



Penang Fast Forward

Text by Evonne Lyn Lee. Photos by Evonne Lyn Lee, Kris Foo, 1st Avenue & various attractions

The isle of Penang brings to mind lovely beaches and wonderful street food. But since acquiring UNESCO heritage site status in 2008, George Town, its capital city has been gripped with a fresh vitality. Keep this section if you plan a trip soon.

The moment you land at Bayan Lepas International Airport, you'll notice the on-going RM250 million expansion that will be completed by mid-2012. Malaysia's national heritage treasures, **Kapitan Keling Mosque**, **St. George's Church**

and the **Pinang Peranakan Museum** have been restored. And by end 2013, the city will have its second Penang bridge.

In the arts scene, events like the July **George Town Festival** (www.georgetownfestival.com) the 2012 **World Music Festival** (www.visitpenang.gov.my/portal3) and **Little Penang Street Market** (www.littlepenang.com.my) held on the last Sunday of each month are bringing Penangites together in a spirit of gotong royong (community participation).



Penang Bridge

Restored heritage sites, upgraded attractions

With tourism dollars making up 70% of Penang's economy, the state government is hard at work tackling crime, congestion and cleanliness to make Penang a must-visit destination. Amidst all efforts to beautify the metropolis, this former British trading port's 200-year multi-racial inheritance is still very much part of George Town's appeal. Many of Penang's colonial era pre-war architectural treasures have been given a face lift.

Tour restored heritage sites located

within the UNESCO grounds by boarding the free city shuttle, Central Area Transit (CAT). The bus passes by the newly refurbished 195 year-old **St George's Church**, South East Asia's oldest Anglican worship hall; **Kapitan Keling** (keling referring to South Indians is now considered an offensive word by some) **Mosque**, built by Indian masons in the 19th century. The restored **Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion** (www.cheongfattzemansion.com) now a heritage hotel, is also known as Blue Mansion after its blue façade. It was formerly home to a Chinese trader dealing in opium, pepper, tea and rubber. Daily guided tours at 11am, 1.30pm or 3pm costs RM12.00 per person.

After a meticulous restoration, the 19th century **Pinang Peranakan Mansion** (www.pinangperanakanmansion.com.my) has been outfitted with eclectic elements like English floor tiles and Victorian ironworks. It got an image boost as the set for the award-winning **Little Nyonya** Singapore TV drama. This repository of over 1,000 pieces

of antiques and collectibles was formerly the home of Captain Chung Keng Kwee, an influential Hakka tin-miner.

After the city tour, take a 10-minute ride in the newly upgraded funicular train from Air Itam to reach **Penang Hill**, 830 metres above sea-level. The railway station is located at the end of Jalan Bukit Bendera in Air Itam.

Tip
Free tour for groups of five persons and above with prior arrangements. Email: rmhbaba@gmail.com. Call +604 264 2929 to book.



Penang Antiques, Mirror



Kapitan Keling Mosque



St George's Church

It operates from Monday to Friday, 6.30am to 8pm and until 9pm on weekends and public holidays. The fees are: Adults RM30 each; children below 12 years RM15 each; and RM70 for a family of two adults and two children.

Penang's Butterfly Farm (www.butterfly-insect.com) re-opened last May with upgraded features – Reptile Zone, Bugs Horizon, Kingdom of Frogs and Aqua Fun Corner, touch-screen LCD displays and interactive insect-focused screenings in mini cinemas. The world's first tropical butterfly sanctuary shelters over 4,000 live



butterflies from 150 species. Open from 9am to 6pm daily (last entry at 5pm) including public holidays, each adult pays RM27, children under 12 years, RM15 and senior citizens above 58 years pay RM13.50 each. Call +604 885 1253 to book.

New malls

Visitors can go home with more than belacan and salted fish. Penang's style-conscious urbanites are flocking to **1st Avenue** the city's newest mall, for casual and branded apparel, lifestyle and wellness services. Next to Komtar and Prangin Malls, 1st Avenue houses Penang shoe labels like **Opera** in stylish mod designs and **Fipper**, all-natural rubber flip flops and sandals. At Underground, there's quirky fashion for restless youth and those young at heart.

Gurney Drive, where Penang's best street food used to be found, has today become a classy commercial address for high-end condominiums, the cool **G hotel** (www.ghotel.com), new restaurants and **Gurney Plaza** (www.gurneyplaza.com). A 15-minute cab-ride from George Town or 20 minutes from Batu Feringgi, Gurney Plaza carries premier lifestyle brands like Coach, Birkenstock, Dorothy Perkins, Fossil, Kiehl's and CK Jeans.

Penang's largest shopping retail space, **Queensbay Mall** (www.queensbaymalaysia.com) is great for shopping right down to the last minute as the international airport is just 10 minutes away. It houses over 400 stores carrying local and international brands and happens to be one of Asia's largest family-focused lifestyle malls.



1st Avenue mall

Shopper's Tip
Get a free 1st Avenue eco-bag for purchases above RM200 in a single receipt.

Shopper's Tip
Apply for a free Tourist and Travellers Privilege card at the customer service counter to enjoy exclusive shopping privileges and benefits. Redeem a souvenir with purchases totaling RM100 and above.

Boutique hotels, heritage guesthouses

In the 80s, five-star hotels like Rasa Sayang and Golden Sands on the Batu Ferringhi promenade were Penang's pinnacle of luxury accommodation. Fast forward to the 21st century, many derelict pre-war shophouses, heritage bungalows and stately mansions that allude to George Town's historical grandeur, have morphed into stand-alone boutique hotels and stunning guest houses.

Ryokan @ Penang on Jalan Muntri is one fine example. Modelled after



Ryokan @ Penang

Japanese inns during the Edo period, this hostel (www.myryokan.com) caters to flashpackers – those who travel with their ipod and digital camera, essentially budget conscious, looking for comfort in lower-priced lodgings. Rates here start as cheap as RM35 per bed for dorm-style stay-overs. Ryokan's arrival in the heart of the city is as if a huge brush dipped in fresh paint has swooshed throughout Penang's George Town, says concept brainchild, Sarah Adnan. This former residential enclave was once home to Penang's upper crust - wealthy Chinese traders and the British colonials. Opposite Ryokan @ Penang is another hotel for flashpackers, the nine-suite **Muntri Mews** (www.muntrimews.com) formerly carriage-houses and stables during the colonial era.

The arrival of boutique hotels has changed Penang's tourism panorama, sadly forcing out many residents, particularly families living in the area for generations, who indeed have been part of the neighbourhood's character, says Penang *kia* (colloquial term for Penang local) Timothy Tye.



Muntri Mews

Others include **Clove Hall's** Anglo-Malay bungalow of six suites in a garden setting (www.clovehall.com); former mansion **Chymes** (www.chymeshotel.com) on Tanjong Bungah sea-front has bed-and-breakfast accommodation. **China Tiger** (<http://chinatiger.info>) belying its name, offers stylish heritage homestay in Little India and there's the **Hotel Penaga** (www.hotelpenaga.com) converted from a clutch of 15 pre-war shophouses.

Travel Notes:

Filled with rich nuggets of history, www.penang-traveltips.com has

just about everything you need to know about Penang – like getting around, where to stay, shop, sight-see and makan. Information is copious but that's because it's compiled from interviews and periodicals right down to walking the streets. Its candid insider perspective and pragmatic approach like money-saving tips for the budget traveller, make it a reliable go-to travel resource.

Urgent hotel booking: Get swift confirmation of your urgent hotel bookings on www.urgentroom.com once payment is made. Simply search and compare rates for the best accommodation deals to match your budget and itinerary. What's useful is the composite review of each property based on other travellers' experiences on location, facilities, cleanliness and service. Click onto the map to check the hotel's location vis-à-vis the airport, city/town, shopping, dining and attractions. There're no distracting advertisements to navigate around when booking. You can also access the search tool using your iphone/android browser on www.hotels.urgentroom.com/mobile.



Street of Penang

Free Tour of UNESCO Grounds:

Hop onto the free **Central Area Transit** (CAT) at any of these stops: Chowrasta Market, Penang Islamic Museum, Khoo Kongsi, Kapitan Keling Mosque, Little India, Pinang Peranakan Museum, War Memorial, Penang State Museum, St. George's Church, St. Francis Xavier Church, Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion and Weld Quay Jetty. It operates between 6am and midnight at 15-minute intervals.

Makan at Pulau Tikus:

Pick up a **Food Trail Map** at Bayan Lepas airport or any hotel to track down 27 local street specialites from **char koay teow**, **nasi kandar** and **pasembur** (Indian rojak) to **assam laksa** at 107 locations island-wide! Now that the Gurney Drive hawkers have relocated, I asked Bee Yinn, a Penangite who runs popular website Rasa Malaysia (<http://rasamalaysia.com>) and also conducts culinary tours,



where to get authentic street eats. She recommended **Pulau Tikus**. The name is a misnomer. Neither is Pulau Tikus (Rat Island) an island nor is it infested with rodents. Actually, it's named after a rocky isle north-east of Penang, shaped like a mouse! Facing the Pulau Tikus police station, **Kwai Lock** café on Solok Moulmein is jam packed during breakfast and lunch with mainly locals tucking into **hae mee** (prawn noodle soup), **Ipoh hor fun** and **Hokkien char** (stir-fried noodles with assorted meat and seafood). The **curry mee** (or ask for bee hoon) in a mild curry-based coconut broth with sliced pork and re-constituted cuttlefish is still served with cubed coagulated pig's blood.



Just outside the kopi tiam are more food stalls - Chinese **apom** (pancake with assorted fillings like banana, chocolate, ham or cheese), **char koay kak** (Penang's version of our pan-fried radish cake) and **Nyonya kuih**. Meals start from RM3 for a small portion.



Bring home:

Shop at Chowrasta bazaar for tau sar pheah, nutmeg products, salt fish, Penang belacan, preserved fruit, coffee and other tidbits.

Getting there:

Jetstar and Tiger Airways depart from Changi Airport's budget terminal whereas Air Asia flies from terminal 1. Flight to Penang International Airport takes 60 minutes; for the cheapest way to George Town, purchase tickets at the Rapid Penang Bus counter for just RM2. A taxi voucher costs RM38 inclusive of toll fees for a 30 to 40-minute ride. ■