

Step Into the Past

Heritage trails in Penang, Ipoh, Melaka—an interesting way to travel

By Emma Chong Johnston

There's very little we love more in Malaysia than talking about how fast things change. How quickly time has passed—it seems like mere days ago that we were walking to school under the burning sun, or trailing after our siblings for a favourite afternoon treat. Something icy and sweet, sipped at in the cool dark of a familiar coffee shop; or something piping hot and flaky, leaving our fingers greasy and tongues tingling.

That reach for nostalgia is ever-present for Malaysians—and no wonder, just look at the rate that our cities are being developed, with towers reaching up and highways snaking out. But luckily, the longing is one that is easily satisfied. Jump in the car or hop on a plane and within hours you can be in a different part of the country, one where the intersection between nostalgia and the present is more immediate and less jarring. One where they still make your favourite noodles the same way they always did. One where you can spend the afternoon wandering down five-foot ways and still find good wif at the end of the day.

PENANG

Nowhere does modern meets traditional as well as Penang, with its mishmash of old Chinese shophouses, hawker stalls, colonial buildings and, of course, shopping malls. To set the tone of your stay right from the beginning, base yourself in one of Penang's beautifully refurbished heritage hotels. The first name that springs to mind is, of course, Cheong Fatt Tze, the Blue Mansion. The mansion is an incredible piece of living history—a private residence built at the end of the 19th century, and outfitted in the style of traditional Chinese houses. Multiple wings, courtyards



and spaces abound in the Blue Mansion, each with its own dedicated purpose and bearing witness to original owner Cheong Fatt Tze's eye for beauty and detail.

These days the Blue Mansion is a breathtaking place to stay, or even just visit. And if you appreciate the aesthetic but are inclined to rest your head somewhere slightly less imposing, the hotel has recently launched its Townhouse collection. This is a curated series of townhouses on Rope Walk (Jalan Pintal Tali), a stone's throw from the Blue Mansion. Each of the townhouses has been thoughtfully, painstakingly restored with traditional and modern elements, paying homage to the bones of each building.

If you appreciate the British colonial approach to life in the tropics—high ceilings, arches and hardwood floors—you'll find much to admire in Penang. It doesn't get more classic than the Eastern & Oriental Hotel, brought to you by the people behind Singapore's Raffles Hotel. Then there's The Edison Hotel, a refurbished colonial mansion updated with tastefully eclectic touches, and Macalister Mansion, the most contemporary of Penang's clutch of colonial hotels, with just eight rooms, acclaimed dining outlets and an impressive collection of local and regional art.

It goes without saying that Penang is known for its hawker stalls and coffee shops. But to get a true sense of past Penang, it has to be a Nyonya meal. For a meal that impresses every single time, you won't go wrong at Kebaya Dining Room. An evening here truly feels like stepping into the past. The restaurant is impeccably appointed in marble, red velvet and embroidery, and the menu bears all the Nyonya favourites, with a subtle, modern twist; think pai tee with the crunch of peanut brittle or otak-otak baked in a crispy puff pastry shell.



Clockwise from top left: Blue Mansion; Nyonya kuih; Khoo Kongsi; Chinese shophouses

At A Glance

YOUR PENANG MENU

Traditional Nyonya cuisine at **Jawi House**.
jawihouse.com

Nyonya and Hainanese dishes at **Tek Sen Restaurant**.

Modern takes on traditional Malaysian flavours at **Gen**.
genpenang.com

Fusion fine dining at **Indigo**.
cheongfattzemansion.com

WHERE TO STAY

Seven Terraces

Beautifully updated heritage terrace houses just behind the Goddess of Mercy temple.
georgetownheritage.com

Jawi Peranakan Mansion

Family suite rooms in a restored mansion that pays homage to Peranakan craftsmanship and heritage.
georgetownheritage.com

Ren I Tang Heritage Inn

A unique boutique hotel contained in the premises of an old Chinese medicinal hall.
renitang.com

A TOUR AROUND TOWN

Penang Hill Gallery

The island's latest love letter to its past, Penang Hill Gallery is housed in the Edgecliff Bungalow and tells the tale of Penang throughout the years. Its five exhibits look at the island state's heritage, culture, history and biodiversity through a series of fascinating stories.
edgecliff.penanghill.gov.my

Pinang Peranakan Mansion

Get a real feel for the colours and beauty of the Peranakan culture at the beautifully restored and recreated residence of Kapitan Cina Chung Keng Kwee.
pinangperanakanmansion.com.my

Kapitan Keling Mosque

This mosque, believed to have been built around 1800, is a stunning piece of architecture in the centre of Penang.

Khoo Kongsi

Arguably the most famous of Penang's Kongsis, the Khoo Kongsi is an astonishing look back in time. The clan association houses the much-photographed temple, clanhouse and 62 terrace houses and shophouses.
khookongsi.com.my



At A Glance

YOUR IPOH MENU

Traditional dim sum at **Foh San**.
fohsan.com.my

Tea-infused Chinese cuisine at **Purple Cane**.
facebook.com/PurpleCaneTeaHouse

Old-school Western fare at **STG Teahouse**.
instagram.com/stg_teahouse

Local favourites at **Durbar**.
facebook.com/DurbarAtFMS

A WALK TO REMEMBER

One of the best ways to explore Ipoh's history is by walking. In Old Town, take in the historical sights starting at the old railway station, working your way past the Town Hall, Masjid India, St Michael's Institution and Birch Memorial Clock Tower.

IPOH

This old tin-mining town is often dismissed as a sleepy backwater—but its charms are hard to ignore. Against all odds, Ipoh has held on to its nostalgic small-town feel, even with the encroachment of big city investors and weekend tourists from all over the country.

When was the last time you slept at a bank? One of Ipoh's most impressive restoration projects is Sarang Paloh, a boutique hotel that is the latest incarnation of one of the town's most iconic landmarks. The Art Deco building started life as the Bank of Malaya, before being bought over by the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation. Now it's a beautiful boutique hotel, restored lovingly with recycled timber, salvaged roof tiles and antique furniture sourced from families around Ipoh. And that's not all—the hotel lobby is housed in an old goldsmith's shop.

For a more low-key stay, look to Belakang Kong Heng, a homestay-style hotel with incredible photo-ready industrial-chic design. Right in the heart of Ipoh Old Town, Belakang Kong Heng is a stone's throw from famous eateries like Restoran Lou Wong and Kong Heng coffee shop.



Clockwise from top:
Ipoh railway station;
dim sum; Purple
Cane Tea House;
Birch Memorial
Clock Tower; Ipoh
Town Hall; Ipoh
white
coffee



MELAKA

Known more for its chicken rice than its Unesco World Heritage City status, Melaka is often seen as a one-stop day-trip by travellers breezing through for lunch and little else. But the city has seen some thoughtful developments recently, as you'll witness in the stylish new boutique hotels and community spaces.

One such hotel is Liu Men, a converted stretch of six shophouses on Jalan Tokong. Liu Men takes inspiration from its colonial and Peranakan roots, but with an added sense of light and calm, resulting in a clutch of well-curated rooms that feel contemporary but respectful of Melaka's long history. The hotel is littered with knowing nods to Melaka's iconography, from round marble coffeeshop tables to intricate Nyonya-style tiles.

Then there's 45 Lekiu, a pre-war Art Deco building turned charming hotel. 45 Lekiu nods to its history but is not overly burdened with trying to restore every single detail to its former glory—rather, it has taken the space's excellent bones and clothed them in a comfortable, contemporary manner. A mix of antique and modern furniture, old and new textures make it a quietly luxurious space to stay.

Don't let your trip pass without a visit to The Bendahari, a thoughtful new creative hub that looks to bridge the gap between Melaka's present and its storied past. The Bendahari building houses a mix of businesses, including modern Peranakan restaurant Bulldog and community pop-up shop The Bendahari Markets. It also acts as an event space for community workshops, talks, launches and pop-ups. ┘



Clockwise from top right: Chicken rice ball; The Bendahari Markets; the Library and pool at The Majestic Malacca. Opposite page, from top: 45 Lekiu; a room at Liu Men and its front exterior



At A Glance

SPECIAL STAYS

The Majestic Malacca

A 1920s mansion turned luxury hotel.
majesticmalacca.com

Courtyard at Heeren

A collection of 15 unique rooms in Melaka's Chinatown.
courtyardatheeren.com

The Stable Malacca

A quiet mews home in Melaka's heritage zone.
facebook.com/TheStableMalacca

YOUR MELAKA MENU

Local favourites at **Geographér Café**.
geographer.com.my

Authentic Nyonya dishes at **Peranakan Place**.
peranakan.com.my

Modern twist on Peranakan staples at **Bulldog**.
instagram.com/BulldogMalacca