

# Strait Malacca Magic

A new boutique hotel brings fresh life to the seafront in cooler-by-the-day Penang. BY JENINNE LEE-ST. JOHN



A hand-etched panel in the elevator, The Prestige.

**FOR QUINTESSENTIAL** Straits Settlements charm, it's hard to beat Penang. Winding streets of weathered shophouses, weird T-intersections and seemingly out-of-nowhere mini roundabouts, stone lions fronting vibrant Chinese clan associations, the elaborate Sri Mahamariamman Hindu temple amid a squall of incense and sari shops—the little, layer-cake city of George Town dates to 1786, when the Sultan of Kedah ceded Penang, in exchange for military aid, to the British East India Company, which established it as a trading port. Immigrants from across Asia came to make duty-free deals and claim all the land they could clear.

By the time Queen Victoria took the throne in 1837, Penang was in full bloom financially and culturally. It's in this thriving golden age of yore that a new boutique hotel situates itself. The Prestige is a neat evolution in hospitality in a town that, on one hand, has as its grande dame, the 134-year-old Eastern & Oriental Hotel, and on the other was not long ago the boutique pioneer of the region, a place of charming refurbishments from visionary small-scale developers like Chris Ong of Clove Hall and Muntri Mews.

Unlike most hotels in George Town, The Prestige isn't a refit of an old building, yet it fits in fine. This is partly because new builds in UNESCO World Heritage Site Penang must adhere to certain proportions and scale (The Prestige is four stories), and partly because the architects at Ministry of Design, led by Colin Seah, took as inspiration a certain of-the-era theme: if the hotel name reminds you of that Hugh Jackman/Christian Bale movie about magicians in Victorian London, you've conjured the right picture.

Geometric shapes and rose gold lend the property a clean, subtle glamour. There's a maze inlaid in the center of the lobby floor and hand-etched, metal panels in the elevators featuring iconic images of Penang. On the two 143-meter-long guest

COURTESY OF THE PRESTIGE

floors, alternating light and dark colored bands painted on diagonals every five meters combined with shadow-casting lamps make the space seem to rotate around you. "The corridors looked never-ending, so we needed some visual trickery to break down the scale," Seah told me. The hallway is such an immersive trompe l'oeil that when the manager was leading me to my room he pointed ahead of us and said, "Don't bump into the mirror," and I jumped back—totally convinced there was a mirror there, but there wasn't.

I shifted from this disorienting borderland into a private space that was bright and feminine. Rooms are outfitted in the softest pastel pinks and blues, with velvety upholstery, trapezium lines, and beds that seem to be levitating; suites have a

champagne-bronze centerpiece that contains the closet and shower and is meant to recall Houdini's escape box. The lofts are duplexes with separate living and sleeping areas.

For someone who wants cute and inner-city but also a splash of fabulousness, the big selling point of The Prestige is its rooftop pool, an infinity number that faces the Strait of Malacca and mainland Malaysia beyond, a rarity in George Town. There are pretty gazeboes and now a bar—it wasn't open when I was there but owner Tommy Koay, who was so gracious about my friends' and my BYO bubbly workaround, assures me that drinks there are currently flowing—making this the choice spot to chill after wandering about town all sticky day. The garden up here is actually a parallel theme

that carries throughout the hotel. Groomed tropical botanicals were a status symbol back in the day and Seah has translated this into leafy green wallpaper blanketing all the bathrooms in the building, making for an aesthetically exciting contrast when you open every hidden door.

All of this is housed within a long, stately, white building with a ground-floor promenade filled with boutiques and eateries. It's like the city itself in modern miniature. "You're meant to be outside exploring in Penang," Seah said, and The Prestige feels entrenched in the bustle. At risk for a few years of becoming a living museum (there are now lines to take photos with those cutesy Ernest Zacharevic street paintings), the city has begun to morph into an actually cool 'hood, with legit speakeasies, an



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Rooftop pool at The Prestige; one of Ernest Zacharevic's famed George Town murals; The Prestige's lengthy façade; carbo-load on 50 types of cake a day at China House.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ANA FLÁSKER/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; COURTESY OF THE PRESTIGE; COURTESY OF CHINA HOUSE





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Glasshouse restaurant at The Prestige; fine dining in China House; there are 16 Loft suites in The Prestige.



underground music scene and impressive imports of artisanal food and drink products.

I co-opted T+L contributors Marco Ferrarese, a writer, and his photographer wife Kit Yeng Chan to show me around their hometown, which was putting on the annual George Town Festival during my visit. After an obscenely wholesome night stroll through the waterfront Esplanade that included projection-mapping lightshows on the façade of City Hall and a trippier-than-*Fantasia* lit-up, life-size horse puppet dance, it was time for many drinks. At tiki-dive Soundmaker Studio, a recording studio and live-music club, we were moved by a local singer-songwriter in the mold of

Izzy Bisu named Leatism and then jumped along to ska band Budak Nakal Hujang Simpang, who literally brought the house down—when a large ceiling tile caved in, we took it as a cue to make a move.

“When I moved here in 2009, there were zero hipster cafés, no mural art, no tourists—just beautifully decrepit buildings and a thriving mix of multi-ethnic peoples,” Ferrarese said as he led us to China House, a genius block-long amalgam of shophouses that you might call an F&B layer-cake, what with its diner-like bake shop on one end and sultrily lit lounge bar on the other. “When Kit was a kid, there wasn’t a bridge connecting the island to the mainland, traffic was less, and the town had real charm, even a tram line. Today it retains some of its former splendor, but is congested,” he said. “It’s getting harder and harder to find space to breathe.”

Perhaps counter-intuitively, that’s a reason to cheer more development. There’s a fair bit of space fringing George Town’s quaint core, much of it valuable waterfront real estate, the regeneration of which could totally change the cityscape. “It’s a good thing that the old buildings near the sea are being refurbished,” he said. “The Prestige has revitalized a very big heritage building that sat unused next to one of George Town’s main thoroughfares for decades.” I’d call that a pretty neat bit of magic. ☘

## THE DETAILS

### STAY

**The Prestige Hotel** 162 rooms and suites in a self-contained village that’s convenient to most of where you want to be in George Town. [theprestige.my](http://theprestige.my); doubles from RM280.

### EAT+DRINK

**Beso Rosado** Hot-pink, highly photogenic craft-cocktail bar happy to whip up bespoke beverages, plus a tapas

restaurant because sometimes you need to eat, too. [fb.com/besarosadobychinchin](http://fb.com/besarosadobychinchin).

**China House** The width of a full block, three connected shophouses and their interior courtyards combine for something for everyone: 50 fresh cakes a day, communal-table lunches, a cool bar whose liquor stock is absurdly vast and deep. [chinahouse.com.my](http://chinahouse.com.my).

**Chin’s Stylish Chinese Cuisine** Terrible name, but props for OTT effort at this haute Chinese on the pier next to The Prestige

where the plates were custom commissioned and hand-painted and crazy Botero-like paintings hang from the ceiling. [fb.com/chinchesineseuisine](http://fb.com/chinchesineseuisine).

### Hong Kee Bamboo Noodle

With an entrance framed by their famous baked goods and noodle-soup stand, this Chinese diner is the spot for *char hor fun* (stir-fried flat rice noodles) and other Cantonese lunch cravings. *37 Lebuh Campbell*.

**Magazine 63** Legit speakeasy (if you find yourself in the Harry Potter bar next door, you’ve

gone an unmarked door too far) that is basically a big, bricked-in back room full of cool kids, with live music on a doll-stage mezzanine balcony. [instagram.com/magazine\\_63](http://instagram.com/magazine_63).

**Tai Tong** A Penang institution. Dim sum done the right way, served by old ladies with rolling, steaming carts, even for dinner. *45 Lebuh Cintra*.

**Via Pre** When your palate needs a change from Asian, head to this cozy, classic Italian with a decent selection of old-world wines. [via-pre.com](http://via-pre.com). —J.L.S.J.