



# INTIMATE ABODES

Penang with its beautiful beaches and UNESCO Heritage-listed capital, George Town, is fast emerging as a destination for quirky little boutique hotels, each with its own distinct character.

## EAST INDIES MANSION

I wasn't quite sure what to expect of the East Indies Mansion, a seven-room boutique hotel with a name that conjured images of a vast colonial empire stretching from the British East Indies eastwards to the Dutch and Spanish East Indies, encompassing what is now Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines. Its name smacked of sweet and smoky cinnamon, precious turmeric, and heated rivalry over monopoly of the spice trade. It made me think of maritime expeditions that involved brave explorers, clever merchants and hopeful pioneers, intent on making a new life for themselves in distant lands. But most of all, it spoke of history.

I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the mansion along China Street in the pulsating quarter of Little India did indeed have historic value. It was once home to Koh Lay Huan, the first Kapitan China or Chinese community leader of Penang. When Francis Light, the 'founder' of Penang, arrived in 1786, this Fujian-born leader was one of his trusted circle, a man Light is said to have referred to as 'an old fox'. Sometime in the 1870s, the mansion passed into the hands of Chung Keng Kwee, the powerful Hakka Kapitan China of Perak and leader of the Hai San secret society.

Considering its illustrious history, it's hard to imagine that this mansion was once at the mercy of a bulldozer. In 2001, the Penang Heritage Trust saved the old building from demolition, convinced that despite the peeling walls, its beautiful design and ornamentation would reveal a fascinating history. They were right. The new owners restored the mansion in partnership with the Penang Heritage Trust, ensuring that the heritage building, a Fujian-style mansion with a deep courtyard arrangement to let in light and breeze, retained its original architectural quirks.

The façade of the mansion features louvred windows, ceramic tiles and porcelain bowl cutwork in floral patterns, with auspicious imagery of fish, butterflies and birds tangled in its vines. Stepping into the foyer, I was surprised to observe how spacious the mansion was; with over 10,000 square feet of space, even in its heyday, this two-storey mansion was considered very large. The foyer opened onto an airy courtyard with peeling turquoise walls, rattan lanterns, pretty potted plants and two sitting areas decorated with local artworks; this led to five guest rooms and another two sitting areas – displaying a black and white picture of the great man himself, Koh Lay Huan, as well as a pair of blue marble lions, meant to chase away evil spirits.

The house was built following the principles of layman's *feng shui*, located between a hill



and a body of water. Back in the day, China Street ended right at the sea, but due to land reclamation, the sea is now much farther away. To make up for the lack of a nearby slope, the house was designed with different levels, its steps mimicking the incline of a hill.

Moving deeper into the mansion, I found another breezy courtyard – this one with a little garden of weeping willows and tropical blooms, and an old well! This courtyard led to a cosy dining hall where simple breakfasts are served daily. Local favourites like *roti John* (Bengali bread with spiced minced chicken) and *paratha* (Indian flatbread) with potato curry are must-tries. Here, glass doors allow diners to enjoy the garden view while ensuring sunshine spills in, illuminating the quaint décor of antique porcelain plates and cake moulds artfully arranged on walls, as well as tiffin carriers that evoke old world nostalgia. As East Indies Mansion strives to offers guests a home-like experience, the kitchen is open to guests, as is the laundry room.

The hotel is very much like a home; no two rooms are alike. I was staying in one of the two king suites. Although my air-conditioned suite was not large, the attached bathroom was about the same size, making it quite spacious! Quirky design details included two antique *kebaya* (traditional Nyonya blouses) in glass frames, as well as a vintage cabinet

and a funky armchair upholstered in striking patchwork-like material. In one of the two spacious family rooms upstairs, I noticed a kids' room with playful toy buses lining a deep blue wall. Following the original plan of the house, there was even a room with a loft, which may have been used for storage once upon a time. Scattered throughout the house were charming relics and cultural heirlooms, from an old sewing machine and bicycle to a traditional xylophone and an eclectic range of Buddhist art.

If asked, my only quibble would be the soundproofing of the hardwood floor above, which left me privy to the slightest movement upstairs. But, it's something I soon accepted as part of the charm of an old building. Even the peeling walls offered a rustic character. I was told that due to waterways that were built to flow beneath the main building hundreds of years ago, water vapour rises from the ground, leaving the walls slightly mildewed. But rather than break the precious terracotta tiles to redirect the water, East Indies has chosen to save them and embrace this slightly worn look.

It is this appreciation for heritage that comes across when you step into East Indies, and anyone looking for a cosy nook that straddles the old world and the new, offering 21st century comforts in an 18th century abode, will be more than happy here. 📍 25, CHINA STREET, GEORGE TOWN



**PARKROYAL PENANG RESORT** Parkroyal Penang Resort offers tropical landscaped gardens, breezy open spaces and luxurious suites designed with a contemporary Asian vibe. Not to be missed is the PARKROYAL Fisherman's Seafood Platter bursting with oysters, scallops, crabs and more at Uncle Zack by the Beach. 📍 BATU FERRINGHI BEACH, 11100 PENANG



**BAYVIEW BEACH RESORT** This beachfront resort offers comfortable hillview and seaview rooms and suites with private balconies, and a wide range of recreational facilities, from swimming pools and a sunken pool bar to a tennis court and spa. 📍 BATU FERRINGHI BEACH, 11100 PENANG



**FLAMINGO BY THE BEACH** The hotel's contemporary rooms, which come with views of either the hills of the sea, are equipped with sound proof walls, a flat screen LCD TV, satellite TV channels and Wi-Fi access. Check out the Flamingo Theque for ice cold beers and the hottest grill in town. 📍 JALAN TANJUNG BUNGAH, 11200 TANJUNG BUNGAH, PENANG



**G KELAWAI HOTEL** Enjoy a good night's rest on a Serta Bed at one of Penang's newest hotels. G Hotel Kelawai boasts a modern aesthetic with 208 stylish rooms, a great location beside shopping malls, infinity swimming pool, fully-equipped gymnasium and rooftop bar with spectacular views. 📍 2, PERSIARAN MAKTAB, 10250 PENANG