

Penang

Malaysia's best kept secret

By DOMINICK A. MERLE

PENANG, Malaysia When I first began travelling to this country back in the early 80s I was convinced it had too many exotic charms to keep North Americans away for very long, despite the fact that it's about as far as you can go without heading back again.



Silk painter

صباغ الحرير

So much for my intuitive skills, and too bad for the Malaysians. A majority of North Americans still don't even know where Malaysia is, let alone have plans for a visit. At best, it's an overnight pit stop on the Hong-Kong-Singapore-Bangkok circuit, or simply leapfrogged altogether. To say that tourism officials are puzzled is a large understatement. They've just capped a massive five-year advertising campaign in print and TV aimed at the U.S. tourist, and yet Malaysia continues to be perhaps the best kept secret in Asia. You want exotic adventure? Try the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak on the legendary island of Borneo. Some of the "wildlife" here includes plants that eat meat, snakes that fly, pigs with beards and full-grown deer the size of small dogs. Toss in the occasional headhunter or cannibal (or most likely their descendants), mix well and enjoy the ride. Is culture your thing? The states of

Kelantan and Terengganu at the northeast corner of the mainland beckon. Time seems frozen here. I visited this region twice - 17 years apart - and it was like I never left. The same traditions of giant top spinning, giant kite flying and bird-singing competitions were under way at the same open field, and just up the street the same nondescript parking lot was transformed each night into a festive Muslim food and crafts market.

For sun and sea worshippers, the northwest island of Langkawi has beaches that rival those of its Thai neighbor Phuket, but without the hordes of tourists. (Langkawi also suffered only minor damage during the tsunami disaster, while Phuket was struck a vicious blow.) For history, the southwestern state of Malacca is where it all began in 1400 when it was discovered by a Sumatran prince. For those who crave the pulse of a city, the capital of

Kuala Lumpur with its majestic twin towers seems like the future and the past rolled into one. Dazzling highrises look down on teeming Chinatowns and Little Indias. While time seems frozen in Kelantan, it goes fast forward in Kuala Lumpur and the city's skyline is constantly changing.

And then there's the storied island state of Penang on the northwest coast, my destination for this visit.

Penang first came into being in 1786 when an Englishman, Captain Francis Light, thought it would make an excellent trading post between China and India. Under the British, Penang thrived as a free port-of-call, with no taxes on imports and exports, attracting fortune seekers from throughout Asia and Europe.

In 1957 Malaysia gained her independence and Penang joined as one of the country's 13 states. During the 60s and 70s Penang became a favorite stop for backpackers on the Singapore - Bangkok trail and quickly ➤



Merdeka Square

ساحة مرده



British Manor

قصر إنجليزي

became the No. 1 tourist destination in Malaysia. Then came the economic slowdown and Penang slowed down with it.

But it's beginning to show flashes of its old self again and today attracts over 3-million visitors a year, most of them from nearby Asia, some from Britain, France and Germany, but alas, hardly any North Americans.

The population of Penang is roughly 1.2-million, about 75 percent of Chinese ancestry. There is also a very large Indian community in Penang, particularly in the capital city of Georgetown. Because of these two large

ethnic groups, a festival of one type or another takes place practically every month.

The main tourist area is on the northern part of the island, located around Batu Ferringhi, which translates literally to Foreigners' Beach. My hotel, the Grand Plaza Parkroyal, was a few steps from a long and winding sidewalk market that is assembled each night and dismantled each dawn. Further down the road were bumper-to-bumper food stalls operated by the so-called "hawkers".

The origin of the hawkers goes back to the 19th Century when Penang had a large male

population of petty traders or coolies who were mostly unable to afford wives and maintain families. A few entrepreneurs began setting up street stalls to feed this enormous male population, and the hawkers were soon off and running.

The formula, even today, is simple: learn a dish, perfect it, add your own unique twist, set up a pushcart and off you go! Consequently, one can find some unusual combinations on hawker stands, like Chinese noodles with sweet potato sauce and stir-fried prawns with mayonnaise and wasabi. They were serving up fusion food in Penang long before they even knew what it was.

There are a number of mosques and temples nearby, including the Kapitan Keling Mosque which features a dome-shaped minaret reflecting Moorish Islamic influence; the Goddess of Mercy Temple, one of the oldest Chinese temples with its intricately crafted dragons and sculptured stone lions, and the Mahamariamman Hindu Temple which contains a priceless statue of Lord Subramaniam embellished with gold, silver diamonds and emeralds. Other attractions near the northern tip of the island are the Penang Butterfly Farm, home to more than 3,000 living specimens of rare butterflies, scorpions and other insects; the Tropical Spice Garden with its more than 500 exotic varieties of plants, and the Tropical Fruit Farm, where early one morning we picked our breakfast from trees. More than 200 tropical and subtropical fruits are grown here, including the vile-smelling Durians, lychees, mangoes, guavas and over 30 varieties of bananas, some as small as your little finger and others as long as your forearm.

Another unusual stop, but not for the squeamish, would be the Chor Soo Kong Temple, more commonly known as "Snake Temple", near Penang Airport. Beginning in the 19th Century, poisonous pit vipers make their way into the temple early each day and can be seen coiled around the pillars, beams and potted plants. They appear to be in a trance-like state, rendered harmless by the smoke of the burning incense. But each night they become revived and eat the fruit, eggs and other offerings in the temple. Then ➤



Kuala Lumpur

كوالالمبور

they leave, returning to the temple early the next morning.

On my first trip here some 15 years ago, there were at least a dozen pit vipers in the temple. On this visit, I counted three. The area around the temple, once mainly open fields, is now commercially developed and consequently most of the vipers have moved on to new territory.

I had lunch at the legendary Eastern & Oriental Hotel the next day, once billed as "The Premier Hotel East of the Suez". Famous guests have included Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Noel Coward, Rudyard Kipling and Somerset Maugham.

After the Suez Canal opened in 1869, the rich and the titled, bored with Europe, looked to the exotic East to satisfy their wanderlust. Thus, a new breed of traveller was born - the globetrotter. To meet the needs of these new affluent travellers, and make money at the same time, two

Armenian brothers established first the Eastern Hotel in 1884 and then the Oriental in 1885 on an adjacent piece of land, and then combined them as the Eastern & Oriental.

Sadly, after the Great Depression, the hotel went into a slow decline and changed hands several times. Happily, it has now been restored in all of its elegance. Naturally, this kind of elegance doesn't come cheap; rates go from about \$150 to \$1,200 a night.

The next day I returned to Kuala Lumpur for my final night before the long flight back. My going-away meal was at the Chinese Museum Restaurant in the Legend Hotel at Putra Place, a short walk from the futuristic twin towers, and the restaurant was featuring a special six-course New Year's dinner.

The opening course, called Prosperity Yee Sang with Salmon, contained 20

ingredients alone and the meal concluded with "Eight Treasures Tea" which was described as "Kung Fu Tea" by my young waiter. I would soon see why. Another young waiter came out with a pot the size of a large watering can and a spout twice the size of one, held it over his head in a menacing fashion and pointed the spout toward my tiny cup in front of me, a distance of at least four feet.

Out streamed the tea in an arc and, except for a couple of errant drops, into my cup. That was my final mental snapshot of Malaysia. ■

(Dominick Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)

IF YOU GO:

We flew Malaysia Airlines from New York to Kuala Lumpur with a stop in Stockholm, continuing on Malaysia Airlines to Penang. Air time from New York to Kuala Lumpur is about 24 hours, and from Kuala Lumpur to Penang about 90 minutes.

No visas are required for stays of up to three months for North Americans; only a valid passport.

The climate is generally warm throughout the year, but humidity is high all year around. April, May and October are usually the wetter months.

Light casual clothes are accepted anywhere, but no shorts or bare shoulders are permitted in mosques.

Shaking hands is the customary form of greeting for both men and women. It is considered impolite to point at someone or point to a direction with your finger; use your thumb instead.

Hotels and restaurants add a 10 percent service charge plus applicable taxes. No further tipping is necessary.

Although Malay is the national language, English is widely used and understood, along with Mandarin, Cantonese and Hindi.

Ringit Malaysia is the official legal tender, with notes in 5 to 1,000 denominations and coins in 1 cent to 1 ringit.

Islam is the official religion but all other religions are practiced freely.