PHOTOGRAPHY by Ewen Bell

FLAVOURS OF PENANG

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The best thing about a stopover in Asia is not just that you get to break up your travel a little, but it's an opportunity to search out the exotic, inexpensive and delicious. Penang is one island that is too easily overlooked as a destination these days. Once popular for resort style holidays, Penang has more recently earned a reputation among budget travellers for exceptional value and unique cuisine.

The cultural flavours of Penang date back to the 1800s, when the island was transformed from a malaria ridden jungle into a thriving centre for trade. Today the cultural mix is dominated by Chinese and Indian, with a peppering of Malay. Stand on the corner of Jalan Penang and Lebuh Chulia, just down from the Cititel Hotel, and you can see what I mean.

Chinese antique dealers open their doors around 10am and enjoy the daily newspapers with a cigarette. Statues of Taoist and Buddhist deities smile down from the shelves, imploring you to buy a few rusty coins or mysterious wooden chests. Down a small side street the golden dome of The Benggali Mosque reflects the hazy light of the morning, and does a good job of waking up the nearby hotel guests at around 5am. There's a Hindi movie house on one side of the street, opposite the Kashmiri Indian Restaurant, and a fleet of trishaw riders hanging out in the shade of a budget hotel. They smile eagerly for the chance to push you around town on a three-wheeled bicycle with a passenger seat for two.

Batik stores are scattered in either direction, as are the workshops with young men welding steel, hammering wood and repairing long worn out motorbikes. The mixture of small business and shopping reflects the balance between the lesser impact of tourists and the thriving population of a living city. A few hundred metres down the main road the morning market is still humming and you can buy everything from fresh fish to mangosteens.

It's mid morning before I am checked into my hotel and ready to find some breakfast, but that's never a worry in Penang. On the first street corner I hit there's two hawker markets in full swing with a total of 10 different cooking styles between them. Each food stall is no bigger than a trishaw; room enough for a glass display to store the fresh ingredients and a small butane cooker to prepare a signature dish. I tried the Nasi Lemak for breakfast, a very traditional Malay choice, and came back for lunch to fill up on the Char Koay Teow Mee – hakka style quick fry curry, prawns and rice noodles.

On the opposite corner is a Malay-Indian canteen that serves dosa, curries and freshly fried roti bread. The list of delights is extensive and requires a very good language guide to explore fully. Even here in the cheap eats there is fresh and tasty seafood on offer, so it's worth being a little adventurous. I don't normally think of squid when I think of Indian cuisine, but that's just one example of what makes Penang is a little different.

Dining out of an evening offers even more choice. Once the sun goes down and the steamy air has cooled to a balmy evening, the people of Penang flood onto the streets to enjoy the night markets. Expect to find unique specialities you won't see anywhere else in the world. If you want a snack instead of a meal then the Lok Lok stalls are perfect

– dim sum meets fondue, as you dip skewered bits of tasty delights into boiling hot soups to quickly cook and eat on the spot. It's about 15 cents a bite. Penang locals don't usually have their food spicy, so be sure to ask for chilli if that is your preference.

The most popular market for locals in Penang is New Lane, a modest but diverse hawkers market that opens after 6pm every night near the corner of Jalan Macalister. The Hong Kong Duck is as good as you'll find anywhere in the world, the wanton options are tasty and fresh and you also have several stalls to choose from if you're keen to try Curry Mee (Penang's own version of Laksa with prawns, cockles and cuttlefish). Very few dishes here will cost you more than \$1, and for another \$0.50 cents you can cleanse the palette with a refreshing lime juice on ice.

Limiting yourself to one delicacy is not mandatory, and if you find the indulgence has sapped your energy for the walk back to the hotel then for a few dollars you can have a trishaw push you home in comfort

No mention of Penang dining would be complete without Kapitans. Located on the corner of Lebuh Chulia and Lebuh Pitt, this icon of Little India is by far the most talked about tandoori in Penang. And with good reason – there simply is none better. A feast of Garlic Naan, Tandoori Chicken, dipping curries and a few drinks will set you back about \$3.

For those occasions when you need to celebrate an occasion Penang does offer one dining experience that is a little more expensive and yet still excellent value for money. Every Friday and Saturday night the Eastern & Oriental Hotel offers a seafood buffet that costs less than \$30. You could get your money back just on the sushi chef alone, but save a little room for the desert bar.

Getting to Penang has never been easier or less expensive. Low-cost airline AirAsia flies direct from Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru (near Singapore) for little more than the cost of a taxi ride, and for around than \$50 a night you can book your four-star hotel online before you arrive. Australians do not require a visa to enter Malaysia, but the welcome doesn't end there. I am constantly surprised at the level of warmth and respect the average Malaysian expresses to western travellers.

Decades of cultural integration has taught the people of Malaysia much about tolerance, and even more about cooking.

