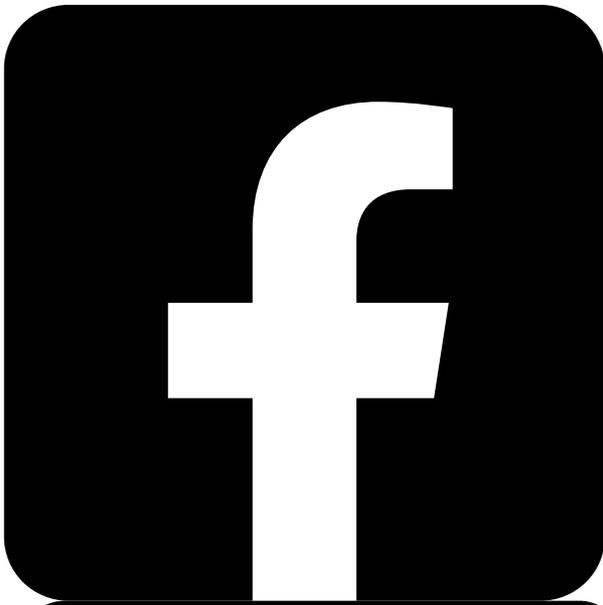




A nostalgic tour of a bygone colonial era in Penang's UNESCO World Heritage Site

By Weena Tan / Published : January 26, 2026 / Last updated : January 28, 2026 / [Leave a Comment](#)

Penang



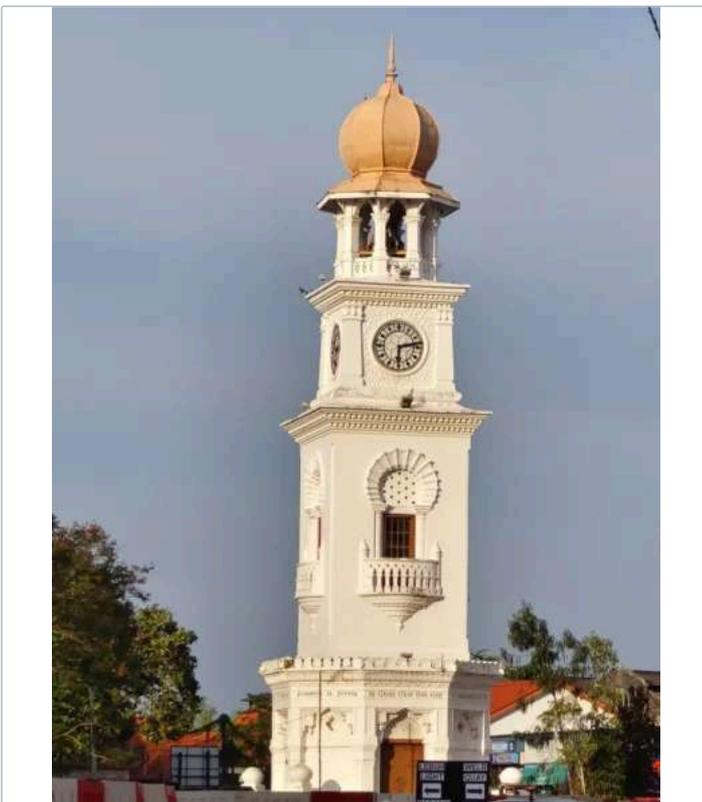
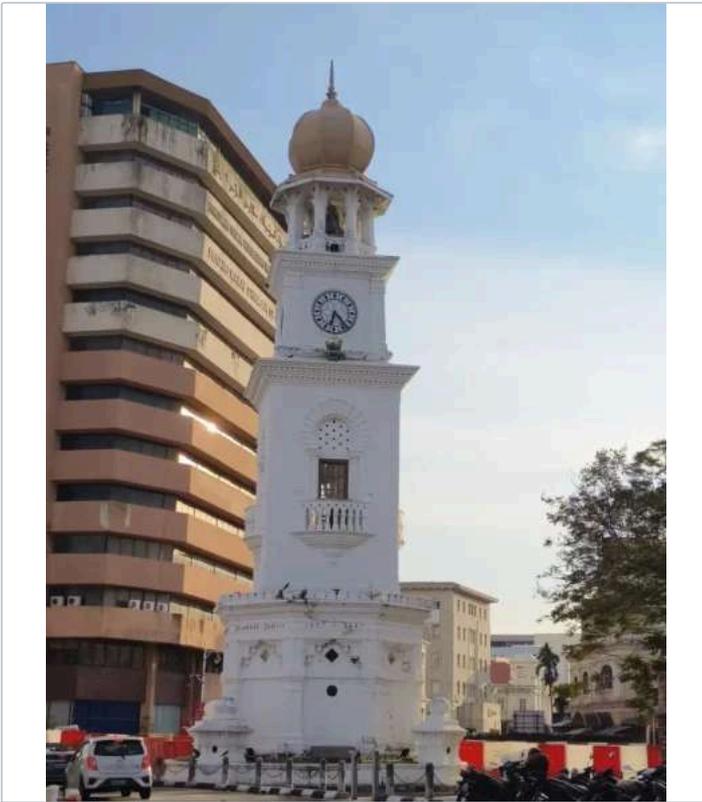
Georgetown, the capital of Penang, Malaysia, was recognised as a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) in 2008 for its well-preserved colonial architecture, multicultural influences and historical significance.

It was founded in 1786 as a port to serve British interests in South-East Asia and it became a centre for global trading, attracting foreign merchants, largely from China, India and Arab countries. As a result, Georgetown developed a multi-ethnic society that still exists today.

One of the key highlights of its UNESCO World Heritage Site is the colonial district that is full of historical charm and features British-era buildings and structures from the late 18th century. These landmarks are located close to each other so you can visit them on a walking tour so let's go!

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Queen Victoria Memorial Clock Tower



A good place to start is the Queen Victoria Memorial Clock Tower or the [Jubilee Clock Tower](#) which was built to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee (1837 to 1897) of Queen Victoria, who was Queen Elizabeth II's great-great-grandmother.

The clock tower, which was completed in 1902, is over 200 metres or over 60 feet high. Each of the 60 feet represents the years of Queen Victoria's reign. It was damaged by Japanese bombings during World War 2, resulting in the tower leaning slightly and the tower has undergone restoration over the years.

Stanchart Building and Downing Street



The imposing building at 2 Beach Street, built in 1930, was the home of Standard Chartered Bank for decades but is now a co-working space, after the bank relocated in 2017. It was so delightful to see a couple wearing traditional costumes, having their wedding photos taken in front of the building, which has become a popular backdrop for photo shoots due to its beautiful neo-classical and Art Deco architecture.



Penang has its own Downing Street. It is one of the few places worldwide that shares an identical name with London's famous Downing Street where the official residence of the British prime minister is located. Right opposite the Stanchart building is the [HSBC Bank building](#) which has the prestigious address of No. 1 Downing Street. The history of this building dates back to 1884 and it was rebuilt after World War 2. It is now a six-storey building built in the late Art Deco style and it was the first HSBC (The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation) branch in Malaysia.

Fort Cornwallis & lighthouse



Fort Cornwallis, the largest and oldest standing fort in Malaysia, and marks the landing site of the British under the command of Captain Frances Light in Penang in 1786. The fort features several historical cannons but it has never seen battle.

Entry to the fort is ticketed. The fort faces a public park and the Esplanade, a seaside promenade so you can enjoy the sea breeze and a nice walk along the coast.



Just right next door is the [lighthouse](#), constructed in a form that resembles a ship's mast, and carries a navigational light which functions as a marker for ships heading towards Penang Harbour. Built in 1882, it is the second oldest lighthouse in Malaysia.

Town Hall and City Hall



The [Town Hall](#) and [City Hall](#) are two of the most striking colonial buildings in Georgetown. They are located side by side. The yellow-walled Town Hall was completed in 1883 and the City Hall in 1903. The Town Hall was used for social events for the European elite and soon deemed insufficient for the governing of the state, hence the City Hall was built.

Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce building



The [Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce](#) building was constructed in 1928 as the headquarters for Penang's Chinese business community. It was the first Chinese Chamber of Commerce in British Malaya and Malaysia. The building's western wing featuring Art Deco architectural style, has been converted into a 12-room boutique hotel, [The Chambers](#).

Penang State Assembly Building



If you see a long building resplendent in white with an orange roof that looks like a Greek temple, it is the [Penang State Assembly Building](#). It was built in the 1820s and the structure exemplifies Anglo-Indian classical architecture. Today, the State Assembly Building is where state laws are enacted, budgets are approved and major decisions for the state are made.

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Penang High Court





The [Penang High Court](#), founded in 1808, is the birthplace of Malaysia's judiciary system. It is housed inside an imposing classical-style building, featuring columns, porticos and a distinctive domed chamber. It incorporates elements typical of British colonial public buildings, with colonnaded walkways and geometric forms.

The current courthouse was built in the early 1900s to replace the original structure that was built at the same site in 1809, the first such court to be set up in the Malay Peninsula. Modern annexes were added later.

St George's Church



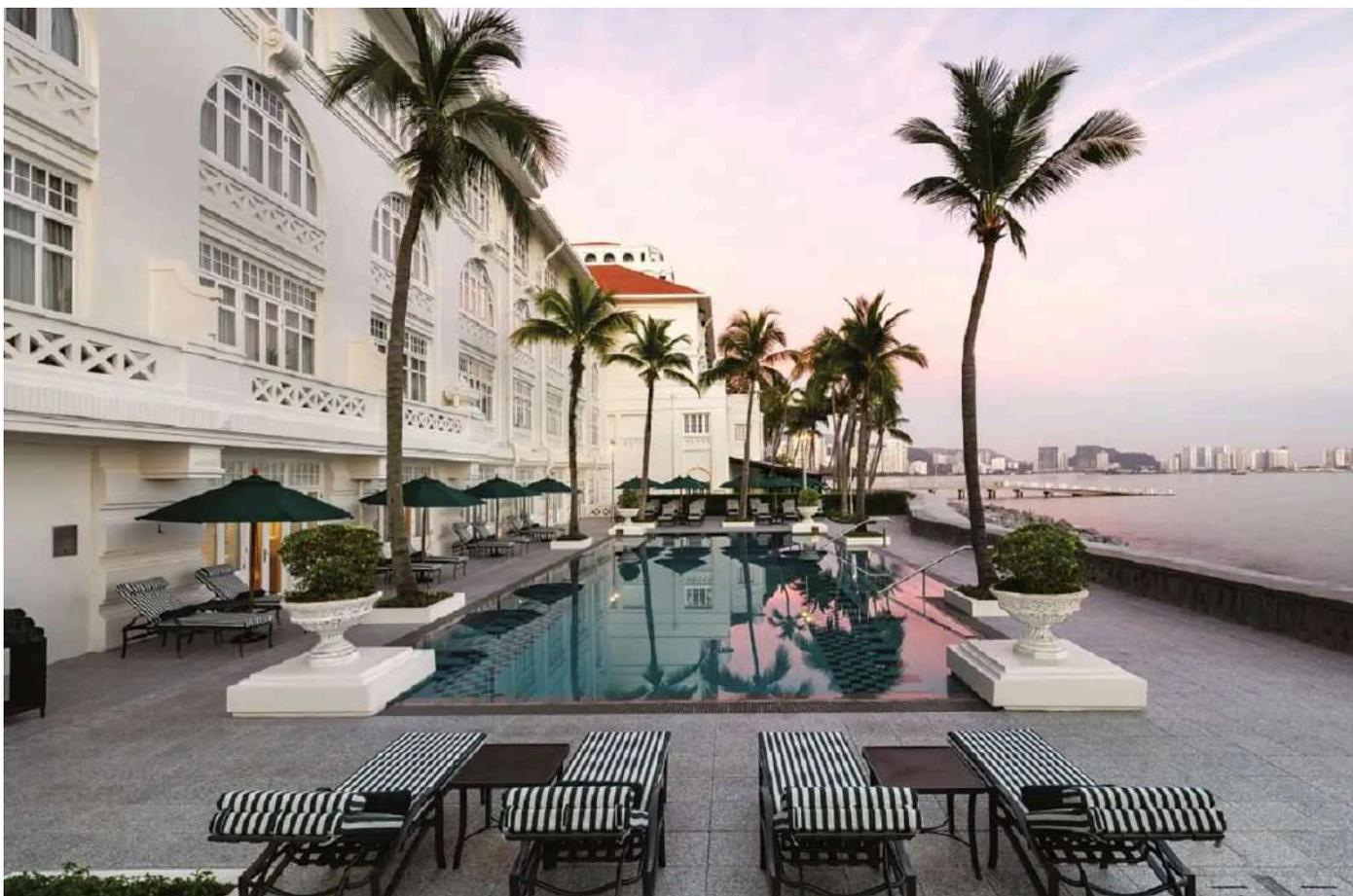
[St George's Church](#) is a 19th-century church which is the oldest Anglican church in Southeast Asia. In 2007, the church was declared one of the 50 National Treasures of Malaysia. The church was built with a combination of neo-classical, Georgian and Palladian architectural styles, and features a portico of Greek columns. The apex of the roof is topped by an octagonal shaped steeple.

Church of the Assumption and State Museum



Further along the road is The Church of the Assumption, which is a Roman Catholic church that was established following the founding of Georgetown in 1786, making it the third oldest Catholic church in Malaysia. Right next to the church is the 100-year-old Penang State Museum which is currently undergoing major restoration, which includes rebuilding sections destroyed during World War 2.

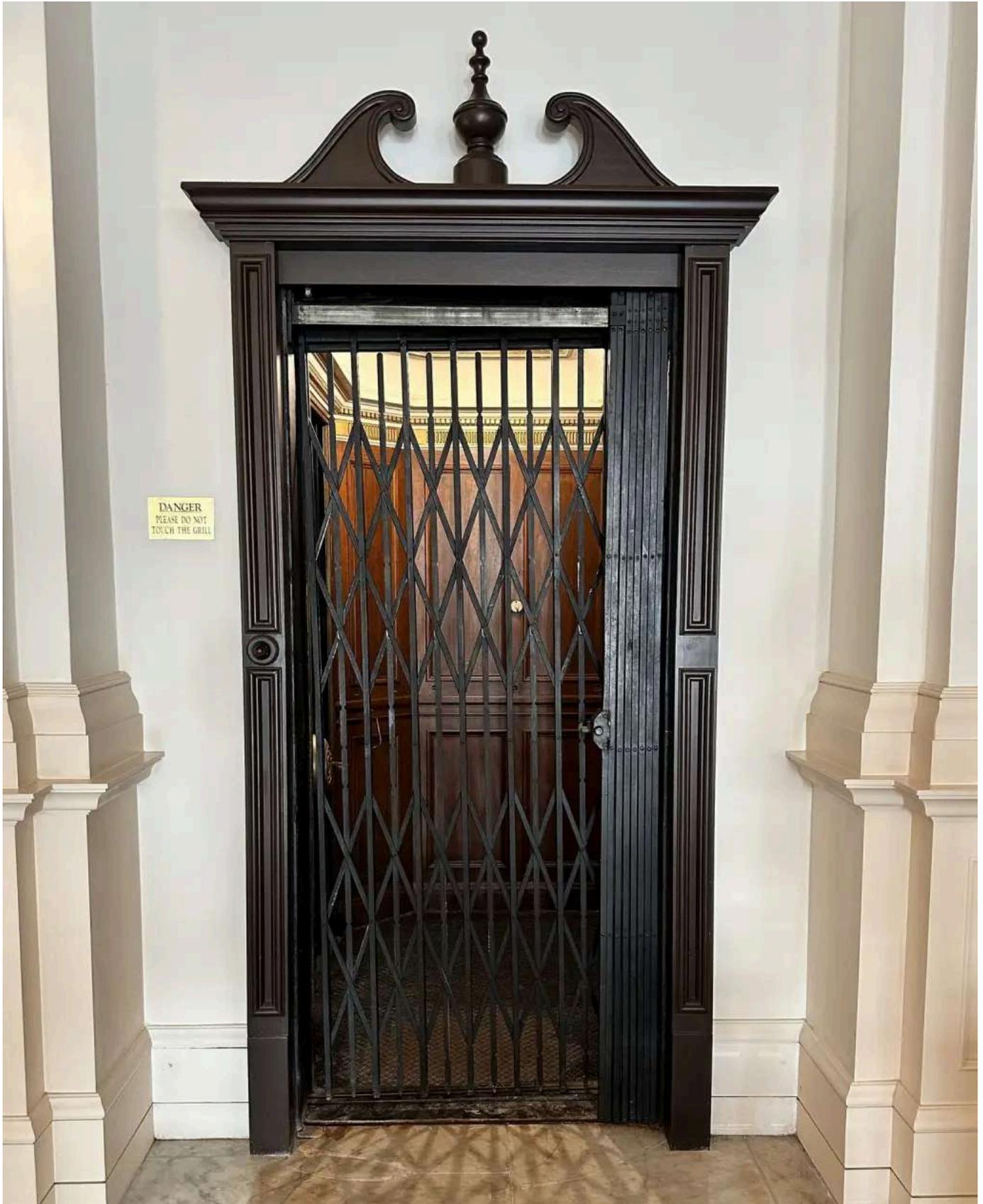
The Eastern & Oriental Hotel



The crown jewel of the colonial district is the iconic [Eastern & Oriental](#), which echoes its historical heyday in colonial grandeur. Widely revered as a [grand dame](#) of heritage hotels, the E&O was established in 1885 by the Sarkies Brothers, who also founded the Raffles Hotel in Singapore in 1887.

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The ultra-luxury hotel, which has 232 elegant suites, has been upgraded over the years and annexes added, whilst restoring the hotel to its original grandeur, preserving its historic charm and classical character.



Another architectural inheritance that the hotel takes great pride in is the antiquated cage lift with a sliding grill at the lobby area, that is still in working order but no longer in use. It was featured in the Hollywood film "Crazy Rich Asians".

The heritage district features many other historical buildings and landmarks, which I will cover in future articles. In the meantime, you can read about Penang's other attractions [here](#) and [Penang Hill](#).