

Penang Travel Guide: Exploring the Pearl of the Orient

Discover the vibrant blend of cultures, tantalizing cuisine, and stunning landscapes that make Penang a true gem in Southeast Asia.

By Leonie Jarrett

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A scenic view of Batu Feringhi at the Rasa Sayang Hotel. Photo by Leonie Jarrett

Penang. It may not be as recognizable a place as its close neighbor, Singapore, but it's certainly a quieter and less expensive holiday destination. There's a UNESCO-protected capital city, a vibrant food scene, colorful street art, a multi-cultural history, and golden sand beaches – something for everyone.

If you're a fan of the film "Crazy Rich Asians," there's a place in Penang you need to visit. No spoilers – you'll need to keep reading.

There's a personal connection in Penang for me, too. My Dad used to work there, and I spent many weeks of my childhood in Penang. I hadn't visited Penang in over 40 years, and my husband had never been. It was time to go back.

Where Is Penang?

Penang, known as The Pearl of the Orient, is part of Malaysia, located on the western side of mainland Malaysia in Southeast Asia. It's situated about 236 miles (380 kilometers) north of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital city, and is separated from mainland Malaysia by the narrow Penang Strait.

How Do You Get There?

The fastest way to travel to Penang is to fly. There is an international airport in Penang, but mostly, you will fly there via another Southeast Asian city. The most common gateways are Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. The flight from Singapore or KL to Penang is only about an hour.

For slower travel, there is a train service to Penang from Singapore via Kuala Lumpur. And there is a luxury train too, a Belmond Train – the Eastern & Oriental Express.

George Town



George Town. Photo by Leonie Jarrett



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and my siblings would go with him to Penang for the long summer school holidays. We would stay at the beach resort area of Batu Feringghi and only visit George Town for Mum to buy some jewelry.

I have memories of patiently sitting in gold shops with the shop owners using an abacus to calculate the price!

George Town has come on a tad! Protected by UNESCO since 2008, it is Malaysia's foodie capital, and it's also known for its street art.

The Eastern and Oriental Hotel

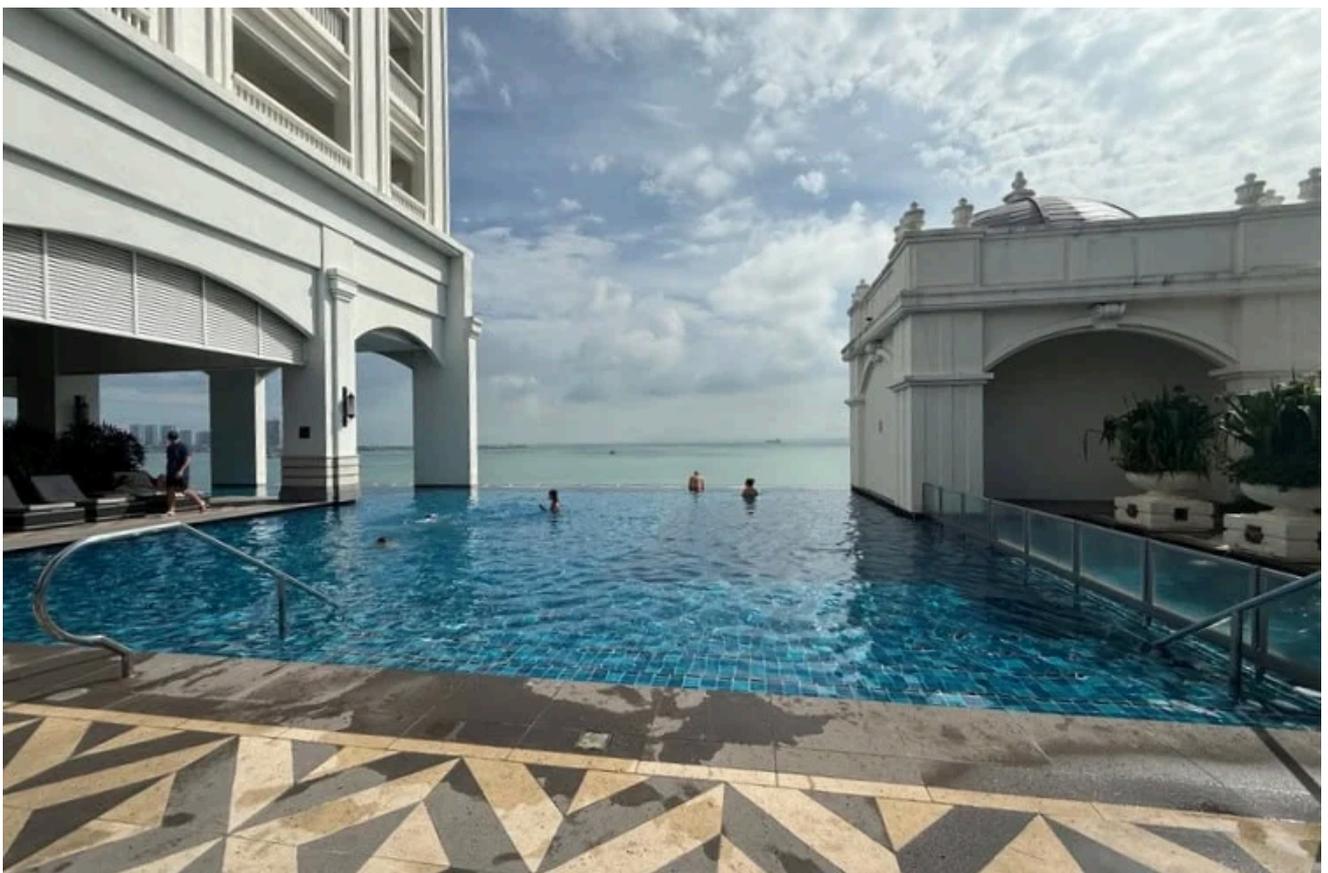
We started our stay in Penang at the Grand Dame, the 140-year-old Eastern and Oriental Hotel in George Town.

The only seafront hotel in George Town, it is integral to the history of George Town and has welcomed celebrated people including: King Charles III, Rudyard Kipling, Charlie Chaplin, Noel Coward, and Somerset Maugham. And, now, my husband and I.



The writer in the Heritage Wing pool, E&O. Photo by Andrew Jarrett

The Eastern and Oriental Hotel (affectionately known as the “E&O”) is an all-suite hotel. It comprises two Wings – the Heritage Wing and the Victory Annexe. Nearly all suites at the E&O face the Andaman Sea.



The Victory Annexe Pool at the E&O Hotel. Photo by Leonie Jarrett

As for my teaser about the film "Crazy Rich Asians," the Heritage Wing Lobby of the E&O features in the opening scenes of the film, complete with its cage lift (one of the oldest in Malaysia), Echo Dome, and elegant Colonial style, the Lobby is worth a look even aside from it being a famous film set.



Heritage Wing Deluxe Suite King at the E&O Hotel. Photo by Leonie Jarrett

The E&O has a special ambience and charm with 21st-century comforts. Our Deluxe Suite King in the Heritage Wing was 624 square feet (58 square metres), comprising a lounge area plus a bedroom and marble ensuite.

Views from the large windows were over the Heritage Wing pool and the Andaman Sea.

There are two swimming pools. The Heritage Wing pool is seafront and surrounded by lawn. The Victory Annexe is an infinity pool on the sixth floor with amazing views over the Andaman Sea.

If you are a Heritage Wing guest or a Corner Suite guest in the Victory Annexe, you can use either pool. Otherwise, you can only use the pool in the

Victory Annexe. The infinity pool was fabulous, so it's no disappointment to be restricted to only using that pool.



Chicken satay for dinner. Photo by Leonie Jarrett.

As a guest of the Heritage Wing, we had access to Cocktails and Canapés at a Lounge called Cornwallis from 6 pm to 7 pm each night. The tapas-style canapés were enough for dinner!

Batu Ferringhi



Sunset, Batu Ferringhi. Photo by Leonie Jarrett

Next stop was to revisit my childhood at the beach resort area of Batu Ferringgi. Batu Ferringgi is a great place for water activities – parasailing, jet skiing, boat trips, and banana boat rides.

On the beach are some stalls operated by local vendors. My husband had a relaxing full-body massage and foot reflexology consultation. I was keen to relive some more memories, so I left him to it and walked through the Golden Sands onto the main road.

There were a lot more shops than I remembered – eateries, souvenirs, and tailors mostly – and high-rise condominiums. There's even a McDonald's! I walked a kilometer or so, footpath all the way. We returned together later for the Night Market.

The sunsets at Batu Ferringgi are glorious. The first night's sunset was the best, with the sun a glowing fireball, but each sunset was beautiful.

Best Penang Tours & Excursions

Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang Resort



Rasa Wing Rasa Junior Suite at the Shangri-La Rasa Sayang Hotel. Photo by Leonie Jarrett

We stayed at the hotel I always stayed at as a child – Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang Resort. It will always be simply "Rasa Sayang" to me.

Situated in 30 acres of tropical, manicured gardens, this is a real oasis. My husband was in awe of the lawn at Rasa Sayang – better than a golf course, he told me! There are layers of tropical vegetation, and everything is immaculate. It is impossible not to feel relaxed whilst you meander the gardens.



Shangri-La Rasa Sayang Hotel in Penang. Photo by Leonie Jarrett

The hotel has been completely renovated since I was last there, but the distinctive and unique roof design remains. The rooms have Malaysian elements too – a nice touch of culture in a five-star luxury hotel.



The Rasa Wing pool. Photo by Leonie Jarrett

There are two Wings at the Rasa Sayang – the Rasa Wing (more exclusive) and the Garden Wing. We stayed in a Rasa Wing Rasa Junior suite. Our 667 square feet (62 square metre) suite comprised a King-size bed, lounge area, marble bathroom, and a balcony that spanned the width of the Suite.

On the balcony is seating, a daybed, and a marble tub. Blinds come down for privacy if you want to have a soak. The views from both the Suite and the balcony over the Rasa Wing pool and the sea were amazing!

If you stay in the Rasa Wing like we did, the room size is bigger, plus you can use the Rasa Pool (as long as you're over 16). You also have Lounge access for complimentary, daily afternoon tea, and nightly evening canapés and cocktails.

There is also an exclusive restaurant for breakfast, the Ferringhi Grill, as well as the massive buffet option at the Spice Market Café.

Penang – Why Visit?

Penang – visit to relax and do nothing, or to shop, or to eat, or to absorb history and culture. Or do a bit of all these things! This Pearl of the Orient has all holiday bases covered. And there are some great hotels there too!

The writer stayed as a guest of the Eastern & Oriental Hotel and the Shangri-La Rasa Sayang Resort, Penang, Malaysia. For more information about the hotels, see eohotels.com and shangri-la.com

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