

The island of Penang is located at the gates to the Strait of Malacca and has one of the richest histories of trade in the Far East. It took generations of ambitious and creative migrant communities to create this place, and the result is unique.

On May 1, 1791, the Union Flag flew over Penang, officially marking it as part of the British Empire. The colonialists encouraged immigrants to the area, luring Indians, Malay, Chinese, Armenians and others in droves, all looking for opportunities in trading and plantations. The largest ethnic group in Penang, the Chinese, have left the most prominent mark. As the Chinese set up their own communities, they implemented the centuries-old tradition of the *kongsis*, or clan house, a place for ancestral worship and the settling of disputes. Most importantly, it unites the clan wherever they may be in the Chinese diaspora. While many of the traditional ancestral homes were destroyed in China during the Cultural Revolution, Penang's have mostly survived.

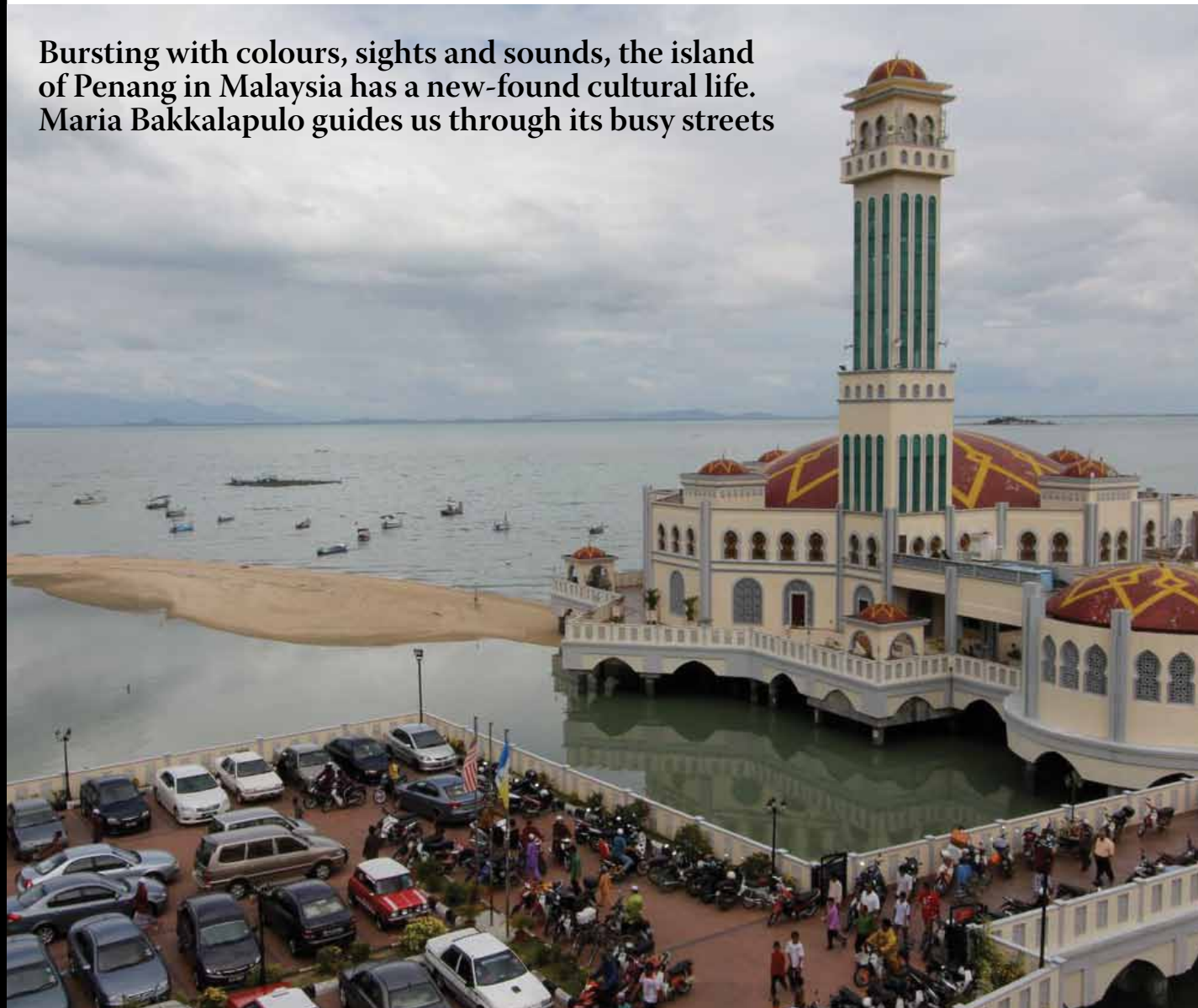
Little India is the most colourful area in town. Brightly coloured *saris* and *bindis* are sold by one family on one street, pots and pans and kitchenware on another, while jewellery and gold traders abound. Bollywood tunes blare from crackling sound systems as the smell of homemade *roti chennai* wafts through the air from hot grills on street corners. It is a place where you will taste the soul of Penang, intermingled with the fragrant spices and sensations of India.

The original settlement on the island is the area of George Town, which fell into dereliction following intense bombing during World War II. People were driven out of the inner city into the suburbs, and much of George Town was left in disrepair. After the war ended, the British imposed a rent-control act as a way to help the needy with housing costs. But between 1947 and 2000, the act was never reviewed. No one dared alter the rent control because it applied to pre-war buildings in the town centre, where the bulk of the voting population lived, and politicians wanted to

keep them happy. Therefore, landlords had no incentive to care for the buildings.

Via the campaigning efforts of various local groups over the last decade, the architectural jewels of Penang are now finally being treasured again. In 2008, UNESCO listed George Town as a World Heritage Site, initiating a vibrant revival that is gaining momentum. Stylish bars, cafés and boutique hotels have been mushrooming in the area, with increasing numbers of jazz and folk artists entertaining their patrons and guests. George Town is once again full of life, fostering a respect for its heritage alongside a cool modernity and a keen interest in showcasing international artists in an increasing amount of annual events. By digging deep into their past, Penangites have taken the tarnished 'Pearl of the Orient' and have made it shimmer again. What has re-emerged is a city that is culturally thriving, as it previously did a century ago. The best way to see Penang is to time your trip around one of the state's music and arts festivals.

Bursting with colours, sights and sounds, the island of Penang in Malaysia has a new-found cultural life. Maria Bakkalapulo guides us through its busy streets



MUSIC FESTIVALS

Penang World Music Festival

Nestled in the serene Botanic Gardens in the Quarry Recreational Park, in the hills above the city, lies the Penang World Music Festival site. Amidst lush trees and tropical foliage, the festival features world-renowned musicians from across Malaysia as well as from overseas.

March, Quarry Recreational Park, www.penangworldmusic.com

George Town Festival

George Town Festival is a month-long celebration of art, music, theatre, dance, opera and film, celebrating the rich cultural heritage of this historical area. Past festivals have showcased everything from Cambodian puppet theatre to Italian chamber choirs.

June, various venues, www.georgetownfestival.com

Penang Island Jazz Festival

The Penang Island Jazz Festival also has lots to interest lovers of world music with local and international performers on indoor and outdoor stages. Taking place in early December, this four-day festival is at the perfect time of year to escape to the tropics.

December, various venues, www.penangjazz.com

TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS

Thaipusam

Thaipusam is a festival that is celebrated during the 10th month in the Hindu calendar, which normally falls during the last week of January. After worshippers have gathered at temples for prayer (Arulmigu Sri Mahamariamman Temple being Penang's oldest and best-known), there are colourful processions with food, music, coconut-smashing and public displays of body piercing.

January, Arulmigu Sri Mahamariamman Temple, Queen Street

Penang International Dragon Boat Race

Attracting participants from all over the world since 1979, the race sees teams go head-to-head, spurred on by the sound of the mighty barrel drum. This annual event takes place in June to venerate the celestial dragon in Chinese culture.

June, Teluk Bahang Dam, Teluk Bahang, www.penangdragonboat.gov.my

Hungry Ghost

While Chinese New Year is the most important celebration of the year, the Hungry Ghost Festival comes a close second. The Chinese believe that on the seventh month, the gates of Hell are opened and the ghosts roam freely looking for food. During this month-long



A trishaw in Little India

event, performances of Chinese opera and *ko-tai* (dance-drama) are at their most popular. It is believed that music is one of the best ways to appease the ancestors and prevent them from harming the living.

August-September, various venues

VENUES & NIGHTCLUBS

If you're not able to time your trip around one of the festivals, there are plenty of places to go for music and entertainment. Even though the local music scene is still in relative infancy, there are new venues constantly filling their spaces with exciting live acts. Penang is a popular stop for visiting musicians from outside the region.

China House

One of the most popular dining, art and music spots in Penang at the moment, the China House features live music on weekends, such as jazz, singer-songwriters and acoustic nights.

153-155 Beach Street and 183B Victoria Street, George Town, +604 263 7299, www.chinahouse.com.my

M2 Club

A nightclub that also hosts live acts of a J-Pop and K-Pop nature, M2 has a huge stage, retina-challenging lighting and a monthly rotation of DJs and performers from across Malaysia, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and China.

B2, Entertainment City, Penang Times Square, +60 16-417 6711

Performing Arts Center of Penang (Penangpac)

Opened in 2011, Penangpac is a space dedicated to the music, theatre and dance of Penang. The 22,000-square-foot space contains two theatres and three multi-purpose studios for classes and rehearsals.

3H-3A-1, Straits Quay, Tanjung Tokong, +604 899 1722, www.penangpac.org

Reggae Club

Its wooden walls covered with pictures of Bob Marley, this club packs its dance floor with clubbers swaying to classic reggae tracks from Black Uhuru and Jimmy Cliff to 90s and 2000s dancehall from the likes of Shabba Ranks.

483 Lebu Chulia, George Town, +604 881 1743

Slippery Senioritas

A Spanish-style bar with tapas and live music of a Latin dance nature. Its signature bar is lit up with flames at night, behind which athletic bartenders provide a show of their own. It is located on the popular Upper Penang Road, where you'll find a whole strip of pubs and clubs.

Upper Penang Road, Jalan Penang, George Town, +604 263 6868

Uptown Pub & Bistro

Enjoy nightly live performances of Chinese songs and Canto-pop as well as a beer garden.

20 Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah, George Town, +604 262 5818

