



**Rickety:** Chew Jetty is home to about 300 people.

Pictures: Samille Mitchell

For a different taste of Georgetown, head to Chew Jetty, where Chinese immigrants established stilt homes over the water in the mid-19th century. These rickety homes remain today and are home to about 300 people.

You can wander down the wooden planks between the houses to see first-hand how these people live. Lanterns hang from verandas and small private temples adorn the front rooms of most homes.

While the houses look ramshackle from the outside, one resident invites us in and I'm surprised to see an enormous TV and flat-screen computer monitor in the spacious residence.

To really soak up the atmosphere you can even stay in some home-stay accommodation offered amid the stilt houses.

For accommodation at the other end of the scale, you can't beat the iconic Eastern and Orient Hotel. This stunning building was constructed by the same people as the Raffles Hotel in Singapore and is just as much part of Penang as the Raffles is of Singapore.

The E and O, as it's more commonly known, was a meeting place for Penang's social elite, and subject to grand parties and balls.

Today it is renowned for its restored grace, grand hotel suites and fine dining.

# Get a taste of heaven

Ask people from Penang what this Malaysian island is renowned for and one of the answers will be "food". The harmonious fusion of Chinese, Malay, Indian, Thai and other cultures has resulted in an explosion of food styles.

Simply stroll through the streets of Georgetown to take in the pungent aroma of curries, see hawkers trading on the street, or enter stylish restaurants housed in old Chinese shop houses or grand buildings left from British colonial times.

Seafood and noodles play a big part in the cuisine, as do food types of Nonya origin. Nonya refers to the descendants of Chinese immigrants who settled in Penang and inter-married with the locals.

By blending all these influences together, the food takes on its very own Penang style.

Ask around and locals will point you in the right direction for a particular speciality such as Chinese popiah, which are fresh spring rolls; rojak, a fruit and vegetable salad with prawn paste dressing; laksa; hokkien mee noodle soup; and nasi kandar, spicy Indian dishes with rice.

Key to all these ingredients are spices mixed together in often closely guarded secret recipes.

Penang was an important port in the ancient spice trade and continues to grow and stock a dazzling variety of exotic spices. To learn more about these ancient culinary enhancers, you can't beat a visit to Penang's Tropical Spice Gardens.

This enchanted garden sprawls over three hectares, with lush vegetation, walk trails, streams, waterfalls and signage explaining the significance of the different herbs, spices and other plants.

Manager Katharine Joan Chua says the owners developed the gardens to highlight Penang's role as a spice trading port. "The trade of spices was important in the establishment of the Penang economy," she says.

Walking around the gardens, she points out the different plant species and explains their effects. There are plants like cat whiskers,



**Growing history:** The Tropical Spice Gardens sprawl over three hectares.



**Traditional Malay cooking.**

which is made into a tea for good health, a cinnamon tree producing the spice which dates to biblical times, and the Pinang tree, which produces the betel nuts which people chew on; it has a red juice and a narcotic effect.

There's a scented garden of highly aromatic flowers, the stunning blooms of the black lily, a giant swing hung beneath towering trees and a big globe of the world highlighting the old spice trading routes.

There's also a specimen of the tree tongkat ali, which Katharine says is Malaysia's answer to Viagra. "People use the root but scientific reports say there's no base for it to be called an

aphrodisiac and in fact it's rather toxic," she says.

You can set out on guided tours of the garden or simply stroll around. There's also a museum showcasing traditional tools and providing interpretive information on the spice trade as well as a gift shop selling spices, beauty products and books. You can take part in a cooking class.

A self-taught cook, the delightful Nazlina Hussin provides the cooking classes, allowing you to experience cooking in traditional Malay style. There are no canned or packet ingredients here — you even straddle a traditional coconut scraper to extract the flesh of the coconut and squeeze it by hand to make coconut milk.

Nazlina guides you through the process of making a seriously tasty menu of seafood curry, stir-fried flat rice noodles with prawns and a dessert called bubur cha-cha. Then comes the best part — sitting down to sample the culinary offerings.

Nazlina also offers cooking demonstrations at Penang's craft markets, held on the last Sunday of the month, and answers questions online at her cooking website ([www.pickles-and-spices.com](http://www.pickles-and-spices.com)).

For a different food view, join a tour of the Tropical Fruit Garden. Here, you wander among the orchards to learn about exotic fruit species, many of which you've probably never seen.

The tour ends at a basic restaurant where you can sample the exotic fruits and enjoy a fresh fruit juice. While one particular fruit, the durian, is much treasured by locals, beware: the fruit is so smelly it's banned from hotels. Some people sneak it in, and the pungent aroma wafts through the air-conditioning and causes complaints of dead animals.

But the saying goes that the fruit smells like hell and tastes like heaven. It's just one of the many exotic tastes you'll find on your Penang culinary journey.

## GETTING AROUND

Getting around in Penang is easy. Around the Georgetown UNESCO Heritage Site, try a trishaw ride. All the famous landmarks are close to one another and this is a good way to see the sights.

Visitors exploring on foot or bicycle can follow the Penang Heritage Trust heritage trail. To go further afield around the island, the air-conditioned Rapid Penang public bus service is reliable and the drivers are helpful (just have a map handy).

Cars, motorcycles and bicycles can be hired by the day.

> Information from Penang Tourism. See [www.tourismpenang.gov.my](http://www.tourismpenang.gov.my).



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