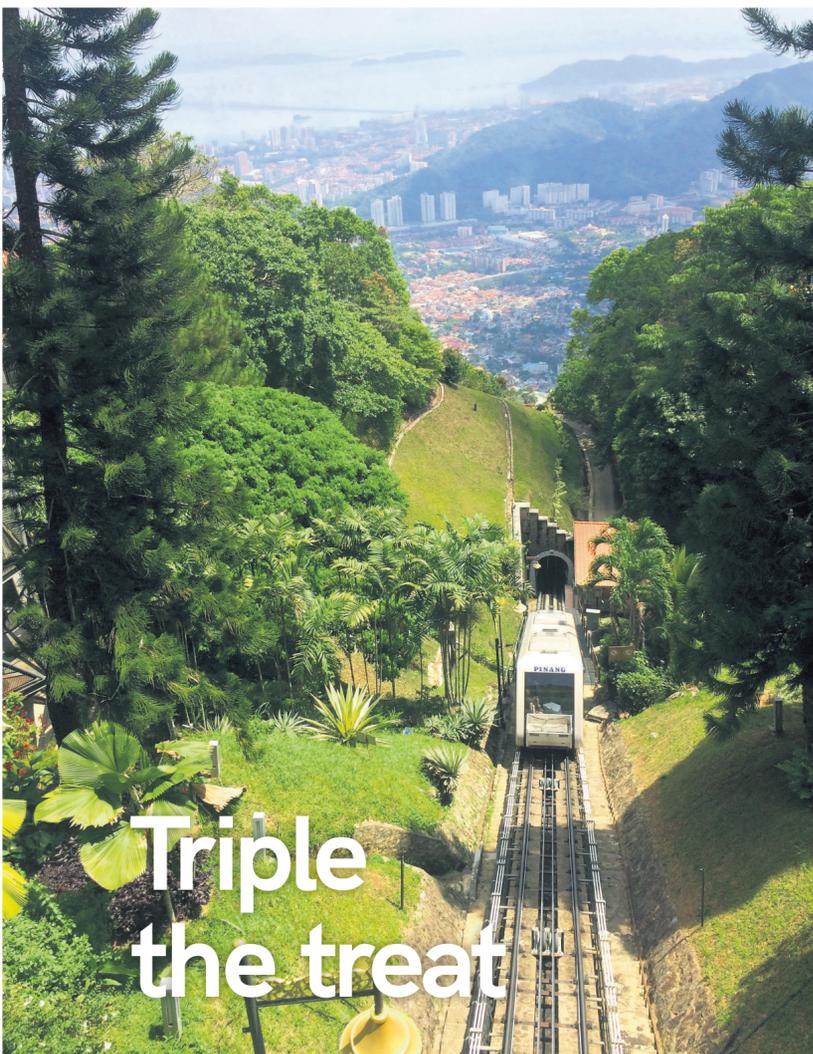


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Triple the treat

Joshua Wong discovers in Penang a delightful combination of heritage, nature and adventure attractions

Penang, tucked away like a pearl in a corner of the Andaman Sea, is one of Malaysia's top tourist destinations.

Last year, the state — comprising the turtle-shaped Penang Island and the Seberang Perai province on Peninsular Malaysia — received 3.6 million travellers.

Its capital city, George Town, was recognised by Unesco as a World Heritage Site in 2008, and placed fourth on Lonely Planet's list of top 10 cities to visit in 2016.

Throughout my five days in Penang, I was continually impressed by its uncontrived nature. Though its tourist veneer thickens year by year, a vibrant and authentic city full of surprises still throbs beneath it.

Historical sights in George Town

One of the city's most impressive heritage buildings is the Pinang Peranakan Mansion, a museum of Penang Peranakan Chinese culture that is preserved as though it were still a home.

The mansion was once the residence of Chung Keng Kwee, a powerful triad leader who fled China during the abortive Taiping Rebellion from 1850 to 1864. Interesting elements in its interior include Venetian stained-glass windows, European statuary and mirrors that enable one to observe all the mansion's entrances while seated at the dining table.

It currently houses more than 1,000 Peranakan artefacts, including an array of

exquisite jewellery and garments adorned with the five-clawed imperial dragon — a symbol of royalty that the exiled Taiping rebels had claimed for themselves.

Being a history buff, I enjoyed wandering through the mansion, imagining what life would have been like as a wealthy Chinese kingpin when Penang was under British colonial rule.

The photographs of Peranakan families, elaborate early 20th century wooden furniture and everyday items in the mansion such as dining utensils, playing cards and a jukebox bear witness to a bygone era.

The clan jetties, houses on stilts built over the water by Chinese immigrants sharing the same surname, are another popular attraction. The long wooden piers leading into the sea provide perfect backdrops for Instagram-worthy photos.

Bar the odd homestay or restaurant, the jetties mostly house families who have lived there for generations. Egg shells on the tips of pointy-leaved plants are a sign of this — they prevent the sharp leafy blades from hurting the children who live and play on the jetties.

Old and new in harmony

While the trishaw is a common mode of tourist transportation around George Town, walking and cycling on a rented bicycle are better ways to explore its narrow streets and discover its famous street murals.

Gat Lebu Armenian is a popular pedestrian-only zone lined with street art, peddlers and performers. It is also the site of a famous mural by Lithuanian artist Ernest Zacharevic, who arrived as a backpacker in 2011 and rapidly caught the eye of locals.

I was particularly taken with a band of septuagenarian musicians playing instruments made of recycled materials, and a pair of globetrotting millennials performing acrobatics to fund their travels.

Hip cafés, hostels and speciality museums — such as the Ghost Museum, a spooky exhibit of phantoms from different cultures — dot George Town's streets, sitting cheek-by-jowl with moneychangers, printing presses and stores selling *tuak* (locally brewed palm wine) dating from the colonial era.

Strolling past the usual tourist hot spots, a visitor will see that the juxtaposition of the new and old, the touristry and the indigenous, results in a harmonious co-existence.

In the heart of nature

To experience Penang's natural heritage, I went to The Habitat, a 1.6km-long nature trail on Penang Hill, the base of which is around 7km from George Town.

The funicular railway up the hill, which once took 30 minutes to reach the summit, now makes the journey in four.

The Habitat is located a short jeep ride away from the hilltop funicular station. The trail includes a 230m-long canopy walk that offers close-up views of the rainforest's flora and fauna.

With the help of a guide, I spotted Langur monkeys, edible berries (which I ate), and a non-lethal striped snake (which I didn't touch).

What struck me most was the serendipity of these encounters. I felt like a guest in the rainforest, glimpsing its age-old rhythms.

The trail leads to the skywalk on Curtis Crest, Penang's highest point, which offers a 360-degree view of the island at 833m above sea level.

The shade and silence of The Habitat were a welcome change from the heat and the bustling streets of George Town, enabling me to fully immerse myself in the beauty of nature.

Hanging by a thread

While culture and nature are available in abundance, so too are adrenaline rushes.

Komtar, Penang's tallest building, recently added three floors and now stands at 68 stories high. On the 65th floor, I mustered up the courage to take on the world's highest ropes course challenge.

The Gravityz outdoor course is 239m

above ground and is about 100m long.

After gearing up with harnesses and ropes, my companions and I stepped out to the platform gingerly, under the watchful eye of two instructors.

The first steps were the scariest as I saw just how high we were, and heard the distant roar of the traffic below. My palms sweated and my heart raced as I battled an onset of vertigo.

Seeing the city laid out before us was exhilarating, and we could see all the way across the cape on which George Town is built, from one shore to the other.

In an hour — during which we gradually overcame our initial trepidation — we managed to complete a series of six challenges, including riding on a zipline, sitting with our feet dangling over the edge of the walkway and leaning backwards supported only by our harnesses.

By the end of it, I was wobbly-kneed but very wide awake indeed.



The Gravityz course at Komtar, Penang's tallest building.

PHOTOS: JOSHUA WONG, KATHARINE GOH

THE WRITER'S TRIP WAS SPONSORED BY TOURISM MALAYSIA AND MALINDO AIR.

GUIDELINES

Malindo Air flies from Singapore to Penang via Kuala Lumpur. The airline offers spacious legroom, in-flight refreshments and on-board entertainment, as well as 25kg of free baggage allowance. It flies to Kuala Lumpur four times daily, from which travellers can take a transit flight to Penang.

Penang is a food paradise. Try assam laksa and char kway teow at Joo Hooi café, 475 Jalan Penang, and Teochew cendol at Lebu Keng Kwee next door.

Wear light clothing, comfortable shoes and sun protection.



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Iceland Free & Easy + holiday package, free flight for second person or child for any selected Asia package, and free limited-edition 28-inch New Yorker Trolley Luggage for each Citi Credit Cardmember with \$5,800 charge for new bookings only. While stocks last. One of the star buys to look

out for is the 10D Greenland Cruise & Iceland Midnight Sun Holiday package. It costs from \$7,888 for the first person and from \$3,944 for the second — a 50 per cent discount. Taxes are \$608. There is only one departure date for this package — Aug 7. Terms and conditions apply. For booking and inquiries, call 6438-8880 or head to the sale this weekend.



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