



A stimulating break

With its intoxicating mix of beaches, heritage and nature, as well as a newly thriving creativity, Penang is the perfect destination for those seeking a wellness break to enrich the senses

Penang is certainly not a new holiday location, but over the last seven years the island in north-western Malaysia has undergone a renaissance. It began in 2008, when the capital George Town was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Shortly afterwards, George Town World Heritage Inc. was established to undertake conservation projects, and run educational and cultural programmes – efforts that run deep in the community and are supported by Penang state government.

Flourishing creative scene
By involving residents, schools and local

business people in the rejuvenation plans – as opposed to pushing rebuilding efforts in a government-led, top-down manner – Penang now has a real buzz about it. Penangites are excited and proud of their home, businesses are moving to the city and the creative scene is thriving.

“The culture and arts scene is attracting the most attention now,” says Ooi Geok Ling, CEO of Penang Global Tourism. “It has significantly contributed to the vibrancy of the city, which in turn has led to many new businesses being set up. It has become hip now to move to Penang to work, when [before] it was the other way round, with Penangites moving to KL.

I can testify to that, as Penang Global Tourism just hired two KLites.”

And it’s not just Malaysians who are flocking to Penang. Tourists from across Asia and beyond are skipping KL altogether, and jetting directly to the island for its laid-back beach vibe, rich heritage and wellness treatments. In addition, five popular shopping malls occupy a space covering more than 4 million sq ft: they are Gurney Plaza, Straits Quay Marina Mall, Queensbay Mall, 1st Avenue Mall and Sunway Carnival Mall.

A multicultural history lives on
Since the 16th century Penang has successfully lured those seeking



Penangites are excited and proud of their home, and the creative scene is thriving

adventure – starting with the Portuguese claiming the island as their strategic gateway to the Malacca Straits, followed by the British, who in the 18th century established it as a port for trade, particularly in tea and opium.

Colonial Penang prospered through exports of tin and rubber to feed the Industrial Revolution in Britain, and the island’s prosperity attracted people from far and wide. Among the ethnic groups that moved to Penang were Malays, Arabs, British, Burmese, Germans, Jews, Chinese, Bengalis, Japanese, Punjabis, Tamils, Thais, Javanese, Portuguese and Eurasians. Today many of these communities have since dispersed, but their memory lives on in place names such as Burma Road, Rangoon Road, Siam Road, Armenian Street, Acheen Street, Gottlieb Road, Katz Street and the Jewish Cemetery.

Art & attractions

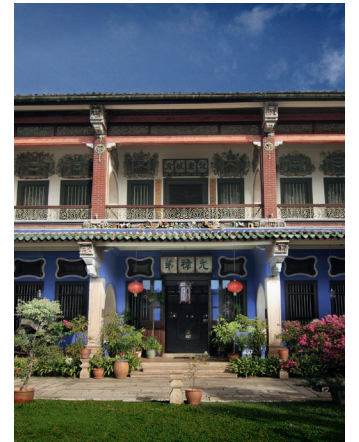
Modern-day visitors are discovering a new creative dimension to Penang. Wander the grid of narrow lanes lined



with intriguing architecture and there is a palpable energy on the streets, which is manifesting itself in the form of loud, vibrant artwork.

Old walls have been given a new lease of life thanks to local and international artists. Consider Lithuanian muralist Ernest Zacharevic, for example – akin to a Penang-based but gentler, more emotive and family-loving Banksy – and you’ll see his imprint adorning walls across George Town. The artworks, mostly depicting children, are funny, fascinating and open to interpretation.

Beyond the capital are beach areas such as Batu Ferringhi, a picturesque stretch of coves and idyllic resorts that’s perfect for soaking up the beach life or shopping for art at the night market. Moving closer to nature, there is also the sleepy Malay fishing village of Teluk Bahang, which is also the



entry point for the beaches and forests of Penang National Park.

Creativity meets wellness

Medical tourists visiting Penang will find an environment perfect for healthcare and convalescence. Penang Hill and Penang Botanic Gardens offer vigorous treks, walking trails and bracing fresh air. As Ooi Geok Ling explains, “Penang is very easy to move around in, and the hospitals are mostly centrally located. It provides city amenities with a village feel.”

Numerous resorts offering spas, reflexology, yoga and meditation, as well as vegetarian and organic restaurants, have sprung up across the island, all of which cater to both locals and visitors interested in wellness.

Penang’s cultural rebirth is not going unnoticed, and that may bring new caveats for tourists. With that in mind, those seeking a rejuvenating vacation should get there soon – before this innovative city changes pace again.

For more on the sights, art, events and medical facilities in Penang, see: <http://mypenang.gov.my>



Photo credits: Top, left: Gurney Plaza; Below, centre: Shangri-La's Rasa Sipping Resort & Spa