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## Pleasures of Penang

Penang, Malaysia has stylish hotels and some of Southeast Asia's best street food.

From May 2011 By Guy Trebay

I had money to burn, thick wads of it, funny money colored bright orange and flaked with gold leaf.

Angling myself upwind of a ritual furnace at the gateway to the Goddess of Mercy Temple, banked in incense as thick as Newfoundland fog, I joined the crowd feeding fake loot to the tongues of flame. The offerings were, in my case, all-purpose: something for the ancestors, for living family and friends, for luck and prosperity and health, the usual stuff. But to the customary human importuning I also sneaked a silent request to the travel gods: "How soon can you get me back here?"

I was in Penang, a small island off the northwestern coast of Malaysia, half a world away from my front door. Few people of my acquaintance have heard of this lovely flyspeck, and the omission seemed more confounding the more time I spent there. Not only is Penang—or, anyway, its capital, Georgetown—so lightly touched by 21st-century modernity that you occasionally feel as if you have wandered onto a period film set, but its dense mesh of streets and cultures, its polyglot population, its infrastructure and sophisticated fusion cooking also call to mind another more celebrated island, the one I call home.

In certain ways Penang is like a Toytown version of Manhattan. An outpost of trade in an earlier era of globalization, the island leased by the British from the Sultan of Kedah—in an agreement forged by Captain Francis Light on behalf of the East India Company in 1786—once lay at the eastern extent of Britain's imperial expansion. Briefly the most important of the British Straits Settlements, it eventually ceded that distinction to Singapore, which went on to claim an important place on the regional and world stages while Penang lapsed into a prolonged subtropical slumber.

In recent years this tiny Malaysian state has powered back into view, its fortunes revived as it transformed itself into Malaysia's Silicon Valley. Though tourism lagged behind the boom, it is increasingly possible to find chic boutique hotels, the first stirrings of a culinary movement, and enlightened restoration projects that signal the end



Photo: Mikkel Vang

### GUIDE TO PENANG

#### When to Go

Aside from the rainy season, which runs from May to September, weather in Penang is consistently sunny, with daily temperatures often around 85 degrees.

#### Getting There

Singapore Airlines and Cathay Pacific offer daily flights from New York and Los Angeles, with connections through Singapore and Hong Kong, respectively.

#### Stay

**GREAT VALUE Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion** 14 Lebuah Leith; 60-4/262-0006; [cheongfattzemansion.com](http://cheongfattzemansion.com); doubles from \$125.

**China Tiger** A 19th-century merchant house and a Deco-style shop-house make up the four comfortable suites and apartments. 25 and 29 Lebuah China; 60-4/264-3580; [chinatiger.info](http://chinatiger.info); suites from \$313.

**GREAT VALUE Clove Hall** Edwardian bungalow with six suites that have vaulted ceilings and colonial antiques. 11 Jalan Clove Hall; 60-4/229-0818; [clovehall.com](http://clovehall.com); suites from \$182.

**GREAT VALUE Eastern & Oriental Hotel** 10 Lebuah Farquhar; 60-4/222-2000; [e-o-hotel.com](http://e-o-hotel.com); doubles from \$217.

**GREAT VALUE Shangri-La's Rasa Syang Resort & Spa** This oceanside retreat on Batu Feringghi beach, half an hour from Georgetown, is also near the Teluk Bahang Forest Reserve. Batu Feringghi; 60-4/888-8888; [shangri-la.com](http://shangri-la.com); doubles from \$248.

**GREAT VALUE Straits Collection** 47-55 Lorong Stewart; 60-4/263-7299; [straitscollection.com.my](http://straitscollection.com.my); suites from \$139.

#### Eat

**Kopi Cine** 55 Lorong Stewart; 60-4/263-7299; lunch for two \$35.

**Pasar Air Itam** Jalan Pasar Hawker Center, Air Itam; lunch for two \$5.

**Perut Rumah Nyonya Cuisine** Try traditional Peranakan dishes such as marinated fish in banana leaves and pork stew. 17 Jalan Kelawei; 60-4/227-9917; dinner for two \$30.

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of Penang's status as a secret shared only by backpackers and Malaysians who make pilgrimages there for the justifiably famous street food. But you would not necessarily notice these shifts if you happened to arrive by night, as I did, taxiing past the shadowed industrial campuses to fetch up in Georgetown beneath the porte cochère of the great white slab cake that is the venerable and deeply anachronistic Eastern & Oriental Hotel.

#### See and Do

**Goddess of Mercy Temple (Kuan Yin Teng)** Lorong Stewart.

**Khoo Kongsi** 18 Medan Cannon; 60-4/261-4609; [khookongsi.com.my](http://khookongsi.com.my); admission \$1.60.

**Pinang Peranakan Mansion** 29 Lebuhraya; 60-4/264-2929; [pinangperanakanmansion.com.my](http://pinangperanakanmansion.com.my); admission \$3.30.

**St. George's Church** Lebuhraya; 60-4/262-0202.

In the days when Penang was still an important port along global shipping lanes—a status predicated on its deep-water harbors and position in the Strait of Malacca—banking thrived there. So did trade of all kinds, most importantly in spices. One version of the origins of Penang's name holds that it is a Malay (or possibly Tamil) word for betel nut, and starting as early as the 15th century, traders dropped anchor here to buy and sell cloves, nutmeg, star anise, bird's nest, tin, pepper, and rubber and also, very profitably and for quite a long time, opium.

Immigrants followed, naturally, in flight from peonage and in pursuit of fortune. By the early 19th century Penang was already a mercantile, shipping, and banking center—the London-based banking powerhouse HSBC opened its first branch there in 1884—and the island's lieutenant governor, Sir George Leith, could observe that there was probably not “any part of the world where, in so small a space, so many different people are assembled together, or so great a variety of languages spoken.”

As I read this an image rose to mind of the New York City subway, specifically the No. 7 train entering Manhattan carrying 21st-century immigrants from China, Cambodia, India, Thailand, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka—spiritual cousins of the industrious voyagers from those selfsame places who once arrived by boat in Georgetown and slowly grafted their customs, architecture, language, styles of worship and, equally important, of cooking onto the tidy little hive of a town.

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