



Best Heritage Hotel in SE ASIA

Story By Edward McBride

Heritage, Inside and Out

The staff here are all characters worthy of Maugham, from the live-in receptionist who used to make a living smuggling Louis Vuitton handbags, to the part-owner, who chatters so enthusiastically during tours of the building that she ends up losing her voice.

Recline in a rattan chair, sip a fruity cocktail, and luxuriate in the breeze of a slowly rotating ceiling fan. Most tourists envisage a stay at a heritage hotel in Asia as a re-enactment of a Somerset Maugham short story: peopled by punkahwallahs, festooned with mosquito netting, and infused with tropical languor.

At Asia's most famous colonial hold-overs, however, the reality is bound to disappoint. Many of the rooms in Singapore's Raffles, Bangkok's Oriental or Hanoi's Metropole are situated in modern - albeit luxurious - extensions. Even in the older wings, it is hard to imagine Mr Maugham rubbing shoulders with the package tourists in the lobby, or purchasing breath mints from the gift shop.

So what is an incurable nostalgic to do? Well, for starters, book a room at the **Hotel Majapahit**, in the Indonesian city of Surabaya. Like the Oriental and Raffles, the Majapahit was built at the turn of the century by the Sarkies brothers, a trio of Armenian hotelier, but unlike the other two, the Majapahit has not changed much since then. The hotel might be big, with 150 rooms, and punctiliously managed by the Mandarin Oriental chain, but it retains a sedate, genteel air. Wealthy Dutch planters used to stay at the Majapahit on their trips into town, and nationalist activists stormed the building at the start of Indonesia's war of independence. Luckily, though, none of them

broke any windows, leaving the jaunty art-deco stained glass in place. What could be more indolent than reclining on your terrace (on a rattan chair, of course), watching the tropical light play on the coloured panes, and listening to the rhythmic clip of industrious gardeners trimming the lawns below?

There is another Sarkies hotel, the Eastern and Oriental, in Penang, one of South-East Asia's best-preserved colonial cities. But the nearby **Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion**, named after the rich Chinese merchant who built it, is slightly older, much less famous and far more enticing. Both have been recently restored, but the Eastern and Oriental somehow ended up with an anodyne five-star sheen, while the mansion preserves such an old-world feel that it was used as a backdrop for the film *Indochine*.

The staff here are all characters worthy of Maugham, from the live-in receptionist who used to make a living smuggling Louis Vuitton handbags, to the part-owner, who chatters so enthusiastically during tours of the building that she ends up losing her voice. Of his five houses and five wives around East Asia, Cheong Fatt Tze apparently liked the ones in Penang the most - and so spent lavishly on every inch of the building, from the cool slate flags of the courtyards to the intricate porcelain mosaics on the pediments. Latter-day guests, however, need only fork out a modest **USD60** for one of the 16 rooms, with high ceilings, period décor, and yes, slowly rotating ceiling fans. Even in Bangkok, where fly-overs and condos supplanted antique architecture decades ago, it is still possible to conjure up an era when the river was the main artery of transport and temples were the tallest buildings. Prince Chakrabongse, a turn-of-the-century royal, built an eponymous mansion in the heart of old Bangkok, to use as a convenient pit-stop after a gruelling day at the nearby royal palace. Nowadays, tourists can do the same,

thanks to the Prince's grand-daughter, who has converted three villas in the garden of the main house into a wonderfully atmospheric bed and breakfast named **Chakrabongse Villas**.

From the private, riverside terrace of a traditional Thai pavilion, guests can watch sentries patrol around an old white-washed fort on the opposite bank of the Chao Phraya River. Candlelit dinners are served in a wooden sala projecting over the river, as tugs, ferries, barges and longtails bustle by.

In the late evening, after all the out-of-the-know tourists have returned to their hotels in the modern part of town, visitors can saunter up the street to Wat Pho, where the soaring, tiled chedis are floodlit until 11 at night, or stroll down the road to the flower market, where whole armfuls of orchids can be bought for the price of a fruity after-dinner cocktail.

Every element of the interior would have tugged at the heartstrings of homesick colonialists, from the lumpy leather armchairs and creaking floorboards to the draughty corridors and chintzy curtains.

But no hotel is less willing to let bygone eras be bygone than the **Hill Club**, in the Sri Lankan resort of Nuwara Eliya. 2000 metres up in the hills, the weather is as pleasant and cool as a hot summer's day in England. At any rate, English flora thrives: the town's many parks and gardens heave with hydrangeas as big as the late Queen Mum's hats, and roses as strongly scented as the soap section in Fortnum & Mason. English etiquette thrives too. A gentleman would never stay in a mere 'hotel' in London, nor need a tourist do so in Nuwara Eliya. The Hill Club is just that: a club - and visitors must purchase a temporary membership to spend the night. Some would-be Scottish laird must have designed the massive stone clubhouse, and decorated the walls with the stuffed heads of

various gentle woodland creatures. Every element of the interior would have tugged at the heartstrings of homesick colonialists, from the lumpy leather armchairs and creaking floorboards to the draughty corridors and chintzy curtains.

The highlight of a night at the Hill Club is dinner, served in the formal dining room at eight o'clock sharp. The staff will lend male diners the required jacket and tie, although some of their stock looks as old as the building, and utterly unacquainted with newfangled technology like dry cleaning. White-gloved waiters will then escort you to your table, where a bewildering array of glasses and cutlery await. After starter, soup, mains and pudding, dazed guests stagger across to the lounge, to enjoy a digestive glass of port in front of the roaring log fire.

Who knows, perhaps Somerset Maugham once sat on the same sofa, and sketched out a short story in his head, before ordering another pot of tea, served in the Hill Club's monogrammed china? 🍵

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