



Penang: A cultural potpourri

Kristina Foster



Kristina Foster travelled to this tropical "Pearl of the Orient" adorned with natural beauty, a fascinating culture and a multi-racial spice pot.

I had long heard tales of delicious foods and exotic spices from the island of Penang. So after waking up in the night with a craving for laksa, I booked the family on a last minute weekend trip.

Penang, also known as the 'Pearl of the Orient', it is located on the north west coast of Peninsula Malaysia and is just a 90 minute direct flight from Bangkok. Penang consists of Penang Island, which covers an area of 285 sq. km, and a coastal strip of 760 sq. km on the mainland known as Seberang Perai.

It was in the 16th century that the Portuguese first discovered the island of Penang. They named her 'Pulo Pinaom', probably due to the abundance of 'pinang' or betel nut palm on the island. The exotic island was one of the most popular of the legendary "Spice Islands". Penang was the northern entry point to the Straits of Malacca, drawing Indian, Arabian, Portuguese and Dutch traders and Chinese merchants. The lushly wooded Malaysian island soon became a major spice supplier with more than 45,000 nutmeg and clove trees by 1835.

Penang's capital, Georgetown, named after the King of England, George III survived World War II intact and the result is a gritty, eclectic cityscape. Colonial meringues like Fort Cornwallis stand alongside, Hindu temples and peeling Chinese shophouses. Hokkien, Malay, Tamil and English bubble and boil simultaneously. This multi-cultural background has given Penang a reputation for the best food in all of Malaysia.

So, first things first, before we get to our hotel we cajole our driver to make a detour as we must try some of the local food. As we stared at all the tasty options a little drool fell from the corner of my husband's mouth and down his chin resembling my one-year old's dribbly little face.

When people mention Penang food, they are more often than not referring to hawker food and coffee shop dining. Penang hawker food can be broken down roughly into several varieties, with each being attributable to Penang's multi-cultural character: Nyonya, Chinese, vegetarian, Indian, Malay, Hakka-styled Western, seafood and desserts. Hybrids are also known to exist, and some famous examples are Malay-style chicken rice and char koay teow, and Chinese satay and nasi lemak. Prices are cheap and reasonable.

Thanks to early Chinese migrants,

to Teochew to Hokkien to Hainanese to Szechuan cooking. There's also Penang Nyonya food, which is a combination of Chinese, Malay and some Thai.

Indian cuisine goes by two names generally – banana leaf rice and nasi kandar. Nasi kandar is famously popular with Penangites, and many restaurants selling it are well known not only to those on the island but those in other states as well. It is quite common to find people from other states detouring to Penang just to stop for a meal of nasi kandar before proceeding on their journey elsewhere.

After treating ourselves to a selection of the delicious foods we arrived at the hotel and were ready to relax at the fabulous beach resort we were staying at.

In James Hilton's famous 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, there is a secret valley. Known as Shangri-La it is a place of beauty, peace and happiness, far from the stresses of the material world. The Shangri-la Rasa Sayang Resort is the epitome of it's utopian namesake. Located on the famed Batu Ferringi beach, the recently renovated resort is a 6-star sanctuary of calm (though if this is out of your price range, there are other options to suit any budget).

After a free glass of Moët at the daily lobby happy hour, I surrendered to a Rasa Asmaradana Massage at the ultra luxurious CHI spa. The signature treatment was developed to incorporate a mixture of massage technique from the diverse cultures of Penang. The techniques involved are Chinese Acupressure, Indian Ayurvedic and Malay Urut massage movements. A special blend of Penang essential oils is used combining Nutmeg, Clove and Sandalwood, all spices produced in Penang. The hot compresses of pandan leaves, lemongrass and ginger melt away my aches. The Tibetan singing bowls gently hum in my ears at various intervals between sweeping hands. A truly heavenly indulgence.

Meanwhile, next door at the Shangri-La Golden Sands, where guests at Shangri La Rasa Sayang are free to use the facilities, is the nucleus for kid's holiday fun. My daughter loved the Star Kids Club located in a unique beachfront playground. It has a team of staff supervising the kids at all times and is open 7 days a week. Parents can join in the fun with the little ones or leave older ones to their own devices. While we were there the activities included t-shirt painting, making paper masks, friendship bands and decorating Malay wooden shoes.

The next day we ventured out and headed toward the Tropical Spice Gardens—a short



If the sun was direct and fierce at the top of the hill, we are now enveloped in green shade: a soothing world of flowering hibiscus and mauve jacarandas. Apart from herb beds of mint, thyme, coriander and parsley, I am surrounded by the splendor of tropical spice plants—red ginger, cardamom, cloves, pepper, turmeric, nutmeg, garlic, cassia (cinnamon) and areca nut.

Trails wind along sloped terraces, edged by meandering streams and waterfalls. Fan-leaved banana plants grow beside bamboo thickets and towering rubber trees, and a riot of deep blue morning glory and hot-pink bougainvillea creepers shawl the railings of miniature bridges. White and lemon orchids cling to the barks of hardwood trees.

A bird whoops in the jungle foliage behind us, and we watch a ballet of royal blue-and-gold winged butterflies fluttering around a plant bearing droopy-fingered orange blooms. The afternoon air is drowsy with the hum of bees, and thick with the smell of frangipani, mingled with the faint, but unmistakable fragrance of cinnamon.

Heady on the scent of nature, next we visited, Penang's Butterfly Farm. It isn't unique—Thailand has several—but it is very well-done and grabs our attention for an hour. I captured shots of butterflies flickering like bright confetti, and my daughter beaming with delight, as a gigantic Raja Brooke, black with dramatic emerald green markings, settles on her hand.

My little girl was then transfixed in front of a display window as a cocoon splits to reveal a soggy-winged butterfly. Apart from

120 species of winged performers, there are other resident virtuosos. Two small horned toads stare beady-eyed, and a spiny stick insect freezes into camouflage mode on a brown twig.

Next door, a tarantula is wooing his mate, and family life also seems to be thriving in the scorpion household, with baby scorpions shimmying around their mum. In the world of beetles, a large stag beetle flexes his mandibles, and a long-armed Scarab brings to mind a stylized Egyptian emblem.

On the other end of the spectrum, exploring the mixed architecture and culture of Georgetown is an essential part of the visit. Chinatown is abuzz with activity. Huge poles of incense smoke into the air and we join a hoard of locals queuing at store of streaming fresh roasted meats.

Penang has perhaps the largest and most well preserved colonial-era old town. We take a stroll along Gurney Drive and see some beautiful examples of colonial homes along the coast. Gurney Drive at night is a different place altogether and becomes a hawker stall hot-bed.

We catch a glimpse of the bustling Little India, home to many traditional Indian traders dating back to the days when the British declared Penang as a trading post in the 18th century. Not to be missed is Market Street, the main shopping street where rows of Indian shops are lined up selling all sorts of Indian traditional wares like saris, Punjabi suits, stainless steel wares, accessories and handicrafts.

On the last Sunday of every month there

are the Little Penang Street Markets. The Little Penang Street Market project is created by long-time Penang residents, cultural professionals, and heritage experts to support creativity, entrepreneurship, & street revitalization. The project aims to upgrade local arts, crafts and culture by providing design and marketing support to local artists, artisans and cultural entrepreneurs. Here we saw some Penang children perform a Malay dance routine and heard a sweet little 80-year old lady singing local Hokkien songs to rounds of applause as we waited for a calligrapher to elegantly draw my daughter's name in Chinese letters.

On the top of a mountain my daughter spotted a huge colorful temple and we made the upward journey toward the Kek Lok Si, perched against a hill slope. On arriving at the temple we are met by the statue of the Goddess of Mercy and a 30 metre high pagoda. By far the favorite sight was the 'Pond of Longevity', home for hundreds of tortoises set free by the devotees. We scooped down one last bowl of laksa noodles at a street stall before hopping back into the taxi.

After a hot day of exploration it was time to head back to the Rasa Sayang. The hotel offers a complimentary service where the staff can prepare a warm bath for you on your private balcony bath from a choice of Ginger, Rose and Lavender.

Retiring back to our spacious room, we relaxed with petals and spices in the steaming balcony bathtub: a Penang potpourri of a different kind.

Let's Learn & Play@



KIDS ACADEMY
International Pre-School

**Exploring,
Discovering &
Learning**












Come and walk to our nature path to adventure & discovery! At Kids' Academy, children develop a love for learning and exploring by building their confidence with fun-based activities.

Our school provides a natural, home-like environment where as they feel safe and secure. They are able to develop their senses and motivation to learn, to express their emotions and to discover the world around them.




- We offer classes for Nursery & Pre-K children ages 1.5-2.11 years old.
- Kindergarten (K1,K2,K3) for children ages 3-6 years old.
- Mother & Toddler Playgroup from Monday-Saturday 09:30-11:30AM & 01:30-03:30PM (0-4 years old)
Please book in advance to avoid an overcrowded room
- We follow British Curriculum
- Under license from The Ministry of Education
- Certified ISAT member

52/1-2 Sukhumvit 63, Ekamai Soi 2 Wattana District Bangkok 10110
Tel. 02-714-3636-37; Fax: 02-714-1212
Website: www.kidsacademy.ac.th; e-mail: info@kidsacademy.ac.th