

Only In...Penang

Five ways to experience the history-steeped capital of Penang, Malaysia's best-known island state.

BY ROBYN ECKHARDT



1. Savor the island in a bowl.

Asam laksa, or Penang laksa as it is known to locals, is best enjoyed on its home turf. The tart, spicy fish noodle soup epitomizes the island's melting-pot history: The tamarind-soured fish broth suggests Malay origins, probable Nyonya additions include hae ko (sweet black shrimp paste), and fresh garnishes like mint leaves, cucumber, pineapple and slivered torch-ginger flower highlight Penang's proximity to Thailand. The sweetish, mild asam laksa at Joo Hooi Café (475 Penang St., 11 a.m. to around 5 p.m.) is popular with visitors, while locals flock to a stall at the corner of Lebuah Aceh and Weld Quay (2 p.m. until sold out) for a chili-packed, sour version.



4. Observe living history.

Long after its trading-port heyday, George Town remains a real, living city, where residences and businesses still outnumber boutique hotels and cafes. Within the city limits are some 500 craftspeople who have been practicing their trade for decades. A stroll along back lanes and alleys reveals noodle, bean curd and sausage workshops, an incense artisan, a master metal worker and assembler of trishaws and several builders of intricate, often huge paper and wood-stick offerings. The George Town World Heritage Resource Centre (116-118 Aceh St.) stocks pamphlets highlighting the city's traditional trades.



5. Collide with contemporary culture.

China House (chinahouse.com.my), a hub for George Town's quietly burgeoning arts scene, is Penang's answer to the ubiquitous Asian shopping mall. Housed in three shop houses, its diverse spaces include art galleries, a performance venue and a bar featuring live music several nights a week; you'll also find a wine room, library, cafe and fine-dining restaurant serving Western cuisine with Asian and Middle Eastern accents. An interior courtyard connects it all, while white-washed walls and ceilings serve as backdrop to an eclectic mix of Chinese antiques, vintage furniture from the 1960s and 1970s and stridently contemporary pieces such as the boxy leather sofas in bar Canteen.



2. Ride a trishaw, for real.

George Town may be a Unesco world heritage site, but its bicycle trishaws aren't just for tourists. The lumbering, canopied vehicles ply the city's streets from dawn to late at night, ferrying uniformed kids to school, housewives to the market and elderly folks just about everywhere. Embellished with anything from plastic flowers and stuffed animals to flashing fairy lights, they are a breezy, slow-paced and photography-friendly means of taking in the city's storied architecture. Be sure to negotiate a fare (about 30 to 45 ringgit per hour, depending on your negotiation skills) before boarding.

David Robert Hagerman for The Wall Street Journal (5)



3. Fall asleep in an artful ruin.

In a city full of self-proclaimed heritage hotels, Sekeeping Victoria (sekeeping.com; rooms from 700 ringgit, or \$226, per night) is the real deal. The 4,000-square-foot, century-old warehouse turned three-suite stay has unpainted walls, original exposed beams and trees sprouting from the ground floor's concrete—all a result of Malaysian owner Sek San's design mission to maintain the building's "ruinous aspect." Guests share an expansive open kitchen, dining and living area; two of the airy, minimalist accommodations are tucked into the structure's eaves. Complimentary bicycles come in handy on Sunday mornings, when nearby Beach Street is closed to cars.