

STROLL THROUGH HISTORY

George Town, Penang boasts a long and illustrious history, making it one of the most colourful and vibrant cities in Malaysia.

Text Robyn Eckhardt Photos David Hagerman

The E&O Hotel has been part of Penang's history since 1885

George Town, a tidy grid of streets splayed over a cape that juts east to the Malaysian mainland, is compact and walkable. With a townscape consisting mostly of low-rise structures, some dating back to the 18th century, it's a refreshing antidote to the sprawling, traffic-choked and skyscraper-pocked megacities that have come to dominate much of the rest of Asia. George Town's lively hawker scene has long attracted Asian foodies and its charmingly decrepit pre-World War II architecture has always drawn the intrepid traveller willing to forego characterful lodgings; but these days, thanks in part to its 2008 designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the city is popping up on South East Asian bucket lists as boutique hotels and cafés proliferate along its once sleepy lanes. Yet George Town remains remarkably real, and its singular personality – born of a trading port past and melting pot population – is still evident.

In 1786 Captain Sir Francis Light – a merchant for the British East India Company – claimed Penang as a trading base and soon after began constructing Fort Cornwallis on the tip of the cape. The stone fort still stands, facing the butter-yellow Penang town hall and the white wedding cake City Hall across the grassy *padang*, site of dawn and dusk circumambulations by resident fitness buffs. Standing on Light Street with your back to the fort, you are surveying George Town's earliest incarnation: a neat square bordered by Light, Pitt, Beach and Chulia streets that is now Little India.

Penang – also known as Pulau Pinang – became a busy port on the Asian spice route, attracting traders and immigrants who came on their own, or in the employ of their British colonisers, from Europe, the Middle East, southern India, China and the Malay Archipelago. The newcomers' legacy is writ large in George Town's UNESCO conservation zone, an area of protected structures that stretches southwest from Fort Cornwallis to Prangin Road and from Weld Quay, which runs along the causeway, northwest to Penang Road.

Street names like Malay, Aceh, China, Hong Kong and Armenia recall the ethnic communities who lived and worked along them. The most well-known of the Armenians are the Sarkies brothers of Raffles and E&O fame. An amble the length of old Pitt Street – popularly known as the Street of Harmony – reveals the former trading port's multi-religious character; arrayed over four blocks are St George's Anglican church, a Chinese temple devoted to the Goddess of Mercy, the Hindu Sri Maha Mariamman temple and black-domed Kapitan Keling mosque, which dates from the early 19th century. Then there is the city's street theatre, a seemingly endless cycle of religious celebrations and observances that range from the Thaipusam (January or February) and Nine Emperor Gods festival (October, usually) – both of which include spectacular processions – to the Hungry Ghost festival, marked by the burning of paper and other offerings to placate restless spirits who have returned to earth for the lunar month. >>

DIRECTORY

China House

153 & 155 Beach Street
Opens 9am-11pm, daily
Tel +604 263 7299
chinahouse.com.my

Sekeping Victoria

164A-B Lebu Victoria
Tel +6012 206 2846
sekeping.com/victoria

Ren i Tang

82A Lebu Penang
Tel +604 250 8383
renitang.com

The Daily Dose Café

8C, Lebu Carnarvon
Opens 10am-7pm, Thu-Tue, closed Wed
Tel +604 261 2063
facebook.com/TheDailyDoseCafe

Eté Café

79, Lebu Carnarvon
Opens 12-6pm, Wed-Mon, closed Tue
Tel +6017 435 0922
facebook.com/etecafe

Kapitan Keling Mosque

Jalan Kapitan Keling
Opens 1-5pm, Sat-Thu; 3-5pm, Fri
Tel +604 264 3494

St George's Church

1, Lebu Farquhar
Opens 8:30am-12:30pm, 1.30-4.30pm, Tue-Sat; services are held on Sun 8.30am and 10.30am.
Tel +604 261 2739

Goddess of Mercy Temple

Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling
Opens 6am-8pm, daily

Sri Maha Mariamman Temple

Jalan Masjid Kapitan Kling (in between Lebu Pasar and Lebu Chulia)
Opens 6am-9pm, daily



The Goddess of Mercy Temple stands as one of the oldest temples on the island



The long entrance way of the Kapitan Keling Mosque



A piping hot bowl of Penang Prawn Mee

Dotted around George Town are workshops where craftsmen practice trades as they have done for ages past. In a cavernous structure in an alley off Kimberley Street, a family of *kong-teik* masters constructs, from nothing but printed paper and wooden sticks, houses and cars and meter-high funerary offerings. In other spaces around town artisans build trishaws, mould incense from sandalwood paste, knead flour and water into noodles, carve wooden signboards, chisel tombstones and sew *songkok*, the caps worn by Muslim men, all by hand.

George Town is best appreciated early in the morning, before the city revs up and the tropical sun sings. As you walk, look up at the façades of shophouses and rowhouses that tell – by way of window height and shape, style of door and intricacy of plaster decoration or lack thereof – both when they were built and the prosperity of their original owners. Take a turn down the back and side lanes that demarcate rows of homes and shops and observe the minutiae of daily life: homemade Chinese sausages hung to dry outside a kitchen door, laundry strung from a bamboo pole, residents lighting a candle and laying sweets and a glass of tea at a waist-high shrine.

A historic site it may be, but George Town isn't pickled in its past; the UNESCO designation may have helped preserve pedigreed architecture and traditional trades and practices but it has also kick-started a distinctive urban renewal. Over the last five years the authorities have undertaken greening and clean-up initiatives while residents, temples and neighbourhood associations have restored properties, and shops, cafés, restaurants and galleries have opened in previously unused or vacant buildings.

To get a sense of George Town's revival head to Armenian Street, where a row of shophouses just off Pitt Street sport newly renovated façades, and tiny no-name indie stores, cafés and 'antique' shops sit amidst a traditional ceramic wares emporium, bike rental spots and Hokkien clan temples. China House, just south on Beach Street, set the bar for the creative reuse of heritage structures when it opened a little over 18 months ago. Occupying 900sqm in three shophouses linked by an interior courtyard the rustically refurbished, eclectically furnished and always buzzing emporium houses a café, restaurant, wine room, bar, workshop space and galleries. Sited in George Town's old warehouse district, it's been joined by Sekeping Victoria, a century-old warehouse turned stylish guest house featuring airy minimalist suites, indoor trees and complementary bicycles, and Ren I Tang, a gorgeously rehabbed structure in the middle of Little India. Formerly a Chinese medicine hall, it's now a homey boutique hotel fitted out in recycled wood with interiors washed in a vibrant palette that reflects the pulsating neighbourhood in which it sits.

If you like George Town, you might also like

1

Freemantle, Western Australia

The port city is located at the mouth of the Swan River and is just a relatively short hop away from Perth's city centre. Renowned for its eclectic mix of trendy bars, eateries, and shops, many of which housed in historical buildings, Freemantle is one of the easiest and most relaxing cities to explore at a leisurely pace.

2

Macau, China

Although it constantly lives up to its billing as the 'Vegas of the East', Macau is a city rich in culture and history. From the ruins of St Paul's Cathedral to Senado Square and A-Ma Temple, the city serves up an amazing east-meets-west vibe for a truly memorable cultural encounter.

3

Valencia, Spain

Managing to harmoniously blend its historical buildings and past with innovative and modern architecture, Valencia offers a unique charm that has made it one of the most unique cities in Europe. Considered by many as a centre for international and avant-garde design, Valencia is also a popular choice for international fairs and conferences.



Mobile hawker stalls are still common place in George Town

No ode to George Town would be complete without a mention of its culinary delights. With hawker stalls on street corners and *kopitiam* (Malaysian-style coffee shops) turning out innumerable specialties (*char koay teow*, Hokkien *mee* and spicy-sour-fishy *assam laksa*, to name a few) day and night, the city can rightly lay claim to the title of South East Asian street food capital. Now that quirky personality-driven cafés like The Daily Dose, run by New Mexico native Tanya Sierra who infuses her menu with flavours of the American southwest, and Ete Café – featuring siphon-brewed coffee, pastel hued macarons and delicate sweets by Cordon Bleu-trained Taiwanese pastry chef Chiang Tsung Hsun – have joined the mix, George Town can also claim to offer something for every appetite. ■

