

Rediscovering Penang's Hidden Gems

Text and photos by Natania Tan

Growing up with my Malaysian relatives, the lepak culture of Malaysia is something that I have learnt to appreciate. Compared to Singapore's fast-paced society, something about the slower rhythm of life in Penang brings comfort and peace.

Penang is known to many as a tourist destination and is famous for its mouth-watering food and historical streets in the heart of Georgetown. To me, it is my second home, but I'm ashamed to admit that I had never properly ventured out into its smaller, lesser-known spots before. Hence, I was pleasantly surprised when my family decided to explore the city as unconventional tourists for a day in 2019 – from roaming the city's bustling streets to treading through muddy terrain in the undisturbed outskirts.

A new dawn

The day started rather early for a nightowl like myself, but the excitement got me up as soon as the maddening ringing of my alarm sounded. We promptly arrived

at Tan Jetty where other early birds were already set up with professional photography equipment – not taking any chances of missing the exact moment night morphed into dawn.

As we all patiently waited for the sun to peek out, the kampung spirit of fellow photographers grew evident as many enthusiastically shared their unique artistic views and personal photography techniques with each other. The hour flew by and before I knew it, I had captured publication-worthy photos of the sunrise with my trusty iPhone.

We then headed off to the well-known streets of Georgetown – but not with the intention of posing with the various art murals on the walls of shophouses. Instead, we navigated through Armenian Street to hunt for Mr Lee Beng Chuan. Away from the hustle and bustle of street vendors, tucked away in a small corner was his cosy home that doubled as his shop. Be careful – blink once and you might miss this destination entirely.

Meeting Mr Lee, the last incense-stick maker in Penang, was a humbling experience. A sincere and modest man, he

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took immense pride in his work and had never missed a day of work since he was twenty. I had to stop myself from asking too many questions as he was deep in concentration kneading the joss sticks into shape. Unlike many of us, his brows were not furrowed with signs of stress or worry while working his craft. Rather, his bright eyes revealed his peaceful, calm state of mind as he meticulously checked over his work. Unfortunately, Mr Lee passed in December 2020 and I was saddened to find out that his dying trade was not to be preserved by his children.

By the time we left Mr Lee's shop, the weather had turned unfriendly and gifted us with a sweltering heat which left everyone dripping with sweat. On our way to our next destination in Georgetown, we stumbled upon Cannon Square and tried to take shelter from the scorching weather. Don't let the picture fool you – the endless rows of umbrellas were a feast for the eyes only, and served no practical purpose! However, I did not have any complaints and was pleased

with what would become my profile picture for the months after.

We managed to take proper shelter at the Cheong Fatt Tze Blue Mansion. Don't worry if it looks familiar even though you have never set foot in Penang – you might have seen the restaurant featured in the film *Crazy Rich Asians!* Its history dates back to the late 19th century when politician and businessman Cheong Fatt Tze longed for a traditional Chinese home, unlike his peers with Anglo-Indian houses. In the past, it served multiple purposes as an office and a home. To this day, it stays true to its roots and has maintained the same ambience and cosy atmosphere. It now houses a successfully run boutique hotel and restaurant. The heritage site's beautifully and intricately designed architecture is one for all to admire.

Capping off our exploration

For the last part of the day, we rediscovered the inner child inside us

and visited Saanen Dairy Goat Farm. An animal lover's dream, I interacted with an impressive array of furry creatures – from domestic pets like dogs and cats, to farm animals like goats and roosters, to more exotic species like ostriches and deer.

Fatigue started to kick in just as the sun began to fade into the depths of the ocean. We treaded wearily through rocky and sandy terrain to come to our final destination: Pantai Malindo Beach. Bug spray was essential to fend off the only other guests at the location – the pesky mosquitos that were eager to greet us. Getting lost in the full force of nature amid the tranquil, serene environment was the perfect way to end an eventful and memorable day.

Looking back, I am grateful for the opportunities that this mini-adventure brought me. Not only was I able to form new memories and strengthen relationships with my family, the exploration also brought me away from my then-seemingly mammoth struggles in life, which I realised afterwards were only small concerns.

I hope that this article has reignited your desire for adventure, and will inspire you to start planning to explore hidden spots on this humble island. More importantly, please realise that home, wherever you reside, is not just a boring or familiar place. It has just as much potential to provide you and your loved ones with new experiences just like holidays halfway across the globe can. Look closely and you may be surprised at what you might discover! ♦

This trip took place in December 2019. Though nearly two years ago, the memories still stay fresh in my mind!

Note: *Our guide Jordan was not only extremely knowledgeable about the history of all the locations we visited, but was also a pro at giving us photography tips. Do reach out to him (jordan.lye@gmail.com) if you need any guidance or suggestions!*

Legend

1. Sunrise at Tan Jetty
2. Mr Lee working in his humble shop which was also his home
3. Interior of Cheong Fatt Tze Blue Mansion
4. Rainbow umbrellas at Cannon Square