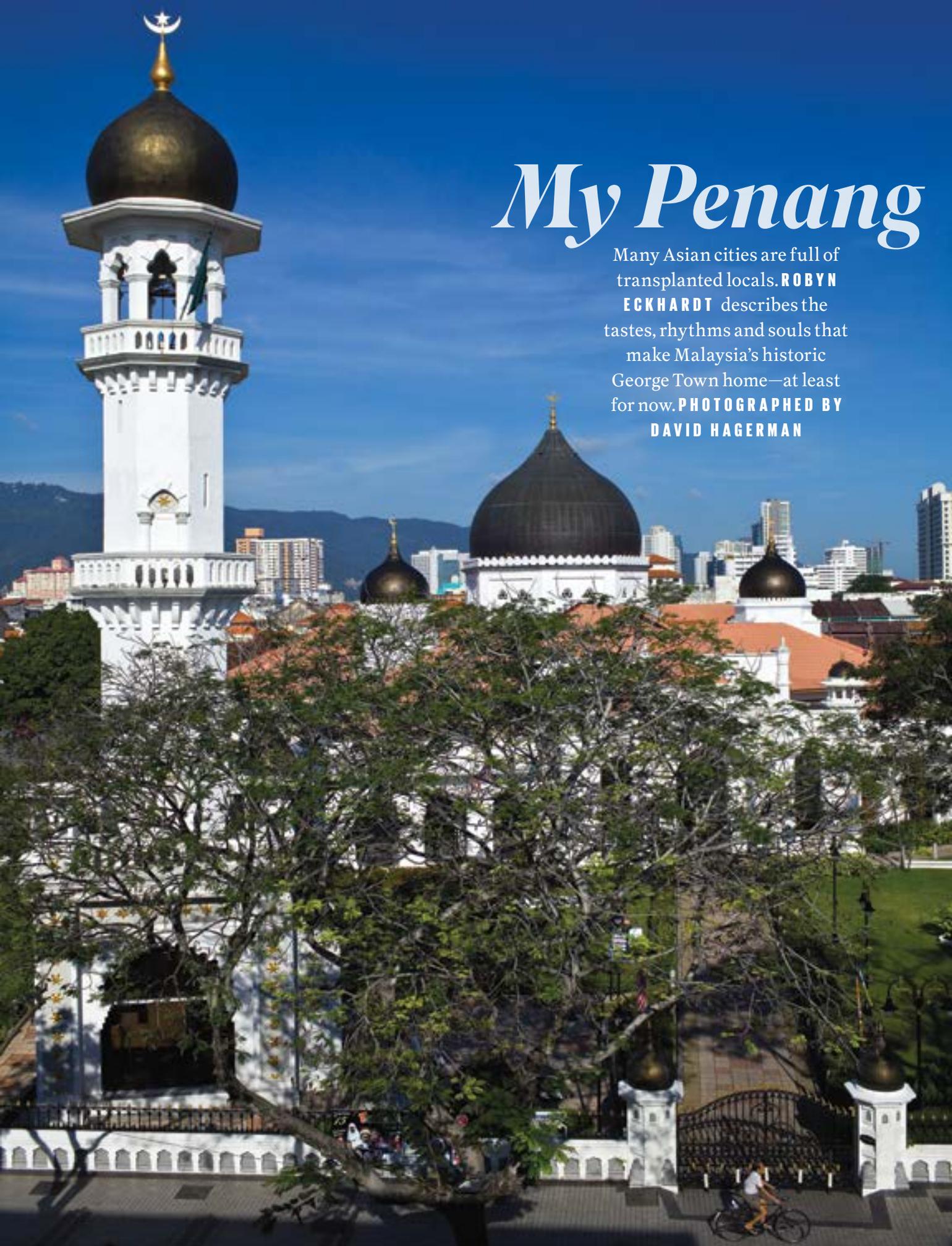




In Little India, *songkok* (caps worn by Muslim men) are still made by hand. **Opposite:** Kapitan Keling Mosque, on Penang's Street of Harmony.



My Penang

Many Asian cities are full of transplanted locals. **ROBYN ECKHARDT** describes the tastes, rhythms and souls that make Malaysia's historic George Town home—at least for now. **PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID HAGERMAN**

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uck soup and charcoal are the first things I smell each morning at daybreak, when I leave my house to walk my dogs. We round our first corner at the *koay teow th'ng* cart, and it's all I can do to not stop for a bowl of silky rice noodles in clear, deep broth when I see the soup pot steaming over coals. I keep moving, down the alley marked by a shrine in which the *koay teow th'ng* seller has left an offering of coffee and *nasi lemak*, to the knock-up curry stall where an Indian Muslim man is frying chicken cloaked in bright orange powdered chili. We keep on to Campbell Street Market. I breathe in fresh pandan leaves and grated coconut, then hold my nose against less appealing scents wafting from the market's live poultry section.

I nod to one of the Burmese holding a chicken's neck in one hand and a cleaver in the other, and to early-bird shoppers carrying plastic baskets overflowing with *choy sum*, *gai lan*, spinach, scallions. On the home stretch I pass Oil Man—the unsmiling septuagenarian machine-shop proprietor who wears a slick of motor oil in lieu of a shirt, sitting in a rattan chair on the five-foot way in front of his shophouse, reading a Chinese newspaper and drinking coffee from a beer glass—and his neighbor, performing tai chi on his own little piece of pavement directly opposite. By the time I return home, the egg store—nothing but eggs, three varieties, six sizes, front door to back and floor to ceiling—across the street has opened its doors and the lottery dealer two houses down has rolled up its metal shutters. Smoke from three sticks of incense stuck upright in a chalice of sand set on the shrine affixed to my neighbor's front pillar is curling through my window bars. Motorcyclists weave through a queue of cars and vegetable vendors pedaling bicycle carts to Chowrasta Market. It's the start of another day in George Town, Penang.



Clockwise from above: Kit Gee Too Watch Repair, Penang Road; tending to an ancestral shrine in 1.5-meter way on Kimberley Street; fishing near Fort Cornwallis; *sepak takraw*, or kick-volleyball, livens up an alley; *asam laksa* in all its sour deliciousness.





THE CRACK OF A
WHIP? THE SIGNAL
THAT A MEDIUM
CALLED IN BY THE
SMALL BUDDHIST
TEMPLE IS ENTERING
A TRANCE





Peninsular George Town pokes out into the Strait of Malacca three kilometers from mainland Malaysia.



Clockwise from top left: A butcher's on Chowrasta Street; a street food hawker flambées *char koay teow* over charcoal on Kimberley Street; where else can you get *char koay kak* (chewy rice cakes) stir-fried in a tire-sized griddle?





Five years ago, I was living in Kuala Lumpur when an assignment sent me to Penang. My husband, David, tagged along and for a week we stayed in a friend's refurbished shophouse in George Town, then less than a year into its status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We ate incredibly well, at *kopitiam* filled with vendors serving up delicious oyster omelets, *char kway teow*, Penang-style Hokkien *mee* (prawn head-and-pork noodle soup), *nasi kandar*, and coffee with toast and *kaya* (coconut jam). At that time George Town didn't attract many tourists; visitors to Penang stayed up north at the beach. There were no boutique hotels, no cafés serving espresso, no bars or clubs—at least not of the sort that could be described as hip or even welcoming. In early 2009, George Town was fading. Many of its picturesque pre-World War II buildings were decaying or unoccupied. Penang-ites described the city as “dirty” and “dangerous,” and after its few remaining old-school restaurants closed their doors around 9 p.m., the streets were empty. At 11 on a Saturday night you could walk George Town's inner city end to end and not encounter a single soul.

I loved it.

For, what George Town lacked in amenities and nightlife, it made up for in something I'd begun to find missing in Kuala Lumpur, as with the progression of Asian cities in which I'd lived in over the previous 15 years: a sense of place. While other urban centers in the region were obliterating their built history in the quest for modernity, George Town wallowed in its glorious trading-post past. Its old street names—Aceh, Melayu, Chulia, Armenian—fêted the multicultural communities of immigrants whose legacies lived on in temples and mosques and churches, not to mention a distinctive fusion cuisine. Street theater—wild processions for religious holidays like *Thaipusam* and the Nine Emperor Gods Festival, noisy Chinese opera staged for the birthdays of gods housed in clan association temples and offerings burnt by observant Buddhists to appease spirits during Hungry Ghost month and on the first and 15th days of the lunar calendar—was simply a part of daily life, not designed for tourist consumption. Crafts people—tofu and noodle and incense makers, sign painters, tinsmiths and men building big Mercedes and other offerings for departed souls out of paper and wooden sticks—did their work to meet the needs of Penang's consumers, not souvenir hunters.

While parts of Saigon had begun to resemble Bangkok and slices of Kuala Lumpur suggested a Singapore wannabe, no part of George Town could be mistaken for anywhere else in Asia. Or the world.

And so, newly untethered from our base in Kuala Lumpur as David joined me in a freelancing career, we moved to Penang, first to a suburban-ish town on the island's west coast and then, after 20 months of renovations, into a century-old shophouse in the center of George Town. That was almost four years ago. In the interim, George Town has changed immeasurably, and not always agreeably. But its distinctive alloy of pan-national flavors and most of the down-to-earth shopkeepers and residents who form the community around me remains. I've yet to regret our decision to make the leap.

As a traveling writer, I spend a total of only six or seven months of the year on Penang. My rituals of return are well-ingrained: a bowl of *asam laksa* (my favorite Asian dish, not because I'm a Penang booster but because its sour-sweet-fishy-spiciness and fresh garnish of mint, cucumber and pineapple hit all of my culinary highs) from the vendor with the wan moustache and the friendly wife who sets up around 3 p.m. on Weld Quay at the corner of Aceh Street; a walk along

the quieter, less-touristed lanes south of Lebuah Carnarvon in the evening, when the setting sun washes shophouse facades in shades of pink; a dinner of Teochew steamed pomfret with tomatoes, fresh tofu and sour plums, and sambal-fried wing beans at Tek Sen, the best restaurant in George Town and perhaps on the entire island.

Like most anyone anywhere in the world, I suppose, my days at home are fairly routine. But a same-old same-old day in George Town is far from the everyday. Where else can you stop en route to the market (Penang's Chowrasta) for a serving of *char koay kak* (chewy rice cakes stir-fried with dark soy and chili sauces, bean sprouts, Chinese chives, chopped preserved mustard and egg) cooked, with a heart-stopping amount of lard (and a heaping spoonful of cracklings, on request), in a blackened truck-tire-sized griddle set over a wood fire and served in a banana leaf-lined newspaper cone? Where else can you buy a free-range chicken from a singing seller who sports a different hat every day, pork ribs cleaved to order from two brother butchers—one fat and one thin—whose squeaky clean shop has stood for more than 50 years, and the sweetest mangoes from a granny who plucked the fruit from her tree that morning? In what city other than George Town would evening bring the sound of a bell rung by an itinerant vendor of roti or, once in a while, the crack of a whip against pavement—the signal that a medium called in by members of the small Buddhist temple in a nearby alley is entering a trance?

My Penang is, for the most part, George Town. One of the joys of living here is being able to walk or bike to everything I need. But despite its compact, low-rise cityscape, living in George Town can be an intensely urban experience, especially on weekends and holidays. For residents, the city's elevated profile post-UNESCO designation is a double-edged sword, one that I feel most when a touring van parked in front of my house belches exhaust, a gaggle of travelers shelters on my porch during a rain shower, or an eager photographer presses her camera against my window to get a clear shot of my home's interior. Like, I suspect, many of us who live in enviably interesting or beautiful places in this region, I battle a mélange of emotions ranging from pride that *my* hometown has become a tourist mecca to surliness towards the visitors who trample it.

Luckily, Penang hides pockets of quietude. When I feel the need to escape I head to Balik Pulau, set amidst fruit plantations on the island's west side, where dueling vendors of *asam laksa* and fresh nutmeg juice soured with salted plums face off across the tiny town's main street. After a bite and a stroll, I head straight out of town, past modest old Malay-style timber homes on stilts surrounded by neat gardens draped in bougainvillea, a small workshop where *belacan* (shrimp paste, made elsewhere on the island) is molded into bricks and packed in foil, and on through one of the island's last lingering fishing villages to where the road dead ends at a sliver of clean—and on weekdays at least, usually deserted—white sand facing open sea.

Penang is home, but I know it's not forever. As much as I love George Town's realness—aspects of the city that endure economically and culturally not because of its burgeoning tourism industry but its actual residents—I am keenly aware of its shelf life. When the city stole my heart, it had a solid core of supporters who viewed its UNESCO listing as a potential precipitant for urban renewal, buoyed by the knowledge that livable cities organically attract tourists. That's changed in the last year or two as city and heritage-site leaders have elected to focus instead on the real (or imagined) needs and desires of the growing numbers of visitors.



An avalanche of color in Little India.

**A MAN IS FRYING
CHILI-CLOAKED
CHICKEN... I
BREATHE IN
FRESH PANDAN
AND COCONUT**



Armenian, the quiet residential street where I stayed during that initial week five years ago, has become a strip of shops peddling kitsch, cafes offering replicas of “famous Penang hawker food,” and home to a Saturday night market modeled after Jonker’s Walk in Malacca. In the last 12 months, I’ve watched as at least 20 shophouses within a three-block radius of my home have been emptied of a Taoist temple, families and longstanding businesses, to be turned into boutique hotels. Several years ago, a century-old soy sauce workshop in the city center was evicted from its premises, the owner planning to build a hotel; the still-empty site is now a parking lot. It might not have been paradise to start, but the unique character that initially attracted me to George Town is slowly but surely being leached away. Every morning my dogs and I walk by George Town’s oldest and largest maker of paper effigies. The land beneath the workshop has been sold and the owner expects to be evicted within a few months.

Things change, and that’s the hardest part. For me the city would be of little interest without its residents: the bespectacled, snow-white-singlet-wearing man who rides his upright bike to the market every single morning and sits on a stoop across from the Indian-owned, lean-to sundries shop reading the paper every single evening; the corner medicine-shop proprietor on Cintra Street whose friendly, pudgy dog patrols the block like he owns it; my favorite curry *mee* vendor who, kicked out of her street stall spot when a new hotel opened behind her, resurfaced—to my great relief—in a cheerfully painted shophouse elsewhere in town; the stogie-smoking uncle at the tiny bakery 20 paces from my house whose son makes the best double-crust pineapple tarts in all of Malaysia. As arrestingly beautiful as George Town’s unique old buildings are, it’s memories of encounters with the people who inhabit them that will stay with me when I leave. +

T+L Guide

STAY

Sin Keh This stylishly refurbished shophouse and performance space is a hub for George Town’s arts community. 105 Malay St.; sinkeh.com; doubles from RM290.

Ren I Tang Bright, comfortable rooms in a former Chinese medicine hall in the middle of Little India. 82A Penang St.; renitang.com; doubles from RM218.

Seven Terraces Spacious

accommodations filled with Peranakan antiques and fitted with luxurious bathrooms, plus a small pool in the center of the heritage site. Stewart Ln.; seventerraces.com; doubles from RM550.

EAT

Tek Sen Teochew and Malaysian dishes. Try the *gulai tumis*, pork belly with mustard, and potato leaves fried with *belacan*. 18 Carnavan St.; 60-

12/981-5117; facebook.com/TekSenRestaurant; lunch or dinner for two RM60.

Toh Yuen Dim sum, roast chicken, fish ball soup and noodle dishes in an old Cantonese eatery. 92 Campbell St.; breakfast or lunch for two RM25.

Char Kueh Kak Delicious fried ‘carrot’ cake from a second-generation hawker. Kimberley Street at Cintra Street; RM3; open daily, 8 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Curry Mee A not-too heavy chicken and coconut soup garnished with fresh mint and slivered torch ginger flower. Keng Kwee St.; RM7; open Thursday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to mid-afternoon.

Kim’s Asam Laksa Penangites swear by this version of the island’s most famous noodle soup. Nan Guang Kopitiam, 67 Main Rd., Balik Pulau; RM5; open daily except Wednesday, 12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.