

Penang: Old-world Charm and Beach Retreat

Penang Island, often referred to as the Pearl of the Orient, is one of the most picturesque and romantic regions in all of Asia. This tropical island lies in the Indian Ocean, just off the north-west coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

Penang received its name from the Pinang, or Betel Nut tree, once commonly found on the island. Founded in 1786 by Captain Francis Light of the British East India Company is a cultural melting pot and the oldest British Straits Settlement. Its historic heart of Georgetown was where ships refuelled and served as a centre for the spice trade as well as tea and cotton from China and India.



The island's alluring beaches and old-world charm has made Penang a popular tourist destination. Locals swear Penang has Malaysia's best food and will delight in taking visitors to the multitude of open-air stalls along Gurney Drive. Nyonya food (a Chinese and Malay culinary blend) is also best sampled in Penang and Melaka.

On Penang Island sits the capital, Georgetown, a city steeped in history and tradition yet sparkling with progress and modern development. Certain sections of the city present a quaint picture from the past where narrow side streets, trishaws, temples and traders plying their goods, seem to belong to a forgotten era. Penang is a shopper's paradise for goods old and new, at bargain prices.

Walking through Georgetown with its eclectic blend of colonial, Moorish, Indian, and Chinese architecture is a sensory journey of fascinating sights, sounds and aromas. Relax and take a trishaw to discover Georgetown's heart and soul. See the clan houses or kongsi established by Chinese settlers the most famous being Khoo Kongsi with its elaborate decorations.

Ride past Kapitan Keling Mosque established by Penang's Indian Muslims. Nearby is the Kuan Yin Teng or Goddess of Mercy Temple, the oldest Chinese temple in Penang. In the Pulau Tikus suburb is a Thai temple, Wat Chayamangkalaram with its reclining Buddha; reputed to be one of the world's longest. Many Penangites are Buddhists and Wesak Day is a major festival. Thaipusam is a colourful Hindu festival observed in Penang and a few places worldwide.



The famous Eastern and Oriental Hotel is the place to unwind and be reminded of an era when it was a popular venue for the city's elite. Visitors can stay in the renovated 19th century Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, one of the most well-preserved mansions outside China.

To enjoy cool mountain air and a panoramic view of the city, take the unique funicular train up Penang Hill. Batu Ferringhi on the northern coastline is a favourite playground for visitors from near and far. Its casuarina-lined beaches from Tanjung Bungah to Teluk Bahang boasts several international deluxe resorts as well as attractions such as the Toy Museum, the first of its kind in Asia and the largest in the World.

The Penang Bridge, one of Asia's longest at 13.5 km, links mainland Peninsular Malaysia to the island. Penang is also accessible by ferry from Butterworth, where the state's main rail and bus terminal are located. The Penang International Airport has direct flights from Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Thailand.

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