

# a Wealth of Heritage

From the culturally-rich cities of peninsular Malaysia to the rainforests of Sabah, indulge in the colorful tapestry of Malaysia's past amidst colonial mansions, exclusive excursions and helicopter tours **By Mabel David-Pilar**

In ancient times, Indian traders called it the Land of Gold. The Greeks referred to it as Aurea Chersonesus or the Golden Peninsula. Aside from the stream of merchants and migrants that came searching for gold (and spices) or using the land's strategic location as a trading post, a large part of its lustrous past also abounds with epic tales of a renegade prince establishing the country's greatest empire and centuries of colonial rule that melded East and West. Malaysia has long possessed a treasure trove of heritage that fortunately was never buried. Even walking against the backdrop of impressive skyscrapers, glitzy shopping malls and modern urban sprawls, its heritage thrives – in mosques, temples, and churches; in indigenous enclaves and colonial architecture; in caves and rainforests.

The moment you land in its buzzing cosmopolitan capital, Kuala Lumpur, you can already find different facets of Malaysia's heritage – its Malay roots in the old settlement of Kampung Baru, its colonial imprint in the former cricket patch that is Merdeka Square, or a little farther away, one of its many faiths in the Hindu place of worship at the Batu Caves. And when you need to call it a day, KL provides many luxurious accommodations depending on your tastes –





Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (blue mansion), Penang



Prayer lamps at Kek Lok Si Temple, Penang

from chic modern design at Hotel Maya to colonial charm at the secluded Carcosa Seri Negara. However, to discover more of Malaysia's rich heritage, venture out of the capital and into its other culturally-steep cities where you can be whisked off into a lavish and exclusive journey.

### PENANG

Hailed as the Pearl of the Orient, it gained worldwide recognition by the 1700s after it was acquired as a British port by the East India Company. As it brought flourishing trade and attracted settlers, it also beckoned playwrights and writers, the wealthy and the aristocrats from the West who wanted a taste of the exotic East.

Until today, Penang offers a luscious sample of its intriguing past. Luxury holiday tour group Malaysia Experience ([www.malaysiaexperience.co.uk](http://www.malaysiaexperience.co.uk)), which specializes in bespoke holidays to both peninsular Malaysia and the states of Sabah and Sarawak, includes a tour around Penang for a heritage-themed itinerary in the country. Its private excursions include a romantic trishaw ride around the capital, Georgetown – to Fort Cornwallis in the Colonial District, the old waterfront at Weld Quay, the fine clan house of Khoo Kongsi in Chinatown, Little

India and Pinang Peranakan. "This allows you to witness the colorful culture of a number of ethnicities living together," shares Ben Inman, product manager of Malaysia Experience.

A stay in Penang won't be complete without evenings spent at the historic Eastern & Oriental Hotel, which is the recommended hotel for the tour. Situated at Georgetown, the E&O emerged when Penang also surfaced as the destination for affluent travelers and counts Rudyard Kipling, Herman Hesse, Joseph Conrad, Somerset Maugham, and Douglas Fairbanks among its famous guests. Beyond its old-world appeal and amazing architecture, its seafront view, splendid pool, and 24-hour butler service keep you pleased and pampered.

Another heritage destination of a hotel in Penang is the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion. Stepping inside evokes a sense of being in another era. The lovely courtyard, the intricately designed floors, walls, doorways and stairs, and the shock of blue – it's hard to believe this two-storey mansion originally built in the 1880s ever fell into disrepair. It's no surprise that after being meticulously restored, it earned the Asia-Pacific Heritage Award from UNESCO. It has also earned positive testimonials from past guests

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including the likes of Booker Prize Winner Peter Carey and Canadian High Commission's Diane Macdonald.

Luxury travel company Urbane Nomads ([www.urbanenomads.com](http://www.urbanenomads.com)) makes an unforgettable Penang tour with a retreat into one of the city's best kept secrets – a private hilltop estate. And where do you get to stay? In old rice barns that were beautifully converted into suites. After a day spent being chauffeured to different Chinese temples and exploring the Straits Chinese shophouses, relaxing in your barn/suites' outdoor bathtub, which sits on the edge of a hill with stunning views, it is truly one-of-a-kind experience.

### MELAKA

No heritage trip around Malaysia is complete without a stop at this UNESCO World Heritage site of a city. Founded sometime in the 14th century by the Hindu pirate prince Parameswara, Melaka was transformed from a simple fishing village into one of the great trading ports of yesteryears. These days, it transports visitors to Malaysia's majestic past with its preserved idyllic allure.

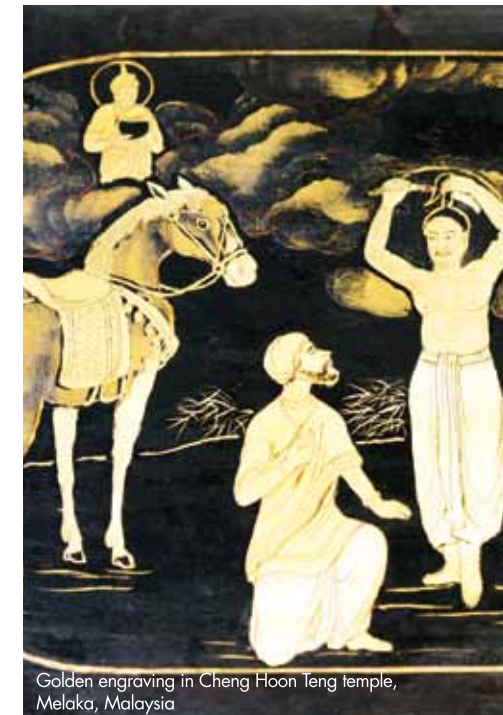
The colonial city center, the heritage museums, the oldest mosque in the country (Masjid Kampung Hulu), the oldest Catholic Church (St. Peter's Church), the oldest traditional Chinese temple (UNESCO awardee for outstanding architectural restoration, Cheng Hoon Teng Temple) – these are just some of the testaments to the unique combination of Chinese and Malay influences (known as Peranakan) melding with the legacies of the Portuguese and the Dutch. Walking along Melaka's streets is enough to induce nostalgia for those bygone years.

To keep the nostalgia alive, Hajar Ali, founder of Urbane Nomads, base their luxury travel to Melaka at the recently restored 1920's mansion, the Majestic. While its interiors – the Portuguese porcelain floor, the teakwood fittings, the elaborate antiques – speak of its colonial past, its Spa Village Malacca offers an entirely different experience to Malaysia's heritage.

It's the world's only spa that features treatments rooted on the Peranakan or Baba-Nyonya traditional remedies. After you soothe your tired muscles (and experience healing heritage first-hand), choose to retire in one of the Majestic's two signature suites occupying the top floor. Aside from being the most spacious, it offers you a lovely view of the Melaka River and the traditional Malay Village, Kampung Morten.



The church of Saint Paul, Melaka



Golden engraving in Cheng Hoon Teng temple, Melaka, Malaysia

Malaysia's heritage thrives in mosques, churches, indigenous enclaves, colonial architecture & rainforests



St. John's peak at Mount Kinabalu, Sabah

## SABAH

To the east of peninsular Malaysia, across the South China Sea, the states of Sabah and Sarawak of Malaysian Borneo teems with tradition within breathtaking mountains and rainforests. While Sarawak often takes the heritage spotlight for its many cultural festivals and ethnic groups (majority of whom still live in traditional longhouses and remote villages), its neighboring Sabah also offers destinations of historic and ethnic significance – with luxurious comforts.

From the lush 400-acre of Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort, Malaysia Experience brings its guests to the foothills of Mount Kinabalu and Poring to explore indigenous flora and fauna and be in the embrace of a misty rainforest. But the memorable parts of the trip are the private excursions to northern Sabah to see local weaving, crafts and jewelry; and the drive to the 'tip of Borneo' for a view of where the South China Sea meets the Sulu Sea – a graceful clash of waves, where many traders and merchants have likely sailed centuries ago.

Urbane Nomads also offers a slice of Sabah's heritage in high style. You take your own private helicopter (from the Terminal 2 of the International Airport or more nearby at Rasa Ria Resort) for a thrilling view of the rainforest, then a stop for a sumptuous picnic and spa treatment by a traditional village. It's the ultimate pampering with a generous serving of culture. Ali reveals that the luxury tour group is also working on creating a luxury mobile tent camping experience in the jungles of Borneo. "Modeled after the tradition of the ultra-luxury mobile safari tents in Africa," he says. Definitely something to look forward to.

With its rich history and diverse ethnicity, Malaysia's heritage can be found in every city or every rural village. But the best way to experience it in ultimate comfort and with lavish perks—is via the bespoke itineraries of the country's luxury hotels and travel companies. You may no longer find the Land of Gold ancient traders spoke of, but you will definitely discover a country with a precious wealth of heritage. **INSPIRE**

## WHERE TO STAY

### YOUR STYLISH ADDRESS IN PENANG

You might like to see the many centuries-old sights of Penang, but if you prefer your hotel to be very current, the **G Hotel** ([www.ghotel.com.my](http://www.ghotel.com.my), Tel: +60 4328 0000) along busy Gurney Drive is your best and chicest bet. Popular Asian celebrities also seem to think so, as Bosco Wong, Raymond Lam, Ron Ng, Bernice Liu, Michael Wong, Rynn Lin, Will Pan, and Yoga Lin have stayed there. A World Luxury Hotel Awards Nominee for 2010, G Hotel has more than 300 rooms, suites and service apartments, the best of which are the Honeymoon Suite and the G Suite (US\$620 per room per night). Beyond its modern, sleek interiors, the bathtub on the balcony overlooking the fantastic view of the ocean may keep you indoors. When you do step out, consider G Hotel's complimentary cycling equipment and opt to cycle in style along the prominent Gurney Drive. On your bike, explore the Heritage Trail of the Colonial District, some of which are closed to cars from St George's Church to the Hainan Temple, to several historic streets, and to the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion.



## Family Matters at PARKROYAL Penang Resort

Located in the heart of Batu Feringghi, the resort offers a choice of restaurants, bars and entertainment for the entire family. Adults are encouraged to rejuvenate at St. Gregory while children will definitely be captivated by the recreational activities offered at Koko Nut Klub.

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