

Penang

The colonial heritage and the natural beauty

By: Derick McGroarty

I flew from KL to Penang. With its busy, bustling, historic Georgetown, dazzling white beaches and diverse countryside this 30 mile wide island is an ideal holiday spot.

Asia Overland Tours operate tours. Experienced drivers know the right spot for the best photograph! The Island Tour shows the diversity of the historic capital, idyllic beaches and forested countryside. Colourful temples, butterflies and fruit orchards contrast with industrious batik factories.

Another trip includes the ascent of the 720 metres Penang Hill by funicular railway, and the breathtaking Kek Lok Si, a complex of temples perched on the hillside. At ground level the Botanic Gardens, started in 1884, are a place of peace and beauty with magnificent specimen trees, a lily pond and orchid houses. Monkeys run free, totally ignoring visitors.

A Heritage Tour of Georgetown can be comprehensive but time taken to explore further is rewarding. When Francis Light of the British East India Company took possession of Penang in 1786 it was a sparsely populated dense jungle. His star-shaped Fort Cornwallis was larger than I expected. Originally of wood it was quickly replaced with more substantial stonework. A statue of Francis Light dominates the entrance to the Penang State Museum. Exhibits include artifacts of the early foundation of Georgetown and occupation by the Japanese.

Nearby an esplanade and green lawns set off the brilliant white, well-maintained buildings of late 19th century origin. South of the fort are the equally impressive State Assembly Building and a 60-foot clock tower commemorating Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee.

A Protestant cemetery is the final resting-place of many English pioneers including Light and other Governors. Poignant is the young age at

which many died. Also buried here is Thomas Leonowen, (31), whose widow Anna became schoolmistress at the Court of Siam. Penang was the location for several scenes in the film, "The King and I".

There are hundreds of "shop houses" - living accommodation above, business and trading below. Many have been maintained or restored and are still in use. Grander buildings include Guild houses, museums and rented accommodation. Impressive are the extent of these houses, the mix of temples and colonial offices and the continuity of lifestyle. Rising high above the streets is the modern 65 story Komtar, a superb shopping mall surmounted by government offices. Plans to control development have already begun. A mansion built by a wealthy Chinese, Cheong Fatt Tze, had 38 rooms, 5 courtyards and 7 staircases. After his death it fell into disrepair but in 1990 restoration commenced and it is now in its original authentic form.

I divided my time between Georgetown and the seaside, in Shangri La hotels, with cross signing facilities and a free shuttle service. The Georgetown hotel has a swimming pool, recreational area, health club and direct access to Komtar shopping mall. Twenty minutes to the north, the recently renovated Golden Sands on a fine beach, fronted with mature gardens and free form swimming pools is lively and suitable for children.

The Batu Ferringhi beach backed by forest has fine white sand and dramatic boulders. Small fishing boats operate from wooden piers seemingly little changed by time. The main road outside the hotels becomes a highly active



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Ferringhi Beach

شاطئ فرنجي

market at night where you must bargain! The award winning Pinang Cultural Centre is an insight into Malaysian life style and dinner is followed by a colourful show of song and dance. Do take a camera. The multi cultural society works well. One of my fondest memories is the friendliness of the people and the smiling faces. Tourism Malaysia can supply useful leaflets. INSIGHT (Malaysia) is a comprehensive guide covering the whole country. The pocket version slipped easily into my camera bag and the full version is good in-depth reading with excellent pictures. Both can be recommended. ■

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