

Gallery
A Stroll Through Colonial Georgetown

Words and Photography by Kennie Ting

Georgetown, Penang is a quaint little gem of a town. Founded in 1786 and named after Britain's King George III, it is quite possibly the best-preserved example of a British colonial town in Asia. It is also easily taken in on foot. The length of the inner city – a UNESCO World Heritage site – can easily be traversed in no more than half an hour, though the reality is that the walk would take you all day as you stumble upon rows of period shophouses and stunning temples, churches and mosques at every street corner. The city's main concentration of heritage sites is down *Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling*, known more simply as the "Street of Harmony." On this single half-mile stretch can be found all of Georgetown's historic religious institutions – the Anglican church of St George (1818), the Sri Maha Mariamman Hindu Temple (1833), the Kapitan Keling Mosque (1801), and the Khoo Kongsi Clan and Temple Complex (1835), alongside other equally stunning pieces of period vernacular architecture. All of these co-exist harmoniously, testament to the unique melting pot of peoples and creeds that have called and still call Penang home. They also ensure that Georgetown's streets are a riotous burst of colours, shades and textures.

The European heart of the town occupies the northern and eastern shores of the inner city, where the Padang, or public square, of Georgetown sits surrounded by a string of monumental civic, educational and cultural institutions, and one of the oldest fort complexes – Fort Cornwallis (1810) – in Southeast Asia. Most of these colonial institutions have actually retained their original functions, albeit under a new regime. More importantly, all the buildings have been so well-preserved that they continue to exude a period "atmosphere." Strolling along the main thoroughfares of Farquhar Street and Light Street, one cannot help but imagine one's self a British Colonial Civil Servant back in the 1800s, surveying the landscape, as it were, with one's doughty Assistant.

The impression one gets from all this concentrated monumental posturing is one of imperial largesse. Penang was the jewel of the British Empire's Malayan territories and its foremost trading port in the East Indies, at least until Singapore came into the picture. The British drew their ambitions into the urban planning and design of the city, which would also be replicated on a much grander scale in Singapore later on. *Lebuh Pantai*, or Beach Street, bears witness to this grand trading and mercantile past, presenting a landscape of whitewashed colonial-era merchant shophouses, alongside forbidding, gray art deco bank buildings the likes of which can be found in British colonial port cities from Bombay to Shanghai. Nowadays, the street still looks pretty much like it did back then, except in place of horse carriages, there is a steady stream of loud and dusty motorcycles and cars.

At the very end of Beach Street and at the edge of the Padang sits an interesting landmark that does more than any other in demonstrating just how the colonial influence continues to endure in Penang. Called the Diamond Jubilee Clocktower, it was presented to Penang by one honorable Cheah Chen Eok, Esq. on the occasion of Her Majesty Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897; though the tower itself was only completed in 1902. Cheah, a formidable Overseas Chinese businessman who later became a Justice of Peace and Municipal Commissioner of Penang, considered himself a loyal British subject, and was particularly outspoken on the benefits of a British-style education. His love affair with the Empire still stands tall and proud to this very day, visible from all parts of the colonial inner city, and bearing a clock that still marks the time accurately, more than 100 years later.

Time stands still in Georgetown, Penang; but it does so resplendently, unabashedly. One marvels at how miraculously everything has been kept in its place and will continue to be so, even as change and development – in the form of the gleaming hotels and luxury residences one can make out to the West of the island – encroach inexorably onto the colonial core's fringes.

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Fig. 1 - Imperial Munificence: Memorial to James Richardson Logan (1869), a lawyer and strong advocate of freedom of Speech in Penang. *Light Street*.



Fig. 2 – The Catholic Church of the Assumption (1860), and a speeding Penang motorcyclist. *Jalan Sultan Ahmad Street*.



Fig. 3 – Colonial Values: Light Street Convent for Girls, founded 1852.



Fig. 4 – Anglican Church of St George (1818), the oldest of its kind in Southeast Asia. *Farquhar Street*.



Fig. 5 – The Padang, with a view of City Hall and Town Hall.



Fig. 6 – Close-up of Town Hall (1880), and the ubiquitous Penang motorcyclist. *Jalan Padang Kota Lama*.



Fig. 7 – A boy and his bike: close-up of City Hall (1902). *Jalan Padang Kota Lama*.



Fig. 8 – View towards the Esplanade, and the War Memorial.



Fig. 9 – View from the Esplanade of the Port of Penang and a lone fishing boat.



Fig. 10 – Clock Tower, presented in 1902 to Penang by the Honorable Cheah Chen Eok Esq. to commemorate Her Majesty Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.



Fig. 11 – *Lebuh Pantai*, or *Beach Street*, dominated by the Standard Chartered Bank Building.



Fig. 12 – *Lebuhr Downing*, or *Downing Street*, with HSBC Bank as backdrop.



Fig. 13 – Cool green facades of the interior courtyard, Penang Peranakan Mansion. *Lebuhr Geraja* (*Church Street*).



Fig. 14 – Detail, ornate interior in the Pinang Peranakan Mansion.



Fig. 15 – Interior of the adjoining temple, Pinang Peranakan Mansion.



Fig. 16 – Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple, *Lebuh Armenian*.



Fig. 17 – Burnished gold exterior of the Khoo Kong Si Temple Complex, presenting an otherworldly vision to the awed visitor.



Fig. 18 – Han Jiang Ancestral Temple, with stage for Cantonese Opera Productions. *Lebuh Chulia*.



Fig. 19 – Copper-hued roof tiles of the Goddess of Mercy Temple, on *Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling*, also known as the “Street of Harmony.”



Fig. 20 – View along a Five-Foot Way, *Lebuh Gereja*.



Fig. 21 – Apartment complex within the Khoo Kongsi compound.



Fig. 22 – Ochre tones of a row of colonial era shophouses with local boys heading home. *Armenian Street*.



Fig. 23 – Washed out sepia of a disused newspaper office, with lone man taking shelter from the heat. *Chulia Street.*



Fig. 24 – Bright orange tentage abutting a busy intersection. *Chulia Street and Penang Street.*



Fig. 25 – Red and bronze sacrificial drum perched at the very edge of the Chew Clan Jetty, with modern Penang in the near distance.



Fig. 26 – Blue speedboats, Chew Clan Jetty.



Fig. 27 – Acheen Mosque, *Lebuh Acheh*.



Fig. 28 – Penang Islamic Museum, occupying an old palace complex on Armenian Street.



Fig. 29 – Street art and street vendor, Armenian Street.



Fig. 30 – Traditional shophouses just off *Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling*.



Fig. 31 – Traditional shophouse architecture, off *Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling*.



Fig. 32 – Masjid Kapitan Keling, after which *Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling* is named.



Fig. 33 – Busy street intersection, *Lebuh Buckingham* and *Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling*.



Fig. 34 – The Blue Mansion, winner of a UNESCO World Heritage Award. *Lebuhraya Leith*.



Fig. 35 - Moorish façade of the Eastern and Oriental Hotel.



Fig. 36 – Timeless view of the Malacca Straits from the *Eastern & Oriental Hotel*.