

LOCALS' GUIDE

George Town

It pays to look beyond the heritage architecture and urban street art in Penang's capital, writes *John Brunton*



Penang's distinctive trishaws still do robust trade ferrying tourists around town

Since George Town achieved Unesco World Heritage recognition in 2008, the capital of Malaysia's Penang state has blossomed into one of Southeast Asia's most popular weekend getaways, a seductive combination of culture and food, Chinese and colonial mansions transformed into designer hotels, cutting-edge restaurants, hidden boutiques and speakeasy bars. But there's nothing like a bit of insider knowledge to uncover the latest and best spots, so we talked to three locals to get the low-down.

Kenny Loh was born here, into a Baba Nyonya (of Malay-Chinese descent) family, and is a craftsman creating Peranakan embroidered kebaya dresses and beaded shoes. Malaysian Joe Sidek found fame directing the internationally acclaimed George Town Festival, while Alison Fraser moved from London in 1997, made her home in Malaysia and became the first female general manager of the Eastern & Oriental Hotel, in 2019.

BEYOND THE INSTA-HOTSPOTS

While heritage architecture and the public artwork of Lithuanian street artist Ernest Zacharevic are George

Town's biggest crowd-pullers, there is much more to this multicultural city of almost 800,000 people.

"Though green spaces are rare we are fortunate that the charming Armenian Park has recently been transformed from a sleazy 'thieves market' into a green park for families and a venue for concerts and dance," says Sidek.

Fraser's favourite spot for a quiet walk is "along the recently renovated Esplanade, passing grand colonial buildings, churches and palaces, green parks, Fort Cornwallis – all with wonderful views over the waterfront, as if time has stood still".

And then there is the Habitat, a jungle-canopy walk 20 minutes from town. "Download the Grab app and book a cab to the Penang Hill funicular station," says Loh. "Ride up to the top and take a guided tour of the Habitat, through ancient rainforest where you see monkeys, wild birds, colourful orchids and have spectacular views across the island."

EATING OUT

"Penangites love both high-end dining and street food," explains Loh. "I have been eating at the same Duck Kway

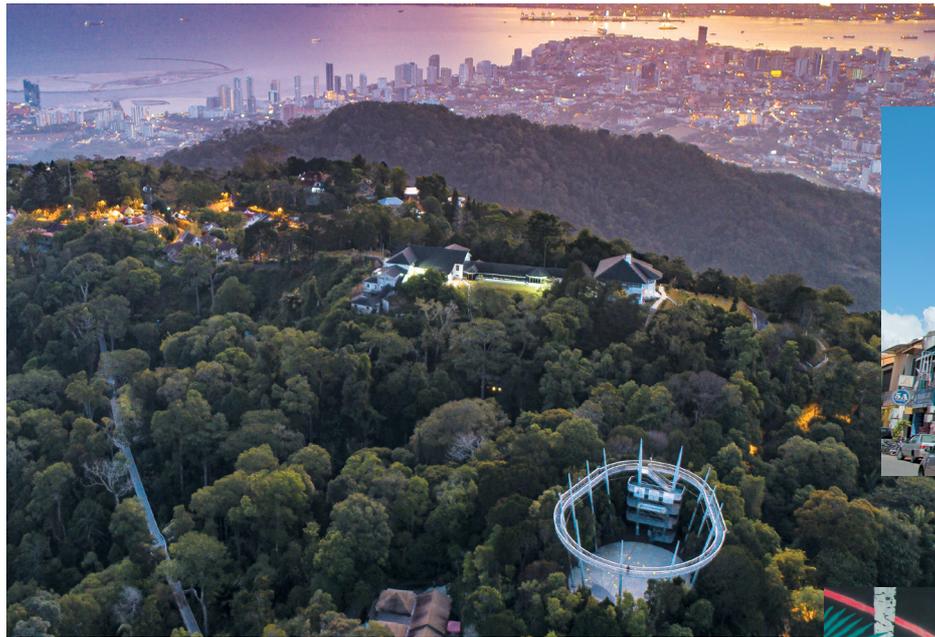
Chap noodle stall on Kimberley Street since I was a kid, and it is so popular, you must arrive early in the evening, before they sell out.

"It is a different world at the grandiose old-world Macalister Mansion, where some people seem scared to even enter. But it is not as expensive as it looks, especially for wonderful patisseries served at tea time, or for a creative cocktail at the cosy bar, where a singer and live band perform at the weekend."

Adventurous foodies "should head to the bustling Jelutong neighbourhood, away from tourist crowds, where Khoon Klang Bak Kut Teh serve this delicious medicinal herb soup, freshly made with pig intestines and pork ribs", says Loh.

Sidek recommends Peninsula House, on Beach Street: "Very under-the-radar, not even a sign outside, just an anonymous office staircase suddenly leading into a huge open dining room with cool minimalist decor. The cuisine is Western fusion and they grow some of their own herbs in the kitchen. Great for sharing dishes, which is very fashionable in Penang right now.

"I love to take guests to Irama [Dining], one of the few restaurants that [serves] dishes from all the regions of



The Habitat Penang Hill, set in the midst of ancient rainforest



Ren I Tang in Little India

Khoon Klang Bak Kut Teh in Jelutong



The Hin Bus Depot

the country. They even serve my favourite dish, the rare kerabu kerang, a delicious cockle curry.

“ChinaHouse [on Beach Street] is a never-ending labyrinth; wine bar, restaurant, cakes and coffee shop, art galleries and boutiques upstairs, live music every night, kids room. Be brave, explore every corner even though you may feel like Alice in Wonderland. It represents George Town because it is beautifully imperfect: chaotic, charming and unique.

“For a cheap and cheerful breakfast sit outside at Borak Borak cafe, right opposite the Campbell Street wet market, and watch the world pass by while enjoying a plate of freshly made roti canai bread, curry sauce and a steaming glass of air-cooled teh tarik, all for less than 10 ringgit [HK\$18].”

Fraser takes friends to Michelin-starred Au Jardin, “to show how the restaurant scene here has become sophisticated over the last few years. Chef Kim Hock Su never disappoints with creative cuisine; distinctively gourmet but served in a relaxed, intimate atmosphere”.

MEMENTOS AND MORE

All three recommend a visit to the Hin Bus Depot, in George Town’s once-abandoned bus station, which now contains fashion boutiques, barista and craft-beer bars, vegan diners and ceramics workshops, and stages an eclectic programme of art exhibitions and concerts.

“Join the locals by going on a Sunday, for the Coex market, an all-day party of pop-up stalls representing the best of George Town’s art and foodie community,” says Fraser.

“Penang has plenty of mega malls that could be anywhere in Asia, so you have to search to find some genuine local stylists,” she adds. “Resembling hip New York loft spaces, Sixth Sense and Warehouse 129 are owned by Penangite brothers Joshua and Daniel Tan, who display their own clothes range alongside select Asian fashions, with elegant accessories and wellness products.

“Across the road, the vibrant Nala showcases the colourful designs of Lisette Scheers, based here and inspired by everything Malaysian. Just opposite, don’t miss Art Lane: Chinese shophouses decorated with stunning murals and graffiti created by artists during lockdown, a treasure trove of original craft souvenirs, from card games to jewellery, food books and recycled handbags and necklaces.”

Sidek offers two quirky addresses. “Hikayat is one of the most beautiful bookshops in Malaysia, and it should be a must-see for all visitors because you can learn so much about the history and culture of our island. And I love browsing for hours in the minuscule Shop Howard, filled to bursting with kitsch vintage collectibles, the avant-garde collages made by the talented Howard Tan himself and his incomparable archive of George Town heritage photography that he has documented with his camera over the years.”

To find resident craftsmen such as himself, Loh recommends venturing “into the most historic corner of the city, around Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, lined with mosques, Chinese and Indian temples, where Jonathan Yun has his workshop boutique. A skilled jeweller, Jonathan creates both his own contemporary designs inspired by coral, as well as a series of traditional-style Peranakan brooches and necklaces, which are my own personal passion”.

SLEEPING WITH THE PAST

Sidek welcomed artists, musicians and dignitaries when he ran the George Town Festival, and for them, he believes, there was no better introduction to the city “than splashing out on a luxurious suite in the Heritage Wing of the Eastern & Oriental, one of the legendary grande dame hotels of Southeast Asia, a step back into the colonial days of curry tiffin, afternoon tea and sunset aperitifs. Don’t miss their excellent museum documenting the hotel’s glorious past.

“I also love the Edison, an intimate, elegant boutique property housed in a grand Chinese mansion that many guests don’t realise was once a rather disreputable red-light lodging house named The Cathay,” adds Sidek.

Among George Town’s many designer hotels housed in stylishly renovated mansions and shophouses, Fraser favours Ren I Teng, which “stands out with its hip rooms and suites, located in a historic Chinese medicine hall, partly preserved as a museum, and well-placed in the lively Little India neighbourhood”.

Loh recommends newly opened The Leith, “because this is a different kind of George Town heritage building; funky, kitsch 1960s architecture of what was once Penang’s grandest hotel, the legendary Waldorf, beautifully restored to its glory days”.

Much like the most attractive parts of the city itself. ■