

Part 3

Penang



A Far East Odyssey © Penny Buckley 2013

Day 11
Penang

Thursday, 24 March

Catherine has booked us a walking tour of Georgetown, capital of Penang. I love these walking tours which allow one to get a little closer to real life. Cumalle, our guide is a lovely thai chinese girl both charming and knowledgeable. We learn about Francis Light, founder of the british colony of Penang in the late 1700s. There seems no connection to Light Street, Baltimore.

Georgetown, named after George III, is now a world UNESCO site and is jam-packed with stately old colonial era buildings many restored and many, we guess, awaiting some TLC. Our walk will only last the morning but Cumalle is going to cram so much information we'll be begging for mercy by the end. We meet at the City Hall and set off past the confidently anglican, St George's church.



***St George's
church and
centenary
memorial to
Francis Light***

Onwards and upwards; 46 years on and the frenetic activity of the streets is just the same and we are 'cut-up' by 'plastics' (motor-scooters) now, just as all those years ago.

Our walk takes us to the Goddess of Mercy temple



Giant 'dragon' joss-sticks at the Goddess of Mercy temple

Joss sticks are used to invoke the spirits.





The temple is also the site for an impromptu soup-kitchen south-east asian style.

Making joss sticks the craft way. Once these sticks are made they will be left in the sun to bake hard



Malaysia is as anxious as anywhere else to preserve old craft skills, so the joss stick maker, chair caner and sign writer are all visited before calling at the paper goods shop. The chinese believe in making the

journey to the after-life as comfortable as possible, thus you send your deceased relative off with a smart 'car', or 'motorbike', a well tailored 'suit' including a shirt with a collar and tie, plenty of 'money' and a 'calculator' to add it all up. All of the above will be made of paper. Thus there are shops devoted to selling this huge range of paper goods.



***Paper goods shop.
All you could
possibly need for
your journey to the
after-life***

We press on. It is said that smell is the most powerful of the senses; my nostrils are full of the smells of incense, flowers, food, cooking and monsoon rains, smells I never thought I would encounter again but which take me back instantly.

***The sweet perfume of
the jasmine flowers is
overwhelming***



We head to Little India for lunch and an afternoon taken at a more leisurely pace, visiting the Penang Museum and general people watching.

There seems to be no limit as to what can be piled on a scooter so the butcher and the baker are fully mobile.

***Can any more
be crammed on
a scooter?***



The butcher



Kitchen on a bike

Day 12
Penang

Friday, 25 March

Catherine has planned a visit to the wet market today which she warned would not be for the faint-hearted but we're not lily-livered softies. After all, we have visited the wholesale meat and fish market in Athens where butchery is primeval.

A huge tropical storm struck last night and the monsoon drain is a torrent of milky, dirty water; briefly we catch sight of a monitor lizard struggling against the flow in an effort to return to its jungle home on higher ground. Health and Safety is a closed book here. The drains, which are deep, are completely unguarded, and it would be very easy to fall in one. It would be a H&S dream, or nightmare, depending on your position.

The wet market is wet indeed, it is also noisy and smelly. Butchery is quite a different ball game here. Forget careful paring of the bone with a fine pointed filleting knife, hello, chop indiscriminately through bone and flesh with a huge cleaver. We buy a wonderful array of exotic fruits, papaya, mango, jack fruit, watermelon, starfruit. Yes, of course all these can be bought - at a price - in most supermarkets but the journey between this tropical land and the supermarket shelves of UK seems to render them smaller and to lose the wonderful heady perfume.



***Catherine behind
bananas and jack
fruit***

***Lotus root, not
sure what to do
with this***



Peking duck

100 day old eggs



The chicken stalls are clustered in one corner and even claws are for sale. What do they make?



The chicken butcher

Nothing is wasted



Bunches of orchids as if they were spray carnations

We return home for lunch laden with good food.

Catherine suggests we visit Kek Lok Si temple in the afternoon. It is, in fact, a complex of temples to the Buddha and the goddess Kuan Yin. It is the most extraordinary mix of consumerism and religion, of oriental architecture and plastic kitsch. There are stalls selling tourist 'tat' alongside religious offerings, votive candles in luminous shades, fruits and joss sticks, to buy your way to heaven. We are both reminded of Le Mont St Michael, both are places of veneration built on raised ground accessed via naked commercialism. Only the god is different. All around is the noise and chaos of Malaysian life though there are not so many mangy kampong dogs as I remember 46 years ago.

Day 13
Penang

Saturday, 26 March

It's raining again! Today we are visiting the tropical spice garden at the northern end of the island at Batu Feringgi. Here we learn about the many curative properties of spices - anything from flatulence to cancer and everything between. We have lunch here also; delicious, fragrant thai laksa for me, spicy but not aggressively so.



*Just one of the
spices growing. I
wish I could take
some home*



Onwards and upwards to the batik painting workshop. Batik is the local fabric painted by hand. In the 60s the colour palette was unexciting, majoring on browns and dull tones. I would always have difficulty finding something I liked. Fast forward forty-five years and the story is very different; the palette is much clearer and more vibrant. I would like to buy but experience has taught me that while such clothes look lovely under the hot tropical sun, they do not travel well and just miss the boat in provincial Bournemouth.



Painting batik by hand

It's raining again. Serious rain, not falling slantways but drilling down in stair rods such as we rarely experience in Europe, much less England. We head home to download another 150 memories before going out to another hawkers' restaurant for dinner. In fact, one could scarcely dignify this motley collection of covered stalls with the name restaurant. Here the menu is a picture card of 8-10 dishes; from which we chose a selection for tasting and sharing.

It's Sunday! Catherine has planned the full-on expat experience; lunch at the Eastern & Oriental (E&O) followed by a swim at the Penang Club. It will be the antithesis of last night's supper!

During the planning for our holiday I had asked Catherine if she knew of the Runnymede Hotel. Did it still exist? The only clue I could give was that it was on the coast, not a great help; Penang is an small island - lots of coast and not much hinterland. In 1965 the Runnymede was a hotel run, I believe, exclusively for families of the Armed Forces serving in Malaysia and Singapore and was typical of the genre: I had spent Christmas 1965 there. Catherine's research drew a blank. I could only think that during 'malaysiafication', it had been reinvented and named something quite else. I had to accept I might never find it.

Before lunch, and while Damian finds the Catholic church, I take my map and return to the wet market. I love the opportunity to go as slowly or quickly as I like, pleasing only myself and as I have always said to the children, you can never be lost with a map! I retrace my steps past the monsoon drain where I hope to see the monitor lizard, he, of course, is nowhere to be seen. The drain is full of the usual detritus, plastic bottles, sticks, vegetation but happily no dead dogs as was not unusual 45 years ago. The pavements here are an exercise to the walker. Typically, malays will build something and forget it - ongoing maintenance is a closed book to them! Indeed the 'Elf & Safety' Gestapo would rejoice at the prospect of such an assured programme of vigilance!

I visit Little Burma, Myanmar to be totally PC, and the buddhist Wat¹³ Chaiamangalaram, built on land given, in perpetuity, by Queen Victoria. Here all is green, gold and beautifully maintained. It is difficult to get my cool and muted western, Christian head around it, deep down, though, the practices are not dissimilar. Votive candles are a staple of many religions and none, here they are fashioned as luminous pink lotus flowers; discreet is not in the Buddhist lexicon. The wat is heaving with people, both curious observer - me - and devout worshipper - many others.

¹³ Temple



Wat Chaiamangalaram
Buddhist temple.
These votive candles
have some style!



We head off to the E & O for lunch where the great days of the Empire have been carefully recreated. High ceilings with whirring fans are now thoughtfully supplemented by 21st century air conditioning. We choose a table on the verandah where it requires no great effort to imagine W Somerset Maugham or Noël Coward sitting here enjoying their gin slings looking over to Butterworth on the mainland. The buffet is sumptuous and we eat far too much but hey, it's Sunday, it's what you do!

***Sunday lunch
on the verandah
of the E&O Hotel -
this is how Sunday
lunch should be!***



After lunch we're move on to the Penang Club, hub of ex-pat life in the 60s now open to all, so long as they pay the membership! By some masterstroke of serendipity, the Runnymede Hotel is situated right next door - how fortunate is that! Sadly, there has been no fairy wand to refurbish here, rather it is an utterly pathetic, derelict site though absolutely recognisable as the scene of my Christmas 1965.



Catherine and I - Damian prefers to sit by the pool reading the weekly edition of the Daily Telegraph - climb along the low sea-wall wearing only swimming costumes, into the grounds which are fast reverting to jungle. On reflection, this seems incredibly stupid!

The hotel is a shocking shell of its former glory. Ceilings have caved in, there are trees growing at the base of the pillars in the former ballroom, the swimming pool is an unattractive, algae-covered sump. While gazing about, and mindful that a beam or girder might fall on us if we so much as sneeze, two young malays stroll out to meet us but with absolutely no sense of urgency. They are not soldiers but are certainly on guard duty, though happily not brandishing SA80s or releasing baying hounds. In fact, idle curiosity with the emphasis on 'idle', sums them up. Dressed as we are in swimming kit, we lack all gravitas but, equally, really don't pose much of a threat; indeed, they seemed more concerned for our safety, well merited in the circumstances. We think

that they understand that we have no malign intent and we assure them we're on our way. It was a sad and salutary experience but because much of Penang is listed as a UNESCO site, I am confident that the Runnymede will, like the phoenix, rise again from the ashes and live to see another day.

Runnymede 2011



***The ballroom
of the
Runnymede***

We have spent three lovely days with Catherine but all good things come to an end and tomorrow we have an eye-wateringly early start to fly to Bangkok to stay with Rosie and Bryan Massingham at Maekok River Village Resort.

