

REBIRTH of  
a  
MALAYSIAN  
TOWN



text and photos by **Austin Bush**

*George Town, on Malaysia's Penang Island, has been undergoing a renaissance of sorts since being named a UNESCO World Heritage site.*



There's something in the air in George Town, the main city on the Malaysian island of Penang, and it's not the smell of char kway teow (fried flat rice noodles) or the salty sea air. Since it was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2008, the city has been experiencing something of a renaissance.

Boutique hotels, chic restaurants, art galleries, lively bars and a new breed of activities for tourists – from cooking schools to walking tours – have been sprouting like mushrooms in the city's fabled colonial-era shophouses. Hand in hand with these have come increasing numbers of tourists, a world-class performing arts festival and a newfound interest in the culture of the city. Simply put, George Town is hot.



A hawker frying char kway teow, one of Penang's signature dishes. **ABOVE:** Experience local colour at the bustling Kuala Kangsar Market. **RIGHT:** George Town's old shophouses, some of which are getting a new lease of life as chic hotels, restaurants and galleries.



This buzz is novel for George Town, a city that dates from the early 18th century but has seemingly been in hiding since its boom days in the late 19th century. "After World War II, people left the centre of George Town for the suburbs," says Salma Khoo, president of Penang Heritage Trust, a body dedicated to preserving

the history and culture of Penang. After this exodus, she explains, many of George Town's unique buildings – some of which were built as far back as the early 19th century – were occupied by squatters with up to 10 families living in a single shophouse. The 1980s then saw a brain drain – many young people left Penang for other Malaysian cities or abroad. Contributing further to depopulation was the repealing of rent control in 1997. It made the centre of George Town too expensive for many, leaving it with an ageing population and crumbling infrastructure.

Until 2008, that is, when a series of events coincided to bring George Town back into the spotlight. That year, renovation of George Town's port began, to allow the docking of large cruise ships. The implementation of Asean's Open Skies policy also saw an increase in the number of international flights to Penang. But the most significant event was undoubtedly when the centre of George Town was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site for being "...a unique architectural and cultural townscape without parallel anywhere in East and South-east Asia." This influential designation almost single-handedly sparked a newfound appreciation of the city's cultural heritage – in particular, its unique architecture. In addition to drawing foreign and domestic tourists, it also brought former Penangites back to their hometown. ▶



Muntri Mews, a stable reborn as a boutique hotel. **TOP RIGHT:** Dickie Ten wants to introduce the younger generation to heritage buildings like the one that houses his cafe-cum-hotel MoonTree 47. **RIGHT:** One of the 10 rooms in 23 Love Lane, a bolt-hole in the former home of a British colonel.



### COOL DIGS

Among them is hotelier Chris Ong, a Penang native who spent more than 25 years away. In 2009, Ong opened the nine-room Muntri Mews ([www.muntrimews.com](http://www.muntrimews.com)), a boutique hotel housed in an early 20th century stable. "My main passion is saving these buildings," says Ong, who also lives in a renovated 1930s-era shophouse. He has an almost fanatical approach to renovation, typically seeking out discarded wood, roof tiles, doors and other fittings and incorporating them into his hotel projects.

Ong's latest and most ambitious project comprises a few adjoining antique shophouses on Stewart Lane in central George Town. When finished in mid-2012, it will be a luxury hotel – which he plans to call Seven Terraces – with a restaurant, pool and 16 two-storey suites, each with a rooftop balcony. His other George Town project, the soon-to-be-finished Noordin Mews ([www.noordinmews.com](http://www.noordinmews.com)) will be targeted at a different market segment, offering so-called "flashpackers" and budget-conscious visitors the chance to experience the town's architectural heritage firsthand.

Indeed, hotels are behind the bulk of George Town's current renovation boom, with developers breathing new life into structures that have in some cases, spent the last few decades as questionable motels or backpacker hovels.

Take 23 Love Lane ([www.23lovelane.com](http://www.23lovelane.com)), a graceful two-storey mansion that served as the home of a British colonel and, more recently, a backpackers' inn. Today, the main structure and attached shophouses have been painstakingly turned into an atmospheric 10-room boutique hotel. Bold contemporary artworks line the walls of the lobby and rooms – a stark but attractive contrast with the compound's peaceful, lost-in-time vibe. "In the old days, people were scared to go into these houses," says George Town native and manager of 23 Love Lane, Fauzi Razak, of the town's antique structures, many of which lay in disrepair or ruin for decades. "But after [George Town] became a World Heritage site, people are coming back."

Those returning include a growing number of young locals who had left to work elsewhere in previous years. One of them, former graphic artist Dickie Ten, opened MoonTree 47 (47 Muntri Street, Tel: 60 4 264 4021), a cafe-cum-hotel, in early 2011 with three friends. They chose a rambling shophouse on Muntri Street and decked it out with retro furniture and antique bric-a-brac. "These old houses are unique," says Ten. "My generation used to live in houses like these, but not the new generation. I want to introduce [these houses] to the new generation and to foreigners." Ten appears to have done just that – encounters with camera-toting tourists from Europe and mainland China are typical of any visit to MoonTree 47. ►



George Town natives Joey Lim (above left) and Clovis Leong in their art gallery Unique Penang. **OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP:** Kopi C. Espresso, one of the eateries in China House, a collection of shophouses that has been turned into a dining and art space by Australian Narelle McMurtrie.

## CULTURAL REVIVAL

The buzz in George Town isn't only about hotels.

Art gallery Unique Penang ([uniquepenang.com](http://uniquepenang.com)) occupies a shophouse on Love Lane – George Town's de facto backpacker strip. Run by 30something George Town natives Clovis Leong and Joey Lim, the airy gallery is a mix of the former's photos and the latter's paintings, as well as the work of Lim's young art students. The result is an art gallery that's anything but pretentious. It attracts a constant trickle of curious visitors who buy postcards featuring images such as colourful village scenes and lively snapshots of local life.

Indeed, art seems to be a significant factor driving George Town's revival, much of it fuelled by the success of the annual George Town Festival ([georgetownfestival.com](http://georgetownfestival.com)). Initiated in 2010 to celebrate the town's status as a World Heritage site, the festival brings theatre, music, dance, film, art, opera, food, fashion, photography, and inspirational talks to various venues in George Town. The 2011 George Town Festival featured more than 80 programmes that drew over 600,000 people from 42 countries. The 2012 edition, to be held from June 15 to July 15, hopes to attract an audience of over a million people.

Foreigners are increasingly contributing to George Town's renaissance. Australian Narelle McMurtrie has lived in Malaysia for more than 25 years, most of it running resorts on the island of Langkawi, a two-hour ferry ride from George Town. Today, McMurtrie oversees Straits Collection ([straitscollection.com.my](http://straitscollection.com.my)), a hotel in four two-storey shophouses on Armenian Street, as well as ►



## CHOW TIME

*Penang food is distinguished from food elsewhere in Malaysia by its Nonya – a mix of Malay and Chinese – and Thai influences. Ong Jin Teong, author of Penang Heritage Food, shares some of his must-tries in George Town.*



### EAT

Padang Brown is one of the very early hawker centres in George Town. Located where Perak Road meets Anson Road, it has good chnea hu (fried beancurd, crispy fried shrimps, dried jellyfish, finely sliced cucumber and blanched bean sprouts in a spicy sweet sauce),

popiah (spring roll; far left) and ice kacang (red beans topped with shaved ice and syrup; left).

### DRINK

Fresh juices (right) made from nutmeg and ambra (a small, green local fruit) and served with salted plum are drinks particularly associated with Penang. You can get them from hawkers throughout the city.

### BUY

Pick up some sweet pickled nutmeg which Penang is famous for. Cooking enthusiasts should also bring home some five-spice powder, a finely ground mix that is



China Joe's (95 Armenian Street, Tel: 60 4 262 7299), a boutique/gallery/cafe on the same street. "When we started in 2009, we were the first cafe in George Town," says McMurtrie. "People thought we were crazy! But it's just blossomed since then."

McMurtrie's most recent venture is China House ([chinahouse.com.my](http://chinahouse.com.my)), three linked shophouses with an art gallery and eateries Kopi C. Espresso, BTB & Restaurant and others. BTB & Restaurant, which serves dishes such as roasted chicken with Ras-el-hanout (a Moroccan blend of spices) on focaccia with cherry tomatoes, preserved lemon, rocket and coriander salad, has almost single-handedly introduced modern cuisine to a town previously associated only with street food.

On Stewart Lane, Coffee Atelier ([coffeeatelier.com](http://coffeeatelier.com)), owned by Swiss native Stefan Gehrig, follows a similar theme of accommodation, art gallery and dining in five linked buildings dating back to 1927. One of Coffee Atelier's buildings had a former life as a coffee roaster, and Gehrig has kept the original roasting ovens. "Eventually I'd like to do roasting demonstrations," explains Gehrig, "and start a coffee museum to share the history of traditional coffee in Penang." For now, Coffee Atelier's restaurant has begun to serve the very un-Penang dish of tapas three nights a week, supplemented with what Gehrig reckons is one of Penang's largest collections of Spanish wines.

Also bringing a touch of European sophistication to George Town is Via Pre ([via-pre.com](http://via-pre.com)), the latest branch of a Kuala Lumpur-based Italian eatery. Located in a grand three-storey structure built in 1874, the restaurant takes full advantage of the building's tall ceilings and elegant exposed structural elements, not to mention its ►



The art gallery at Coffee Atelier, which is also a hotel and cafe. LEFT: Via Pre is an Italian restaurant housed in an elegant 19th century building.

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People from all walks of life learning how to prepare Penang dishes at cookery school Nazlina's Spice Station.

location overlooking the Strait of Malacca from Weld Quay. Via Pre also has a vast deli counter where customers can buy salami from Milan or buffalo milk mozzarella from Campania – hitherto hard-to-obtain items in Penang.

If there's an ideal encapsulation of the type of eclectic vibe that's fuelling George Town's revitalisation, then it might very well be Nazlina's Spice Station (*[pickles-and-spices.com](http://pickles-and-spices.com)*), a cooking course taught by Nazlina Hussin, a former electrical engineer and native of George Town. Started in 2010, it covers iconic local dishes like char kway teow, rendang (spicy meat dish) and nasi lemak (coconut rice) – for a decidedly international group of students. A peek inside might reveal a retired New Zealander pounding chillies in a mortar and pestle, or a backpacker from Finland manipulating a wok in the courtyard of an antique shophouse. "The courtyard is a major attraction of my shop," says Hussin. "People are amazed, and they can get an idea what life was like back then for people who lived in shophouses."

Exotic flavours, emblematic architecture, unique culture – George Town has always had these. It took a while, but now the rest of the world has also awoken to its delights. ■

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## fast facts

### CURRENCY

Malaysian Ringgit  
US\$1 = 3.05 MYR

### VISA

Requirements vary.  
Visit [tourism.gov.my](http://tourism.gov.my) for details.

### BEST TIME TO VISIT

There's relatively little fluctuation in George Town's weather. Being close to the sea, a single day can have both rainy and sunny weather. June to August are usually the hottest months, with the wettest being April to May and from October to November.

### HOW TO GET THERE

Singapore Airlines' regional carrier SilkAir flies 4 times daily from Singapore to Penang.

### MORE INFORMATION

[tourism.gov.my](http://tourism.gov.my)