

This week, I was interviewed by Asia Gaming Brief about the outlook for travel in South East Asia, plus media outlets in Singapore and Thailand for upcoming reports. On Thursday, I'll be participating in an online seminar for Malaysian TV station Astro AWANI to discuss the forthcoming reopening of Malaysia's borders.

More details on all these next week!

# Penang's Iconic E&O Hotel Prepares for Malaysia's Reopening



*The E&O's General Manager Alison Fraser charts the roadmap for one of South East Asia's most historic hotels.*

*Founded in 1885 by the Sarkies brothers, who also established the Raffles Hotel in Singapore and The Strand in Yangon, the hotel's verandahs, tropical gardens and swimming pool overlook the Straits of Malacca.*

*The guest list of the 'Pearl of Penang' includes Charlie Chaplin, Rita Hayworth, Mary Pickford and Orson Welles. More recently, the opening scene of the movie Crazy Rich Asians was shot in the hotel lobby. As Malaysia prepares to reopen to international visitors on 1 April, its most famous hotel will once again be a coveted destination.*





*Asia Travel Re:Set: Alison, you became General Manager of this world-famous hotel in January 2019. What were your initial impressions about the job ahead of you?*

*Alison Fraser:* I'd been living in Penang for 10 or 12 years, and I'd stayed at the hotel. I was approached about the position, and what really drew me was that I knew there was a planned major renovation to take effect in the Heritage Wing from March 2019. That was a major drawcard for me. It was exciting to be involved in that.

*ATF: The E&O was founded in 1885. How does the overlay of heritage influence your everyday work?*

*AF:* The hotel stands as a beacon for Penang, and we all embrace the culture and the history that surrounds us. We are also very aware of the two different experiences of both wings of the hotel. When we were doing the renovation, we added a lot of hints of heritage and reminders of where we'd come from within the uniforms. The sarong of the receptionists, for example, has a design that incorporates the wrought iron work outside the building. In both wings, our doormen wear original colonial outfits with khaki shorts and pith helmets that show off the history and heritage of the hotel.

*ATF: Originally, the E&O was a hangout for colonial high-society, but that has changed over the years. Tell us about the guest profile.*

*AF:* The hotel has always been a leader for annual society balls, special events and weddings. In terms of the profile of clients, even prior to Covid, it would have been the type of people who enjoy coming to a historic hotel and attending such functions.

Over the past two years, we've concentrated entirely on the domestic market while borders have been closed. The profile hasn't changed that much, it's just that there haven't been any foreign guests - although they'll soon be coming back.

Over the years, there are unbelievable stories about the assortment of colourful and important clients that have stayed here. The Sultan of Brunei has frequented the hotel over the years. Britain's Prince Charles and Camilla came to stay in 2017. Many leading politicians, like Lee Kuan Yew, famous writers, poets, celebrities. Dame Julie Walters stayed here for five weeks on two different occasions when she was filming in Penang. It's a very long and celebrated list.



*ATF: The hotel completed a comprehensive refurbishment programme in December 2019. Tell us about the changes.*



**AF:** Primarily, the objective was to better use the diverse spaces we have. It was important to keep the original heartbeat of the hotel, but certain areas were remodelled to be more suitable for business, as it was pre-Covid. For example, Farquhar's Bar has moved to a new location. Another F&B venue has been divided into three separate outlets, each now with different offerings.

**ATF:** *One of the hotel's most famous attributes is Farquhar's Bar, which has been relocated and restyled. What was the thinking behind this?*

**AF:** In years gone by, Farquhar's was a pub style bar. But with the level of renovations we were undertaking across the Heritage Wing, we wanted the style of a vintage cocktail bar, and to improve upon the offerings. With the interior soft furnishings we were able to achieve this within a different setting. You immediately notice a long bar and hard woods, which have the vintage feel, plus comfortable sofas and the verandah so people can sit outside and look across the sea. The space was curated with fresh artworks that are in keeping with the times of when the hotel was first opened.



**ATF:** *Which are your personal favourite parts of the hotel?*

**AF:** The hotel is a joy to work in. Being here in Planters Lounge on the 6th floor with the most glorious views, I'm staggered by it every time I walk in. But I love the four Writer's Suites we have in the Heritage Wing - dedicated to Rudyard Kipling, Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham and Hermann Hesse. They have been so carefully crafted with their own personal identity and very cleverly done to entice people who are keen writers or people who want to embrace the writers or poets who used to stay here. They are all beautiful and very individual, and tranquil places to relax, read and write.

*ATF: How hard has the pandemic hit George Town?*

*AF:* During the pandemic, it's been tragic. There was a silence throughout the town. The hotel was closed for the majority of each of the three Movement Control Orders. All the cruise liners that are consistently here every day vanished. You could hear a pin drop. Without tourism, business has ground to a halt. There were many casualties in the hotel industry. Navigating through has been difficult, and we're still navigating through because the pandemic isn't over yet. It's tremendous news that the borders are reopening, as this gives us the biggest sense of hope for the past two years.

*ATF: How hard was the E&O's business hit over the past two years?*

*AF:* A hotel like the E&O is lucky in many respects because we are something for everyone. We have a lot of leisure clients, so we have been able to look after a strong domestic clientele, and that predominantly would be around weekends. We also have a lot of business clientele, whether that is corporate or government-related, and so we've been able to balance our business with different types of segments. Not every hotel has that opportunity, so we realise we are lucky and this has kept our occupancies quite buoyant - but, of course, the business has suffered.

*ATF: How is the hotel preparing for a new era of travel in Malaysia?*

*AF:* All through the MCO periods, we put out specific types of promotions to certain segments of society. We are doing exactly the same for the international market to say we are safe, we are open, please come and stay. That is beginning to work already.

I'm very hopeful. I believe we are seeing some light in the tunnel. Covid isn't going away, but we are becoming more comfortable with the knowledge of how to live with it. The most important aspect is to make guests feel safe. It might be the first time they have travelled in two years, and they will want to know they can come and stay and be very comfortable.

It will be wonderful to see our international guests come back, and to see guests who normally stay for long periods, such as four or five weeks at a time. We are seeing those bookings coming in once again. I've never worked in a hotel where some leisure guests stay so long. We even had one woman who lived here for five-and-a-half years.

## **Vietnam Kickstarts a New Tourism Era**

## TWO YEARS OF TRAVEL DISRUPTION, PART 7 - VIETNAM KICKSTARTS A NEW TOURISM ERA, WITH MIKE TATARSKI



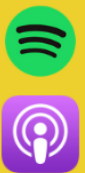
Gary  
Bowerman



Mike  
Tatarski



Hannah  
Pearson



Vietnam's reopening has been highly anticipated, and rather unpredictable. But it's on track! On this week's [The South East Asia Travel Show](#), we chatted with Ho Chi Minh City-based [Mike Tatarski](#), Editor of [Saigoneer](#) and Founder of the [Vietnam Weekly](#) newsletter, about the outlook for Vietnam's inbound, outbound and domestic sectors. Plus, proposed airport expansions and a North-South high-speed railway.

Listen to *Two Years of Travel Disruption, Part 7 - Vietnam Kickstarts a New Tourism Era, with Mike Tatarski*:

 [Website](#)  [Spotify](#)  [Apple](#)

*Or search for The South East Asia Travel Show on any podcast platform.*

And, that's a wrap for Issue 76.

Until next Sunday, find me on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), the [Asia Travel Re:Set](#) website and [The South East Asia Travel Show](#).

Happy travels,

Gary