

# **Heritage route along ethnic lines: the case of Penang**

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## **Penang: a historical glimpse**

The State of Penang (Negeri Pulau Pinang) is situated in the northern region of the Malaysian Peninsula. It consists of Penang Island (Pulau Pinang) and Province Wellesley (Seberang Perai) on the mainland of Peninsular Malaysia. The island of Penang is connected to the mainland by a 13.5 km bridge, the longest bridge in Asia. The city of Georgetown, the second biggest city in Malaysia, is located on the northeastern cape of the island. The local Malays simply refer to the city as 'Tanjung'.

The history of Penang goes back to the year 1786 when Captain Francis Light established the first British trading post on the island for trade between India, China and the archipelago. Light arrived at the site of Fort Cornwallis and it was reported that he encouraged the locals to clear up land by firing coins into the forested swamp. A few years later, Light went ahead to take possession of the island and an additional strip of land on the mainland known as Province Wellesley from the Sultan of Kedah, a neighbouring northern state of the Malaysian Peninsula.

In 1832, along with Malacca and Singapore, Penang became part of the British Straits Settlements. Since Penang Island is situated on the trading route of the Straits of Malacca, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Europeans, including the Dutch and British, were competing to open up the East Indian trading routes. The settlement quickly attracted people of all descents: Europeans, Chinese, Indians, Bugis, Arabs, Armenians, Persians, Siamese, Burmese and Sumatrans. Chinese and Indians were drawn to the Straits Settlement during the second half of the nineteenth century by the booming tin and rubber industries.

Over the years, a consolidation of these cultural influences brought about the dominance of British colonial architecture in the island. With the independence of Malaysia or Malaya on 31 August 1957, Penang became a State, governed by an appointed Head of State and administered by an elected Chief Minister. Georgetown has become the capital city of Penang. Today the different ethnic groups of Georgetown still exist and can be traced through their heritage buildings, diverse cultures and languages.

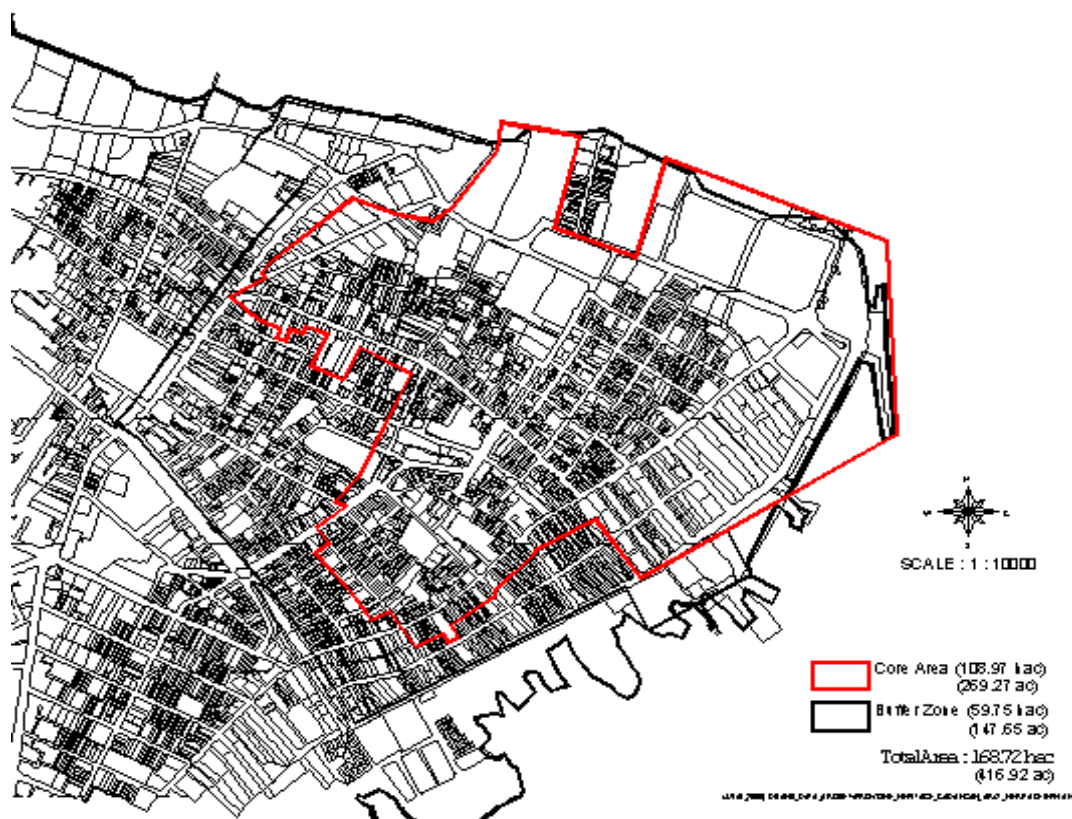
In the early days of Penang, Georgetown functioned as a port town where regional traders brought in products such as nutmeg, pepper, clove, gambir and textiles, to name a few, to trade with the Europeans, Arabs, Indians and Chinese. Soon after Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore, Penang, Malacca and Singapore were incorporated to form the British Straits settlement. When Pangkor Treaty was signed in 1874, Penang flourished as the export centre for the northern hinterland. This revolutionised the trade and commerce that allowed the Straits Settlements to keep up

with western trends and fashions, which extended into the local etiquette and architecture.

Earlier, Penang had been ruled by the Sultan of Kedah and was populated by the Malays. After Penang became the British trade centre, traders from various regions gathered and settled down in the island. Among them were two prominent groups, the Indian Muslims and the Chinese, who took Malay wives and became a part of the earliest permanent community. These two groups were urban elites and cultural hybrids, and were more receptive to European influence than other contemporary groups. The two communities were known as *Peranakan Jawi* (Indian Muslim) and *Peranakan Cina*, locally known as the *Baba-Nyonya* (Straits Chinese).

Besides these prominent groups, Penang had also attracted Europeans, Arabs, Armenians, Jews, Burmese, Thais, Achenese and other Malay groups, Tamils, Gujeratis, and the Sikhs of India; Hokkien and other southern Chinese groups and later the Japanese and the Filipinos. Obviously, these people came from different backgrounds, religions and cultures and this has contributed to making Penang Island into a unique place. As observed by Tjoa-Bonatz (2000), the migration of various people from all over Asia has constituted a society of multiethnic sojourners. Although this cultural pluralism has often been highlighted, the degree of cultural assimilation has varied over time and ethnicity has become the main criterion for cultural stratification.

The architecture of Penang is seen as an eclectic mixture of the European classical style, with Islamic, Malay, Indian, Chinese and later Art Deco motives. Interestingly, the different religions, cultures and architecture of the various groups co-exist in harmony. As a result, it is common to see mosques, churches, Buddhist and Hindu temples standing side by side on the same street in Georgetown, Penang.



**The Historic Enclave of Penang**

## **Tourism in Penang**

Penang continues to be one of the top destinations in Malaysia together with the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, the heritage town of Malacca and Johore Bahru in the south. The number of tourist arrivals grows at an average of 6-7% annually and today, Penang receives over 3 million tourists, both domestic and international (Table 1). While the majority of the visitors to this island are from Malaysia (about 40% of the total number of visitors) and its ASEAN counterparts (especially from Thailand and Singapore), other major sources of international markets are the United Kingdom, Australia, and Japan. At the same time, Penang also registers an increasing number of Middle Eastern tourists, particularly from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Among attractions found in Penang are the Snake Temple, Penang Hill, the Botanical Garden as well as the unique local living culture found in thousands of historic buildings, mostly in the inner city of Georgetown.

<b>No. of visitors</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2000</b>
Total of tourists	1.8 million	3.44 million	3.75
Foreign visitors	1.28 million	1.93 million	n.a
No. of hotel rooms	7714	10891	n.a

## **Penang Tourism Facts. Source: Tourism Malaysia**

### **Heritage tourism in Penang**

Heritage is not only about the past. It is about the present generation who continues to cherish and to learn about the vibrant and glorious history, culture and past civilization. It is about cultural traditions, places and values that people proudly preserve (Collins 1983). It includes family patterns, religious practices, folklore traditions and social customs, as well as museums, monuments, battlefields, artefacts, historic buildings and landmarks (Konrad 1982). Heritage tourism also involves visitations to natural sites such as valued gardens, wilderness areas of scenic beauty and landscapes. It reminds us of war and peace, struggles and successes. Heritage tourism can be classified as a subclass of cultural tourism, defined by the World Tourism Organization as the movements of persons for essentially cultural motivations such as study tours, performing arts and cultural tours, travel to festivals and other related events (1985).

Heritage culture and buildings in Penang have become among the most valued assets in Malaysia, consisting of a jumble of old temples, churches and mosques, white stucco colonial mansions, rows of tiled Chinese and Muslim Indian shophouses, and ornate clan houses guarded by stone dragons. Walking through Penang's narrow old streets within the Georgetown's inner city carries anyone through the relics of time.

Though Georgetown has been included on the United Nations list of the world's 100 most endangered sites by the World Heritage Watch, the town has taken measures to apply to UNESCO to become a World Heritage Site, together with Malacca, another strait settlement. Strict controls have been enforced on any renovation. Guidelines have been introduced on the color, façade, motives, height and various architectural aspects of any work to be carried out on these buildings.

Georgetown has more than 12,000 old buildings comprising shop and terrace houses, churches, mosques, bungalows, villas, government offices and monuments. In 1996 the Penang State Conservation Committee, consisting of government agencies, local authority and private sectors, was formed to monitor and control any development in the conservation areas. Many heritage buildings in Georgetown have been protected under a Rent Control Act, introduced in 1948,<sup>1</sup> as well as by the Antiquities Act of 1976. In a further effort to conserve the historic buildings of Georgetown, the State Government and the local authority have designated six conservation areas in the inner city and these zones have been forwarded to UNESCO to be nominated as heritage sites. The zones are:

- a. Cultural precinct: Chulia-Love-Muntri Street.
- b. Historic commercial centre: Little India and traditional business communities.
- c. Waterfront business-financial district: Banking, shipping and corporate business.
- d. Mosque and clan house enclave: Religious buildings, clan houses, and small businesses.

- e. Market and shopping precinct: Traditional retail and neighbourhood markets.

The streets of Penang keep thousands of untold stories of human interaction with mankind, the built environment and God. The historic buildings in Georgetown, some aged more than 200 years, were once regarded as 'outdated'. Not until recently have these buildings been revisited, appreciated and revitalized. Conservation and tourism activities have given these 'old' buildings a new life.



**Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion**

Heritage sites around Penang attract the curiosity of both allocentric and psychocentric tourists (see Plog 1972 for detail descriptions on types of tourists). They are mostly westerners, allocentric, and travel in a small group. Many stay in low-budget hotels, found in abundance along Chulia Street, an important tourist district. They travel on shoestring budgets and can be found wandering through every little corner of the streets. Psychocentric tourists, on the other hand, usually come from Europe, the Arab world, China and Japan. They prefer to travel in-group and to stay at the classy hotels found in Ferringhi Beach.

### **The 'new tourists'**

Popularized by an increasing number of what are known as the 'new tourists' worldwide, visitations to places with historical significance quickly gains popularity. Buildings with historical background attract these tourists. This new trend boosts the value of old buildings, pressing the local authority to take proper measures to ensure these assets remain intact. People are also attracted to the nostalgic part of a place. As mentioned by Boniface and Fowler (1993), across the globe colonisers become the tourists to the land from which they, or their ancestor, originated. Their expectations may be both different and greater than those of travelling companions who are solely on holiday.

Today's new tourists have a different approach in their travelling behaviour. Travelling used to be a way of 'escapism' for many people, but today, the notion of travelling has changed to that of 'enrichment' of knowledge. Today's tourists no longer visit a place only for the sake of visiting; they demand much more than that. They not only desire to observe the culture in the galleries, but also to experience it -- to feel the flavour of the place -- every flavour that Penang has got to offer -- the architecture, the colors, the sound and the smells.

### **Heritage routes along ethnic lines**

Penang's heritage assets can be classified into both tangible and intangible ones. As discussed above, Georgetown inner-city, where most treasured architecture is located, can be divided into several zones, along various ethnic lines. Its culture has been moulded by the successions of civilisations that arrived and shaped its urban growth. A closer look at these zones and the locations of some heritage buildings that dot the inner city exposes a strong sense of compromise between the pioneers, earlier settlers and the later immigrants. The street names could give us some indications of the history and the significance of an area. Bishop Street, Church Street and Buckingham Street indicate the influence of Christianity on that part of the city, proved by the existence of several churches along the streets. Aceh Street and Farquhar Street mark the arrival of Muslim Achenese and Arabs, in the early days of Penang. While China Street, as the name clearly states, denotes the congregation of Chinese early community in Penang. At Little India, there is a line of shops owned by Indian shopkeepers originated from South India selling necessities such as fabrics like the *sari*, accessories, statues and music instruments.



**A busy morning at Little India**

Just like the famous *pasembur* -- a popular Penang dish -- Georgetown comprises blended ethnic groups of different cultures, continuing their daily routines now as in the past years. The many intact buildings become hosts or eyewitnesses to some very important development of Penang's history. The dates on the building walls denote the succession of settlers that fought their way to this 'Pearl of the Orient'.

The mosque has been the locus of both social and economic activities, which can still be seen around it. Another symbol of the Islamic community is the Lebuah Aceh Mosque, reflecting an area once richly populated by people from Aceh, Indonesia, confirmed by the existence of graveyards with stones resembling those of Sumatra's and Riau's. This area was a service centre for those going to make the pilgrimage to the holy land of Mecca by sea, when Penang was one of the departure points. Pilgrimages by sea however, has become less popular because of the improvement in modern aircraft.



**Acheen Street Mosque**

The evidence of Chinese civilisation can be traced in some of the most beautiful religious structures in the island—the Kong San Tong Khoo, best known as the Khoo's *Kongsi* (or clan association), the Cheah's *Kongsi*, and Yap's *Kongsi*. Khoo's *Kongsi* is located at Cannon Square. The clan members formally established the *Kongsi* in 1884. The temple however, was burned down soon afterward. It was rebuilt in 1906 by a group of 102 members of the Khoo clan from Hokkien, China to serve as the centre for their members and for those just arrived from China. Crafted by artisans imported from China, it has pillars and walls with beautiful designs that depict some Chinese myths. Inside the temple are altars to the God of Prosperity and for honoring the Khoo ancestors. For the past 100 years, the temple has been used for worship and for special Khoo clan celebrations. Today, it becomes one of the most visited sites in Georgetown, receiving some 800 visitors a day all year round.

For Hindus, the Sri Maha Mariamman temple, located at Queen Street, is a showcase of temple architecture of East India. Built in 1883, it is the oldest temple in Penang and is currently the host of various religious celebrations and ceremonies related to Hinduism.

Georgetown can be explored either on foot or by trishaw. At present there are two heritage trails set up by the American Express Company for the inner-city. The first heritage trail which takes one and a half hours for a leisurely stroll, or up to a few hours if one investigates each cultural attraction along the way, begins at Fort Cornwallis at the Jalan Tun Syed Sheh Barakbah facing the sea and ends up at the

Cheah Kongsı at Gat Lebuħ Armenian. The second heritage trail begins at the Penang Museum and Cathedral of the Assumption on Lebuħ Farquhar and ends at the Saint Francis Xavier Church at Penang Road. But these trails merely connect places of interests found within the walking zones.

Thus, a different approach is suggested here where the heritage sites of Georgetown are in three overlapping zones, distinguished by their respective ethnic characters: Indian, Indo-Malay-Arab, and Chinese. This ethnic divide is both historical as well as physical, and dynamic co-existence and intermingling is the strongest selling point of the inner-city communities. Over centuries, through constant interaction, inter-marriages and a shared history and purpose, each culture has absorbed and adopted the accoutrements and traditions of its neighbors. Although still recognizable Indo-Malay-Arabian, Chinese or Indian as individuals, most heritage-zone natives would be more at home with each other than they would be back in their respective countries.

Ethnic sub-sets have arisen, including the remarkable evolution of *peranakan* Chinese or *baba-nyonya*, a people of Chinese descent who speak Malay and whose culture is a unique blend of both Malay and Chinese; and the *peranakan Jawi*, Indians of Islamic faith, each with their signature styles of dressing, dining and traditions.

The purpose of separating these cultures, which have existed side by side for so long, is to be inclusive, rather than divisive. Visitors are encouraged to travel through the communities and time-lines of each culture in isolation before venturing into the next, thereby forming a clearer picture of each ethnic group and culture by itself before comparing all three as a whole. The current practice of having tourists arbitrarily stumbling from one heritage building to another, with no legible sequence, is confusing and discounts the value of each of these cultures separate from the whole.

### **The Indo-Malay-Arab Zone**

This community covers the areas of Acheen Street, part of Armenian Street and Kapitan Kling Road, up to the Kapitan Kling Mosque, behind which is a sizeable area of *waqf* land. The starting point for this Zone is the Kapitan Kling Mosque, which is highly visible from the main road.



**Kapitan Kling Mosque**



### **The Chinese Zone**

The Chinese community covers the largest area in the site, and contains whole living communities (like the Khoo Kongsi), religious facilities, business premises, craftsmen guilds and individual homes. The starting point for this Zone is the Khoo Kongsi and covers other *kongsis* such as Cheah Kongsi, Tan Kongsi, Lim Kongsi, Yap Kongsi and Yeoh Kongsi and their extensive trust properties.

### **The Indian Zone**

The Indian community in the heritage site covers the area between Queen Street, Market Street and Penang Street. There are bustling spots of hawkers offering traditional Indian fare and tidbits, colorful sari shops and traditional Indian moneychangers and barbers dotting the entire route. The starting point for this Zone will be the beautiful Sri Mariamman Temple on Queen Street.

The area is a contrasting mixture of the vernacular shophouses, the ornate European style buildings such as the commercial houses along Lebuah Pantai and the modern office blocks. 'Little India' on Market Street with its Indian Shops and restaurants attracts many visitors. It is the focal point of the Indian community for Penang and the surrounding states. Most of Penang's Indian textile retail trade is concentrated in Little India, Bishop Street and Chulia Street.

### **Concluding remarks**

The future and the growth of heritage tourism in Penang not only depend on the conservation efforts to preserve the historic buildings in the Georgetown inner-city but also requires strong involvement of the local people who make up the bulk of 'living' and 'moving' culture of Penang. It also depends on continued support from the tourists who should be exposed not only to the classic beauty of the buildings, but also to the reality of the life of the people. Most tourists only come to Penang without wanting to know too much about the physical and social realities behind those 'interesting' facades. They are interested by the ambience of the place rather than by the actual history of one place, however, they should be made acquainted with the urban reality - a product of history - rather than only a soft-focus, sanitized heritage. In other words, heritage tourism should have an educational role.

The abolition of the Rent Control Act in January 2000 in Georgetown presents new dimensions and challenges to the conservation efforts and to the move to establish a World Heritage site here. Already, the repeal of the Act creates an atmospheric change since many people who lived their lives in the old shophouses have had to move out due to higher rental charges at market value. Traditional trades and business will disappear and Penang is in danger of losing one of its heritage attractions. One after another, the tenants who have been living in those buildings for generations lose their rights and have to move on. They move and would take the essence of Penang's culture away with them. This is the most worrying part. A heritage site without a soul. Thus, Georgetown has to change to stay alive.

The move to turn Penang into a World Heritage Site is a noble one, but measures need be taken not only to preserve the external façades of the buildings but also to promote the living cultures inside the buildings as well. Maybe, it is time for Penang to consider an alternative to the abolished Rent Control Act. For this, the Tenancy Act,

advocated by the influential Consumer Association of Penang could provide the buffer. Even though there are calls and efforts for a more affordable alternative housing for the poor to induce urban dwellers, it is difficult to stop the exodus to the suburbs, especially for the younger generation, which prefers modern detached houses and condominiums to the perceived dirty and congested inner-city.<sup>2</sup>

Conservation efforts are further hindered by greed, insufficient legislation to protect the heritage buildings and to control the development of heritage areas, as well as by the lack of design guidelines for building repair and maintenance. On the ground the general public must be educated on the value of the historic buildings to the future generation. Only by educating people will the culture and the buildings that host the culture stay intact, preserved from one generation to the next.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Source: Tjoa-Bonatz (2000). The Rent Control Act (RCA) was enacted to address the issue of social inequity of half century ago. By controlling the rent of certain properties and protecting the tenants from easy evictions, RCA easily housed poorer citizens and redistributed wealth. An overwhelming 12, 609 premises were under the Act. 67% of the number involves Georgetown (Utusan Konsumer, Feb. 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Thieme, Knigge and Schenke 1999.