Penang

Think of the term 'Southeast Asia'. South and east of what? Essentially, Asia's most influential countries: China and India. And for all the impact these titans have on the continent, there aren't many places where their societies meet in unfiltered, immediate cultural contact.

Then along comes Malaysia's smallest state: Penang. In a teak townhouse, an Indian man places joss sticks in front of a family altar studded with pictures of the Hindu god Rama, the Chinese bodhisattva Kuan Yin and black-and-white photos of his Chinese wife's departed ancestors. Later the couple may eat a curry of cinnamon bark, shallots, tamarind, coriander and chillies – ingredients sourced from Malaysia's mother cultures of Indian, Chinese and Malay.

Local food, by the way, is one of the top draws of the 'Pearl of the Orient,' but the living cultures those dishes stem from are the real reason to visit. Penang is the only one of Malaysia's 13 states to have a Chinese majority population, but rather than feeling mono-ethnic, it exemplifies Asia-as-entrepôt that is this nation at its best. Physical vestiges of the colonial era – low slung townhouses, narrow alleyways, tea shops, temples, Chinese mansions and Little India districts – make a visit to Georgetown eminently rewarding, while beyond lies a landscape of jungle, lakes, beaches, a cosy national park and, yes, a cool hill station.

South of one Asia, east of another, and Asia condensed. This state is about experiencing the continent's culture and history at its oldest and most evolving. And obviously, trying the curry.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Chowing on charred pork on rice while watching life pass by in **Georgetown** (p192)
- Exploring Chinese Assembly Halls and clanhouses like **Khoo Kongsi** (p184)
- Wandering to the top of **Kek Lok Si Temple** (p199).
- Relaxing on the beach at **Batu Ferringhi** (p204)
- Grounding yourself in the state's past in the **Penang Museum** (p184)

★ Batu Ferringhi

★ Georgetown

★ Kek Lok Si Temple

■ TELEPHONE CODE: 04	■ POPULATION: 1.52 MILLION	■ AREA: 1031 SQ KM
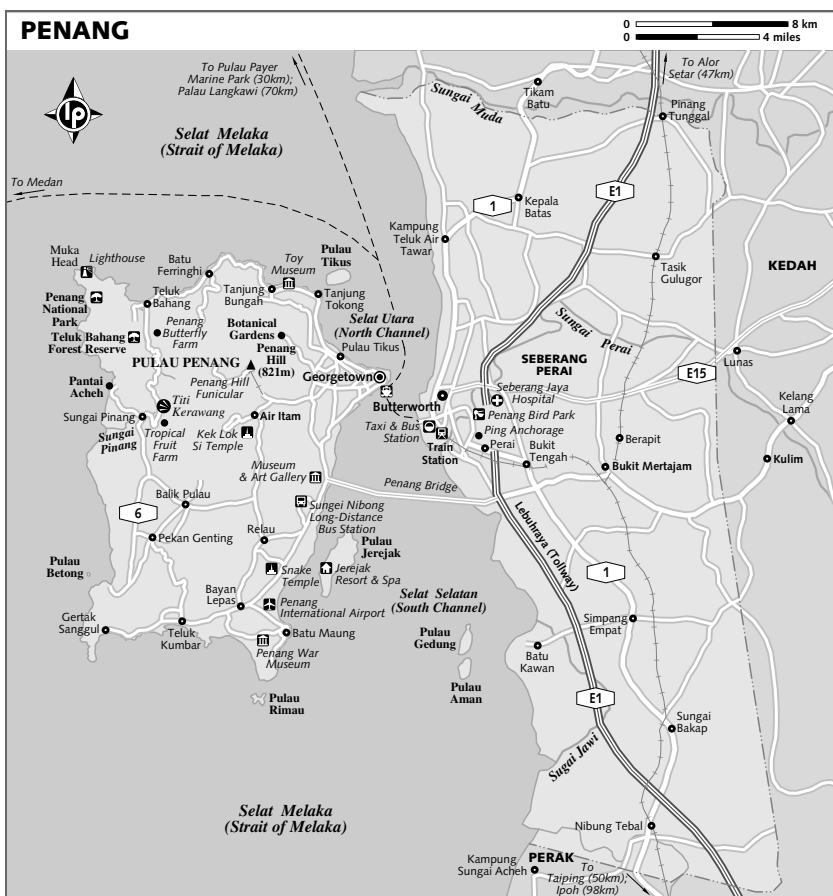
PENANG

History

Little is known of Penang's early history. Chinese seafarers were aware of the island, which they called Pulo Pinang (Betelnut Island), as far back as the 15th century, but it appears to have been uninhabited at the time. The English merchant-adventurer Captain James Lancaster swung by in 1593, but it wasn't until the early 1700s that colonists arrived from Sumatra and established settlements at Batu Uban and the area now covered by southern Georgetown. The island came under the control of the sultan of Kedah, but in 1771 the sultan signed the first agreement with the British East India Company, handing it trading rights in exchange for military assistance against Siam.

In 1786 Captain Francis Light, on behalf of the East India Company, took possession of Penang, which was formally signed over to him in 1791. Light renamed it Prince of Wales Island, as the acquisition date fell on the prince's birthday. It's said Light fired silver dollars from his ship's cannons into the jungle to encourage his labourers to hack back the undergrowth for settlement.

Whatever the truth of the tale, he soon established Georgetown, also named after the Prince of Wales, who later became King George IV, with Lebuh Light, Lebuh Chulia, Lebuh Pitt and Lebuh Bishop as its boundaries. By 1800 Light had negotiated with the sultan for a strip of mainland adjacent to the island; this became known as Province Wellesley, after the governor of India.