





PENANG, MALAYSIA

Beach Culture

Story and pictures by Urs Muller

Times have a' changed since the 1970s when Penang was one of Asia's top beach resorts, yet a sizeable number of predominantly British regulars still bask on Batu Ferringhi's sun-drenched sands every year. But, besides its beachy attributes, the Pearl of the Orient has a lot more to offer from a cultural standpoint.

Although stained here and there with the patina of age, Penang's colonial-flavoured city of Georgetown wears its history just as well as its popular beaches pull visitors. Whenever I stop in Penang, I always fall for the sultry period charm, the sun-baked white beaches and the lush green hills. Despite modern progress, Penang blends the enjoyment of life and food its own special way, while the city's mix of Malay, Chinese and Indian culture is immediately intoxicating.

Seldom is cultural heritage so well preserved in Asia as it is in Penang. In 1879, the great 19th century traveller Isabella Bird noted Penang's multifaceted exotic character: 'As one lands on Penang one is impressed even before reaching the shore by the blaze of colour in the costumes of the crowds which throng the jetty.'

Georgetown is one of Asia's most pleasant cities to explore, where the gentle pace turns even Malaysia's maniac motorists into considerate drivers. It is a fascinating melting pot of ethnicities and colonial heritage, revealed in its pre-war European architecture, bustling Chinatown, colourful temples and communal atmosphere.

Here, ethnic boundaries blend into one: Chinese flock to the Kuan Yin Teng temple to burn joss sticks for good luck, while Hindus visit the ornate Sri Mariamman temple some 100 metres away, and Muslims pray in the majestic Kapitan Keling Mosque further down the street. Despite its different cultural traditions, Penang is an extraordinary example of peaceful coexistence.

A leisurely evening walk through streets full of stalls, lights and life captures the best of Penang. Enjoying local food in fan-cooled coffee shops and roadside stalls is a must. Here some of Penang's tastiest delicacies such as *rojak*, or *laksa* will come for a fraction of the cost of a restaurant meal. Gurney Drive is a long-time favourite among food lovers, situated along the seafront a couple of kilometres from the city centre. Each night, hawkers cook up a storm from their small pushcarts while customers wait impatiently at nearby tables.

Coexisting with the old is new Penang, with skyscrapers and upmarket shopping complexes like the huge Prangin Mall in the heart of Georgetown. In recent years, the former British trading post, founded by Captain Francis Light in 1786, has re-established itself as a commercial hub and IT production centre after being long overshadowed by Singapore.

Opening spread: A fisher pulls his boat out to sea at Teluk Nangka. This spread, clockwise from top left: A fishing boat moored on the beach at Teluk Bahang; a Malay man gets ready to go shopping by bicycle in Georgetown; sailing along the shore in Teluk Bahang; and huge joss sticks burn in front of the very popular Kuan Yin Teng temple (The goddess of mercy).





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When the humidity gets too much to bare, march straight to Batu Ferringhi, the 'Portuguese Rock' on the northern shore. International resorts dot the coast where Portuguese ships once stopped for fresh water. One favourite, Shangri-la's Rasa Sayang is presently undergoing extensive redevelopment. Next year, it will reopen as a stylish lifestyle resort with destination spa Chi set in landscaped gardens, giving visitors an alternative to the current leader of the pack, the Penang Mutiara Beach Resort, near Teluk Bahang.

Apart from relaxing in the sun on a hotel's lawns, shaded by huge casuarina trees, there are plenty of water sports to enjoy on this strip, including jet-skiing, all kinds of boating, hang-gliding, water-skiing and para-sailing. One alternative is to hire a sailing boat and ask the skipper to take you around Penang to good fishing spots, or show you some of the best marine life. While sailing along the coast, you'll discover a different side to Penang with small fishing villages nestled in coconut tree groves and lush jungle. It's an idyllic escape from the city.

The beauty of island life is captured at Penang's off-the-beaten-track beaches, worlds apart from Batu Ferringhi's main resort strip. Teluk Nangka, a short taxi ride from the centre, has a softly curved sandy beach lined by palms. At the end of the bay, wooden houses huddle against coconut trees. Nangka is wonderfully secluded, and only a few locals find their way to this peaceful spot.

Following the long winding road towards Georgetown, right at a sharp curve, is Lost Paradises, an eagle nest-like resort above a natural marina. The view from the swimming pool over the deep blue Andaman Sea is stunning. In the marina, thrill seekers take catamarans out onto the water. In the late afternoon, move on to Teluk Tikus, a few hundred metres further down the road, where locals come at sunset to enjoy the beach. During the day the place is deserted, and there are no shops so bring a bottle of water. The big round rocks at the western end are fun to gallyvant around.

Last December's earthquake set Penang's walls shaking for minutes, but the city was secure from the devastating tsunami tidal waves unleashed by the powerful tremors, although fishing communities were badly affected. 🌐



Penang Mutiara Beach Resort
1 Jalan Teluk Bahang
Tel: + 60 4 886 8888
infopg@mutiarahotels.com
www.penang-mutiara.com.my

Shangri-La's Rasa Sayang (Opening mid-2006)
www.shangri-la.com/penang





Penang: Beyond the Wave

Text by Tom Vater Pictures by Aroon Thaewchatturat

“A wall of water as high as a house was rushing towards me. I had no chance to run,” 36 year-old carpenter Abdul Mutalib intones again and again from his bed at the General Hospital in Penang. He, like many others, escaped miraculously in the midst of chaos and loss.

“I was fishing with a couple of friends when I saw the water retreat and many fish flapping on the beach. I thought: great, we will make a big catch today. So many expensive fish on the beach, right in front of us. Then the wave came crashing in and I was swept out to sea.”

Penang, one of Asia’s most popular tourist destinations was the worst hit Malaysian community in the tsunami. While escaping much of the large-scale destruction witnessed elsewhere, even a relatively small number of casualties and minor physical damage have left scars on the island community. According to the General Hospital, 51 people died on the island, with more than 200 injured.

“I have been living by the ocean since I was a little boy. I have been a fisherman all my life. But I have never seen anything like this wave and neither has anyone in my family in living memory.”

Ali, a fisherman, lived in a modest home on Batu Ferringhi Beach. Now his entire community is stranded between surf and beach road, living in tents behind the flooded and destroyed

homes. “I have not been out to sea this week. I am scared to go fishing. But what can I do? This is my job, my livelihood.”

Most residents of the beach survived the tsunami. The giant wave was partly deflected by Aceh, Sumatra’s hard hit province to the northwest. Ali smiles sadly, “Aceh saved us. Penang would have been flattened, had it not been for Sumatra being in the way of the tsunami.”

On Sundays, the beaches around Batu Ferringhi are packed with picnickers from all over the country. Mohammed Saiful Nazri was sleeping in a blanket on the sand while his parents were unpacking. The family of 10 had made a day trip from for their annual holiday. Mohammed’s father was laying out the food when the giant wave surged up the beach and rolled across the small group. Mohammed was immediately carried away. The family raced to higher ground, but the little boy was gone. His mother, distraught, set off back down to the beach, oblivious to the potential dangers of another surge. But there was no sign of the child.

She returned to her husband when a local fisherman arrived with the lifeless body of the boy. The family rushed to the General Hospital, by now inundated with emergency arrivals. The boy was admitted to ICU and put in an incubator. Mohammed had drowned when he was admitted, but he recovered and after four days and could breathe independently. Shell-shocked, his father mumbles, “We will never have a beach picnic again.”

Abdul Mutalib, the carpenter who was swallowed and spat forth again by the ocean, sits on his hospital bed with a serene smile: “Soon I will go fishing again. I am not scared of another tsunami. I have lived all my life by the sea.”

Above: Batu Ferringhi, on Penang’s northern coast was hard hit by the tsunami and local houses on the waterfront have been completely destroyed.