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KEEPING THE TOURISM INDUSTRY INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE

FEATURE

THE PERFECT PACE: CYCLING IN NORTHERN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND SOUTHERN CHINA

PENANG PROFILE

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SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

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SUSTAINABILITY IS GOOD, BUT NOT ENOUGH; LET'S AIM FOR SATISFIABILITY

BY OOI KEE BENG





"SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT" makes good sense as a concept. This term was definitely coined to draw attention to the dangers inherent in unrestrained "development", in a world where all countries have ambitions of becoming "developed".

We cannot, for practical and moral reasons, stop any country from wishing to become developed, but the inherent ecological cost of allowing every country to develop without restrain would be unacceptable. This is the great paradox of our time. It could mean the destruction of Mother Earth's life-sustaining ecologies, and the very ecosystems within which the human species came into being and thrived. We are now clever enough to observe and describe how human activities in recent centuries have actually disrupted the circularity—the sustainability—of Earth's basic processes. Should the resulting fluctuations become too large or unpredictable, then human life itself is threatened, not to mention that of countless other species.

This is the key lesson learned from the histories of industrialisation in those countries that first managed to become developed: pursuing exactly the same modes of development would simply be "unsustainable".

Life-forms depend a great deal on environmental stability in order to thrive. Their evolution, we realise, depends on adaptability to new conditions. But we also know that if conditions keep changing fast and ceaselessly, then no new species can emerge, while old species will merely live in a protracted state of crisis. And if the changes are too great, then extinctions will become common—and rapid. Already, the speed of environmental change is very high, and in fact, most of us are already speed-blind.

Humanity as a whole, shocked at what it has done, now propagates the idea of sustainability. We have to make governments and peoples conscious of the need for sustainability in all that humanity, as a whole, undertakes. As the United Nations (UN) puts it, we have to work towards implementing sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Our general consciousness has been raised, and SDGs have been normalised, even institutionalised, as a norm in modern thinking (but bear in mind that bureaucratised thinking, which often signifies conservatism in thought, then becomes a problem in itself). For all their benefits, are SDGs a crisis or stopgap measure? A buy-time strategy? A comforting blindfold? After all, they were first articulated only when the dangers became obvious: at the cliff's edge, the roar of the rapids becoming deafeningly louder.

So, are SDGs a prescription for the terminally ill? Are they just delaying the inevitable, by giving us false hope?

I prefer to think that they are at least buying us time. The issue, then, is what we do with the time that they are buying us.

The biggest problem to solve is really knowing how we got here in the first place. How did a species, which evolved under sufficiently stable conditions, come to seriously undermine the very ecological processes that gave birth to it? Why are we destroying the earthly dynamics that gave us life?

Truth be told, humanity's concern today is not about merely surviving, but about "progressing" and "developing", not to mention raising the gross domestic product ad infinitum. Although we now know where this fixation is leading us, can we really stop ourselves?

Short of changing course entirely, what we first have to do is to at least manage our fixation with established patterns of development, and limit the destruction that it brings. If we all do our little bit to make sure that our means of production, lifestyles and consumption patterns do not lead to scarcity, to pollution, to ecological upsets—in other words, if we think sustainably—then maybe the slight shift in trajectory of human development will be good enough, and things can work out in the long run.

Secondly, we should also act upon sustainability's strong heuristic function. The more we act in awareness of the critical value of ecological balance, the greater the likelihood that later generations will become less demanding of Earth's resources, less careless with their wastes and more conscious caretakers of the world.

We can hope. Meanwhile, we need to work towards a human philosophy where Sufficiency and Satisfiability are of higher ethical and economic worth than Affluence and Dominance; one where communal values define culture more deeply than financial calculations; and where mutualism is recognised as a greater good than competitiveness.

***Note:** For in-depth analyses of Penang's sustainable tourism prospects, see: Ong Wooi Leng *et al.* (2026). *Penang Economic Outlook*. Penang Institute. https://penanginstitute.org/publications/reports-and-papers/penang-economic-outlook-2026/.

WHERE ARE YOU FROM?

LETTER BY LAILA FANEBUST



"WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"

If I had five ringgit for every time I was asked this question in the five months I spent in George Town, maybe I could have put down a deposit for one of the crumbling backstreet terraces I passed by on my daily walks. There is no offence given or taken with this query. It is genuine, but I am glad to leave it behind, now that I am returning to Australia. I know I am different. I see it every day.

I first arrived in Penang in 1972, naïve and awash with culture shock. I did not return for 40 years. Now I come back in November for the George Town Literary Festival. Last November, I was here well-ahead of time, after accepting a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to stay in a George Town apartment for an extended period. By the last weekend, when the Festival was held, I was settled in, relieved and happy to be resident, for a time, in this fascinating place. No more awkward communal breakfasts in the hotel or, worse, leaving the hotel to look for the first good coffee of the day. Instead, fully caffeinated, I walked from my apartment near the sea to the Festival's daily offerings of rich, creative storytelling: three days of exposure to some of the best of Southeast Asian writing. Most George Town Literary Festivals also feature a few writers from further elsewhere, sponsored by their governments in, say, the Netherlands, Belgium and Canada.

I look forward to the next contribution supported by the Australian government. This is, after all, our region too, and we have some excellent writers. But I digress.

One day, in Kuching, a woman whom I met in the hotel lift did not ask where I was from. Instead, by way of greeting, she asked if I was Malaysian. I have blue eyes, blond/grey hair and skin savaged by the Australian sun. There are Malaysians who look like me, some born here, some not. But they are rare. This woman made no assumptions. It was such a thoughtful way to say hello. The answer, of course, was the same. We had the usual conversation about which city I lived in, and whether she had ever been or knew anyone there. This exchange felt different though, less like I should be somewhere else.

At one of the many noisy, colourful celebrations surrounding Chinese New Year, I spotted a chair at a small table where two women were seated. I was learning Bahasa Melayu, so I tried out a few words. "Could I join them?" One woman nodded and smiled, and I thought, well, I'm doing okay with this language thing. After a few moments, she asked where I was from.

I was tired, and had a mouthful of Banh Mi, so I took some time to reply.

"Australia," I said, for the millionth time. The conversation ended there.

Dinner done, I asked if she was local. People come from all over Malaysia to Penang for these celebrations.

"No," she said, surprised. "I'm American."

She was from California, visiting for four days and knew nothing about Penang, let alone Australia. She was finishing off her first-ever Banh Mi. I live in Footscray, Melbourne, where Banh Mi rules.

It is so easy to make assumptions, to tip a conversation between strangers away from ease. I did it. It happens, even with innocent, obvious queries.

I look forward to November when someone asks, again, "Where are you from?"

"Australia," I will say, for the first of many times.

I will know then that I am back.

THE PERFECT PACE

CYCLING IN NORTHERN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND SOUTHERN CHINA

BY 小嵹 LITTLE KHONG





1

FOR YEARS, I have cycled through much of what was once called "Indochina"—specifically Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia—and China, watching landscapes changing with every turn of the wheel.[1] But why choose a bicycle when flying, taking a bus or riding a motorbike would be faster and easier? I have tried all of these modes, and even travelled on foot. Yet cycling remains unmatched because of how a bicycle moves at a perfect pace. It is fast enough to carry you forward, yet slow enough to restore a rare, immersive presence. By shifting the traveller's focus to connection and participation, cycling becomes one of the most sustainable ways of exploring the world, in an era where travel often prioritises efficiency and consumption.

ON LINGERING

On a recent journey towards China, I lingered in Mae Salong, a small village in northern Thailand. But what was meant to be a short stop became more than a week's stay. Each day, I navigated its narrow lanes on my bicycle, moving slowly enough to notice daily life unfolding: from women carrying baskets of vegetables to children playing in the streets, smoke rising from kitchen chimneys and dogs stretching lazily in the sun. Had I been on a motorbike, these moments would have slipped past unnoticed. Cycling allowed me to observe unobtrusively, to exist within the village rather than merely pass through it. Sustainable travel, I have learned, begins with slowing down.

One of the greatest advantages of cycling is the freedom to stop whenever curiosity calls. When driving a car, stopping can be inconvenient or disruptive. A motorbike offers flexibility, but is often detached from the feeling offered by a bicycle, where making effort becomes part of the experience of place. There is a deep satisfaction in climbing a mountain under your own power, to be rewarded by an open view. Physical engagement fosters respect for the environment. Not only does it leave minimal environmental impact while offering maximum sensory reward, but it also reminds you of the energy required to move through space: even those spaces closed to most forms of transport. In Dali, China, a 40km stretch along Erhai Lake is reserved almost entirely for pedestrians and cyclists. While electric bikes are permitted, their limited range makes long journeys impractical. But on a bicycle, I could follow the shoreline at my own pace, feeling the breeze, watching light shimmer on water, seeing mountains emerge and fade with each turn.

Practicality is another reason why cycling supports sustainable travel. While motorbikes may seem affordable, fuel and maintenance costs rise quickly, especially in countries where petrol is not subsidised. A bicycle, by contrast, demands little. A punctured tyre can be fixed with a simple patch. Over a six-month journey, professional servicing may be needed only once, usually costing no more than RM100–200 per session. My bicycle proved especially valuable in rural areas, many of which still had rough, unfinished roads. I was forced to dismount and push forward along rocky, sandy and uneven roads at times. Doing the same with a heavy motorbike would have been exhausting. But on a bicycle, the challenge became part of the journey, deepening my connection to the land.

ON IMMERSION

My savings on transportation allowed me to spend money where it mattered most, such as on local food, small guesthouses and experiences that directly support local communities. Laos is home to countless family-run guesthouses, an ideal situation for bicycle travellers. I could keep my bike indoors, eliminating concerns about theft in the process. More importantly, these stays offered opportunities for genuine human connection, through shared meals, conversations and insights into village life that hotels rarely provide.

Many tours of such villages promise "local experiences", yet these are often staged for visitors and offer little insight. In contrast, cycling gives me a sense of freedom that no organised tour can replicate. I can travel without a fixed itinerary and be guided by intuition and curiosity. When I discovered a town or landscape that resonated with me, I could slow down and stay. I could wander into markets where locals shopped, talked and traded goods. As windows into a community's heart, the marketplace was where culture could be lived rather than performed.

Often, the most memorable moments appear far from the main roads: hidden waterfalls after a quiet



2

CAPTIONS

1. Northern Thailand, at the Thailand–Myanmar frontier.
2. A group of laughing, muddy kids sprinting home after an afternoon football match.
3. Keeping my bicycle safe inside my room.
4. Detouring from Dali to Lijiang along a picturesque Chinese lake.
5. A punctured tyre is easily fixed in just five minutes.
6. Morning chitchat with a local food seller over breakfast at the market.
7. Donating funds collected from my followers to a rural temple in Laos.



3



4



5



6

turn away from paddy fields glowing in the sun, or a humble homestay boasting a natural hot spring flowing gently in the yard. Sometimes, the simplest encounters, such as with smiling children amused by a stranger on a bicycle, or generous villagers who welcomed outsiders unquestioningly, are those that stay with me.

ON GIVING BACK

Cycling allows me to contribute to local communities in small but meaningful ways, through an itinerary that involves staying in local accommodation, eating at roadside stalls and purchasing locally made products. These modest actions directly support communities that rarely benefit from mainstream tourism. I also document parts of my journey through photos and videos, and share glimpses into their lives, which express a unique dignity and rhythm.

One night, I stayed at a small temple in Sekong, a rural province in southern Laos. Before dawn, I followed and recorded the monks as they walked barefoot through the village collecting alms. After having their single daily meal, they worked quietly together to build a kitchen for the temple. When I shared the video with my followers on social media, they unexpectedly asked how they could support the kitchen's construction. Without planning to, I began connecting people who had never been to Sekong with its community, whom they would likely never visit.

Within one day, we raised RM1,200. For some, it was a small amount. But for the temple, it made a tangible difference. Years later, I returned to find the complete kitchen standing behind the main hall, already shaped by daily use. It was no longer just a structure of wood and concrete, but a quiet reminder of how sustainable travel, when rooted in respect, patience and honesty, can create deeper impacts beyond the journey itself.



7

ENDNOTE

1. To know more about the historical use of this term, see: https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/indochina-geographical-term



LIEW CHI KHONG is a vagabond cyclist exploring Southeast Asia and beyond, one road at a time. He travels slow, lives light and lets the journey shape the story.

KEEPING THE TOURISM



THE CHANGES TO George Town's core heritage area over the last decade have been significant. Although the "hardware"—the wonderful heritage façades, quirky street art, always-been-there traditional kopitiams—is intact, the "operating system" seems to have switched. Once-charming streets are now thronged with tourists spilling over the pavements, where cars also fight for space. New shopfronts—for cafés and souvenir shops—cater to the tourist flow, taking over from traditional trades.

Yet a quiet holdout remains in a corner of Lebuh Armenian. An uncle sits in the gloom of his old-style bicycle shop, surrounded by antique repair paraphernalia.[1]

INDUSTRY

INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE

BY SUMEI TOH

FOR THE HABITAT FOUNDATION (THF)& SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MALAYSIA (STM)

Tourism comes as a blessing and a curse. Before Covid-19 halted international travel, the industry was undergoing exponential growth: 1.5bil people traveled globally in 2019 alone. That came at a cost, however, which has compounded over time; destinations have had to struggle to balance economic gains against social and ecological limits. Thailand closed several popular tourist islands in 2011, and the Philippines shut down Boracay in 2018, in both cases to recover from tourism-induced environmental damage. Seasonal closures are now routine. Meanwhile, Bali faces gridlock, pollution and water scarcity, and is losing traditional farmland to unchecked tourism development. Iceland, which banked on tourism to overcome the 2008 financial crisis, hosted 2.5mil tourists in 2025 (more than six times its population), straining its pristine environment, infrastructure and communities. In contrast, Penang, with a population of 1.8mil, recorded 8.2mil registered hotel guests—5.2mil domestic and over 3mil international—2024 alone, excluding those using online reservation platforms and staying in unlicensed accommodation, based on preliminary figures.[2]

Post Covid-19, mass tourism has rebounded with a vengeance in cities like Barcelona and Venice, sparking "Tourists Go Home" protests by local residents.



2

The pattern is clear: the more popular a destination becomes, the greater the damage when tourism grows unchecked. One solution is sustainable tourism, designed to take local human and ecological needs into consideration.

FROM CRISIS, AN OPPORTUNITY

The Covid-19 shutdown forced a reckoning. Governments worldwide realised that they needed to redesign tourism policies to balance economic benefits against social, cultural and environmental protections. By 2025, sustainable tourism had become central to national tourism strategies in multiple countries worldwide.[3] In parallel, travellers are increasingly seeking meaningful travel experiences over mass tourism. Surveys show growing interest in sustainable tourism options, less crowded and alternative destinations (including nature destinations), and higher health and hygiene standards. While cost still remains the primary concern, the shift in priorities is unmistakable; which, in the eyes of sustainability advocates, is long overdue.

Malaysia is exceptionally well-positioned for tourism, with its beguiling mix of indigenous, migrant and colonial histories and cultures, natural habitats, charming small towns, modern infrastructure as well as a central location within ASEAN. The ambitious Visit Malaysia 2026 (VM2026) targets, at 47mil foreign visitors and RM329bil in total receipts, speak to its economic importance. In 2024, tourism contributed over 15% (RM102.2bil) of Malaysia's national gross domestic product (GDP), surpassing pre-pandemic levels.

While often overlooked as less exciting compared to international travel, domestic tourism offers distinct advantages: it is accessible, affordable, generates lower emissions and directly benefits local economies. It became the backbone of Malaysian tourism's recovery, and by 2025, domestic visitor numbers had jumped 11.5% to 290.1mil, with spending rising 13.3% to RM121bil. With the VM2026 campaign in full swing, these figures are expected to climb further. However, the rebound is unevenly distributed—data indicate Selangor and Kuala Lumpur showed strong recovery, while states like Kelantan and Perlis lagged behind.

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM TOGETHER

Since 2022, the Madani government has prioritised sustainable and inclusive development to uplift rural and underserved regions while meeting the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) embedded these commitments into the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030. In December 2022, the UN Development Programme partnered with MOTAC and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) to launch the Sustainable Tourism Recovery project. The goal: building community resilience and strengthening risk management to limit the exploitation of natural and cultural assets.

To be sure, sustainable tourism concepts had already been taking root, including through grassroots initiatives. Niche providers in ecologically sensitive areas, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations had been pioneering such practices for years. As the world pivoted online during the pandemic

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) The fifth Santai Bendang event, in Kedah, supported by STM, coincided with the rice harvest. Although now automated, the host villagers set up traditional lesung (mortar) and alu (pestle) for visitors to pound paddy the traditional way. (Photo by THF).

2. Jennifer Linggi conducting research with local women on the history of tin mining in Kaki Bukit. (Photo by Tham Ngui Long).

3. Local villagers serving up traditional pancakes for guests, in Kedah. (Photo by THF).

4. Jennifer Linggi painting *The Dulang Ladies* with a former dulang lady by her side. (Photo by Tung Chee Yoon).



3



lockdowns, some like-minded practitioners connected, united by the belief that conscientious travel experiences could rebuild and regenerate communities and ecosystems. As their shared vision crystallised, they became the founding members of STM: a platform for practitioners, NGOs, communicators and academics to share knowledge on local sustainable tourism practices.

Co-founded by THF, a Penang-based charitable trust championing conservation, and Tengah Island Conservation, a community-based conservation NGO in Johor, STM was launched with a masterclass seminar on embedding sustainability through the "4Cs"—a holistic approach balancing community protection and benefit, preservation of culture, conservation of natural assets and resources, and the promotion of commerce that sustains livelihoods. The seminar, led by Delphine Malleret of the Long Run, a global sustainable tourism network, brought together tourism operators, government officials, NGOs and academics nationwide.

STM's approach goes beyond technocratic and managerial framings for operational sustainability (e.g., tourism sustainability certifications) to achieve a more fundamental and transformative intent: tourism that can potentially contribute to the regeneration of communities, cultures and ecosystems. It pivots away from an overly tourist-centred focus to balance the needs of community and place. In 2024, with STM poised to expand its network, THF secured matching funds from the Madani government to support eight grant projects that year. A further tranche from the MOF in 2025 allowed STM to expand its support to 31 grantees across 10 states, including Sabah and Sarawak. The projects spanned several thematic components: marine conservation, national geopark development, tourism in and around protected landscapes, as well as the promotion of urban green spaces. These grants support "off-the-beaten-path" destinations through projects led by local communities, small enterprises, nonprofits and community-based organisations. These aim to develop new tourism offerings as alternatives to established destinations while protecting culture and heritage, landscape and biodiversity, by ensuring that tourism strengthens rather than simply exploits local assets. Many projects also function as place-making efforts, where local communities use and design public spaces to create meaningful and functional environments that encourage respectful exchange between local residents and visitors.



4

SPURRING GROWTH IN THE NORTH

Tourism in northern Peninsular Malaysia has historically centred on Penang and Langkawi. Yet the potential of the Kedah mainland and Perlis—positioned strategically close to these established destinations—remains largely untapped, despite significant potential as alternative northern destinations. Here, the designation of "geoparks" can function as catalysts. Geopark landscapes encompass sites of special importance, whether of geological and archaeological interest, unique natural habitats and biodiversity, or cultural heritage values. These features make them ideal regions for conservation, education, research and sustainable tourism, which benefit local communities living within their landscape.

Within the last decade, both states have earned National Geopark status—Jerai (Kedah) in 2016 and Perlis (in its entirety) in 2023—and STM grants support local projects to realise their potential for sustainable tourism. Perlis, Malaysia's smallest and most northerly state, is recognised for its ancient geological formations and dramatic karst landscapes with steep cliffs, hidden valleys and deep caves along the Nakawan Range (Malaysia's longest continuous limestone ridge). The region also harbours rare biodiversity in a unique, semi-arid ecological zone, where the 5,000ha Perlis State Park at the Thai border serves as a vital conservation area. Hidden within its limestone caves lies an even lesser known story: a rich tin-mining heritage.

Despite these geological and ecological treasures, most Malaysians remain unaware of Perlis's uniqueness. In separate projects, several STM grantees (photographer Peter Ong of Monyet Ventures, a team comprising photojournalist SC Shekar, author Liew Suet Fun and artist Jennifer Linggi) have leveraged authentic storytelling. Grantees worked with local villagers and local experts: the people who know best, hence leading to community ownership of project outcomes. The results include a sequel to the successful documentary *Wang Kelian, Perlis—The Forgotten Valley*, which featured descendants of tin miners and a new generation of homegrown conservationists on a mission to protect their region's biodiversity and geological treasures. Its launch was officiated by the Raja Muda of Perlis, and remains freely available on Youtube. Wang Kelian's visibility sparked renewed community pride and catalysed follow-on projects. One was a mural in town depicting women miners' lives. Another was the rehabilitation of Denai Warisan, a 10km heritage trail running through a 370mil-year-old limestone forest. This trail was once the only physical link between the communities, and was therefore the lifeline for Wang Kelian's villagers visiting the thriving market town of Kaki Bukit.

By telling locally rooted narratives about their history, culture and struggles as pioneer communities, this approach fosters respect and understanding for local communities. This has led to deeper and more meaningful cultural exchanges between visitors and hosts, transforming Perlis into a place with depth and meaning for visitors.

These examples represent the first steps on a longer path towards sustainable tourism. They demonstrate how communities can reclaim their voices, revive heritage and share survival stories. Place-making and authentic storytelling are essential and powerful starting points, but they cannot sustain tourism growth alone. As destinations capture the public imagination through compelling narratives and events, they inevitably attract increased visitor footfall. Without careful planning, such attention can overwhelm smaller destinations or ill-prepared communities. Deliberate and sustainable growth of "off-the-beaten-path" tourism requires great care. Critically, decisions must foreground local sensitivities and community priorities. The challenge ahead is to channel growing visitor interest into benefits that strengthen communities and the uniqueness of their landscape.



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5. View of the mural *The Dulang Ladies* on Tung Chee Yoon's roadside stall. (Photo by Jennifer Linggi).

6. Aerial view over of a village in Nakawan Range, Perlis. (Photo by Peter Ong).

7. THF facilitated a familiarisation visit for the Penang Tourist Guides Association to the monthly Santai Bendang community-led event at Lembah Bujang, Kedah. They revelled in traditional fare such as Pek Nga, locally brewed coffee and a live ensemble of traditional Malay instruments.

The event was made possible through the support of Jabatan Warisan Malaysia, which has enabled community programming in the vicinity of the Lembah Bujang archaeological site.

8. The MATTA Fair in KL in April featured four MESTI (MATTA Eco and Sustainable Tourism Initiative) pavillions featuring 40 booths including STM network members; Tengah Island Conservation, The Habitat Penang Hill, Fuze Ecoteer and Come to Taiping.

UNLOCKING PENANG'S POTENTIAL AND EMERGING CHALLENGES

Penang is the northern peninsula's main economic powerhouse, and one of Malaysia's top tourism destinations. As it diversifies its tourism strategy, challenges have become apparent. A 2024 Penang Institute study, for example, found that George Town and Gurney Drive are "experiencing tensions between rapid tourism growth and liveability". It also noted growing challenges in other tourism zones on the island, and concluded with an urgent call to prioritise "sustainable infrastructure to support tourism growth without harming local life or ecology, diversification in tourism offerings [...], increased community involvement in planning to meet local needs and preserve cultural heritage, and stringent conservation measures in natural parks and coastal areas."[4]

The idea that Penang is ideally positioned to be a northern gateway for tourism is not new. "Penang already functions in practice as the best-connected entry point into the northern corridor, but policy and branding still seem to treat Penang mainly as a destination in its own right," said Vikneswaran Nair, a Malaysian academic specialising in sustainable and responsible tourism. "There does seem to be room for a more deliberate policy and destination-management conversation around Penang as the northern gateway." With tourism concentrated in Penang, how can incentivising tourism to neighbouring states distribute benefits more evenly across the northern region and attract longer stays?

"This has been one of the questions we've always asked," Nigel Wong, president of the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA), said. Penang has a very clearly defined tourism plan compared to other states, and being able to expand to include regional partners is not going to detract from its attractiveness, "but rather enhance it," Wong added. Yet a gap remains. "There must be involvement by the government and the public sector of the different states to make this possible—everything from mobility and accessibility to promotions."

While some tour agencies are already promoting packages integrating the northern states, a joint regional tourism narrative alone will not suffice. "[N]arrative alone won't put boots on the ground." Other factors are critical to encourage a sustainable regional tourism crossover, such as having the right infrastructure and facilities (including the availability of clean toilets, Wong remarked) and tourism offerings and services that appeal to target markets.

Perhaps Penang's regional role should be "to channel [tourists] more responsibly into a broader northern ecosystem of places and communities," Nair suggested. And



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success could be measured differently, for example "not just by arrivals to Penang, but by regional dispersal, length of stay, local spending and reduced site concentration."

As for sustainable tourism in the north, more broadly? "The gateway idea can be tied to sustainable tourism only if redistribution is planned, community-linked and low-impact," noted Nair. "Otherwise, it simply spreads the same extractive model across a wider geography."

GETTING A MAINSTREAM PUSH

Malaysia stands at a pivotal moment in tourism development. The industry's impressive recovery and the continued resurgence expected from the VM2026 campaign presents both opportunities and risks. The tourism industry is also stepping up to the challenge. The MATTA Eco and Sustainable Tourism Initiative (MESTI) was launched two years ago to drive responsible growth and long-term industry viability. "We wanted to debunk the myth that it had no business relevance," said Wong. "We needed to start somewhere. We're not saying that we are 100% sustainable, but we're actually at the most important juncture: creating awareness [both within the industry and amongst the public]."



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Ultimately, building a "travel for good" tourism model will depend on how well the different pieces of the puzzle—advocacy, policy commitments and grassroots momentum—fit together. It will need clear short-, medium- and long-term strategies coordinated across all levels of government, public–private partnerships and investments as well as, most critically, genuine community involvement. A key lesson from the STM grant projects is that sustainable tourism requires trust-building, community ownership, creative and careful stewardship, and the creation of meaningful spaces where visitors and locals connect as equals.

ENDNOTES

1. The shop, Chin Seng Leong, with its unchanging storefront, has been a landmark for six decades.

2. R. Sekaran. (2025, July 3). "Sure or not: Penang rebukes tourism survey, cites official hotel data to prove it has more tourist visits than Perak." *The Star*. Note that Tourism Malaysia may provide updated data on previous years.

3. OECD. (2024). *OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2024*. OECD Publishing.

4. Çakmak, Erdinç, et al. (2024). "Four Tourist Zones in Penang: Suggestions to Secure Their Future." Penang Institute (Issues).



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BEYOND NUMBERS, TOWARDS MEANING: SHIFTING TO DEVELOPMENTAL TOURISM FOR PENANG

BY BEH MAY TING

DRIVING ALONG THE old town's narrow arteries, one quickly encounters the layered rhythms—and the resulting challenges—of George Town's urban tourism industry. European backpackers on foot, tour groups (and buses) and luxury-seekers are distributed throughout, some in specific niches and others leisurely strolling about. Some sites reveal the pitfalls of uneven planning and the overconcentration of tourist hotspots. On Love Lane, for example, tourists and residents weave between traffic, broken pavements and illegally parked motorbikes.[1] In marked contrast is the airy and bustling Hin Bus Depot, whose crowds have prompted the state to build safer pedestrian paths and crossings.

This contrast underscores how good urbanisation can flourish when the authorities not only keep pace with, but also productively make use of, the popularity of particular sites. Such an approach can be regarded as a facet of *developmental tourism*, which harnesses the industry to drive socioeconomic progress, cultural empowerment and governance innovation. This concept, which has not been fully articulated or standardised in academic literature yet, differs from sustainable tourism by its active pursuit of equitability. Meanwhile, the latter, which we are probably more familiar with, is typically defined as the balancing of economic growth against environmental protection and sociocultural preservation. In short, while sustainable tourism asks how the industry can endure, developmental tourism explores how it can drive equitable development, for existing and upcoming destinations alike.

DIVERSIFICATION, REDISTRIBUTION AND TRANSPORTATION

Penang has already made significant strides at diversifying its tourism products, while enhancing connectivity and embedding sustainability. Its tourism landscape is evolving beyond the UNESCO heritage core, with ecologically grounded attractions becoming particularly prominent, if comparatively less accessible. Privately managed sites such as the Tropical Spice Garden and Entopia at Teluk Bahang, alongside The Habitat on Penang Hill, provide lush sanctuaries away from urban bustle. Areas like Balik Pulau are gaining recognition for their eco-trails, verdant landscapes and tranquil rural settings. Meanwhile, Seberang Perai's vast mangrove forests and agrotourism farms invite immersive encounters with biodiversity. These strategic diversifications not only alleviate mounting pressure on George Town's historic precinct, but also ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are more equitably distributed statewide, across both the island and mainland.

By potentially lowering the concentration of tourists in the heritage core, positive outcomes emerge for visitors and locals. One is the alleviation of traffic congestion, which directly impacts upon liveability and tourist experiences. Current modes of mass tourism are vehicle-dependent, focused on bringing visitors directly to sites. The expanding numbers of cars and tourist buses strain road and parking capacity in the old town, and undermine sustainability goals. A developmental tourism approach would favour the closing of streets to encourage walking and cycling, therefore dispersing visitor flows, reducing pressure on road infrastructure and creating healthier public spaces. Its viability, however, depends on the success of a broader modal shift away from private vehicles, in alignment with the state's support for improved public transportation. So far, Penang's efforts to tackle traffic congestion have centred upon a mix of infrastructural and policy strategies, including long-term plans for a light rail transit network, dedicated bus lane trials and one-way-street systems. When fully realised, transportation initiatives not only support local commutes, but also channel tourists towards less-congested attractions, thus relieving heritage districts of overcrowding.



ELEVATING HIGHER-VALUE TOURISM AND THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

There is untapped potential in higher-value tourism, which seeks to attract discerning travellers seeking luxury, cultural depth and unique experiences. It can be encouraged by investing in upscale accommodation, curated cultural tours and exclusive events, all of which simultaneously elevate Penang's global reputation. This strategy of diversification and specialisation, in contrast to mass tourism, generates greater revenue, supports local creative industries and enhances community wellbeing. As a pathway towards long-term sociocultural and economic transformation, one aspect involves growing Penang's creative economy, which depends on making local designer products more visible and accessible.

One promising approach is to reserve substantial retail space in major shopping malls for locally designed and made goods. Some models are offered by Singapore's Design Orchard and Bangkok's CentralWorld, which dedicate premium mall space to artisanal products. For Penang, these examples provide ready-made inspiration for tourism-driven consumption. By embedding design and creative collaborations into its tourism masterplan, the state can ensure that visitors leave not only with memories, but also stories, con-



ENDNOTE

1. See Penang Institute's past initiatives to improve walkability, including its Chulia Street Streetscape Project, here: https://penanginstitute.org/media/news-coverage/860-making-george-town-more-walkable-one-street-at-a-time/.



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nections and material products carrying Penang's inventive spirit into the world. A mall featuring products by Mano Plus, Loka Made and Shop Howard, for example, enriches the shopping experience for locals and tourists alike, fosters deeper connections between consumers and artisans, stimulates entrepreneurship and encourages the authentic expression of local identity. In such ways, mainstream retail environments can become platforms for developmental tourism.

SELLING EXPERIENCES THROUGH PUBLIC SPACES

Public spaces, even if freely accessible, can also feed into Penang's tourism masterplan. Mass access aligns with higher-value goals, where such sites can offer immersive encounters celebrating heritage (such as natural and cultural assets) while strengthening the creative economy. Several key locations can be reframed as platforms for local artisans, cultural producers and entrepreneurs, in addition to maintaining their current recreational value.

One is the Penang Botanic Gardens, which can be reimagined as a cultural venue selling experiences. Developmental tourism goes beyond sustaining the Gardens as an existing attraction, but deliberately structures tourism to generate on-site socioeconomic progress, cultural empowerment and community benefits. Imagine music performances staged against lush greenery, elegant cafés and restaurants highlighting local gastronomy as well as curated gift shops featuring Penang-made crafts—while still providing a space for daily exercise and recreation. A dedicated Hibiscus Garden, both educational and Instagrammable, could blend botanical learning with striking landscapes. Visitors can enjoy not only botanical richness, but also participate in site-specific experiences that elevate Penang's creative economy. One model to emulate is the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

Museums and galleries, too, can reimagine themselves as experiential spaces. Instead of being passive repositories, they can host late-night openings, interactive installations or even culinary tie-ins connecting heritage with contemporary life. Across Southeast Asia, inspiring precedents abound, from Bangkok's "Music in the Park" concerts and the "Night at the Museum Month" across Thailand. There is Singapore's "Night Festival", which transforms the Bras Basah-Bugis district into an outdoor canvas of light installations. Also inspirational is Taiping's Legasi festival (see *Penang Monthly's* April 2026 issue). Such initiatives show how public spaces can create layered experiences beyond mere sightseeing.

TOWARDS DEVELOPMENTAL TOURISM?

Tourism, when guided with foresight, can be a powerful engine of urban (and rural) renewal, sparking business growth, breathing life into forgotten spaces and nudging governments towards providing better infrastructure that benefits locals as much as visitors. Developmental tourism structures an otherwise ad hoc process, by constantly demanding ongoing and systematic recalibration and innovation. Beyond merely identifying new products, the relevant authorities must keep the next phase in mind: balancing growth against resilience, elevating local champions as global voices and integrating tourism into broader developmental goals (such as education, wellbeing and governance).

Penang's unique strengths offer room for optimism: from its vibrant street food culture to creative economy, its natural landscapes to heritage districts. Developmental tourism reframes the future not merely as a challenge of managing ever-larger crowds brought about by over-tourism, but also offers fundamentally different opportunities to build a platform for innovation, identity and inclusive prosperity. With this approach, Penang is poised to offer the world a model of how to actively shape a thriving, resilient society, beyond current sustainable tourism approaches.

A TALE OF TOURISM IN TWO STATES

SUSTAINABILITY APPROACHES FOR PENANG AND SARAWAK

BY ELIZABETH SU

ON 30 MARCH, the International Day of Zero Waste, the United Nations (UN) Environment Programme and UN Tourism launched the "Recipe of Change" initiative. Supported by major players in the global tourism sector, it is committed to delivering ground-level impacts to prevent food waste, lower costs, influence consumer behaviour, build resilience against supply shocks and accelerate the transition towards more sustainable food systems.[1] This initiative reinforces a sustainable tourism approach "that takes full account of [tourism's] current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities."[2]

How is this ethos being expressed by Penang and Sarawak?

PENANG

Imagine relaxing in a "sea jacuzzi" and playing pickleball on the waters!

On 8 April, Penang announced these new tourism experiences on the man-made "Forest Island", built on an aquaculture farm near Pulau Jerejak.[3] It now houses the world's first permanent open-sea pickleball court. This innovative experiment is also conscious of ecological limits. Speaking on Forest Island's innovative offerings, the state Executive Councillor for Tourism and Creative Economy, Wong Hon Wai, emphasised that these demonstrate "how tourism can be developed responsibly while offering experiences that delight visitors and contribute positively to the local community."

This project aligns with Penang Global Tourism's (PGT) encouragement of balance between increased connectivity as well as responsible destination management and branding. As Ooi Chok Yan, PGT's chief executive officer (CEO), noted, Penang's growth as both a regional and international tourism destination has been driven by factors including visa-free entry for select markets, which "significantly improved accessibility and encouraged higher visitor arrivals, particularly from key source markets in Asia", and the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030, which positions tourism as "a sustainable, competitive and high-value sector".

Another crucial factor has been a "focus on smart tourism and digitalisation [which enhances] the overall visitor experience through better connectivity, data-driven marketing and seamless travel planning. Strategic initiatives such as strengthening governance, developing tourism investment zones and upskilling human capital have also contributed to improving service quality and industry resilience."



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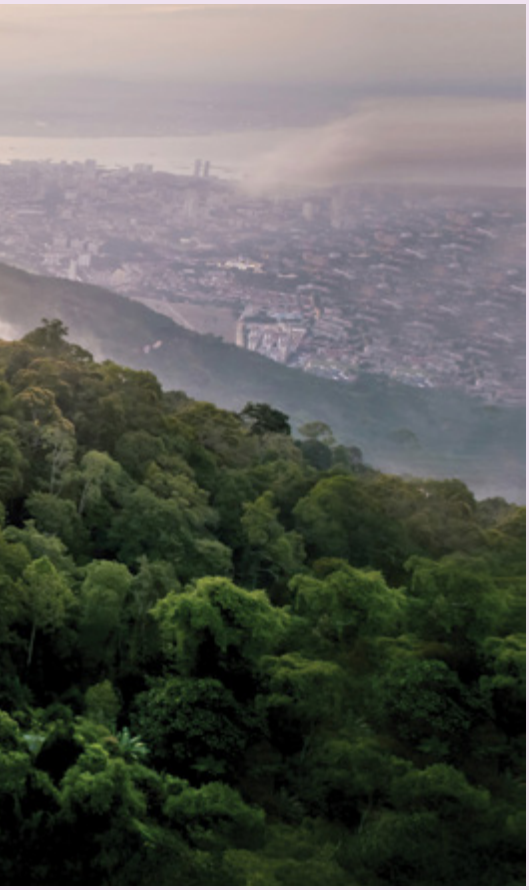
CAPTIONS

1. The Habitat Penang Hill.

2. Fog and mist over the pinnacles of Gunung Mulu National Park.



2



Consequently, Penang has been able "to position itself as a high-quality, sustainable destination that balances growth with cultural preservation and community well-being." Sustainability efforts are reinforced through initiatives such as the Penang Green Hotel Excellence Programme, which supports hotels in adopting low-waste practices and improving energy efficiency. Besides key industry players as well as state and local government agencies, PGT partners with educational institutions, Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) organisers, and digital platforms or content creators. These multi-sectoral stakeholders are "increasingly important in driving innovation, talent development and targeted global outreach."

SARAWAK

Sharzede Datu Hj Salleh Askor, CEO of the Sarawak Tourism Board, also highlights the importance of sustainable tourism.

"Sarawak's approach to responsible and sustainable tourism is not an add-on; it is foundational to how the destination is developed and experienced. Our tourism assets are rooted in rainforest ecosystems, extraordinary biodiversity, complex cave systems and living indigenous cultures. These are finite, sensitive and deeply interdependent systems. As such, sustainability is not positioned as a value proposition, but as a structural necessity to ensure that what makes Sarawak distinct remains protected for generations.

"One of Sarawak's inherent strengths is that we operate within a conservation-led landscape. A significant portion of the state remains under forest cover, supported by an extensive network of Totally Protected Areas. Destinations such as Gunung Mulu National Park and Bako National Park are not only tourism highlights, but carefully managed ecosystems where conservation takes precedence. This allows tourism to exist within protected environments, rather than attempting to mitigate damage after development."

The approach embeds sustainability across multiple segments. "In nature-based tourism, this includes regulated access, guided experiences and conservation-focused site management. In community-based tourism, particularly among indigenous longhouse communities, it is reflected through local ownership, cultural preservation and equitable benefit-sharing. In the events space, initiatives like the Rainforest World Music Festival demonstrate how large-scale tourism can be managed responsibly through waste reduction efforts, environmental awareness programming and low-impact design."



3. Wisma Kastam (formerly the Malayan Railway Building).

3

Looking ahead, Sarawak is involving global benchmarking platforms to introduce clearer performance indicators and accountability. "The shift is from principle-driven intent towards evidence-based outcomes, where we can track impact and where growth is measured, managed and aligned with long-term environmental and social objectives."

CAN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM SURVIVE GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS?

Amidst geopolitical tensions, the Malaysian government has recently decided to extend its Visit Malaysia 2026 campaign to the end of 2027, to give "itself and the industry more time and runway" to achieve its targets: 47mil tourists and RM147.1bil in tourism receipts.[4] What is the outlook like for sustainable tourism in Penang and Sarawak?

In terms of international arrivals via direct flights, Penang's top source markets are Indonesia, China, Singapore, the US, the UK, India, Australia, Thailand and Japan. This diversified portfolio allows Penang to better cushion itself against external shocks and adapt its marketing strategies accordingly. Ooi remains "cautiously optimistic" about 2026. "[T]here will be a stronger emphasis on domestic, ASEAN and short- to mid-haul markets, in alignment with Tourism Malaysia. These include Asia, Oceania and selected European markets, which have shown consistent travel demand and resilience in the past few years." Moving forward, PGT's focus will be on "building high-value and experience-driven tourism, strengthening regional appeal and long-haul interest to ensure that Penang remains competitive, accessible and sustainable in a changing global landscape."

Similarly, Sarawak Tourism's strategy reflects "a balanced, resilient and increasingly value-driven structure, reducing reliance on any single market", Sharzede noted. It also has a strong cultural and ecological component, given that "travellers are increasingly seeking authenticity, wanting to connect with local communities, understand cultural contexts and engage with natural environments in a more responsible way".

For both Penang and Sarawak, there is a clear shift towards encouraging longer stays, deeper engagement and more meaningful experiences. As such, there is hope yet for sustainable tourism to develop and thrive in these tourism hotspots.

> "Sarawak's tourism strategy is built on balance—ensuring that growth does not come at the expense of the natural and cultural assets that define the destination. By integrating nature, culture and community into a cohesive offering, Sarawak positions itself as a destination that values depth, authenticity and sustainability. Ultimately, our goal is not simply to grow tourism, but to grow it in a way that is meaningful, where benefits are shared, ecosystems are protected and culture continues to thrive as a living, evolving identity. As the Gateway to Borneo, the state's focus is on strengthening its existing foundations while continuing to evolve in a way that remains responsible and future-ready."
>
> **—SHARZEDE DATU HJ SALLEH ASKOR ON SARAWAK'S SUSTAINABLE TOURISM APPROACH**



ENDNOTES

[1] UN Tourism. (2026, March 30). "Tourism Leaders Convene on Zero Waste Day to Launch Global 'Recipe of Change.'"

[2] Global Sustainable Tourism Council. (2018, March 20). "What is Sustainable Tourism?"

[3] Opalyn Mok. (2026, April 8). "From sea jacuzzi to pickleball on water: Penang unveils new tourism site Forest Island." *Malay Mail.*

[4] TIN Media. (2026, April 6). "Visit Malaysia 2026 Campaign Extended to End of 2027 in Response to Middle East Crisis."; Zuzilawati. (2025, December 5). "Reimagining Hospitality: A Digital and Sustainable Pathway for Visit Malaysia Year 2026." Malaysian Investment Development Authority.

PURSUING A NOMADIC ARTISANAL LIFE AT HALOO HOUSE

BY PAN YI CHIEH

BALIK PULAU, with its paddy fields, spice-scented history, vibrant fishing villages and durians, is a place with deep cultural roots. Nestled within this diverse landscape is Haloo House, a home studio created by Alan and Hui Xin. *Penang Monthly* explores how their unique nomadic lifestyle and spirit have taken root locally, and how Haloo House provides a supportive, if temporary, space for two artisans always on the move.



THE DIARIES OF A WANDERER AND A WILD SOUL

Tucked away from the main road, Haloo House is not immediately visible to passers-by. It sits atop a small slope behind a motorcycle-repair shop, whose sounds provide a rhythmic backdrop to everyday life. The studio is housed in a traditional wooden home that Alan and Hui Xin have lovingly restored. Here, they blend their personal lives with craftsmanship, while sharing coffee, baking and conversation with friends and visitors alike. Born in Johor in the 1990s, the couple had separately discovered the meaning of life through adventures in their youth.

Alan's travel journey began at 24, when a friend pulled out of a trip they were supposed to take together. Forced to go alone, he discovered a lifelong passion for exploration. During this two-week trip to Thailand, he used his camera to document his experiences, before returning very shortly afterwards for a full month, learning how to travel on a much smaller budget. Photography allowed him to go beyond typical sightseeing and connect with local communities. In northern Thailand, he visited remote areas to distribute daily necessities with a group of friends, an experience which taught him that happiness does not always require wealth. By working in exchange for accommodation at youth hostels, he was able to stay longer and authentically document the lives of the people whom he met. Later, his travels took him to Cambodia and Taiwan.

Since 2017, he has visited Chishang in Taitung, Taiwan, many times. While working at a homestay, he learned to make coffee and was inspired by its owner, an artist who used driftwood to create meaningful spaces. This philosophy of using local, original materials to create art without a large budget has become a cornerstone of his work.



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While Alan found it hard to explain his lifestyle to his family, Hui Xin had the full support of hers. Her parents loved travelling and, in fact, encouraged her to explore the world from a young age. When Alan and Hui Xin eventually met, they discovered that they shared the same nomadic values and vision for life: a rare and often-misunderstood connection.



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They began traveling together in a small van while still respecting each other's independence, making a living through skills picked up on the road. During this time, Hui Xin also mastered coffee-brewing and baking. Today, she makes all the coffee and sourdough at Haloo House, turning their wooden home into a space full of life and art.

FINDING AN IDEAL BASE FOR ARTISANS

Their identity as artisans was gradually established as they gained more confidence at making things by hand and celebrating the individual spirit of their creations. Alan and Hui Xin have found Penang to be a supportive environment, given the state's focus on the arts and cultural tourism. This means that both tourists and locals alike have a greater appreciation for handmade crafts, allowing the couple to survive while pursuing the life they love.



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Their current lengthy stay on Penang Island was not originally planned, however. When they arrived at Balik Pulau in 2022, they originally planned to stay for only three years, but soon realised that the town was an ideal place to stay longer. Alan notes that unlike many other kampongs and small towns that face the challenge of ageing populations, Balik Pulau remains vital and energetic. Its community is diverse and includes many young people, which ensures that the town feels alive rather than idle.

"The current status of Balik Pulau is ideal for us as artisans and makers," Alan said. "It sits perfectly between the busyness of George Town and the quiet atmosphere of Malaysian kampongs." It offers a rare balance between the quiet retreat of a slow life, yet remains accessible enough that daily necessities are always within reach. They do need to sell their handicrafts in George Town, but can easily return to the peace of Balik Pulau by evening. Although they cherish an independent lifestyle, Alan and Hui Xin are far from isolated. They are gentle and calm, engaging deeply with their surroundings. Concerned about the old trees behind their house being cleared for commercial plantations, they connected with like-minded local friends who also value nature and sustainable living.

Maintaining a comfortable boundary between their private and public lives is essential, and sometimes needs effort. Unlike typical cafés that prioritise customers' needs above all else, Haloo House is first and foremost a private residence and studio. They view visitors not as customers, but as guests bound by clear "home" rules. The space is only for adults and operates strictly by appointment.

At Haloo House, they want to share the feeling of a slow life with guests experiencing daily pressures. "Because this experience is genuine, we must be true to ourselves," Alan explained. "We have to prioritise our own living environment and balance of life, and then only our crafts and café."



5

THE NEXT STAGE OF THE JOURNEY?

For the couple, journeying is a genuine process of finding meaning through the people they meet, the character of the places they visit and the many skills they master. These abilities are not just hobbies, but knowledge and tools carried to each new destination.



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People are often curious about whether such a lifestyle is sustainable, and the answer is a definitive yes. They have learned from their many trips that one does not always need a lot of money to survive and gain happiness, but can thrive through their own talents and handmade crafts. Haloo House serves as a flexible testing ground for exploring endless possibilities. Even now, they are still learning new techniques, such as the woodcarving skills, used to restore their house and create small art pieces, while continuing work in leather-making and baking sourdough bread.

This June, Haloo House begins a new chapter by moving to Project Mars, a base for sustainable agriculture in Balik Pulau. Once settled there, Alan and Hui Xin will continue exploring environmentally friendly living, deepening their practice and sharing local knowledge with the community.

After our chat, I could not stop thinking about the concept of "home", which often seems like the opposite of a nomadic life. I am beginning to understand why they do not need to be antonymous terms. For the couple, home is never a fixed building. It is about finding a supportive community, regardless of size, where people cherish similar values and work together. It is about finding a sense of belonging in quiet corners. It is not so important to define whether they have found a permanent home or not. They believe that, eventually, they must move to a new location, no matter how wonderful the current place may be. They do not want to be tied down, but to be open to change. What matters is the evolving journey itself.

***Note:** After Haloo House moves, it will continue to be open by appointment, bookable at https://www.facebook.com/haloohouse/.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Alan and Hui Xin in their lovely home studio (Photo by Iylia De Silva).
2. Visitors can find a sense of peace in the many relaxing corners of Haloo House (Photo by Iylia De Silva).
3. Every corner in Haloo House is filled with handmade treasures and memories from travels around the world (Photo by Iylia De Silva).
4. Alan's leatherwork showcases a rugged, raw style that honours the character of natural elements (Photo by Iylia De Silva).
5. The freshly baked homemade bread at Haloo House (Photo by Iylia De Silva).
6. As part of the community, Alan and Hui Xin lend a hand in tending to the grounds of Project Mars.
7. Warm vibes and handcrafted wooden furniture define the Haloo House interior. (Photo by Iylia De Silva).



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SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN NUMBERS

BY HAJAR ARIFF

THROUGH SUSTAINABLE TOURISM, Penang strives for a responsible "win-win-win" situation where visitors enjoy authentic experiences, the environment is protected and local communities benefit economically while preserving their cultural identity. But what do the tourism industry's economic contributions, impacts on liveability, steps towards sustainability and improved management look like in numbers?



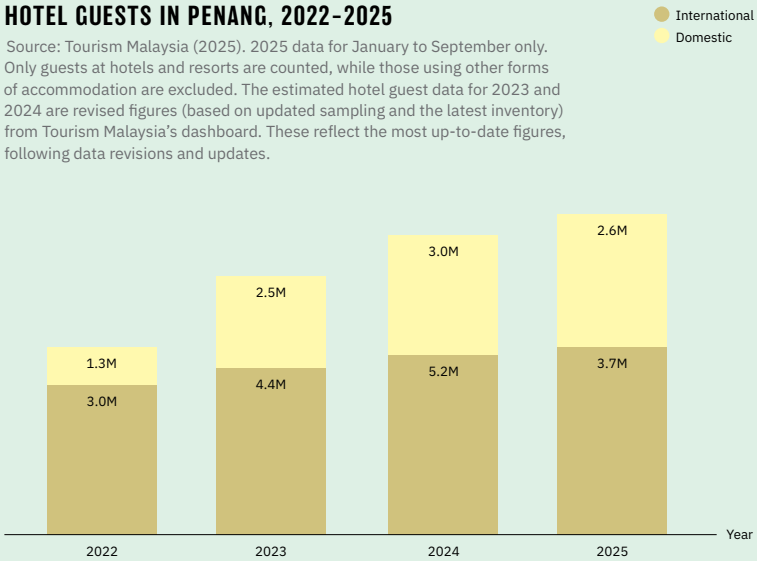
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ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Tourism has been steadily recovering since 2022, with total hotel stays almost doubling by September 2025. Domestic visitors rose **23%** from 3.0mil to **3.7mil,** while international guests increased from 0.7mil to **2.6mil,** reflecting a gradual return of global travel and Penang's continued appeal as a **regional tourist destination.**

HOTEL GUESTS IN PENANG, 2022-2025

Source: Tourism Malaysia (2025). 2025 data for January to September only. Only guests at hotels and resorts are counted, while those using other forms of accommodation are excluded. The estimated hotel guest data for 2023 and 2024 are revised figures (based on updated sampling and the latest inventory) from Tourism Malaysia's dashboard. These reflect the most up-to-date figures, following data revisions and updates.



Complementing this rebound in leisure travel is Penang's professional tourism sector, which is also gaining momentum. In 2025, Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) activities generated an estimated **RM1.91bil in economic impact,** marking a **47.7% increase** from 2024. By attracting business travellers, who tend to stay longer and spend more, MICE provides a more **economically sustainable alternative** to a dependency on mass tourism alone, thus helping the state **grow its tourism industry responsibly.**

MICE SUBSECTOR'S ECONOMIC IMPACT, 2025

Source: Bernama (2026, January)

EVENTS HOSTED
3,391

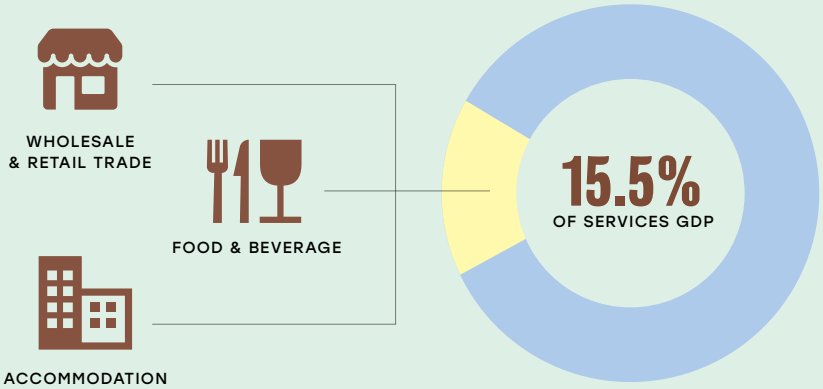
ESTIMATED ECONOMIC IMPACT (EEI)
RM1.91bil

DELEGATES WELCOMED
451,198+

ROOM NIGHTS GENERATED
824,505+

TOURISM'S ECONOMIC IMPACT BY SUB-SECTOR

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (2024). Tourism is not reported as a standalone industry in state gross domestic product (GDP). Figures shown here use tourism-related activities (wholesale and retail, food and beverage, and accommodation) as proxies.

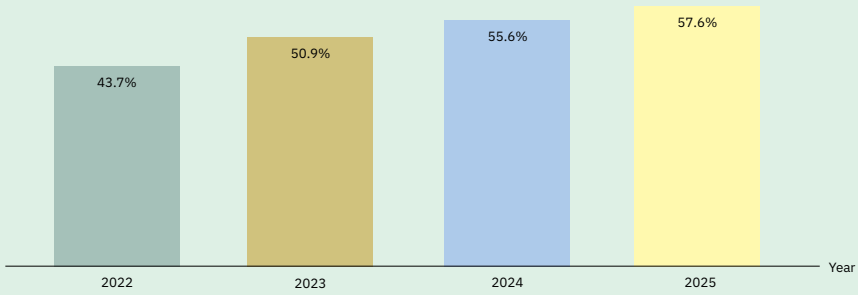


Tourism's contribution to Penang's economy is best understood through **proxy measures,** since it spans multiple services such as **wholesale and retail trade, food and beverages** as well as **accommodation.** The total contribution to its GDP in 2024 **(15.5%)** highlights tourism's important (although not separately reported) economic significance.

IMPACTS ON LIVEABILITY

PENANG'S AVERAGE HOTEL OCCUPANCY RATE, 2022–2025

Source: Tourism Malaysia (2025). 2025 data for January to September only.



Penang's average hotel occupancy rate has **risen steadily,** from 43.7% in 2022 to **57.6% in 2025.** During peak periods, for example school holidays and festive seasons, it goes up to **90%.** However, tourist activity remains concentrated in key tourist hotspots, where higher visitor numbers can **add pressure on local places.**

Tourist demand is most visible in **George Town's UNESCO World Heritage Site, Batu Ferringhi and Penang Hill.** These sites anchor Penang's tourism industry, but during peak periods, the intensity of such activity can be seen more strongly through **crowded streets, longer wait times** for attractions and **a greater strain on shared amenities.**

TOURIST HOTSPOTS

Sources: *The Star, Buletin Mutiara* and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture

PENANG HILL

1.67mil

VISITORS (+12.1% YOY IN 2023 VS 2022)



BATU FERINGGHI

ESCAPE PENANG ALONE ATTRACTS ROUGHLY

250,000–300,000

VISITORS A YEAR.



GEORGE TOWN UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE

OVER 50% OF PENANG'S HOTELS ARE IN THE TIMUR LAUT DISTRICT, CENTRED UPON THE HERITAGE SITE.



Beyond visible crowding in key tourism hotspots, resource use trends (which impact liveability) provide additional insights into evolving demand. Between 2023 and 2024, non-domestic water consumption increased by **7.2%,** reflecting **higher activity in commercial sectors** such as hospitality and food services. However, overall water consumption then **declined slightly by 0.6% in 2025,** suggesting that rising demand (although not specific to tourism alone) is being managed through **improved efficiency and conservation efforts.** Taken together, these figures collectively highlight the importance of **balancing tourism's growth** against the overall liveability of local places.

WATER CONSUMPTION, 2023-2024

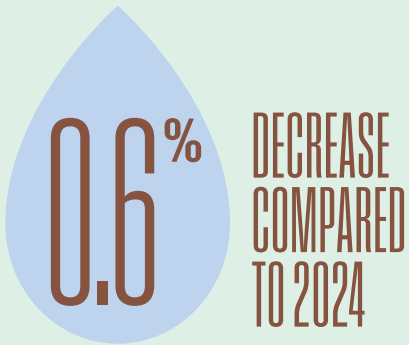
Sources: Bernama (2025, February) and *New Straits Times* (2026, January). 2025 data reflects overall water consumption only. Breakdown by domestic and non-domestic categories is not available.

Category	2023 (MLD)	2024 (MLD)	Trend (%)
Domestic	503	471	-6.4
Non-domestic	374	401	+7.2

Note: Water use is measured in MLD (million litres per day). Non-domestic water use includes commercial, industrial and special category usage. While not exclusive to tourism, it can serve as a proxy for resource intensity linked to visitor activity.

TOTAL WATER CONSUMPTION, 2025

Sources: Bernama (2025, February) and *New Straits Times* (2026, January). 2025 data reflects overall water consumption only. Breakdown by domestic and non-domestic categories is not available.

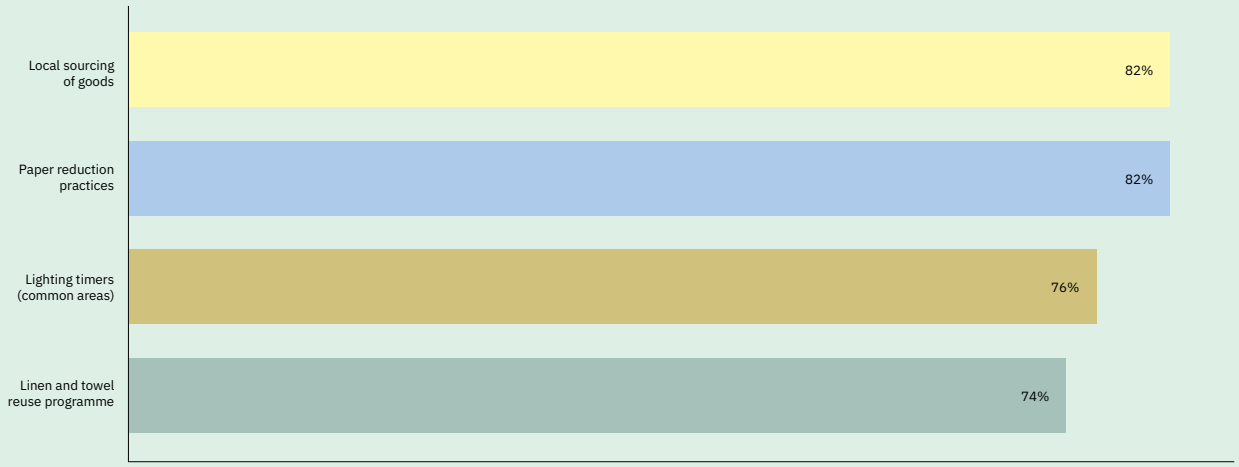


STEPS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

Penang's hotel sector is steadily **adopting sustainable practices,** with **over 70%** implementing measures such as local sourcing, paper reduction, energy-saving lighting and linen reuse programmes. However, these efforts largely involve **low-cost operational changes,** highlighting room for more advanced sustainability solutions.

ADOPTION OF SELECTED GREEN PRACTICES AMONG HOTELS, PENANG, 2025

Source: Penang Green Hotel Survey 2025 (conducted by the Penang Green Council)



Sustainability efforts also extend to communities themselves, as seen with **community-based tourism.** Such initiatives, particularly **homestay programmes,** play an important role in supporting more inclusive and sustainable tourism in Penang. By offering visitors opportunities to experience **local culture, traditional livelihoods and nature-based activities,** they help **preserve heritage** while **generating income** for local communities. At the same time, strong community involvement ensures that tourism's benefits are more widely shared. However, challenges such as **limited funding, marketing expertise and capacity** highlight the need for continued support to strengthen and scale-up these efforts.

COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

Source: Community-based Homestay Tourism Study (2025)

1

SUPPORTS LOCAL LIVELIHOODS

Tourism money stays within the community, not just large hotels.

2

PRESERVES CULTURE AND HERITAGE

Tourism helps keep traditions alive, not replace them.

3

PROMOTES LOW-IMPACT, NATURE-BASED TOURISM

Less mass tourism, more small-scale, environmentally friendly experiences.

4

ENCOURAGES COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND OWNERSHIP

Creates community-led tourism, not externally driven development.

MANAGING TOURISM BETTER

Penang is moving towards a **smarter tourism experience** by blending its heritage appeal with **digital innovation.** With **strong internet coverage** and **ongoing investments in technologies** such as e-payment systems, smart mobility systems and integrated tourist applications, visitors can expect **smoother and more convenient travel** across the state. At the same time, these digital tools allow the authorities to better **understand visitor patterns** and **manage crowding in busy areas,** such as those identified above. By using **real-time data** to guide planning and improve services, Penang is taking steps to ensure that tourism's growth remains both **efficient and sustainable.**

TECHNOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS FOR THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Source: Penang Tourism Master Plan 2021–2030 and Digital Transformation Masterplan 1.0 (2021–2023)

GOALS FOR DIGITAL ADOPTION

- "Smart Tourism" maturity
- Frictionless travel experience
- Internet connectivity

HIGH-IMPACT "SMART" INITIATIVES

- E-payment adoption
- Smart mobility systems
- Contactless and integrated services

DATA AS A PROXY FOR MANAGEMENT

- Visitor tracking
- Managing urban congestion
- Predictive planning

A GLIMPSE ECOTOURISM MER

BY PETER ONG



INTO MALAYSIA'S FUTURE



THERE ARE PLACES in Malaysia that announce themselves loudly, drawing crowds by reputation alone. And then there is Merapoh, a frontier town at the northern edge of Pahang, which extends a subtle invitation to experience one of Peninsular Malaysia's hidden gems. Lying just seven kilometres away from Sungai Relau, one of the lesser-known gateways to Taman Negara, it offers an entrance to a rainforest estimated at over 130 million years old. And it is also where a vision of ecotourism's future is persistently unfolding, offering a model for similar sites nationwide. For Malaysia, this is not just a matter of natural heritage, but also ecological capital.

A P O H



2

AT THE EDGE OF AN ANCIENT WORLD

Together with a team from The Habitat Group, I started bringing guests from Belmond's Eastern & Oriental Express into Taman Negara via Merapoh a few years back. Waiting for the Express to arrive, we would stand by one of Malaysia's quaintest train stations, stuck in time like its surroundings. This remote landscape alone made the train's mere arrival an enchanting experience.

The Taman Negara rainforest predates even the Amazon. This vast ecosystem, spanning 4,343 km², is one of the oldest continuous tropical rainforests on Earth. Even at the park's fringes, human landscapes coexist with natural biodiversity, rendering both near-inseparable from each other. The agroforests surrounding Merapoh, where rubber and durian trees are cultivated in close proximity to native vegetation, have also become habitats for small mammals and birds.



3

Unlike Kuala Tahan, the more commercialised entrance, the Sungai Relau site feels intimate. Trails begin almost immediately, dissolving into lowland forests, peat swamps and riverine ecosystems within minutes. Guided treks reveal the forest as a layered system, from the towering emergents forming its canopy to the forest floor teeming with life. Similarly, time reveals itself not as a linear path, but as equally layered. The gradual hum of cicadas, the calls of the rhinoceros hornbill, the singing of the siamang and the paw prints of large felines add to the sense that you are stepping into some place ancient.

To speak of biodiversity in Taman Negara is to risk understatement. This forest is essentially a living cathedral of over 10,000 plant, 200 mammal and 675 bird species, not to mention an astonishing diversity of insects and freshwater life. Dipterocarp giants rise above a dense understorey, while rivers carve through sedimentary rock, feeding entire downstream ecosystems. Living in proximity are some icons of Southeast Asian wildlife: critically endangered Malayan tigers, Asian elephants, siamang, sun bears, tapirs and gaur. It is not merely the presence of such wildlife, but the way in which you encounter it, that makes Merapoh particularly compelling. This is a landscape where you can experience gibbons calling at dawn, their haunting songs diffusing through the canopy, hornbills gliding overhead like prehistoric relics and tracks appearing in the mud before the animals themselves come into view.



4



5

Beyond the rainforest alone, Merapoh is a geological frontier characterised by a unique karst landscape. Towering limestone hills, riddled with caves and underground systems, rise abruptly from the forest floor. These ancient formations create microhabitats that support unique plant and animal species. Consequently, Merapoh has also become a hub for spelunking and caving, with sites such as Gua Gajah offering glimpses into subterranean ecosystems.



6

Such adventures have to be undertaken with care, however, since karst landscapes are among the most fragile ecosystems on Earth. Once destroyed, they cannot be replaced. In Merapoh, they have fortunately remained largely intact: a rarity in Southeast Asia. And in the distance looms Gunung Tahan, the highest peak in Peninsular Malaysia, drawing trekkers into a multi-day pilgrimage through the wilderness.

CONSERVATION AS EXPERIENCE, NOT JUST IDEOLOGY

Despite its richness, Merapoh remains under-visited. In fact, there have been declining visitor numbers at Sungai Relau in recent years, pointing to gaps in infrastructure and a lack of awareness about its existence.[1] Yet perhaps this is also its greatest strength, since Merapoh now has the rare opportunity, and significant responsibility, to *develop ecotourism right* before overdevelopment takes hold.



7

CAPTIONS

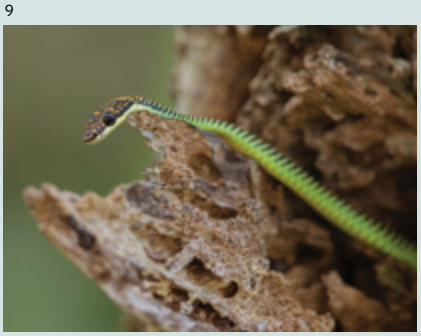
1. (Cover page) Merapoh on a misty morning.
2. The siamang is the largest species of the lesser ape.
3. The Malayan Horned Frog, also known as the Long-nosed Horned Frog.
4. The Black Hornbill is distinguised by its jet-black feathers.
5. A Monarch Flycatcher in its nest.
6. The Rhinoceros Hornbill, one of the largest birds in this part of Asia.
7. The Great Argus is one of the largest pheasants.
8. Prevost's Squirrel is also known as the Asian Tri-coloured Squirrel.
9. The flashy White-Rumped Sharma.
10. The elusive Paradise Flying Snake.



8



9



10

Conservation cannot succeed if it exists only in policy documents or within protected boundaries. It must also be embedded in how people experience, value and choose to protect particular places. Consequently, one of ecotourism's most compelling aspects is its presentation of conservation not as a distant concept, but as something lived. One can choose to participate in biodiversity surveys, trek with indigenous guides and local communities who know the forest intimately or seek to understand the agroforestry systems that balance livelihoods against conservation. The menu of options is endless.

This is where ecotourism begins a critical shift away from passive observation to active engagement. Communities lie at the heart of sustainability, and play a crucial role by making this concept visible in everyday life, rather than leaving it as an abstract goal. When local communities are able to earn livelihoods from conservation-friendly tourism, retain ownership of their lands and traditions as well as become stakeholders rather than bystanders, conservation outcomes improve. It is now in their immediate economic interest to protect the forest and maintain its biodiversity so that future generations can also benefit from the same resources. This is not a theoretical consideration, but is already happening in places like Merapoh, albeit quietly and with room to grow. Here, homestays, guide services and small-scale tourism enterprises are largely community-run, providing direct economic benefits to local residents. The presence of indigenous communities, such as the Bateq people, adds a cultural heritage dimension to the intersectional potential of ecological knowledge.

Standing at the edge of the forest in Merapoh, watching mist rise through the canopy as gibbons call in the distance, one cannot help but feel that this place represents a fundamental choice. Malaysia can continue to rely on traditional tourism models which are volume-driven, infrastructure-heavy and often come at the expense of ecosystems. Or, it can look to places like Merapoh and trace a different path: one where biodiversity is the core asset; where communities are partners, not merely participants; and where conservation is not a constraint, but a selling point.

For the wildlife enthusiast, Merapoh is already a treasure. For Malaysia, it could become a blueprint. Perhaps its power lies not in what it is today, but in what it can become. It is a place where the future of ecotourism is not only imagined, but realised, one careful step into the forest at a time.

ENDNOTE

[1] See for example T.Z.W. Lee et al. (2022), "Tourist Satisfaction on Ecotourism Facilities and Services in Taman Negara National Park, Sungai Relau, Merapoh, Pahang", *Journal of Wildlife and Parks*, 37: 83–107.



PETER ONG is a wildlife photographer, documentary producer and sustainability advocate. His previous publications include *Wang Kelian, Perlis—The Forgotten Valley* and *Primus—The Primates of Peninsular Malaysia.*

GREENING PENANG'S HOTELS: WISHFUL THINKING OR ACHIEVABLE TARGET?



BY ASSIF SHAMIM AND RENUKA RADAKRISHNAN

BY 2030, the Penang state government envisions an ambitious target of 80% of local hotels adopting green practices.[1] Tourism accounts for about 8% of anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions, with accommodation alone contributing roughly one-fifth of this amount.[2] These figures require critical consideration in Penang, one of Malaysia's top destinations for domestic and international arrivals alike, with hotels becoming a key site of tension. As economic multipliers (e.g., creating jobs, anchoring investments, stimulating supply chains), they are also resource-intensive institutions (e.g., in terms of energy, water and waste-management demands) and high-carbon emitters.

For Penang to achieve climate resilience and long-term competitiveness, the transformation of its accommodation sector is no longer optional. Without implementing systemic efficiency measures, cumulative ecological pressure grows quietly in parallel with economic success. How can tourism growth be decoupled from resource intensity, through which hotels transform from climate liabilities into assets? How ready are Penang's hoteliers to make this leap, and what kind of green policy architecture is required to empower them?

HOTELIERS' PRIORITIES AND CHANGING MARKET EXPECTATIONS

Findings from the Penang Green Hotel Survey (PGHS) 2025 conducted by the Penang Green Council (PGC) indicate that hoteliers are most likely to prioritise energy efficiency (49%), followed by waste management (34%), green procurement (10%) and water management (7%) in their green conversion trajectories.[3] Overall, most hotels already actively promote and practise elements of sustainability. They promote energy and water efficiency, implement effective sustainable waste management practices, use eco-friendly products and also encourage staff and visitors to recycle.[4]

In practice, some elements receive more attention than others, resulting in selective efficiency. With regard to energy efficiency, cooling costs alone contribute significant operational expenditure. Therefore, the business case for LED retrofits, timers and smart thermostats is often straightforward: lower bills, faster payback. Reducing waste, digital documentation, installing refillable dispensers and eliminating disposable amenities are comparatively easy initiatives to implement and visibly align with guest expectations. However, water conservation, despite its



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long-term strategic importance, is often perceived as being less urgent unless there are water shortages or tariff revisions. Green procurement, meanwhile, can result in cost or supply-chain constraints, especially for smaller operators.

The PGHS found that many operators acknowledge how pursuing sustainability requires new competencies (e.g., data tracking, energy management systems, procurement screening, staff engagement). Training is essential, not just for management but also frontline teams implementing daily practices, meaning that new professions such as sustainability specialists and renewable energy technicians experience significant growth and demand.[5] Cost perceptions do shape decision-making; however, industry players find that green operations are not overly troublesome and operational burdens are manageable.

For policymakers, these behavioural patterns matter. The most persistent barrier to the green transition is not ideological resistance, but operational capacity. After all, energy retrofits, renewable installations and comprehensive audits require capital expenditure. Smaller and mid-sized hotels—common in Penang's hospitality landscape—often operate on tighter profit margins and may hesitate to transition without incentives or technical guidance. If sustainability transitions are left entirely to market logic, measures resulting in immediate cost savings will dominate, but those requiring upfront investment or long-term planning may lag behind. Strategic policy design must correct imbalances and ensure a holistic transformation.

A transition is critical. The market context is changing significantly, where environmental performance is shifting away from being just a marketing add-on to a competitive baseline. Corporate travel buyers are embedding sustainability criteria into procurement decision-making, while investors increasingly assess hospitality assets through environmental, social and governance (ESG) performance lenses. Risks to businesses may no longer lie in investing too early in sustainability, but in falling behind emerging market expectations. Consequently, the narrative that green hotels are commercially unviable is increasingly outdated. This is precisely where policy can intervene: not by mandating unrealistic compliance, but by lowering transition barriers through guidance, recognition and fiscal analytical tools.

OPERATIONALISING THE PENANG GREEN HOTEL PROGRAMME

Accordingly, PGC has introduced the Penang Green Hotel Programme (PGHP), a one-stop solution platform and structured pathway designed to guide hotels through measurable sustainability improvements. Such programmes, supported by state endorsement, can align individual initiatives with broader climate targets. The PGHP serves as a practical guide built around the four key metrics identified above: energy, water, waste and green procurement. It was developed through a bottom-up, collaborative policymaking approach that actively engages relevant industry stakeholders to co-create a framework reflecting real operational needs, in alignment with broader sustainability goals.

As such, the PGHP provides a clear and accessible starting point for hotels to implement more sustainable and environmentally responsible business practices, through several progressive stages.

(1) Quick green check-in: A concise 10-question diagnostic that provides a simple, fast and accessible entry-level snapshot of a hotel's current sustainability status.

(2) Full self-assessment: (a) The Penang Green Hotel Matrix allows hotels to undertake a structured assessment across the four metrics. It emphasises practical, easy-to-implement measures suited to Penang's operational realities. Upon completion, hotels receive a gap analysis identifying strengths, weaknesses and priority areas, followed by a tailored action plan. Hotels seeking deeper engagement can opt for (b) a comprehensive pre-on-site review. They will receive a more detailed assessment that prepares them for full on-site evaluation to ensure readiness and clarity before formal recognition.

What are the benefits of participating in the PGHP? It boils down to official recognition. Participating hotels: (1) are featured on the PGC's website and state's tourism platforms; (2) are eligible to use the official "Penang Green Hotel" logo in all documentation and publicity material; (3) receive an official plaque for display at their premises; and (4) are recognised at an awards ceremony celebrating participation and progress.

FROM VOLUNTARY ACTION TO STRUCTURED TRANSITION

Voluntary sustainability efforts have limits. Without a shared framework, progress remains fragmented and uneven. This is why PGHP's mechanism also reflects a key policy philosophy: encourage before enforcing, guide before grading. Possible next steps could include providing fiscal incentives for energy-efficient retrofits, training partnerships with hospitality institutes, integrating green metrics into tourism promotion strategies and providing tiered recognition to accommodate hotels of varying sizes. The objective is not to burden hoteliers, but to create an enabling ecosystem for sustainable and environmentally friendly operations.

Encouragingly, the PGHS found that 95% of hoteliers who do not currently consider their establishments to be "green" are open to conversion within the next five years. Their desires signal that the state's ambition to position Penang as a sustainable destination hub is aligned with actual industry readiness. In this policy moment, sustainability is no longer peripheral to destination branding. Eco-conscious travellers, ESG-driven investors and corporate clients increasingly assess environmental credentials when choosing accommodation. 83% of travellers claim that sustainable travel is key to decision-making, thus confirming that the state must align itself with current needs.[6]

Penang has the advantages of scale and agility. With a mix of boutique properties, mid-tier hotels and international chains, it can pilot green frameworks that are both practical and exportable. If executed strategically, Penang can situate itself as Malaysia's benchmark for sustainable urban tourism. Having long positioned itself as a leader in environmental governance, the accommodation sector is the state's next frontier. Accordingly, policy must move from aspiration to architecture, in the form of guidelines, assessments, incentives as well as training and recognition systems to determine measurable outcomes. Tourism will continue to power Penang's economy, but will it also power climate commitments? The hotels are ready. The next move belongs to policymakers.

ENDNOTES

[1] Chow Kon Yeow. (2023, March 14). "Future proof Penang for the new global economy." Penang Future Forward Summit, G Hotel Gurney.

[2] Gössling, S., et al. (n.d.). "Tourist accommodation, climate change and mitigation: An assessment for Austria." In *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, 34*: 100367; Lenzen, M., et al. (2018). "The carbon footprint of global tourism." *Nature Climate Change, 8*: pp. 522–28.

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[4] Pang, S.F.H., et al. (2013). "Climate Change and Tourism: An Overview." *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, *18*(1-2): pp. 4–20.

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[6] Booking. (2024). "Sustainable Travel 2024." https://news.booking.com/download/904910bb-db77-4886-9ead-accbf87ad891/sustainabletravelreport2024.pdf

***Note:** To learn more about the PGHP, please scan the following QR code.

MALAYSIA'S KINDERGARTEN REFORM: A MORE COMPLICATED IMPROVEMENT THAN IMAGINED

BY RAHIDA AINI

MALAYSIA'S NATIONAL EDUCATION PLAN 2026–35 signals a bold shift in the schooling landscape. It does this by significantly restructuring early childhood education with a renewed emphasis on foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy. One key aspect is its lower starting ages for schoolchildren, which provides greater flexibility and potential opportunities, especially for those demonstrating early readiness for formal schooling. This means that kindergartens, once positioned at the margins of the education system, will need to recalibrate rapidly.

While the transition may feel daunting for parents and operators today, the long-term policy vision is clear: a more responsive, competitive and future-ready education system. The real question, however, is whether or not short-term discomfort is worth the promise of long-term human capital gain. In other words, are today's adjustment pains a necessary sacrifice for tomorrow?

A LOWER STARTING AGE AT ALL LEVELS

For many developed societies, early entry into formal schooling is nothing new. In the United States, for example, it is common to start Grade One at six. I recall, from my own experience living there, how my younger brother began school at this age. While my parents had some concerns, they provided the support that he needed to adjust accordingly. Children, after all, adapt quickly when placed in nurturing environments.

Malaysia cannot afford to lag behind global education trends, particularly as more than 137 countries have already lowered the age of entry for primary education.[1] Once implemented in 2027, preschool enrolments will start at age five, and Standard One at six. In practice, some children would still be aged five when they begin formal schooling, before turning six later in the academic year. Parents may even register their children in kindergarten as early as four-plus, meaning that some students could complete upper secondary education by 16.

Still, there remain concerns that a lower entry age could put undue pressure on children who are not developmentally ready. Embracing best global practices also means compressing the preparatory window for our young learners, while posing operational challenges for kindergartens themselves. A policy shift of this scale requires preparation at all levels, meaning that kindergartens must revise their programmes to build school-readiness earlier (possibly from ages three or four), with a gradual progression towards Standard One.

The Penang Education Institution Operators Association has cautioned that enrolling pupils as young as five or six could disrupt critical stages of emotional and learning development, potentially affecting their long-term relationship with education.[2] However, Fadhlina Sidek, who heads the Ministry of Education (MOE), emphasises that early entry will remain flexible and be based on parental and child readiness.

KINDERGARTENS IN THE EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM

Bakri Musa, a surgeon and public commentator, writes: "Starting preschool at age five is commendable. I would lower that to four, especially in rural areas where early interventions are most needed. Make it voluntary. When parents see the value, they will enrol their children."[3]

His remarks reinforce the idea that kindergartens are not merely transitional spaces, but critical environments where foundational skills and learning habits are formed well before formal schooling begins. They are the foundation of lifelong learning, shaping children's early cognitive, social and emotional development trajectories. "We've always been the first stepping stone for children before they enter government schools," said Rozalita, a retired teacher who now runs her own private kindergarten. For years, her classrooms focused on building basic literacy, social skills and confidence among young learners. However, the policy shift has disrupted this carefully structured progression. Enrolment patterns have shifted, class structures and teacher–student ratios have been affected while financial and operational pressures have intensified.

For Rozalita and many private kindergarten operators, reform is not simply an administrative adjustment, but a challenge that directly affects teachers, children and families. They argue that the current governance structure for early childhood education is ill-equipped to support this transition. At present, childcare services for those aged up to four years old are licensed by the Social Welfare Department, under the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, while kindergartens serving children aged four to six fall under the MOE. Each kindergarten or childcare centre operator has to deal with at least three different bodies (the local authorities, Fire and Rescue Department and the Health Department) and must have three different licences from two ministries (with varying directions and regulations).[4] This overlapping regulatory framework has created confusion, increased compliance costs

ENDNOTES

[1] Zaf S. & Mohammad AI As. (2026, January 27). "Malaysia can't afford to lag behind in education, says PM." *New Straits Times*.

[2] Chern, L.T. (2026, January 27). "Early entry may place kids under stress." *The Star*.

[3] Bakri Musa. (2026, January 25). "Amateur Hour On Malaysian Education: All Theater, Minimal Substance." *Seeing Malaysia My Way* (blog). https://bakrimusa.blogspot.com/2026/01/amateur-hour-on-malaysian-education-all.html

[4] Suraya, A. (2026, January 25). "Private kindergartens call for single licence system under one ministry." *New Straits Times*.

[5] *Sinar Harian*. (2026, January 20). "Kemasukan Tahun 1 usia enam tahun fleksibel, bergantung kesediaan ibu bapa, murid."



RAHIDA AINI is a project researcher at Penang Institute. In her quiet hours, she enjoys nature walks, exploring destinations, losing herself in the piano, and immersing herself in the beauty of live orchestral music.

and placed additional strain on operators. As a result, many call for a more streamlined licensing system under a single ministry, arguing that coherent governance is essential if kindergartens are to effectively support education reform.

Complicating matters is the diverse preschool landscape, comprising public providers such as Jabatan Kemajuan Masyarakat (KEMAS) and Tabika Perpaduan (for ages 4–6), alongside private and religious institutions. While plurality expands access, the sectoral quality of curricula, teaching approaches and teacher qualifications is uneven. Furthermore, children from lower-income households often have limited access to high-quality early education, resulting in unequal learning outcomes even before primary school begins.

TRANSITIONS AND COMPLICATIONS

The transition from kindergarten to Standard One is not merely an administrative shift, but a developmental one, particularly for six-year-olds navigating their first formal schooling experience. Parents were initially expected to assess their children's readiness before enrolment, while the MOE would conduct diagnostic tests to evaluate educational levels, psycho-emotional states and specific needs.[5] However, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim recently announced that these diagnostic tests will be scrapped on the grounds that they may lead to discrimination. His comments signal an awareness of parental concerns at the highest level of government. Unfortunately, kindergartens and primary schools consequently bear greater responsibility for supporting children's varied learning needs without formal screening mechanisms.

Given these uncertainties, parents remain divided over the policy shift. Latifah* sees advantages in enrolling her five-year-old daughter in Standard One next year. Earlier entry would expose her to formal education a year sooner, while reducing the financial burden of kindergarten fees. These savings could be channelled towards other developmental activities, such as swimming lessons or music classes. In contrast, Farid* remains concerned about his daughter, who is still developing basic reading skills. He worries that larger classroom settings may not provide the individual attention that she needs, while premature entry risks undermining her confidence and academic development.

As reforms unfold, parents, educational institutions (particularly kindergartens) and teachers will inevitably need time to adjust to new structures and expectations. In particular, operators must reorganise their business models, perhaps by shortening and accelerating programmes to prepare children for an earlier schooling journey. Ultimately, successful reforms depend not only on policy intent, but also on how well the entire early education ecosystem centres children's wellbeing. A structured transitional period of three to five years should be implemented (during which parents may defer enrolment until age seven), while the system progressively adjusts through phased cohort introduction, infrastructural expansion, teacher upskilling and curriculum alignment.

***Note:** Individuals marked by asterisks are pseudonymous.

“The transition from kindergarten to Standard One is not merely an administrative shift, but a developmental one, particularly for six-year-olds navigating their first formal schooling experience.”



MOUNT MIRIAM CANCER HOSPITAL: A LEGACY OF HOPE AND LOVE

BY KOAY SU LYN

BEFORE PRIVATE HOSPITALS came to dominate Penang's oncological scene, there was Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital. It served as the first and only charitable cancer hospital in the state and northern Malaysia, catering especially to the needy. In light of its recent golden jubilee on 20 February 2026, the story of Mount Miriam is worth recounting.



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BISHOP FRANCIS CHAN'S DEFERRED DREAM

Mount Miriam's establishment was envisioned by the Singapore-born Bishop Francis Chan Weng Cheong. Having been diagnosed with cancer in 1960 by a local doctor, Peter Tan Ewe Aik, Bishop Chan had to seek treatment in Hong Kong. This was because Penang had no treatment facilities or hospices for cancer patients, despite being a reputable provider of quality healthcare compared to most states in the Federation of Malaya.[1] Following a relapse which left him bedridden, Bishop Chan received personal care from the Sisters of the French Foreign Missions, known as the "Grey Sisters" because of the colour of their habits.[2] His personal experience ignited a strong desire to provide patients with a comparable high level of skilled palliative care, so that they could live their remaining time with dignity.

Assisted by the Grey Sisters and Tan, the bishop endorsed several fundraising campaigns for a cancer home. Not only did he donate $26,000 to the starting fund, but he also endowed a piece of church land along Kelawai Road for its establishment. Community support streamed in, including from Chief Minister Wong Pow Nee, a devout Catholic.[3] By January 1965, the Catholic community had successfully raised more than $7,000.[4] The Penang Rotary Club, Lions Club of George Town and Penang Junior Chamber of Commerce also contributed additional funds.[5] Unfortunately, Bishop Chan did not live to see his dream fulfilled. With $19,000 in additional funds received and construction plans awaiting the city council's approval, he passed away in October 1967.[6] Shortly afterwards, another setback occurred when Tan was notified that the Grey Sisters' work and stay permits would not be extended by the immigration authorities after 1975.[7]

THE NEW DAWN

Fortunately, Bishop Gregory Yong Sooi Ngean's appointment in April 1968 ushered in a new dawn in the home's progress.[8] He honoured his predecessor's dream by offering a finer property on Bukit Padri in Tanjong Bungah. "Mariophile" (Latin for "Lover of Mary") was a serene 30-acre plot, upon which sat a bungalow and chapel (See *Penang Monthly*, December 2024).[9] Once a retreat for priests, it eventually housed what became known as Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital.[10] The Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM), who managed Singapore's Mount Alvernia Hospital and Ipoh's Our Lady's Hospital, were invited to run Mount Miriam, and they proved "unanimously in favour of accepting this apostolic work".[11]

Led by Sister Mary Baptista Hennessy and her assistant, Sister Mary Raphael, were the "Magnificent Seven": Sisters Assunta Low, Jennifer Chan, Jean-Marie Andrews, Cyrilla Baptist, Caritas Gay, Christoforo Leo and Raphael McDowell. Like the late Bishop Chan, they proactively raised funds door-to-door, while those travelling north from Singapore collected funds along their journey. Given their existing reputation in Singapore, they even received a RM1mil donation from the businessman and philanthropist, Lee Kong Chian. Alongside Tan as well as the architects Derrick David and Dennis Liew, the nuns supervised Mount Miriam's construction daily until its completion at a cost of RM2.5mil.[12]

Officiated by Bishop Yong on 21 February 1976, the 24-bed hospital opened its doors as a modest community home founded upon Catholic values and the spirit of St Francis of Assisi. Overseen by Tan, Mount Miriam served all patients regardless of race, creed and belief, while subsidising fees and even providing free treatment. The "Magnificent Seven" ran the hospital almost single-handedly, performing roles ranging from administration and operations to housekeeping. Sister Cyrilla Baptist vividly recalled two of their first patients: the lift engineer's mother with advanced fungating breast cancer, and a 10-year-old Malay boy with a large tumour arising from the orbit of his eye.

With no radiotherapy or chemotherapy available, they could only provide basic dressing, pain management and hygiene control.[13] But Mount Miriam also instilled an atmosphere of love and care for its patients. This required that staff respond to a special calling that radiated faith, hope and love despite the juxtaposition of hopeful moments against bitter disappointment. Residing on the hospital grounds, the nuns set an example for the community to follow.



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They not only nursed patients, but even remained present until their eventual deaths, ensuring that the last rites were safeguarded and families received emotional support.

TOWARDS PROVIDING ACTIVE TREATMENT

Coincidentally, Koh Pen Ting, president of the Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce, was in attendance at Mount Miriam's opening. Koh sought to admit his wife for treatment, but was unfortunately turned down because the hospital lacked treatment facilities. Consequently, he offered to raise funds for a Cobalt-60 radiotherapy machine.[14] In a special meeting at the Penang Rubber Association, attended by prominent local businessmen such as Tan Hoay Eam and Loh Boon Siew, RM480,000 was secured within an hour, thus paving Mount Miriam's route towards providing active cancer treatment.[15]

With the machine's installation in 1979, Mount Miriam grew into a leading oncological hospital boasting qualified radiotherapists and trained nurses.[16] However, it still remained a home where healing and comfort did not have to burden the needy. This ethos necessitated cost-effective measures, and the nuns proved extremely thrifty. They made their own disposable dressing and undertook cooking and laundry by themselves. Needlework to mend old sheets and covers was a common activity, and only those on the night shift had the luxury of a small desk light. [17]

These simple acts and the blessings of community support, as demonstrated in annual fundraising initiatives, sustained Mount Miriam's operations despite rising costs. As the hospital expanded, medical operations were gradually taken over by professional staff while the nuns increasingly served as overseers, focusing on the provision of pastoral care to patients. Sister Jennifer Chan initiated the Clinical Pastoral Care Ministry in 1998 to provide counselling, emotional, spiritual and social support to patients, family members and staff alike.[18]

Care work paved the way for Mount Miriam's evolution over 50 years by incorporating advanced, non-invasive and painless procedures, while returning to its roots in palliative care. As a testament to the importance of faith, human endeavour and public support, Mount Miriam continues its legacy as a charitable cancer hospital, bringing hope and love to the people who can least afford treatment.

CAPTIONS

1. Bishop Francis Chan.
2. Mother Superior Baptista Hennessy supervising the daily construction work together with architects Derrick David and Dennis Liew.
3. Mount Miriam nearing completion, as seen from the rear.
4. Bishop Francis Chan with the Grey Sisters, who first arrived in Penang in 1954.



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KOAY SU LYN is an independent researcher who recently obtained her MA in history from NUS. She now straddles between two islands: her hometown, Penang and host city, Singapore.

ENDNOTES

1. Peter Tan Ewe Aik (Dato' Dr) and Eleanor Eu Gaik Choo. (2011). *Prescriptions of Faith.* Kee Koon Lay Sdn Bhd (p. 157); V. Thuraisingham. (2011). "Medical Reminiscences from 1960." In Ong Hean Teik (ed.), *To Heal the Sick: The Story of Healthcare and Doctors in Penang.* Penang Medical Practitioners' Society. (p. 91)

2. An age-old affiliate of the Foreign Mission of Paris, which brought Roman Catholicism to Malaya around 200 years ago, the Grey Sisters arrived in Penang in 1954 to serve the College-General. Later, they opened a free clinic for the poor at No. 45, Perak Lane, in Jelutong. Known as the "Clinic of Our Lady of Lourdes", Peter Tan served as its visiting doctor. See Tan and Eu (2011, pp. 155–57).

3. *The Straits Times*. (1965, April 27). "Grey Sisters plan fund drive," p. 7; *Nanyang Siang Pau*. (1967, October 24). "王保尼首席部長昨表示州政府將協助興建槟癌症病人看護所呼吁公衆支持完成善舉', 南洋商报," p. 6.

4. *The Straits Budget*. (1965, January 13). "$7,000 raised for Bishop Chan's purse," p. 20.

5. Peter Tan Ewe Aik. (2001, February 11). *History of Mount Miriam Hospital* [silver anniversary booklet]. Mount Miriam Hospital. (p. 2)

6. *The Straits Budget*. (1967, November 1). "Drive to set up cancer nursing home," p. 7.

7. Foreign missionaries, once quite freely allowed to enter the country before Malayan independence, would afterwards face greater restrictions. See Chew, Maureen K.C. (2016). *History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Penang.* The Titular Roman Catholic Bishop of Penang. (p. 71)

8. *The Straits Budget.* (1968, May 8). "New Bishop of Penang receives good wishes – Dedicated to God and my fellow-men," p. 5.

9. Cheong, Paul. (1984). *"The Historical Background of Mariophile." The Seminarian*: pp. 4–5.

10. Letter from Mother Angela McBrien to Dr. Peter Tan, 31 August 1971, FMDM/D/MMCH/1/1, FMDM Archives (Ladywell).

11. Formed at Ladywell Convent in Surrey, England, in 1870 by a group of women inspired by the spirit of St Francis of Assisi, the FMDM sisters arrived in Singapore in 1949, having been invited by Archbishop Michel Olcomendy to work in his diocese. See: FMDM. (1999). *Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM): Golden Jubilee of Presence in Singapore & Malaysia: 1949–1999 handbook.* (p. 19); Letter from Bishop Gregory Yong & Dr. Peter Tan to Rev. Mother General, 7 April 1970, p. 2, FMDM/D/MMCH/1/1, FMDM Archives; Letter from the Committee Secretary to the Committee advising that FMDM will take over the project, 27 April 1970, FMDM/D/MMCH/1/1, FMDM Archives.

12. Tan (2001, pp. 3–4); Letter from Mother Angela McBrien.

13. Interview by Dr Francis Tan with Sister Cyrilla Baptist, 9 December 2024, in Penang.

14. Koh reached out to Mount Miriam Hospital through his son, Dr Koh Tsu Koon (then a lecturer at Universiti Sains Malaysia, later Penang's chief minister). See: Zaatar, A. (2011). "Memories of Mount Miriam Hospital from 1976-2003," in Ong (ed.), *To Heal the Sick*. Penang Medical Practitioners' Society (pp. 87–88).

15. Tan (2001, p. 4); Zaatar (2011, pp. 87–88).

16. The introduction of locally taught nursing aides in 1977 saw Sister Cyrilla providing the team with in-house nursing training, according to a strict British-style timetable (inclusive of chapel time). Interview with Sister Cyrilla Baptist.

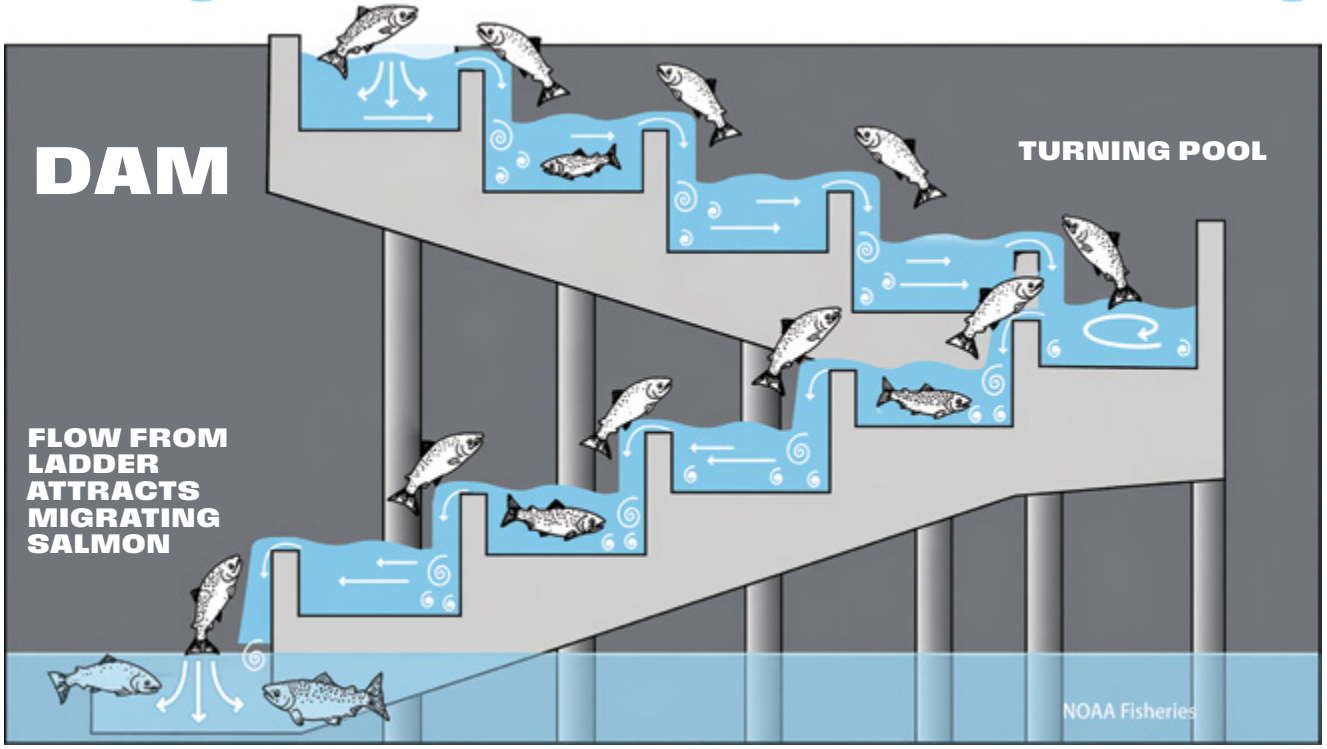
17. Yuen, Priscilla. (2016). "Being the Pioneer Sisters," *Reflections: Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital 40th Anniversary, Issue 1.* (p. 7)

18. *The Star*. (2011, June 26). "Sisterhood of Caring Hearts," p. 31.

FISH LADDERS

HELPING FISH CROSS HUMAN-MADE BARRIERS

BY CHEE SU YIN



1

RIVERS ACT AS nature's highways, allowing fish to travel upstream and downstream to find food, avoid predators and, most importantly, reproduce. In Malaysia, these movements are particularly crucial in river systems such as the Perak, Pahang, Muda and Rajang, which support diverse freshwater species and, by extension, sustain inland fisheries and local communities. However, many of these rivers are interrupted by dams. While essential for meeting human needs, these structures disrupt natural river flows and block fish migrations, thus fragmenting existing ecosystems and reducing biodiversity. To mitigate these effects, fish ladders—structures built alongside dams or river barriers that allow fish to bypass these obstructions—can be designed to give fish alternative pathways, helping them continue their natural migrations.

GETTING AROUND DAMS

Malaysia currently has 104 dams with a total storage capacity of roughly 84,000mil m^3 of water, 83 of which are located in Peninsular Malaysia and 21 in Labuan, Sabah and Sarawak. 81 are classified as large dams, while the remaining 23 are smaller structures (see Table 1). For a population of 31mil people, this represents a supply of approximately 2,700m^3 of water per person. Many were initially constructed without plans to raise their heights, but several have since been elevated to increase capacity. Notable examples include the Bukit Merah Dam (raised in 1965 and 1984), Klang Gates Dam (1979), Durian Tunggal Dam (1992), Lebam Dam (1992), Sungai Tinggi Dam (2003) and Timah Tasoh Dam (2010). Plans are also underway to raise the Bekok and Mengkuang Dams. Mostly built in upland and interior catchments, where narrow valleys allow for efficient storage, they serve multiple purposes including water supply, irrigation, hydropower, flood control and recreation.

Some Malaysian freshwater species depend on migration to complete their life cycles, including *kelah, lampam* and

DAM	LOCATION	SURFACE AREA (APPROX.)
Bakun Dam	Sarawak	695 km²
Batu Dam	Selangor	2.55 km²
Chereh Dam	Pahang	16 km²
Jus Reservoir	Malacca	5.5 km²
Kenyir Dam	Terengganu	369 km²
Klang Gates Dam	Selangor	2.03 km²
Pedu Dam	Kedah	84 km²
Semenyih Dam	Selangor	3.6 km²
Sungai Selangor Dam	Selangor	6.0 km²
Sungai Tinggi Dam	Selangor	8.5 km²
Tasik Subang	Selangor	0.76 km²
Teluk Bahang Dam	Penang	18.24 km²
Timah Tasoh Dam	Perlis	19 km²

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tengas. They move along rivers to reach their feeding or breeding areas, particularly during monsoon seasons when water levels change. When these movements are blocked, fish may fail to reach their spawning grounds, become trapped in unsuitable habitats and experience population decline over time. Similar problems have been observed worldwide, where blocked rivers have led to reduced fish stocks and biodiversity loss.

Hence, fish ladders can play an essential role in preventing disruptions to existing ecologies. They consist of a series of small steps or pools that gradually raise water levels from a location downstream of a dam, allowing fish to swim upstream without facing sudden drops or powerful currents. This concept is akin to a ramp or staircase built beside a steep drop, which slows down and breaks up the flow of water. Fish ladders essentially divide an artificial waterway into smaller sections, each with a manageable flow rate, allowing migratory species to bypass the disruptions to river systems caused by dams. They can be made of concrete, rock or natural materials, often designed to blend into the riverine environment. Also usually included are resting pools where fish can pause before continuing their upstream journeys. While some fish ladders are straight and stepped, others are designed as winding channels resembling natural streams.

EXAMPLES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

In North America, fish ladders are mostly associated with salmon migration. Large dams, like the Columbia in the US and Canada, are accompanied by extensive fish ladder systems that allow millions of salmon to reach their spawning grounds each year, supporting both ecosystems and fishing communities. In Europe, many older dams are being retrofitted with fish ladders to reconnect fragmented rivers, benefiting species such as trout, eel and lamprey. In countries such as Germany and the UK, natural-looking fish ladders are built with rocks and vegetation, in order to help an increasingly wider range of species besides just strong swimmers. Japan, which has many small river barriers for irrigation and flood control, frequently incorporates fish ladders into these structures using gentle slopes and slow-flowing water suitable for smaller fish. In Australia, fishways along river systems such as the Murray–Darling are designed for native species that are not strong jumpers, characterised by long, low-gradient channels.

DO FISH LADDERS WORK FOR ALL SPECIES?

Fish ladders may appear simple, but their impact can be significant. By allowing fish to circumvent human-made barriers, they help protect biodiversity, sustain fisheries and maintain rivers as living ecosystems rather than reduce them to channels for water management. In many parts of the world, they represent an opportunity to design river infrastructure that works not only for people, but for nature as well. Unfortunately, they do not work equally well for all species, since different fish have various swimming abilities, sizes and behaviours. Strong swimmers can cope with faster flows, while smaller or bottom-dwelling fish need gentler conditions. This point is especially important to consider in tropical regions like Malaysia, where rivers support diverse fish communities rather than a few migratory species. Context-specific fish ladder designs need to consider various nuances, such as local species, river flow patterns and seasonal water changes, or else a poorly designed ladder may go unused.

As Malaysia continues to develop water infrastructure for various needs, rivers and their ecologies become increasingly fragmented. Fish ladders offer a practical way to balance developmental goals against environmental protection. By improving river connectivity, they can help sustain inland fisheries, protect culturally and economically important species as well as support rural communities that depend on healthy rivers for food and livelihoods.

CAPTIONS

1. Diagram of a fish ladder illustrating how migrating salmon use a series of stepped pools and a turning pool to bypass a dam. Image reproduced from NOAA Fisheries.

2. List of major dams in Malaysia and their corresponding surface areas.

3. Fish ladder on Germany's Elbe River, designed to help fish bypass dams and other obstacles. Photo by imageBROKER/Alamy Stock Photo.



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3

ZANG TOI

THE MALAYSIAN WHO DRESSES THE GLOBAL ELITE

BY RACHEL YEOH



ZANG TOI'S FASHION career is the embodiment of "concrete jungle where dreams are made of", as Alicia Keys sings in "Empire State of Mind". He arrived on the shores of New York City (NYC) from Kuala Krai, Kelantan, enrolling at the Parsons School of Design. In 1989, he set up House of Toi, and has since made a name for himself, by dressing A-listers from the first lady of the US, Melania Trump, to the late Elizabeth Taylor, and current celebrities like Eva Longoria and Gong Li.

In an exclusive conversation with *Penang Monthly*, Zang Toi reflects on his couture legacy and how his Malaysian identity is still reflected in his runway shows, even after almost four decades abroad.

Rachel Yeoh (RY): Dato' Zang Toi, the world knows you as a formidable couturier. Tell us a little about yourself and how far you've come since you left Malaysia.

Zang Toi (ZT): I was born and raised in Kuala Krai, Kelantan. I am, of course, still a proud Kelantanese. I usually come back to Malaysia every year to visit my now 98-year-old mother and family.

My favourite Malaysian dish is Nasi Dagang—it is what I grew up eating for breakfast; that's common especially if you are from either these two regions, Kelantan or Terengganu.

It is also here that is said to be the cradle of the "Golden Thread" tradition, that is, the songket. I think the songket is a most beautiful, decadent and intricate fabric. As a matter of fact, for my 30th anniversary collection, which premiered in Spring 2020, I did my version of the songket fabric for the evening section. However, instead of the traditional metallic thread used in the fabric, we hand-beaded it with the tiniest of silver beads to recreate the songket.

I gifted that entire evening section collection to Her Royal Highness (HRH) Tengku Anis of Kelantan after the show. She was the one who organised my inspiration trip in 2018. She closed up all the museums and a factory for me to tour.

This year is my 37th in business, and I've done three collections inspired by Malaysia: its cultures and fabrics. One of them won me the Mouton-Cadet Young Designer of the Year Award in the early 1990s. I did another Malaysia-inspired collection in 1994. I designed a beautiful fabric with leopard prints but with a modern twist. The leopard print was surrounded by beautiful, vibrant orchid flowers. HRH Tengku Anis of Kelantan—she is a very good artist—hand-painted those orchids, which we showcased on the runway. It was a big hit!

RY: How do you decide which cultural elements will translate best to your American clientele and on the runway?

ZT: People always talk about how writers have writer's block—but thank God that after 37 years, I haven't had that block yet.

I run in the park for approximately 30 minutes five, six days a week. It is during these moments when design ideas just happen. After my run, I just sit at the park bench and start typing in the designs. I would send it to my assistant to save it.

Then, there is a lot of research, re-editing, creating and designing. I am a firm believer of "doing it my way". I never think about how a collection would bring me fame or money. I go with what makes me happy and what I think is going to make a beautiful collection. Once that is done, I sell it to my clients according to my price.

RY: Oh, so it's the reverse—not thinking about your clients, but thinking about yourself first and what makes you happy. I guess you were thinking a lot about the songket when you designed "Home Sweet Home".

ZT: Exactly… the things that I grew up with and that I knew from my childhood. All the beautiful batik sarongs in the market, the songket, etc. I wasn't even thinking about my clientele at that point. I just wanted to bring back my beautiful, happy childhood memories and pay homage to my home country. My aim was to create a really beautiful collection that made me and fellow Malaysians proud. It was a dedication, a tribute to Malaysia.

RY: When you begin a collection, do you choose the fabric first and let it dictate the silhouette, or does your sketch come first?

ZT: The inspiration comes first. Whether it is from my travels within Malaysia or a collection inspired by Paris, my favourite city in the world. When that inspiration comes, I close my eyes and I can already envision the look and how it will be presented on the runway. Once that is done, I start researching the fabric. I decide what fabric will be ideal for the design of that particular collection. The sketching is the very last stage of the collection.

I'm fortunate enough to go anywhere around the world, get myself huddled up in a nice suite for a week and stay up all night sketching a collection. I love to stay up, sometimes up until 6am sketching, having a lot of fun by myself. Then I sleep during the day and get up in the afternoon and go to the gym, have dinner—just one meal—and then back again, sketching all night long.

RY: I recently watched your latest collection, and the first piece was a gorgeous cape studded with diamonds to create a glittering city. Can you tell me about it?

ZT: The infamous skyscraper cape—that is the third version I did. The very first version of that cape was a New York City skyscraper cape which I did in 2009. That year, I did not do a formal runway show. I was so busy raising money for the Lance Armstrong Foundation, to improve the lives of cancer survivors. So that year, in lieu of a formal runway show, I did



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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Delivering a showstopper with the first look, Zang Toi introduces an intergalactic and futuristic take on his celebrated embroidered cape for Fall/Winter 2026 during New York Fashion Week.

2. Carol Alt and Zang Toi with Celebration Cake. Photo by Eka Halim — Zang Toi S-S 2020.

3. Look 1 — Zang Toi S-S 2020.

4. Individually cut metallic elements, varied jeweled shapes, and layered beading techniques were applied by a team of 10 artisans over more than 30 days to create this futuristic skyscape.

5. The original New York City skyline cape from 2009.

6. Zang Toi in his French Louis XV-style home.



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something I considered brave—I took over Restaurant Daniel by the famous chef Daniel Boulud. Instead of a runway show, I sold tickets to those who wanted to come for the event.

It was a champagne reception followed by an intimate runway show. All proceeds were paid out of my pocket—every penny from the ticket sales and the silent auction and the live option went to the Lance Armstrong Foundation. We were able to raise over USD750,000. I was raising money for a great cause and decided to do a New York skyline-inspired collection. This cape went into the archive afterwards.

But fast forward to 2020, right after the Malaysian collection, I thought of doing one on NYC. NYC embraced me as a designer, as a person who came here 45 years ago with USD30. NYC became my home, you know, my second home, my adopted home.

When I started working on the New York City tribute collection, I decided to pull out that very same cape that was designed in 2009 and restyle it for the runway show. Of course, not many people, except the select few, have seen the cape. It became a finale piece, worn with a strapless mini dress with the Chrysler Building hand-beaded onto it. The whole room erupted when it came out. I got a huge standing ovation, and former mayor Rudy Giuliani was front row and centre at that runway show.

Ironically enough, three years later, Ralph Lauren's team decided to copy the iconic New York skyline for Alicia Keys to wear to the Met Gala. Now, I opened that collection with the Jay-Z and Alicia Keys' "Empire State of Mind". That show resonated with so many across the US. So during that Met Gala, as Alicia Keys walked in with the New York City skyline cape, my phone blew up. Everybody knew—from the salesperson to my customers and my fans—they called me saying, "That is a copy of your New York City diamond cape!"

I laughed. This is not the first time I was being copied, so I laughed. It's a great compliment. The next day at 6.30am, I got a text from the editor of *New York Post*. It read: "Do you have a minute? I would love to talk to you about putting this item in Page Six." I said "okay" because it was all over social media anyway.

She basically wanted to run a story on "Ralph Lauren copying Zang Toi" in a blurb on Page Six. But when she started doing all the research, she realised that the cape was actually from 2009. As she was typing away, her big boss happened to walk by and asked who she was writing about and commenting on how great the clothes were. He is a straight guy running *New York Post* and doesn't know much about fashion. He told her to forget about doing a little blurb on Page Six and said that it should be a big article.

It became a mammoth article on how Ralph Lauren copied Yves Saint Laurent in the 1990s and got sued and was now copying Zang Toi's skyline cape. When the article came out, it went viral all over the world. When Yahoo.com picked it up, the story went further.

Six months later, I got an official letter from the Museum of New York City, stating, "It would be an honour for us to display the iconic New York City skyline cape at the museum in conjunction with its 100-year anniversary." They were doing a big exhibition on artists who were inspired by NYC. That cape was in the museum for a year.

When I started working on this new collection, which I call the "Fall 2026 Grand Galaxy" collection, it was something completely different from what I did in the past: they were travelling collections. This time was a little different. This collection was 18 months in the making. Then, I started following Elon Musk on X. I'm not a science-and-rockets kind of guy. I don't know anything about science and rockets, but the images that he consistently posed on SpaceX… it was so breathtakingly beautiful to see rocket launches. I also started following a couple of people who loved this particular topic. I thought it would be a great challenge to do something that I was not familiar with. I decided to design a collection inspired by SpaceX. I wanted the first piece on the runway to be a cape with a futuristic skyscraper.

RY: It was gorgeous. Who has been the most iconic person you have dressed and why? And who would you be honoured to dress in the future? And why?

ZT: I am going to get myself into so much trouble because I have so many. But if I really have to pick one, it would be the late Farrah Fawcett. She was such a special human being. She wore a gown I designed with an American flag sewn to its train to the 2003 Vanity Fair Oscar Party. The red, white and blue gown worn by Farrah was also splashed on UK's *HELLO!* magazine. They did a special on the Oscars where they featured many celebrities, each with small images of their outfits that night. However, Farrah was the only one with a full-page [spread] of herself in my design. As a person, she was also so wonderful—she and Ryan O'Neal. I had so many special moments with her alone. Someday, when I write a memoir, Farrah would have a whole chapter to herself. But of course, as of now, I won't reveal too much.

For the future, the one person that I would love to dress is Cate Blanchett. I haven't met her yet, but I think she is the best actress in her generation. She wears clothes so incredibly well and therefore, she will be my next pick.

RY: What other kinds of Asian or Malaysian fabrics would you like to bring onto the runway?

ZT: I haven't given much thought to that, but I believe I have done it. I have used a very normal sarong fabric, the kind you can buy at the pasar, elevated it and sold the pieces to my American clientele. I've done songket. I've used the wayang kulit motif. But I am not going to force it. When it happens, then it happens. That inspiration will come back again, naturally, and I'll be glad to promote Malaysia again.



RACHEL YEOH is a former journalist who traded her on-the-go job for a life behind the desk. For the sake of work-life balance, she participates in Penang's performing arts scene after hours.

DESIGN FOR STRENGTH

FROM BUILT STRUCTURES TO RESILIENT LIVING SYSTEMS



1

BY NICOLE CHANG

IN OCTOBER, the Persatuan Arkitek Malaysia (PAM) Northern Chapter convened the World Architecture Day Symposium 2025 at the Penang Waterfront Convention Centre. Nearly 200 local and international participants from the professional, academic and public sectors gathered to address the theme "Design for Strength", going beyond architectural and structural integrity alone. As the organising chairman, Francis Tang Kim Sheng, emphasised: "Strength should not be measured merely by the durability of its materials or the construction of its form. We, as architects, are entrusted with the responsibility to design with empathy, foresight and integrity, creating environments that protect, empower and sustain." But how can architectural creativity and design sensitivity constructively address the evolving, multifaceted and interconnected pursuit towards realising social, cultural and ecological resilience?

DESIGNING FOR FOOD SECURITY, CULTURAL CONTINUITY AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING

Qhawarizmi Norhisham of Cyberjaya-based Qhawarizmi Architect shared two of his team's endeavours to advance unconventional architectural solutions and viable alternatives towards resilience. Ladang Langit redefines urban agro-food production and supply through an integrated, self-sustaining ecosystem to address food security in cities. The project integrates technology-enabled cultivation, rapid distribution and public education into a cohesive food infrastructure framework, efficiently reducing food miles and logistical carbon emissions while maintaining harvest freshness.

The Surau Majlis Perbandaran Selayang design embodies the continued expression and reinterpretation of cultural intelligence through architecture. Inspired by the relationship between the moon and sun in Islamic cosmology, its circular form materially symbolises the oneness of God. By expressing theological significance in its geometry, orientation and lighting, "the design emphasises scientific logic, echoing Islam's intellectual heritage," Qhawarizmi explained.

Seperately, Twitee Vajrabhaya from the Bangkok-based Department of ARCHITECTURE Co. shared several projects aimed at nurturing community wellbeing through inclusive interaction and publicly accessible place-making. The Commons Saladaeng and The Commons Thonglor emphasise the significance of circulation through infrastructural elements like open-air public spaces and transitional zones, which also serve as vital social connectors. By facilitating the conversion of movement into public interaction, architecture becomes an active catalyst of community engagement.

CAPTIONS

1. Qhawarizmi Norhisham.
2. Francis Tang (first row, fifth from left), with members of the organising team and the PAM Northern Chapter.
3. Giovanni Santos presenting the Fort Cornwallis restorations.
4. Antonius Richard Rusli.
5. A panel presentation involving several participants.



2

The openness and adaptability of Chonburi's "The Flow" Multipurpose Pavilion provides spatial flexibility for users' changing needs; Sala Bang Pa-In Resort reinterprets riverside living in Ayutthaya through design rooted in local contexts; and Chulalongkorn University's Architecture Library is spatially defined as a creative incubator and hub for contemporary learning. Architectural resilience is cultivated through human-centred design to emphasise inclusivity, adaptability and social engagement.

NURTURING ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ADAPTATION

Antonius Richard Rusli, a Chinese-Indonesian architect and founder of RAD+ar, prioritises inclusiveness within communities through unconventional prototypes/strategies of context-responsive design. Designed as a small-scale, self-initiated prototype, the Chicken Hero Pavilion fosters social and ecological resilience through everyday practices. Constructed from reclaimed bamboo, it integrates backyard poultry farming, food-waste composting and passive ventilation into a temporary public installation within an urban forest. Project partners and community visitors directly engage with food cycles and urban farming, with each household becoming an agent of sustainability. "[A] household chicken coop can be a fun, manageable way to combat food waste, reduce carbon footprints and lower methane gas emissions. This helps address the challenges of global warming. Also, it's a healing garden," said Antonius.



4

Meanwhile, at the Lattice Creative Garden, RAD+ar's team transformed plastic waste collected from Jakarta's Sudirman Central Business District into 16,800 architectural lattice plates to serve as sun-shading devices, thus highlighting Indonesia's waste-management issues while converting waste for practical use. Without imposing rigid architectural forms, their "Stalk, the Tree Hugger" project encases five existing 30m trees within a lightweight, parametric "cloth" structure that responds to organic geometry. This flexible enclosure transforms the spaces between trees into adaptable commercial and social zones, shaped by natural lighting, shadows and ventilation. Rather than clearing vegetation, they preserve natural assets, improve microclimatic comfort through shading and ventilation while blurring indoor–outdoor boundaries. Such experimental structures can facilitate urban activities while promoting environmental stewardship and social engagement.



3



5

CONSERVING HERITAGE AS LIVING STRENGTH

Think City's heritage conservation specialists, Francesco Siravo and Giovanni Santos, shared their experiences spearheading the restoration of Penang's Northern Seafront and Fort Cornwallis. Siravo broadened the focus of conservation from individual sites/buildings to the wider context of cities and governance, by reframing resilience as an ecosystem of partnerships among various stakeholders. Urban strength is not authored, but rather, cultivated through collective commitment, sustained dialogue/negotiations and long-term stewardship. Heritage, in this sense, is not a regulatory constraint or fragile relic, but a living economic and social asset capable of creating jobs, inspiring creativity and fostering a communal sense of belonging. As he argued: "Authenticity isn't just nostalgic. It involves preserving the site's soul and identity by using genuine materials and honouring traditional craftsmanship."

Similarly, Santos framed conservation as a dynamic and disciplined process grounded in authenticity, guided by stewardship and executed through thoughtful, measured interventions. Compatible materials, traditional techniques and rigorous quality control can ensure the long-term maintenance and sustainability of restored sites. Conservation integrity lies in ensuring continuity, respecting historical layers and adapting structures for future relevance. As he explained: "Conservation is an adaptive process that bridges past and future. Restoring architectural details using original techniques instead of replacing them with modern substitutes preserves both tangible and intangible cultural heritage identity." Both men advocate for local capacity-building, while emphasising ongoing training and adherence to professional standards. Doing so ensures that conservation practices remain self-sustaining and locally empowering, therefore safeguarding cultural continuity for future generations.

ADAPTIVE REGENERATION FOR URBAN VITALITY AND RESILIENCE

Finally, Ng Chin Yong, design principal of Retail at 10 Design, addressed how strength can be built through large-scale adaptive regeneration. At MixC Sungang, a former industrial site in Shenzhen was transformed into a gastronomy-led, mixed-use precinct integrating retail streets, a mall and an open cultural plaza into a vibrant public realm for leisure and cultural engagement. Through daylight-filled atriums, shaded interconnected circulation and adaptable "floating market boxes", it maximises commercial efficiency while fostering social interaction and climate responsiveness within a high-density urban setting.

His other major Shenzhen project, Huafa Snow World (the world's largest indoor ski centre, launched in late-2025), demonstrates how complex leisure developments can still be energy-conscious systems. "The 600m-long ski slope with a roof area of 42,000m^2 covered in solar panels which generate 7mil kilowatts of electricity, [can] power the entire development and allow excess to be sold back to the government," Ng clarified. Retail, hospitality and recreation are combined within a cohesive, environmentally responsive framework, positioning leisure infrastructure as a contributor to, rather than burden on, urban resilience. Such resilience arises from architecture's ability to perform and support interdependence through economic, environmental and social urban systems.

From this symposium, a new shared understanding of "design for strength" has emerged. It is an ethical stance as much as an architectural one, which recognises the built environment as a living system shaped by human behaviour, cultural continuity and ecological limits.

Strength should not only be measured through what we build, but also the wisdom embedded in designing for change, facilitating adaptation and maintaining long-term sustainability.

***Note:** Images courtesy of the PAM Northern Chapter.



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A RETIREMENT WE CAN NO LONGER AFFORD?

BY KENNETH ONG

49-YEAR-OLD NORAZLAN ISMAIL, a taxi driver in Johor, embarked on a journey from Johor Bahru to Istana Negara.[1] Travelling on foot over six gruelling days during Ramadan in 2023, Norazlan sought to plead with national leaders to allow more Employees Provident Fund (EPF) withdrawals, so that he could pay off his debts. When questioned about his long-term financial security, the sole breadwinner replied: "Why should we think about the future when I feel like dying now?"

Norazlan is one of many Malaysians forced to sacrifice long-term retirement security to resolve current financial hardship. As of August 2025, more than 4.6mil EPF members aged under 55 have withdrawn more than RM14bil via Account 3 (Akaun Fleksibel).[2] This means that 35% of EPF's 13.2mil members have withdrawn at least RM3,000 from their retirement savings. The scale is such that one in four Malaysians could exhaust their EPF savings within five years of retiring.[3] Put more bluntly, retirement is slowly becoming a luxury. What has gone wrong, and what can be done to improve matters as Malaysia becomes an ageing nation?[4]



THE CURRENT RETIREMENT SAVINGS LANDSCAPE

The EPF is a mandatory bedrock of retirement for the private sector workforce and non-pensionable public servants. Largely funded by monthly deductions from employees (contributing 11% of their salaries) and employers (who top-up employees' contributions by providing 12–13% of this figure), savings are invested in various financial securities to generate annual dividends (most recently declared at 6.15% for 2025).[5] Although the minimum retirement age has been raised to 60, contributors can begin withdrawing their savings at 55.

TABLE 1: EPF REGISTRATIONS, AS OF DECEMBER 2025[6]

	2024	2025
Total members	16,223,368	18,088,387
Active members	8,783,130	10,588,648
New members	480,351	2,783,508
Total active employers	614,563	640,391
New employers	71,471	89,649

In May 2024, EPF contributions were restructured as follows: 75% goes to Account 1 (Akaun Persaraan, the primary account); 15% to Account 2 (Akaun Sejahtera) for pre-retirement needs like housing and healthcare; and 10% to Account 3. While Account 3 was newly introduced to allow for emergency cash withdrawals, such as in Norazlan's case, increased liquidity could risk prematurely depleting vital savings (see *Penang Monthly,* June 2024). As of February, 74% of EPF members may have less than RM100,000 in savings upon retirement, an amount that could be depleted in fewer than five years.[7]

Consequently, EPF has revised its retirement income adequacy (RIA) framework to introduce a three-tiered, income-focused model.[8] It seeks to encourage Malaysians to save sufficiently for a sustainable retirement income, instead of simply treating EPF as a one-time withdrawal. However, only 39.5% of members are on track to meet the basic savings tier (RM390,000) needed for retirement. Translated into monthly withdrawals, they can withdraw RM1,625 monthly within their first year of retirement (aged 60), and RM4,434 monthly by the 20th year, post-retirement. The remaining amounts in their accounts will be supplemented by annual dividends to adjust for inflation.

TABLE 2: EPF SAVINGS AMONG ACTIVE MALAYSIAN FORMAL SECTOR MEMBERS, AS OF DECEMBER 2025[9]

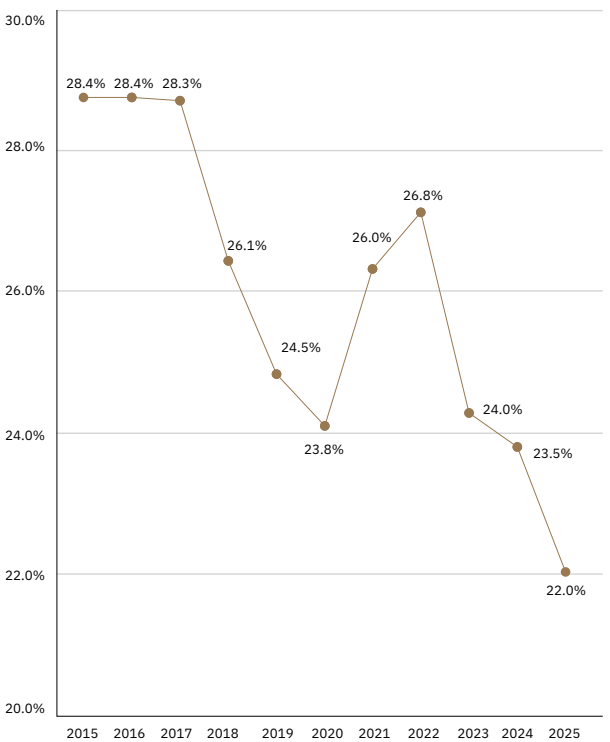
Age range	On track status toward savings target by age 60		
	Basic RM390,000	**Adequate** RM650,000	**Enhanced** RM1,300,000
18–30	39.8%	32.5%	13.0%
31–40	40.6%	28.0%	8.5%
41–50	42.6%	25.4%	8.9%
51–55	36.6%	20.4%	7.2%
56–60	21.5%	13.3%	5.2%
Overall	39.5%	28.2%	10.2%

Notably, over 60% of formal sector EPF members (4.42mil active workers) under 60 are unable to meet the basic savings benchmark. An impending "work-until-death" scenario has already manifested in 2024 survey data, where 26% of respondents aged 60 and above expect to continue working until their health eventually fails.[10] If the vast majority of Malaysians retires without sufficient savings, the financial burden of supporting them will fall upon the next generation. The result is an expanded "sandwich class" of younger workers supporting their own children *and* ageing parents. Other trends—such as falling birth rates, a shrinking workforce and widespread old-age poverty—will strain government resources immensely, ultimately weakening social protection systems in general.

THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE RETIREMENT CRISIS

The primary cause of this impending crisis is rooted in a persistently low wage structure. As of 2024, 77% of members earn less than RM5,000 monthly, with 55% earning less than RM3,000. Coupled with inflation and stagnant wage growth, accumulating personal savings becomes more challenging for the average worker. By 2024, the gross savings rate (the national savings rate) actually fell below pre-Covid-19 levels, effectively erasing years of post-pandemic recovery.

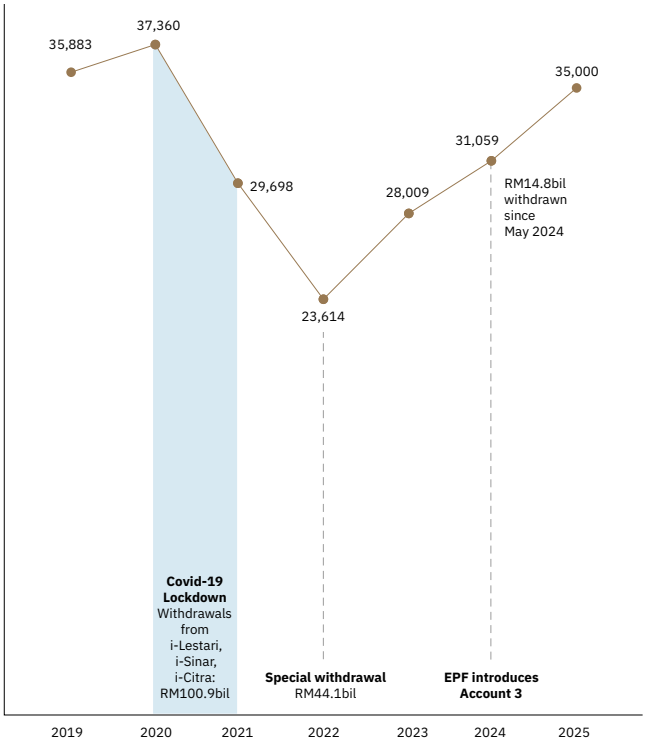
FIGURE 1: GROSS SAVINGS RATE, 2015–25 (% OF NOMINAL GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT, GDP)[11]



The Covid-19 pandemic was the major cause of declining retirement savings, which necessitated government action. Between 2020 and 2022, the government introduced emergency withdrawal schemes to address basic monthly needs such as i-Lestari, i-Sinar and i-Citra.[12]

These allowed members to withdraw between RM500 (under i-Lestari) and RM10,000 (under i-Sinar) monthly from Account 1. As a result, 8.1mil EPF members, more than half the total, withdrew a cumulative RM145bil. The consequences were seen almost immediately, with median savings plummeting 37% during this period.

FIGURE 2: EPF WITHDRAWALS BY AND MEDIAN SAVINGS OF EPF MEMBERS, 2019–25 [13]



Furthermore, Malaysia also suffers from a persistent household debt crisis. By the first half of 2025, Malaysia had a staggering 84.8% household debt-to-GDP ratio: one of the highest in Southeast Asia, largely driven by residential property (RM36.27bil) and private vehicle (RM18.52bil) ownership (according to December 2025 figures).[14] This combination of high debt, rising costs and stagnant wages creates a precarious cycle, where retirement savings are no longer a financial priority.

POLICY INTERVENTIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

Malaysia's retirement crisis is a multifaceted problem shaped by structural, economic and behavioural factors. It reflects the daily struggles of regular Malaysians: the pressures of unpaid debts, a relentlessly rising cost of living, stagnant paycheques and growing anxiety about working until death. A multidimensional approach targeting critical areas is urgently required. Fortunately, the 13th Malaysia Plan and Budget 2026 have introduced policy interventions across three levels—the federal government, statutory bodies and social security organisations—to alleviate the crisis.

TABLE 3: TARGETED INTERVENTIONS IN BUDGET 2026[15]

Implementing agency	Targeted areas	Interventions	Status
Federal government	Labour	Raising retirement age from 60 to 65	In-review
	Social safety net	SARA cash assistance	Disbursed between January–April 2025, and January 2026
		RON95 fuel subsidy (BUDI95)	Effective September 2025
EPF	Savings adequacy	New RIA framework	Effective January 2026
	Vulnerable groups	Extending protection for housewives from age 55 to 60	
	Informal economy	Government matches incentives for gig/informal workers	
	Religion	Higher Hajj withdrawal limits	
Kumpulan Wang Persaraan (KWAP)	Ageing ("silver") economy	Jana MyPesara (a microfinancing initiative for pensioners)	Effective February 2026

Crucially, safeguarding our future retirement savings also requires a fundamental shift in our financial behaviour. This must start at the ground level, by improving financial literacy, diversifying savings beyond EPF and embracing passive investing, among other changes. Retirement savings should be prioritised as long-term social insurance, rather than an emergency financial lifeline. For Malaysia to truly transition into a high-income economy, we must prioritise the long-term wealth of the working class over short-term immediate liquidity. After all, a vibrant and developed nation cannot be built upon the backs of a generation that cannot afford to retire.

ENDNOTES

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2. *Free Malaysia Today.* (2025, August 13). "Nearly RM15bil EPF Flexible account withdrawals as of June, says Anwar."
3. Hana Naz Harun. (2024, June 4). "1 in 4 Malaysians exhaust EPF savings within 5 years of withdrawal age." *New Straits Times.*
4. By 2030, 15% of the population will be aged 60 and above. See: KWAP. (2025). *Retirement Strategic Agenda*. https://www.kwap.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/RSA.pdf
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9. EPF (2026).
10. Hana (2024).
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THE LIMITS OF ORGANISED INCLUSION: SOME INSIGHTS FROM ENGAGED YOUTH IN PENANG

BY SURESRAJ THERAMBARAJOO

IMAGINE A FULL ROOM, a party banner fluttering behind the stage. The microphones crackle once, as an older, well-meaning political leader leans forward to deliver that ubiquitous line. "Young people are the leaders of tomorrow." For a moment, it sounds like an affirmation of the late Kofi Annan's call to action. As the former secretary-general of the United Nations put it, "any society that does not succeed in tapping into the energy and creativity of its youth will be left behind". [1]

But in practice, all major decisions about what gets funded, prioritised and delayed have already been decided before the youths arrived. The session might end with handshakes and a few photographs. And inclusivity remains *separate* from representation.

This is a recurring contradiction for four young, politically engaged Penangites: Andika Putera, Leang Yue Yi, Siranjeev Ram and Alka Kaur. From their experience, the youth are not disengaged, but instead often kept at arm's length from exerting real influence within political parties, whether due to age, hierarchies, internal structures or the persistent unspoken belief that young people can only help, but not steer, decision-making. What do their experiences with politics look like, and what possibilities exist, moving forward?

MOMENTS OF CONTENTION

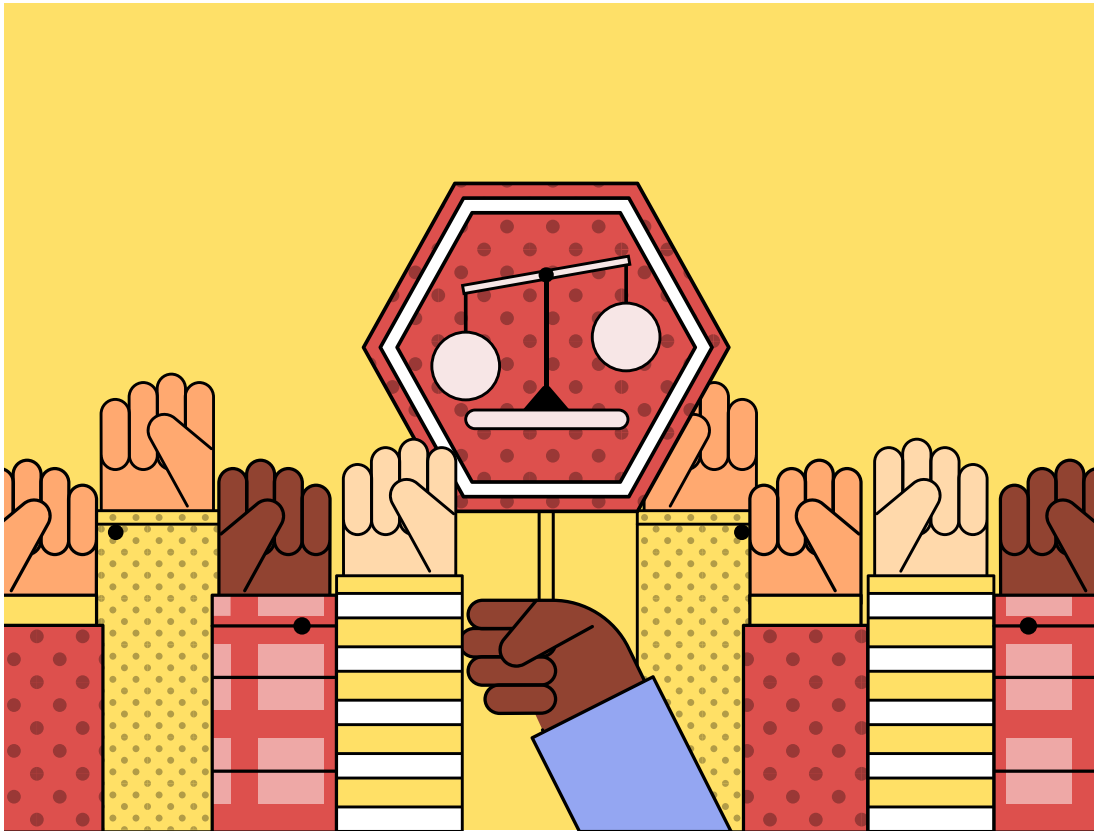
Rather than charting personal arcs, our conversations revealed key moments where politics stopped being abstract arguments, but became lived encounters with power. The first moment emerged around education, and the way policies change the parameters of what is deemed possible. Leang spoke about admissions to the public higher education system and a persistent sense that particular demographics are being prioritised, rather than merit-based admissions. [2] Her frustration was not expressed merely as grievance, but framed as a broader lesson. Sometimes, policies do not just distribute opportunities, but also suggest whom systems expect to succeed. Consequently, politics stopped becoming distant for Leang, and formed the terrain upon which potential futures were negotiated.

The second moment was around climate change, framed by the slow violence of delay. Alka described being surrounded by young people who were both informed about and ready to act on the crisis, yet decision-making authority remained in the hands of leaders removed from the consequences of postponed action. Without political will, even strong policies stall. Caring thus starts to feel like a prerequisite for work, rather than being work itself.

How do political structures neutralise the frictions that emerge from these revelatory moments? The first is by absorbing public concern. Andika described hearing the same civic grievances—whether around poor public facilities, flash floods or traffic congestion—being repeated yearly but with little visible change. Over time, repetition becomes a political education. It teaches you that a system can listen, nod, normalise dissatisfaction and carry on. In short, everybody outside of power simply learns to live with outcomes that they are unable to change. The second is through a form of gatekeeping that masquerades as guidance. If there is a spectre that haunts youth politics, then it is the instruction to wait: to patiently grow into and earn a place in politics. It is often delivered gently, but its intention is to delay youthful influence until decisions are already made—and to mould youths in line with these expectations.



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> After all, a new generation can enter politics, yet still inherit old habits.

Andika saw these as facets of "conditional inclusion". Young people are encouraged to volunteer, attend programmes and be visibly supportive of party leaders, but when it comes to asking questions, making decisions or practising leadership, they are still expected to stay in place. For Andika, politics rarely creates space out of goodwill. Rather, space has to be claimed.

Siranjeev then explained how gatekeeping functions differently from the perspective of minority youths. With the prospects of political engagement postponed to an older age, destructive pathways start looking viable. He watched peers getting drawn towards gangsterism, having been tempted by the possibility of easily acquiring money, power and status. He tried to respond by starting community programmes, but these initiatives were hampered by the fact that the broader political system kept reproducing the conditions that funnelled young people towards harm in the first place.

THE LIMITS OF INCLUSIVITY?

For Alka, gatekeeping is most professional and difficult to challenge in formal policy settings, where youths are invited to contribute ideas, sit on panels and submit recommendations. On paper, these appear to be inclusive moves, yet participants are still rarely trusted with decision-making authority. Exclusion gets reframed as preparation, and then waiting begins again.

This is not to say that there has not been any progress. Andika noted genuine change occurring at the ground level, where young people become more outspoken and issue-driven, organising themselves around real problems rather than charismatic personalities. Similarly, Leang added that civic engagement may occur faster than ever before through social media, peer networks and new forms of mobilisation, yet power still concentrates upwards. Innovation easily moves horizontally across society, yet struggles to rise vertically within institutions. As Andika explained, hierarchy can reassert itself by punishing risk-taking, protecting established positions and slowing progress down. It is not that ideas are missing or lacking, but rather, that caution and conformity are incentivised.

This is where the language of inclusion reaches its limits: when it can be used as a substitute for the actual sharing of power. A party can create youth wings, yet keep nominations controlled. Leaders can hold dialogues, but decide upon budgets elsewhere. A superior can listen thoughtfully, while still protecting the ladder that determines who advances.

WHAT SHOULD RENEWAL LOOK LIKE?

This piece ends where the interviews do: not with reassurance, but with an assessment of what renewal means. Every younger generation is told, in one way or another, that they will be the ones to fix what their predecessors could not. But none of these four young Penangites saw youthful politics as an automatic cure. After all, a new generation can enter politics, yet still inherit old habits. So, when young people show up—when they are in rooms, committees or panels—what changes in practice? Are they kept visible but powerless in decision-making? And when they disagree, who has the final word? We need to think about what youth inclusion actually means, and how it must move towards true representation. Awareness alone does not break cycles; rather, representation does. Penang does not need more praise for tomorrow's leaders. The future may be endlessly negotiable, but the present is not.

ENDNOTES

1. This quote is also the title of Annan's 12 August 2013 blog post, accessible at https://www.kofiannanfoundation.org/publication/any-society-that-does-not-succeed-in-tapping-into-the-energy-and-creativity-of-its-youth-will-be-left-behind/.

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SEPARATED THROUGH NECESSITY?

GENDERED SEGREGATION AMONG THE AGED AND HOMELESS

BY CAROLYN KHOR

GENDER-SEGREGATED HOMES for the elderly poor are usually justified on practical operational grounds such as privacy needs, safety and staffing, and sometimes in line with long-standing cultural norms (but not necessarily religious ones). Such homes are part of the infrastructure of elder care in Penang, which has already crossed the threshold into an ageing society.[1] Older adults are increasingly living longer, but sometimes have limited savings and weakening support networks. The potential implications are serious.

Between 2014 and 2016, the Social Welfare Department recorded 5,274 homeless individuals nationwide—3,532 men and 1,742 women—concentrated in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Penang. There were 952 homeless individuals in Penang alone: 701 men and 251 women, a ratio of roughly three to one. Post-pandemic data remain fragmented, but the same general pattern holds today. Men dominate the visible homeless population, and while women's destitution tends to be less visible, it is no less acute. What are the challenges faced when homelessness, ageing and gender intersect? The experiences of two segregated homes prompt us to think about what it means to care for older men and women, and what is often overlooked in the process.

CAPTIONS

1. Residents at Vallalar watching a large-screen television in the living room.

2. Senior resident at Grace Home during a baking session.



1

PUSAT JAGAAN VALLALAR

At Vallalar Home Care Centre, a home for elderly men in Batu Maung, segregation is described simply as a necessity. Its founder, Ravi Tandathabani, 60, has been running the home for over 11 years since his brother, a double-amputee, was placed in his care. He began accepting others shortly afterwards, but only admits men. There are no female workers available to care for women, and furthermore, a mixed-gender setting demands managerial capacity that he does not have.

Named for Saint Vallalar Ramalingga Swamy and guided by his teachings, the home provides meals, clothing, medical care and funeral rites. Ravi, trained in homoeopathy and basic nursing, handled much of the care by himself until he recently hired four helpers. The home currently houses 29 men—20 Chinese and 9 Indian—at a monthly cost of RM15,000–17,000, funded entirely by donations. Moving forward, a new wing will be built next to its existing premises, to accommodate more residents in need.

Most residents arrived through referrals from hospitals and the police, as well as the general public. "They are elderly, unemployed and alone, and we take them in," said Ravi. Some were also ill, homeless or abandoned. "I think society is less forgiving to men," he continued. Elderly poor men are often seen as difficult rather than vulnerable, a perception that influences where they are sent and how care is organised. He has reported few disruptions, however, and most of these are related to health issues, punctuated by the occasional argument.

GRACE HOME

Meanwhile, Grace Home in Port Klang takes in destitute women who have been abused, abandoned, neglected or left homeless, often arriving following referrals by families, hospitals, welfare agencies and the public. This women-only home has 33 residents, ranging from their 40s to 90s, with most being elderly. Daily life is structured by duty rosters, chores, scheduled activities and counselling sessions. Conflicts are not uncommon, mostly revolving around gossip, accusations about misplaced belongings or confusion resulting from diminished mental capacity. Although religion is not imposed, grace is still said before meals and church groups visit regularly.

Many residents arrive suffering from depression and a loss of self-worth, and the home's chairman, Desmond Teo, understands the restoration of dignity as part of the home's most critical duty. This ethos extends to the end of life. When residents die, the home also handles funeral arrangements (usually cremation) at a cost of several thousand ringgit, with or without donor support.

When Grace Home first opened, it accepted both men and women, but over time, more women started being referred. Mixed housing proved difficult in practice, especially when older men began paying attention to the women, creating a sense of discomfort for them.



2

Today, admitting men would require changes to infrastructure and staffing, as well as spatial requirements, which are not always feasible. Teo is considering re-establishing a men's facility, but has found male caregivers hard to recruit. Furthermore, men are physically stronger and more volatile, thus raising safety considerations. Then there is also the matter of prioritising women's needs, especially since their challenges on the streets are of a different magnitude compared with men.

"Women are more vulnerable, especially when left to fend for themselves," Teo said. While men can often survive better outside, and indeed, sometimes refuse help because they believe that they can manage alone, women face dangers such as rape, abuse and trafficking. "Through our work, I have discovered that homeless women move according to a schedule, appearing only at certain times to find food, and retreat to hidden corners to sleep during the day. At night, they remain half-awake, alert to danger."

THE CHANGING NATURE OF CARE

This glance at both independent shelters suggests that gendered segregation among the elderly poor is primarily a matter of addressing needs, vulnerabilities and resource constraints. No regulatory framework governs segregation by individual operators, who are entirely responsible for decision-making. But in single-gendered settings, issues of sexuality and intimacy are rarely raised, possibly reflecting a broader cultural unease with older adults' emotional lives. Studies on residential care have found that institutional environments frequently render older adults' sexual and emotional needs invisible,[2] with staff and policy essentially framing them as "post-sexual" individuals.

Barriers to recognising intimate needs might also extend to older individuals themselves. For example, none of Vallalar's residents, even relatively younger ones in their 40s or 50s, have expressed any desire to mix with women. When asked, several residents did not admit to feeling lonely or if they were seeking female companionship. It is unclear whether they are genuinely content with their lives, or simply reluctant to speak about how they really felt.

Yet intimacy does not disappear with age. At Grace Home, Teo explained that if carers observe any inappropriate incidents, they would engage the women through counselling. Regardless, Teo does not deny that residents are sexual beings. Some younger ones have expressed a desire to marry: something that the home would support if circumstances allowed. However, charity-run homes generally do not offer shared rooms for couples, unlike private facilities, which sometimes do. Meanwhile, homosexual relationships have not been observed, he noted, stating that this topic is rarely discussed openly. "Homes may be reluctant to acknowledge such issues for fear of damaging their reputation."

As it transpires, an ageing homeless population changes the nature of the care required. The elderly poor do not only need shelter and meals; they also carry emotional histories, family fractures, unaddressed loneliness and emotional needs. When they are segregated by gender in under-resourced homes, a focus on physical management often leaves little opportunity to manage residents' emotional and relational needs. In an ageing society, where poverty intersects with abandonment, engaging with concerns around sexuality, intimacy and mental health are not a secondary matter, but part of what it means to age with dignity.

ENDNOTES

[1] As per United Nations benchmarks, a society is considered ageing when at least 7% of its population is aged 65 and above.

[2] See for example: Nay, R., et al. (2007). "Sexuality: from stigma, stereotypes and secrecy to coming out, communication and choice." *International Journal of Older People Nursing, 2*(1): pp. 76–80.



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FROM THE HIGH TOWER TO THE HUMBLE TRUCK



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ILHAM GALLERY'S DECADE OF INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION, 2015–2025

BY IVAN GABRIEL

THE ILHAM GALLERY has consolidated its unique position within Malaysia's cultural landscape by navigating the tensions between private funding and its public-sector mandate. Founded in 2015, the Kuala Lumpur-based space has successfully addressed an institutional gap by prioritising scholarly rigour in the arts over commercial interests. Its first decade can be thought of as a series of deliberate curatorial interventions: characterised by its non-collection strategy, commitment to historical recovery, interrogation of global systems, institutionalisation of experimentation and radical decentralisation. Consequently, ILHAM has fundamentally reshaped contemporary art museums in Southeast Asia by repositioning them not as insular sites of viewership, but as extensible, civic-facing networks for regional discourse and proactive pedagogy instead.

THE "NON-COLLECTION" MANDATE

Globally, private art museums are frequently criticised as "ego-museums": repositories designed to validate the personal tastes and assets of their founders. Managed by the non-profit Yayasan ILHAM, the gallery deliberately subverted this model at its inception. While maintaining a growing corporate collection, its core operational philosophy is built around a "non-collection" mandate, which seeks the curatorial decoupling of art from capital.

By forgoing the need for a permanent display of its own holdings, ILHAM freed its curatorial team to pursue thematic, research-heavy exhibitions that are not beholden to provenance or market value. This decoupling enables the gallery to operate with flexibility and independence. The result is a decade's worth of programming that prioritises knowledge-production over the display of objects, thus ensuring that conversations revolve around aesthetic worth, rather than monetary value.

REDRESSING HISTORICAL SILENCES THROUGH CURATORIAL RECOVERY

Another defining characteristic is ILHAM's commitment to historical recovery. Where the national artistic canon has often been fragmented by shifting political tides or neglect, ILHAM embodies a revisionist force. Its exhibitions are not merely visual surveys, but also scholarly interrogations of the unspoken.

A prime example is 2023's *Nirmala Dutt: Statements*. By dedicating significant resources to archival research and a comprehensive publication, ILHAM disrupted the standard exhibition model. Its attempt to canonise Dutt as a pioneer of environmental and sociopolitical installations reflects ILHAM's broader praxis of using the gallery as a space for historical redress. By highlighting artists whose practices were previously overlooked or undervalued, ILHAM fills a scholarly gap often left behind by underfunded state institutions. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive and academically grounded Malaysian art historical record.

INTERROGATING GLOBAL SYSTEMS

Building upon this historiographical foundation, ILHAM recently pivoted towards expressing Global South solidarity, exemplified by 2025's *The Plantation Plot*, a seminal collaboration with the global non-profit organisation, KADIST. Curated by Sheau Yun Lim, it deployed a dual-etymological framework: the "plot" as *both* a measured piece of land and the events of a narrative.

Drawing heavily on an intellectual lineage of critical theorists, including Sylvia Wynter, Lim posits the plantation not as a historical colonial relic, but rather, a "prologue" to contemporary capitalism. By uniting 28 artists from Southeast Asia and the Americas to expose the shared legacies of cash crops such as rubber, sugar and indigo, this inquiry identified the plantation as an ongoing imperial engine that reduces human labour to a secondary component of monoculture.

As a whole, key works—such as Gogulaaajan Rajendran's "Coolies' Chorus", a revival of Tamil plantation folk songs—collectively enact vital archival interventions that pivot from historical displays to active performances of memory. Using this methodology, the project reoriented the "white cube" of the gallery towards confronting the logic of the colonial plantation. In doing so, ILHAM facilitated an awareness of how the plantation's banalising totality continues dictating contemporary social and ecological orders.

INSTITUTIONALISING THE EXPERIMENTAL

Whereas its survey exhibitions look backward in time, the triennial ILHAM Art Show, first initiated in 2022, incubates the future. Despite only reaching its second iteration, the Show has already established a definitive national benchmark for infrastructural support. It has created a rare institutional horizon that challenges artists to outpace the immediate demands of the market in



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CAPTIONS

1. Installation view of *ILHAM Art Show* (2025), a triennial exhibition platform.

2. Installation view of *Nirmala Dutt: Statements* (2023), co-curated by Rahel Joseph, Beverly Yong, Snow Ng and Ellen Lee.

3. Installation view of *The Plantation Plot* (2025), curated by Sheau Yun Lim.

favour of long-form conceptual rigour through a grant-based model. In a market where commercial success often dictates artistic form, leading many to produce safe, sellable works, the Show disburses production grants to specifically encourage non-commercial experimentation.

The 2025 edition resulted in monumental, risky works that engaged with, among other themes, indigenous forest custodianship and complex personal histories of grief. It effectively created a protected ecosystem for artists to engage with conceptual and multidisciplinary practices (including film and textiles) that might otherwise be neglected by the local gallery circuit. Further, by leveraging a regional selection panel, ILHAM curated these Malaysian voices through a broader Southeast Asian lens, therefore avoiding the insularity common to domestic arts competitions.

RADICAL DECENTRALISATION THROUGH A BORDERLESS MUSEUM

Perhaps ILHAM's most significant development was the launch of Skola Gambar ILHAM (Malay for "Picture School") last July. A decommissioned 40ft shipping container was re-engineered as a high-fidelity satellite gallery in the field, while meeting the environmental and security standards for professional art handling. In doing so, the institution effectively deterritorialised its practice by breaking with the fixity of the gallery space. Skola Gambar's very etymology is a deliberate invocation of the 19th-century terminology for museums. This linguistic choice reaffirms the gallery's mandate of prioritising deep-seated cultural literacy over transient consumption.

For Director Rahel Joseph, Skola Gambar's launch represents the logical maturation of the gallery's commitment to radical accessibility. Recognising that genuine audience cultivation demands proactive physical movement, the institution sought to transplant the "ILHAM experience" beyond its physical confines at the ILHAM Tower. By deploying the container to public schools and urban housing projects, it addresses a structural deficit by engaging communities who are otherwise historically distant from cultural infrastructure.

Its inaugural exhibition, *Ceritalah*, operationalised this vision through an intergenerational dialogue among 12 Malaysian artists, whose works spanned the material spectrum: from traditional batik and sculpture to contemporary video. By integrating specialised pedagogical resources and scholarly wall texts into this mobile circuit, the exhibition's intellectual density and institutional integrity remained uncompromised in transit.



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Through site-specific dialogues led by dedicated educators, the project immediately established a culture of active inquiry on the ground. This was vividly evidenced by recurring grassroots engagement, where younger visitors returned to the container with peers and kin, effectively claiming the space as a community hub.

ILHAM's first decade is defined by the successful cultivation of a "Third Space" that synthesises the academic rigour of a national art institution, independence of a private foundation and accessibility of a public square. The challenge in the coming decade lies in sustaining this equilibrium between rigorous scholarship and radical outreach. If the inaugural ten years has established a definitive framework for Malaysian art, the next ten must ensure that this framework remains sufficiently elastic to hold together the diverse, often contradictory, voices of a shifting national identity.

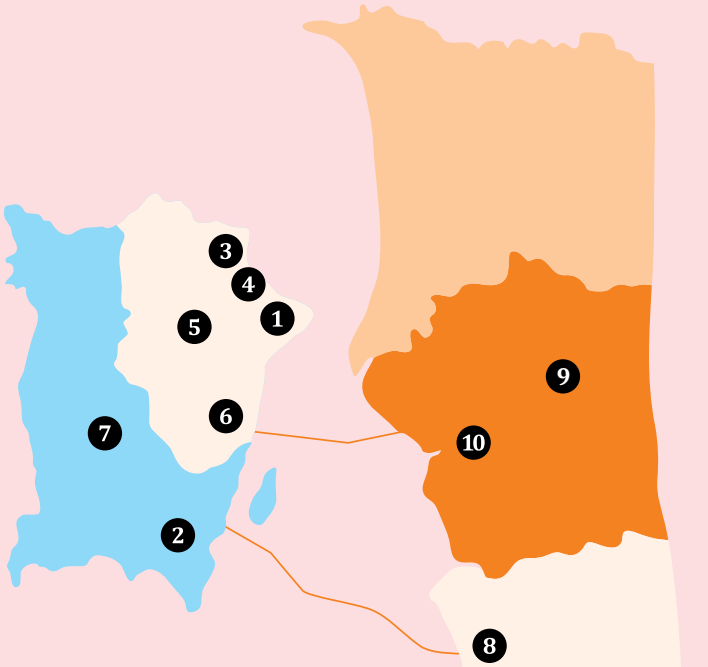
4. "Budaya, Kerjasama & Komuniti: Perbincangan di Atas Tikar" (2023), part of the *Borneo Heart* exhibition, with Yee I-Lann and collaborators.

5. Installation view of *Nirmala Dutt: Statements* (2023), featuring works from her "Tsunami" series (2004–5).



IVAN GABRIEL is a curator with a curatorial approach committed to making art accessible to diverse audiences. He views each showcase as a chance for inadvertent education, using art as a powerful platform to initiate conversations about contemporary issues, provoking audiences to think and reflect.

HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



PICK-UP SPOTS
KL/SELANGOR

◯ Kuala Lumpur
Hubba Hubba Mont Kiara
The Godown Arts Centre

◯ Petaling Jaya
Temu House
Yin's Sourdough Bakery and Café

◯ Subang Jaya
Sunway University
(Students Study Area)

PICK-UP SPOTS
PENANG

1 George Town
Areca Books
Book Island @ COEX
Infinity 8
Black Kettle
BookXcess Gurney Paragon
ChinaHouse
Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion
(Blue Mansion)
Gerakbudaya Bookshop
@ Hikayat
Gurney Plaza
(Information Counter)
Hin Bus Depot Art Centre
Huey & Wah Café
Le Petit Four Patisserie
More by Arang Coffee
Penang Institute
Penang Island City Council
(Komtar Level 3)
Pusat Harmoni
(Harmonico)—Reception
Ren I Tang Heritage Inn
Sin Seh Kai Artisan Bakery
Tourist Information Centre

2 Bayan Lepas
Arang Coffee
InvestPenang
Penang Development
Corporation (PDC)
Penang Skills
Development Centre (PSDC)
Urban Republic

3 Tanjung Bungah
Gusto Café
Straits Mini Mart
Tenby International School
Yin's WholeFood Manufactory
(Lembah Permai)

4 Tanjung Tokong
Blue Reef Straits Quay

5 Air Itam
Coffee Elements
Penang Hill—Lower Station
Sunshine Central

6 Gelugor
E-Gate (Security Desk
located at the building's
middle span)
Penang Youth
Development Corporation
(PYDC)
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Hamzah Sendut Library 1
(Main Entrance Foyer)

8 Batu Kawan
IKEA Batu Kawan

9 Bukit Mertajam
Seberang Perai City Council

10 Juru
AUTO CITY
Shop-In D'Park

READING SPOTS
PENANG

1 George Town
Bricklin Café Bar
Consumers' Association
of Penang
Forward College
G Hotel
Kim Haus
Komichi Tea House
Mugshot Café
Narrow Marrow
Penang Public Library
USM Library
Wheeler's Café

4 Tanjung Tokong
Leo Books

7 Balik Pulau
Botanica Mansion
Nada Natural Farming

8 Batu Kawan
Peninsula College



WATER FOR ALL

PBAPP works to supply clean and potable tap water to all domestic and non-domestic water consumers in Penang, on a 24/7/365 basis.

However, Penang is a water-stressed state with a limited land area (1,059 km^2) and limited water catchment areas (62.9 km^2 of precious hillside forests).

For now, we only have one primary raw water resource (Sungai Muda), and we share it with Kedah.

Climate change has affected seasonal rainfall in dam water catchment areas.

Everyone who lives and works in Penang needs water every day.

Please make it a point to use water at home and at work wisely, so that we have enough for all.

Please support our target of lowering per capita domestic consumption in Penang to 250 litres/capita/day (LCD) or less in 2026.

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