

# PENANG FESTIVALS, FOOD, AND FUN



Penang's Eastern & Oriental Hotel has the best location and view in George Town. Photo by Nancy Wigston.

## By Nancy Wigston

The view from our windows at [Penang's Eastern & Oriental Hotel](#) stretches across the pale blue Strait of Malacca all the way to the horizon in the early morning and still tolerably cool. Yellow-beaked mynah birds squawk, coconut palms whisper in the gentle breeze and waves break rhythmically below the longest hotel sea wall in the world. "Idyllic," sighs a guest.

Legions have agreed. Playwright, entertainer, and wartime spy [Noel Coward](#) was among E&O fans in the 1920s and 30s. He notably ate lunch on the E&O terrace at dusk in his silk tennis whites. (His former suite is a few doors down the hall from ours.) Herman Hesse, Rudyard Kipling, Rita Hayworth, and more recently, Malaysian-born Oscar winner Michelle Yeoh have all enjoyed the hotel's ambience which manages to evoke what Penangites call the "British Time" (which ended in 1963 when the Federation of Malaysia was created). There's also a sleek modern feel since the hotel's 2019 update. Restaurants resemble the most welcoming London clubs and give travelers the feeling they belong.

Writer [Somerset Maugham](#) has a suite named for him close to Noel Coward's. Maugham was besotted with Penang, spilling some juicy details in his best-selling and salacious tales, based on confidences shared by colonial officials. One such tale became the hit movie *Letter to Three Wives*, starring Bette Davis as a planter's wife who shoots her lover stone-cold dead. That story, and the trial that followed, were based on real events. Today the island boasts a homegrown crop of literary stars.



Eastern & Oriental Hotel. The style is retro-modern.

In his recent bestselling novel, *The House of Doors*, Penang's own **Tan Twan Eng** revisits both the murderer and the English writer whose story is famous. Intriguingly, Tan adds Chinese revolutionary **Dr. Sun Yat Sen** to his tropical brew. Near the end of his 16-year exile in China, Sun spent July-December of 1910 at 120 Armenian St, in downtown George Town, plotting with overseas Chinese supporters to raise money to overthrow the Qing Dynasty, which occurred in 1911. His house is now a museum. Hot Penang may be, but boring? Never.

## RACE FOR RICHES

A few centuries back the Dutch and the British struggled for control of the spice islands of today's Indonesia. Located between the Celebes and West New Guinea, the clove and nutmeg-rich island group became the most valuable real estate in the world and all the spices it produced had to be shipped to Europe traveled through the Malacca Strait. Dutch-controlled Sumatra was on the west side. The British desperately needed a base on the east side, which they found in Penang.



Pulau Tikus Market is well worth a visit not only to see fish so fresh they're still jumping on long tables, massive piles of tropical fruits, and open-air cafes where you can grab coconut pancakes for breakfast. You'll also meet friendly merchants like this curry vendor whose smile is as wide as her culinary offerings. Photo by Nancy Wigston

A few of the famed travelers who stopped here sniffed about the heat. "The air is like breathing steam," quipped writer Aldous Huxley on his 1926 world tour. For those who chose to stay, the E&O was the only luxury hotel in town, akin to Raffles in Singapore and The Strand

Rangoon. All were designed and built by the three Sarkis brothers, Armenians who followed the expanding British Empire to make the fortunes.

Present-day guests enjoy cooling air conditioning while the bossa nova of Stan Getz wafts from the hotel's soundtrack. They can only sympathize with **Francis Light**, former Royal Navy captain turned explorer, who signed a 1786 treaty with the Sultan of Kedah while wearing 18th-century gear: high leather boots, bewigged curls, and woolen waistcoat. The tropics could be noxious for the English, but Light did well, before dying of malaria at age 57. Suffolk House, the grand mansion he named after his home county lives on today as an exclusive restaurant.

Light's monumental tomb dwarfs those of his fellow colonials in the Protestant Cemetery, a short stroll from the E&O. Among the grave markers you'll find the name of **Anna Leonowens'** husband, Thomas, an army paymaster's clerk from County Wexford, in Ireland. His 1870 memoir about tutoring Thai King Mongkut's 82 children eventually became the 1944 Broadway hit, **The King and I**. Today the weathered stones and fragrant frangipani trees open a peaceful window onto the city's often turbulent colonial history.



Group of Malaysian dancers sitting on an E&O staircase waiting for their Lunar New Year performance to begin. Photo by

Nancy Wigston

When Francis Light first arrived the island was impenetrable, a jungle with only a few fishing villages. The legend persists that Light encouraged reluctant workers to clear the land by shooting coins of silver and gold from his cannons into the forest. Whatever the plan worked, and the British East India Company claimed a profitable new outpost for its rubber tree plantations, spice exports, and a transi opium. A drive along the Malacca Strait on the island's west side reveals the rolling green hills, lush fruit farms, unspoiled landscapes

villages that seem timeless compared to the bustling coastal communities in and around [George Town](#), Penang's capital, on the South I island. Named for the mildly intoxicating *pinang* or betel nut, the island soon became a profitable part of the British Raj.

## HEAVEN FOR FOOD

As South China migrants began arriving, the number of Malay-Chinese families known as Baba-Nyonya or [Peranakan](#) increased dram An industrious few became “Kapitans China” or tin millionaires. Many chose Penang to build “wedding cake” mansions they staffed v best chefs from the southern Chinese island of Hainan. A few remain grand private homes, but many have been repurposed as hotels, b or upscale restaurants, like “The Mansion,” a flamboyant affair near the E&O Hotel.



Originally built by colonial millionaire Cheong Fatt Tze, the restored Blue Mansion is famous for its traditional Chinese design. It is a favorite of travelers who stay overnight and dine at Indigo, its restaurant. Photo by Nancy Wigston

One of the most striking repurposed residences is [Cheong Fatt Tze's Blue Mansion](#). Now restored to its former glory, it offers rooms, r tours of its exquisite architecture, flawless feng shui, and Chinese porcelain craftsmanship. Before its restoration, the Blue Mansion w: neglected, a tenement. In 2008, a passion for George Town's history created a heritage movement that resulted in both Penang and mai Melaka earning UNESCO World Heritage Status, forever protected from the development encroaching on island history.

George Town's center is a patchwork of Chinese-style shophouses where business is conducted downstairs while families live above. ] decorative pillow-making, Chinese book publishing, and the fabrication of sailboat anchors continue in the old shophouses, although c boutique hotels, photography, and chocolate shops have moved into the old town. Outside the heritage zone, you'll find the high-rise c called Komtar, with clothing and electronic shops.

Most striking are the many temples and clan houses (*khongsi*) some very elaborate (the *Khoo Kongsi*). Others occupy wooden jetties tl out into the old harbor, where families live, operate shops and eateries, and honor the Goddess of the Sea.



Despite a surfeit of Chinese shophouses, many close to a century old, George Town's historic core remains a vibrant city that reflects the diversity of Malaysia. Photo by Nancy Wigston

Nyonya culture endures. The E&O serves colorful, chewy nyonya *kueh* or cakes, strikingly flavored with green pandan leaf and coconut. Nyonya ladies who typically wore lacy long-sleeved blouses called *kebaya*s over colorful sarongs are grannies now, but there are soft : for E&O hotel guests' use. A high-end restaurant in George Town is called The Kebaya with a framed example on the wall.

Whoever put down roots here – Malay, South Indian, Chinese, Eurasian or any mixture of their descendants – continues to celebrate their heritage, often with food. *Nasi Kandar*, a local rice specialty, is named for market vendors who carried rice and various tamarind-scented in containers hanging from the ends of wooden poles. In Penang's Little India, you'll still find stall food and "banana leaf" restaurants where rice and curries are served on plates of leaves, along with drinks of *lassi*, salt or sweet. Tamil music blasts into the night and you might be tempted to pick up a sari from the many clothing shops.

**Batu Ferringhi**, the island's beach area, is thought to be a corruption of "foreigner" or "French." It's possible to enjoy the area yet avoid crowds by stopping by The **Lone Pine Hotel**, whose central section looks perfectly colonial and once was home to a British doctor. It has a green lawn, lined with casuarina pines and beyond them a sandy beach. Be sure to order the refreshing lychee and lemon grass juice or sugar, sago and cream-topped sweet called *gula melaka*.



Nighttime view of two large Chinese lanterns hanging in front of a building colorfully decorated for the Lunar New Year. The passageway is called a “five-foot way” since it offers five feet of protection from road traffic on the right and from the rains, which fall frequently in Penang’s tropical climate. Photo by Nancy Wigston

Perhaps Penang’s most renowned specialty is Assam Laksa, a sweet-sour fish noodle soup. The “best laksa in Penang,” so the sign says found on weekends at the café near the foot of Penang Hill. The nearby Funicular railway takes visitors up 2,733 feet to cooler hilltop temperatures.

Among the many films that have been shot in these parts — with stars like Catherine Deneuve (“Indochine”) and Jodie Foster (“Anna King”) — is the addictive BBC series *Indian Summer*, which shows British misbehavior during the Raj. Dame Julie Walters bossed me the faux-British Simla Club on Penang Hill. Stand-in for India or not, Penang was part of the Raj, evidenced today by nourishing English like Horlicks and Milo that appear on local menus, along with creamy island *kopi* (coffee).

## FESTIVE TIMES IN PENANG

The moon rules the dates of many Penang festivals, like the Chinese Lunar New Year, that draws many celebrants to the island. There are dances and fireworks nearly every night. Throughout the year the Teuchew Chinese hold an opera-with-puppet show on Saturdays. For its religious diversity, Penang’s old “Street of Heaven” (now called Masjid Sultan Kapitan Keling) features a Temple to the Goddess of Kwan Yin, the elegant old Kapitan Keling Mosque, and St George’s Anglican Church. Walking past these architectural gems leads to a quiet but often raucous lanes where tourists knock back Tiger Beer before strolling to shops and temples on sidewalks shaded by “five-ways.”



A trishaw driver and his passenger pause briefly in front of a fanciful mural in downtown George Town. In a city where traffic is constant, trishaws remain popular conveyances. Photo by Nancy Wigston

When Lithuanian artist [Ernest Zacharevic](#) came to Penang in 2012, he was struck by the empty white walls on many old buildings. So, he painted them. His interactive portrayals of the warmth of the society he witnessed grew in number and popularity, becoming a street art phenomenon, complete with maps showing where to find and photograph his pictures. Other wall art shows witty cartoons of local characters, historical tributes to famous business leaders, like international shoe designer, Jimmy Choo. The street sketches, markets and handicrafts at the old Hin Bus Depot all can be reached by air-conditioned tourist buses or the fleet of local Ubers.

## THAIPUSAM



Thaipusam devotees with milk purification offerings. Photo by Nancy Wigston.

Under a full February moon in the Hindu month of Thai, more than a million people come to Penang for the Thaipusam Festival—a religious extravaganza of music and dancing by tranced and often pierced devotees. Supervised by a priest, the pierced participant first enters a friends and relatives stand around chanting “Vel! Vel! Vel!” referring to the lance (vel) given to the god Murugan to vanquish the evil (Soorapadman). It’s an unforgettable scene. Although eye-catching, not everyone is pierced. Many devotees carry brass jars of milk, cow purifier.

Proceeding from downtown with the encouragement of family and friends, the Tamil faithful trek, often dancing in place at roadside temples blasting religious music, up to the Waterfall Temple, where tiny hooks and *vels* are removed by priests. Some carry *kavadi*, wooden semi-circular burdens, or just as common, jars of milk. Everyone has observed a strict vegetarian diet a month in advance as well as praying the [god Murugan](#), to grant their wishes—the birth of a child, or healthy recovery after surgery.

Despite the noise and obvious effort involved, the atmosphere is curiously joyful, contrary to first appearances. There is no pain, scars, bleeding, and a day or two later participants return to work or the office, quite their usual selves. After the pilgrimage, families enjoy girls in their best saris may catch the eye of boys their age. A debt has been paid, a prayer has been answered. Speaking to a young mother whose family carried milk in this year’s Thaipusam, I asked her how long she intends to give thanks for the healing of her son. “For the rest of my life,” she said with a smile.



Man pierced with metal vels dances while carrying a kavadi during Penang's Thaipusam festival. Photo by Nancy Wigston

## CHAP GOH MEH

At the end of the Chinese New Year celebration comes **Chap Goh Meh**. If you're lucky you may see ladies in sarong-kebaya dancing, paper umbrellas while old men play traditional Chinese instruments. During February evenings usually the seafront Esplanade to the *p* full of children playing soccer. But during Chap Goh Meh Central George Town has a festive air as jovial Malaysians sip fresh *air tebi* (cane juice) before walking to the seafront to watch fishermen catch ... Yes, floating in the water there were oranges. Girls had written phone numbers on them and thrown them over the seawall where boats scooped them up. A flirtatious old Penang custom that remains an age of digital dating.



Chendol vendor in George Town dishes up a favorite Penang drink, jokingly called “Green worms” for its green worm-shaped jellies that rest at the bottom of the sweet drink, rich with coconut and palm sugar. He’s wearing a traditional Malay cap, called a *songkap*.

Photo by Nancy Wigston

As the sun set, we headed down to 18<sup>th</sup> century **Fort Cornwallis**, to enjoy dinner at **Kota**, a restaurant within the fort’s thick stone walls. One of the new Penang-style eateries, Kota’s seabass with ginger and lemon grass was perfection, as was the **chendol**, a layered drink made with green worm-shaped jellies, coconut and palm sugar.



Built as a monument to Britain’s Queen Victoria by a local millionaire who gained his fortune in the opium trade, Penang’s 19th-century Clock Tower connects a diverse, modern city to its colorful past. Photo by Nancy Wigston

Driving to the airport the next morning, our *teksi* headed toward a roundabout encircling a distinctive clock tower built for Queen Victoria in 1897 to commemorate her Jubilee. It was a gift from local millionaire **Cheah Chen Eok**. The colonial world hasn’t vanished from this outpost of Empire, despite the modern buildings all around and the wide highway to the airport. “Endearing” is how a local friend described her first impression of the island when she arrived in the 1970s. Some things never change. [6](#)

**Nancy Wigston** is based in Toronto. Her most recent stories for the East-West News Service examined river cruising in France, espionage in London and the travels of Agatha Christie.