PENANG MONTHLY

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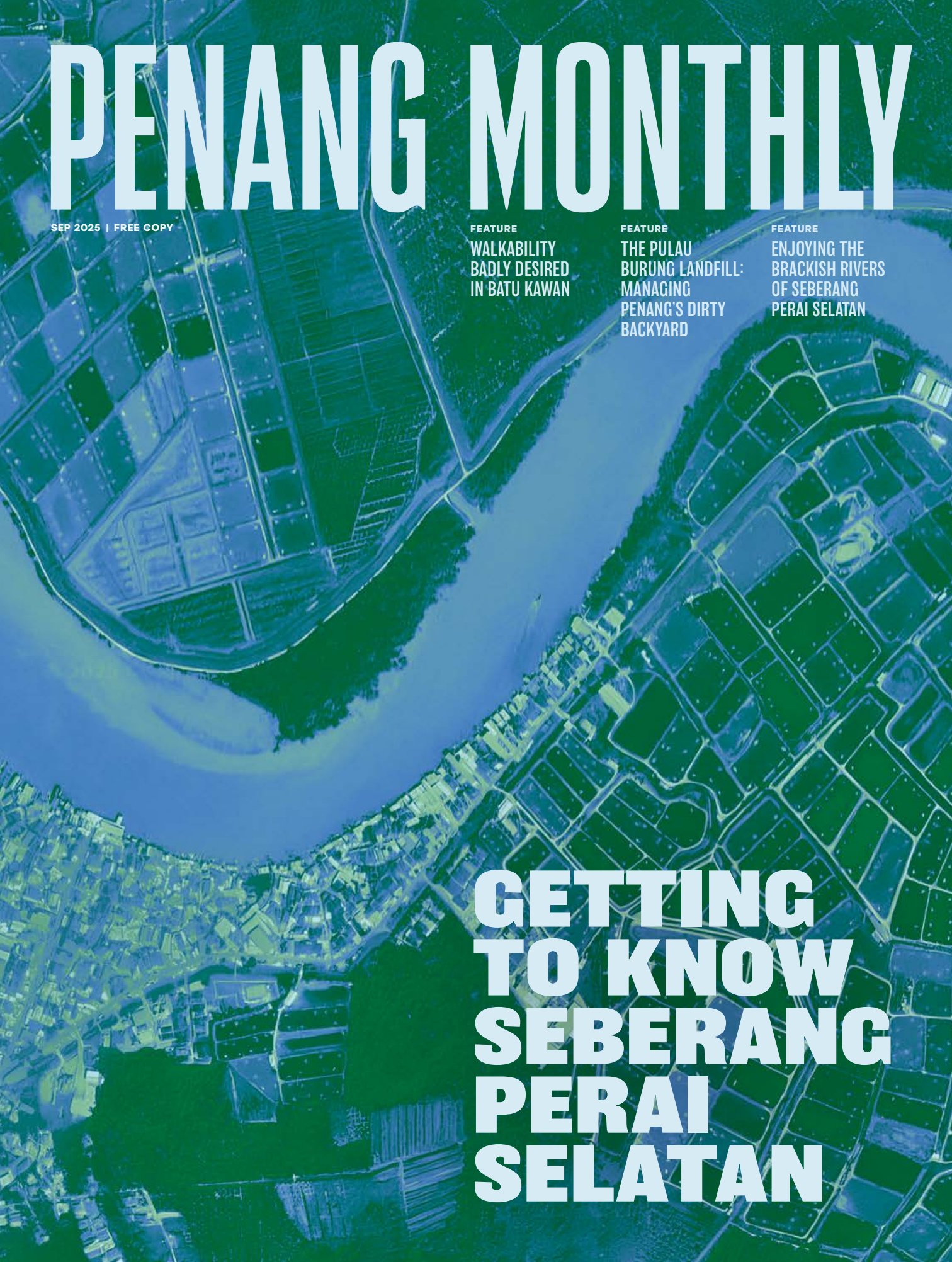
FEATURE
WALKABILITY BADLY DESIRED IN BATU KAWAN

FEATURE
THE PULAU BURUNG LANDFILL: MANAGING PENANG'S DIRTY BACKYARD

FEATURE
ENJOYING THE BRACKISH RIVERS OF SEBERANG PERAI SELATAN



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1. Supply Penangites with information about significant issues in order to promote public participation;
2. Encourage discussion about various aspects of Penang's fate and fortune;
3. Profile Penang personalities who have contributed, sometimes in very unassuming but critical ways, to the reputation and wellbeing of the state;
4. Put the spotlight on ordinary Penangites who otherwise go unnoticed, but who nevertheless define the culture of the state in essential ways;
5. Highlight the importance of Penang as a generator of culture, education, industry and cosmopolitan values;
6. Emphasise present trends in the arts, industry, politics and economics which affect the immediate future of the state and country; and
7. Offer reliable socioeconomic data for the benefit of decision makers in government and the private sector.

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EDITOR
Ooi Kee Beng

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Sheryl Teoh and Rachel Yeoh

COMMUNICATIONS
Iylia de Silva

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT
OGL Consultancy

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS
Kai Fam and Kevin Teh

LOGISTICS EXECUTIVE
Muhammad Amirul Naim

PRINTER
The Phoenix Press Sdn Bhd (1723K)
2509 Jalan Perusahaan Baru,
Prai Industrial Complex,
13600 Prai, Penang, Malaysia.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES & CONTRIBUTIONS
editor@penangmonthly.com or
contact +604 228 3306 (Extension 223 or 225)

BUSINESS ENQUIRIES
business@penangmonthly.com

PUBLISHER
PENANG INSTITUTE
making ideas work

10 Brown Road, 10350 Penang, Malaysia

T +604 228 3306
F +604 226 7042
IG @PenangMonthly
FB fb.com/penangmonthly
W penangmonthly.com

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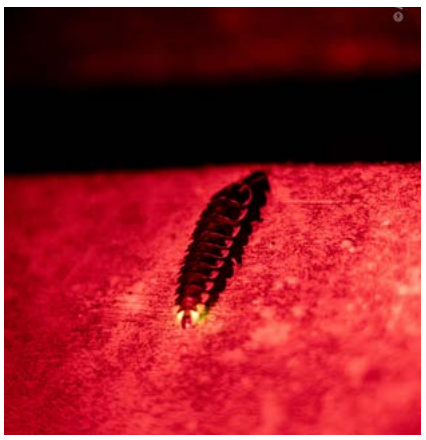
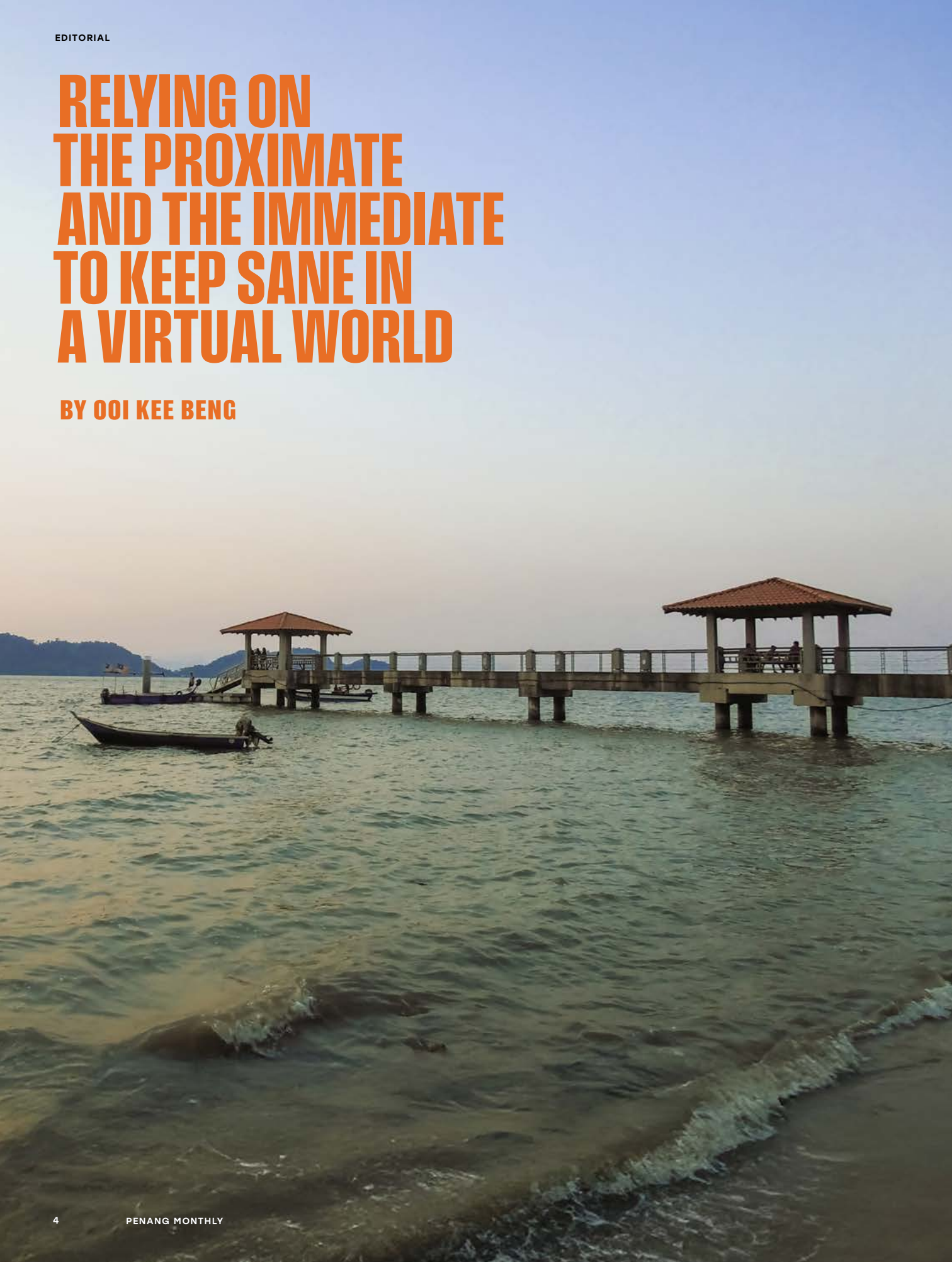


RELYING ON THE PROXIMATE AND THE IMMEDIATE TO KEEP SANE IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

BY OOI KEE BENG



WE LIVE WITHIN narratives, don't we? Our identities are built on them. Our collective identities are definitely group memories woven by time into stories and narratives, and into memories and myths.

For places and times for whom there are few stories, we use terms like "prehistorical", "no man's land", "wilderness" and even "the hinterlands" to describe them. For personalities unknown, we have other terms; we refer to them as being "off the grid", being an enigma, a phantom, a ghost, a shadow or a cipher.

Narratives are, by their nature, a collective event and a social event; in sum, they are an exercise of power as well, a nexus where different wills and opinions wrestle each other to emerge with as much claim to being true as possible. It is therefore far from correct that tales about ourselves are dictated from within, by us. In fact, they emerge out of the very process of co-existence and inter-conflicts.

As the arena where stories could be told expanded with globalisation and modern information and communication technologies, the struggle for attention and the need to tell one's stories have become all the stronger. The avalanche of information that has hit us in recent years through the Internet in its various formats not only bury information through pure abundance, it also dilutes the content at the same time, making them less interesting and consequential.

Dramatic headings thus become important, and click-bait captions. Graphics and videos are valued more for their sensational value than for their truth value; in fact, with deep fakes, it's now hard to tell one from the other. The fear is that we then tend either to ignore them for being manipulative or we watch them for entertainment, in both cases doing it with a sneer.

AN ONTOLOGICAL CRISIS

If having reliable stories about ourselves and our surroundings is vital to our sense of place, our sense of purpose and our sense of self, then the ontological crisis we are faced with is indeed a grave one.

In what sense do I exist if I can't be sure of my defining narratives and facts? How are my collective identities relevant in social interactions if generalisations suffice, and nuances are deemed befuddling?

Staying sane is no easy task if we cannot rely on our recollection of milestone events in our lives. In this context, the Covid-19 pandemic did teach us one important remedy against paranoia and the slow dissolution of the self: this is the notion of "proximity". Many of us came to rely on interactions with those close to you, on doing what is close at hand, and on what you can touch with your hands and feet.

The pandemic revealed how fragile product supply chains are—and this was of course worsened by the trade war initiated by the US in the mid-2010s. Across the world, tolerance for inter-continental cultural and ethnic differences suffered a dismal drop not seen in decades. Suspicion grew even deeper when information could no longer be trusted.

This affected the part of our collective identities built on the impact on us of the stories "distant others" had been telling about us, and of those we had been telling about them. Global cultural harmony has been suffering great challenges, and no alternative has yet appeared that allows for these deep rifts to mend. Such a remedial process will take time to evolve.

Meanwhile, we have to rely on ourselves, on what we know rather than on what we are told; on what we experience concretely in our daily lives than what we are fed audially and visually online.

What we need is a greater sense of immediacy, of authenticity.

Proximitism—allow me herewith to coin that word—is the transitional attitude through which individuals can guard oneselves epistemically and psychologically against the chaos and confusion that is increasingly infecting their information inflows.

The point—and therein lies the remedy—is to seek certainty, reliability and insight through individual and immediate participation—in action, in discussion and in travel. The more this involves physical activity the better.

The undeniability of the physical world, experienced through the body's interaction with it; the comforting pain in muscles pushed to their limit for the day, through jogging or some other exercise; the sounds and smells aroused by gardening work; or the pling-plong of a musical instrument; all these are examples of proximitism experienced by the individual as reminders of the real world beyond the virtual one. It is the immediacy of such actions—understood literally to be a lack of a medium—that best grant us authentic experiences.

Another phenomenon that is close to what I mean by proximitism is "domestic tourism". Visiting places close by should be the natural course of action for anyone wishing to take a break from their daily routines. Instead, cheap flights and enticing information about distant places had made it the favoured option for most people before the pandemic to travel as far away as possible whenever they wished to "get away", to eat imported products instead of local ones, and to see any distant place to be greener than a proximate one.

Discovering a new restaurant around the corner, a new hill to climb in the next town or a new beach to enjoy down the coast—these are simple events that should gain new relevance in these times when we can't trust in much of what we are told.

Rediscovering the world at its most basic, as immediately as possible... That is as good a defence against the epistemic and ontological attack on our exhausted modern minds as any other.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN BATU

KAWAN

BY SAMANTHA KHOO

BEFORE ITS SIX-LANE highways, Batu Kawan had only one paved road, wide enough for one car. Before the industrial parks, residential townships and manicured landscapes, Batu Kawan was lined with coconut, rubber and palm oil plantations. Before it became the hotspot for out-of-state office executives and foreign workers, Batu Kawan was home to a tight-knit community of families who lived on the estates and who raised their children together.

Today, Batu Kawan is fast becoming a bustling township, but I had a chance to peek into its peaceful and idyllic past. I spoke to Maran Krishnan and his wife, Karen Morton, who brought me around to get to know this new township I just moved into late last year.

Maran was born in Batu Kawan in 1961, a third-generation estate worker. Karen met Maran when she came to Batu Kawan as a social worker. Together they have witnessed changes descend on their surroundings. As they told their stories, I became their scribe, noting the historical details as they gave me a verbal and visual account unheard and unseen by most.

ACCESSING OLD BATU KAWAN

It may not feel like it, but Batu Kawan is actually an island. It is separated from Seberang Perai by Sungai Jawi, a wide tidal river, and Sungai Tengah in the south.

Before it was spotlighted by the state government for rapid development, Batu Kawan consisted of plantations, totalling 6,700 acres, of which about 85% were owned by Taiko Plantation (Batu Kawan Berhad)[1], and the remaining were privately owned. It was an agricultural community with its own economy. Palm fruits were also sent to Batu Kawan, which would be processed into palm oil in the only palm oil mill in the region, which was then exported.

For these purposes, a ferry was provided by Taiko Plantation (Batu Kawan Berhad). The ferry was also the primary mode of transport in and out of the area for the villagers. "We had to cross the river to get to the market, hospital and to access other amenities. It was the only way to get to Penang Island via Seberang Perai," Maran recalls.

The ferry service terminated at 10pm daily. It also depended on the tides; on low-tide days, you would have to wait… which became even more challenging during critical times like medical emergencies. The ferry captain operating the ferry played a crucial role—he served as a messenger, being the only person who would know the whereabouts of everyone, whether they had crossed to the mainland or had returned.

LIFE ON THE ESTATE

Maran's grandfather arrived from India during the British rule to work on the estate. Their family worked the ground for decades, eventually purchasing a five-acre piece of land which would be passed down to Maran's generation. In 1985, Maran converted his grandfather's rubber plantation into a palm oil plantation.

When he was not working on his palm oil plantation, he was heavily involved in social work. As a Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung[2] (JKKK) member and an active voice in the workers' union, Maran fought for employee rights. Along with Karen, they started a community project, helping individuals with disabilities, who were shunned by society. They would organise outings such as beach picnics, coordinate physiotherapist appointments, and ensure these individuals could access medical equipment and aid from local welfare departments and NGOs.

"Maran is a very good man. If anyone was in an emergency or needed transport to go to the hospital, the entire *kampung* knew that the go-to person was Maran," says Lean Ah Peng, who worked together with Maran in the 1970s.

Unlike Maran, Peng moved here from Taiping when he was 22 to seek job opportunities in palm oil mills. He also lived on the palm oil estate. Together, they did a number of contract jobs together, such as servicing the ferry.

2

Various types of work existed. People worked on the plantation—fertilising, harvesting and transporting oil palm fruit. The women who were not involved in agricultural work served in various capacities,

3

like running the estate's daycare facility for children. Peng's wife sewed clothes to earn some side income.

Most of the children went to school in the estate, although some also went to schools on the mainland and were transported daily via the ferry.

There was a television in the estate's community hall, which served as entertainment for the villagers. Saturdays were cinema nights, and villagers gathered together to watch black-and-white Tamil movies. The community hall was also used for meetings and festivities.

THE ACQUISITION OF BATU KAWAN

Things started to change in 1990, when the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) announced it would develop Batu Kawan into a township, to be called Bandar Cassia.[3]

Maran held on to his five acres of private family land for as long as possible, resisting the development. "However, after several months of high tide flooding, our palm oil trees were killed and the waters destroyed our property," Karen recalls. It was a disaster that rendered their land uninhabitable, and they finally moved out after accepting the government's compensation package.

In the acquisition and compensation process, a relocation scheme was provided by the government. The owners of these private lands were given financial compensation in proportion to how much land they possessed, and those who owned a house were given a standard-sized plot of land to build a new house. Those who did not own land, but lived and worked on the estate, like Peng, were given a severance package which they could use to buy affordable housing.

After moving out of the estate, the workers had to find different ways to earn a living, either doing contract work or getting jobs in nearby towns. Despite these changes, they remained close to the community they had built over the years.

Naturally, the community of villagers had mixed responses to the development of Batu Kawan. "There was a resistance to change, but also anticipation for the modern life that was promised," says Karen.

4

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BATU KAWAN

The major milestones of the development of Batu Kawan can be summarised as follows:

1990 PDC begins land acquisition in Batu Kawan through four gazetted notices. PDC acquires 93% (about 6,326 acres) of the land.

1999 Penang State Stadium is complete—the first major structure built in Batu Kawan.

2000 The stadium hosts the SUKMA Games (Malaysian Games). Surrounding areas remain largely undeveloped.

2004 PDC drafts the first Batu Kawan master plan, laying out the vision for a new township with residential and commercial zones.

Parcels of land sold to Abad Naluri. They launch Crescentia Park, Batu Kawan's first housing project.

2007 Construction of the Second Penang Bridge (Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah Bridge) begins—a critical trigger for future development in Batu Kawan.

2010–2011 Planning and early infrastructure works begin for what will become the Batu Kawan Industrial Park (BKIP).

2013 The Second Penang Bridge is complete, linking Batu Kawan to Batu Maung (Penang Island).

2014 BKIP officially launches—first phase infrastructure is complete and open to investors.

Main access roads to BKIP completes, connecting the industrial park to the bridge and the North-South Expressway.

2015 Aspen Group and IKEA announce joint venture to develop a commercial hub in Batu Kawan.

2017 IKEA Batu Kawan opens, becoming a regional anchor, signalling the area's transformation into a lifestyle and business hub.

2018 EcoWorld begins developing Eco Horizon, a major residential township and commercial gateway to Batu Kawan.

University of Wollongong (UOW) Malaysia campus opens in Batu Kawan.

2019–2021 Further infrastructure expands around BKIP and residential areas. New feeder roads complete.

Commercial components of Aspen Vision City begin to open, including offices and hotels.

2022 BKIP gains attention as a key electronics and medical device manufacturing hub, with global brands establishing facilities.

2024 Continued expansion of BKIP with new road links, logistics access and high-tech manufacturing clusters.

EFFORTS TO GREEN BATU KAWAN TODAY

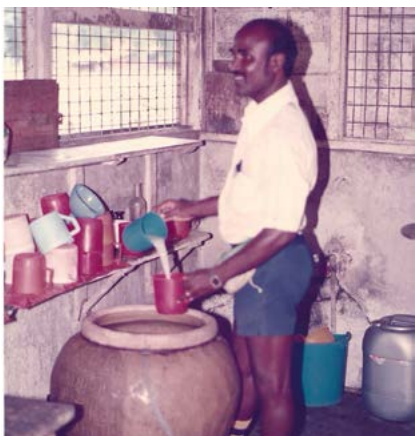
You may no longer be able to see Batu Kawan the way it used to be: lush with tall trees, along with direct access to the river and the beaches. However, centralised efforts to promote greener construction in Batu Kawan are underway. PDC's Batu Kawan Eco-City Initiative details efforts to preserve its ecology, increase access with walking and cycling pathways, and ensure GBI-certified developments.[4]

The Seberang Perai City Council (MBSP) enforced a mandate that all developments in the area must have a minimum of 30% green space (See *Penang Monthly*, June 2015). However, does this directive automatically make Batu Kawan a green city?

Well, it is debatable. It really depends on the criteria the authorities depend on when dubbing a city as "green". According to the Institute of Sustainability Studies[5], such a city aims to protect the local environment while ensuring the well-being of the people residing there. These types of cities should consider its natural biodiversity and land use. The city should be built in a way that proritises the use of renewable energy or zero-emission energy, with infrastructure that encourages residents to walk, cycle or use public transportation.

So, is Batu Kawan a green city? Come visit, and be the judge.

In the coming decade, if all goes according to plan, Batu Kawan will be a medical and digital technology hub in Penang.[6] At the same time, I hope there is some way to preserve the stories of the people who lived and continue to live in Batu Kawan. It was not just a "vast and vacant territory", and beyond the quipping, "There was nothing in Batu Kawan *lah*, just palm oil plantations,". There were generations of people who lived meaningful lives there—working, playing and supporting each other—once upon a time.



5

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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Fishing boats along Sungai Jawi.
2. In 1992, when PDC acquired Batu Kawan, a bridge was built to ease the access of transporting labour and materials from Seberang Perai for construction.
3. Children, who went to school in the estate, during an assembly.
4. Maran and the boatman on one of the *sampans* which flanked the ferry, heading back from Bukit Tambun.
5. A villager serving toddy in a *warung*. The locals fondly refer to this place as the estate's local pub.
6. (From left) Lean Ah Peng and wife, Karen and Maran. They remain good friends to this day.

FOOTNOTES

1. https://www.sparrowsph.my/article-search/3rd-generation-of-lee-family-on-board.html
2. Translated as Village Development and Security Committee.
3. https://theedgemalaysia.com/article/cover-story-batu-kawan-continues-grow
4. https://architecturemalaysia.com/Files/Pool/223_230706_1315401540_5c_mbsp__eco_city_batu_kawan_pg_8__13.pdf
5. https://instituteofsustainabilitystudies.com/insights/lexicon/what-is-a-green-city-and-how-is-it-built/
6. https://www.penangpropertytalk.com/2021/06/bandar-cassia-on-track-to-become-a-flourishing-township-in-15-years/

A personal blogger since her teenage years, **SAMANTHA KHOO** has always enjoyed stringing words together. Her dream is to live off-grid in a cottage with all the coffee, ink and paper she can have.

WALKABILITY BADLY DESIRED IN BATU KAWAN

BY NURUL NATASHA AMIR

NURUL NATASHA is an intern at Penang Monthly with a passion for writing and graphic design. She enjoys crocheting, singing and occasionally making music—a ukulele is never too far from her reach.

WHAT'S THE FIRST thing that comes to mind when you think of Batu Kawan? For me, it's those juicy IKEA meatballs! Maybe a quick stop at Design Village too. But honestly, what's a trip to Batu Kawan without hitting both? And with the two establishments merely a block away from each other, I wish there was a pedestrian walkway or bridge connecting the two, so I wouldn't have to drive from one to the other. Imagine this: while shopping, I suddenly get a craving for meatballs. Instead of walking over, I have to get back in the car, drive there, look for *and* pay for yet another parking space. It makes me wonder—was Batu Kawan ever meant to be explored on foot?

It *is* a planned development, after all. My first impression of the suburb was that everything feels like it was there by design—residential zones on one side, industrial buildings on the other, and a sprinkle of cafés, parks and shops in between. It looks neat on paper, but if you actually tried to walk around—which I did, by the way, for this article—you will quickly realise that it is not a town curated and designed for walking.

PARKS CAN INCREASE WALKABILITY

Out of all the townships in Batu Kawan, Aspen Vision City comes closest to feeling walkable. With a mix of residential high-rises, commercial spaces and a 25-acre park[1] right in the middle, it's the only place in the suburb where I felt that walking from one place to another is possible—though not always very practical.

This, I feel, is mainly because of Central Island Park, which links residential houses to food spots in the commercial hub, Vervea. What I like about the park is how open the space feels—not just in terms of layout, but in terms of visibility too. You can see everyone, and everyone can see you. There aren't any dark corners or isolated stretches. As a woman walking alone, that kind of safe openness makes a big difference.

It is also the only place in Batu Kawan where walking actually can feel enjoyable: there are picnic spots where you can watch turtles and koi fish in the lake—which, yes, I got very excited about, as you can even pay to feed them.

That being said, while Aspen Vision City is promising in terms of walkability, it is still missing a lot of the essentials. For one, there are no public toilets, no benches and no play areas for children. If it starts raining, good luck—there is barely any covered area. And if you're walking with someone elderly or in a wheelchair, accessibility becomes sub-optimal. While there are metal ramps, walkways are often separated by strips of grass, which would easily catch the wheel of a wheelchair or cause a less-mobile person to trip. Also, if you happen to be carrying trash around, you'll quickly realise that trash bins are few and far in between.

Technically, you can also walk from Vervea all the way to IKEA. According to Google Maps, it takes about 11 minutes on foot. However, the route is hardly pedestrian friendly—and by that, I mean there is no actual pedestrian walkway connecting the two places. Though a mere 11-minute walk, much of the route will have you walking along the edge of roads meant for cars, and sometimes, on narrow pavements or grass patches between lanes. So, can you walk there? Yes. But is it practical? No.

You are constantly aware that the space is not built with pedestrians in mind, and in my opinion, that takes away any sense of comfort or safety while walking.

IS BATU KAWAN ONLY BUILT FOR VEHICLES?

The southern part of Batu Kawan—the Batu Kawan Industrial Park (BKIP)—is home to large manufacturing companies like Hotayi Electronic, Micron and Boston Scientific. That is where you'll find factories, technician training centres, colleges and student housing. A few cafés have popped up here, which is nice, but the layout and planning of the area still looks and feels like it prioritises vehicles over pedestrians, just like most of Batu Kawan. According to one user on Reddit, a trip that takes only five minutes by car becomes a 46-minute walk.[2] That is also assuming that the weather is good and you have nerves of steel; there aren't proper footpaths, and you will be sharing the road with lorries and trucks.

Unlike George Town, Batu Kawan was—ostensibly—built "from scratch". You live in one area, work or study in another, and hang out somewhere else. It sounds great in theory, but unless you have a car—which is not something to expect of students—getting around takes much more energy than expected. And it begs the question: if Batu Kawan is branding itself as a university town, why is it not better designed for students?

For someone without their own modes of transport, I assumed e-hailing would be a popular choice… Right? Well, not quite. Another Reddit user chimed in that it once took them 30 minutes to drive just 3km, as traffic near BKIP can get really congested.[3] For many, e-hailing just isn't reliable there. One person shared that their friend once waited over two hours without a single driver responding. Others say that there are "close to [no]" e-hailing drivers around the area during peak hours.

Due to this, some have turned to motorbikes or bicycles, but as mentioned, the roads in Batu Kawan are not built for cyclists, and are hence unsafe. As one user puts it: "Cycling would be alright here, but a lot of roads are car-access only, and there are heavy trucks going in and out all day."

The Penang2030 vision, which guides the Penang state government's policy initiatives, envisions a more livable state that invests in infrastructure, green spaces and sustainable urban development. Batu Kawan, one of the newest developments in the state, has the most potential to embody these values. Instead, it has missed opportunities and plunged the suburb into the very same problem faced by other older Penang suburbs—issues like traffic congestion raised by Reddit users living there would have been eased if road users could choose other forms of transport, whether it is riding a motorbike, using public transport, cycling or walking.

Design decisions made today—about how roads, sidewalks and parks connect—will shape how people live here for decades to come. Will Batu Kawan become another car-centric suburb, where quality of life depends on whether you own a vehicle? Or can it evolve into something more people-friendly and inclusive? It already has all the right components—parks, food places, shops, housing—but developers and planners need to think about how people actually move through space. A bench here; a shaded walkway there; a safe bike lane connecting homes to grocery stores and cafés to campuses. These small things add up.

FOOTNOTES

[1] https://mypenang.gov.my/experience-2020/20-must-see-places-in-penang/view/central-park-batu-kawan/?lg=en

[2] https://www.reddit.com/r/penang/comments/1hjuqur/help_transportation_issue_in_industrial_area_batu/

[3] Ibid.

A HERITAGE HAVEN ON PENANG'S MAINLAND

NIBONG

BY TEIOH NUAN NING

TEBAL

IN SOUTH SEBERANG PERAI'S southernmost region lies a small town at the Penang-Kedah-Perak border. Named for the town's dense—*tebal*—nibong palm tree forests, this is Nibong Tebal.

To the Chinese community, Nibong Tebal is known as 高渊, or *ko-ean* in the local Teochew dialect, which is both a transliteration of the Kerian River that runs through the town and a reference to the said river's deep currents. Unlike Penang Island, where the predominant Chinese dialect and culture is Hokkien, Nibong Tebal stands in contrast as a unique consolidation of Teochew culture and heritage.

Nibong Tebal was established during colonial times as the administrative capital of Southern Province Wellesley.[1] Alongside Bukit Mertajam and Butterworth, which were the administrative capitals of their respective districts, Nibong Tebal became the centre of trade and communication in the region, necessitating an intra-state railroad link, which began operating in 1902.[2] Reconstructed in 2010, the Nibong Tebal railway station is now part of the KTM West Coast railway line, which connects passengers from Singapore to Thailand in a continuous route that spans 1,151km.

Thanks to the Kerian River Basin, Nibong Tebal has long boasted a fertile, water-rich landscape. Affected both by migration and by trade, its culture, history and politics have been undeniably agrarian.

THE SECRETS OF SUGAR MOGULS

While early settlers in Nibong Tebal had long practised subsistence farming, agriculture only became the main source of economic activity and wealth after the advent of the sugar industry. The East India Company, upon acquiring and commodifying the land, brought Chinese, Indian and Sri Lankan migrants to Nibong Tebal to work on the plantations. This permanently altered the ethnic composition of the town.

The locally based Penang Sugar Estates Limited, founded by Edward Horsman, had emerged as the largest sugar producer in Province Wellesley. At one point, the company oversaw around 12,000ha across estates, with names such as Caledonia, Victoria, Krian, Golden Grove, Jawi and Val d'Or.

But global markets tended to fluctuate and Horsman fell into debt during shipping crises. The affluent Ramsden family took over the enterprise, and their capital underpinned the continued expansion of sugar operations in the region, linking Nibong Tebal directly to major ports such as Calcutta, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Another key player in the sugar industry was Khaw Boo Aun, the Kapitan of Perak, who is credited with pioneering large-scale sugarcane plantations. At his peak, the sugar magnate controlled over thousands of labourers and more than 20,000ha of plantation land. These holdings would eventually be sold off to Robert Kuok, a.k.a. the Sugar King of Asia. A combination of these powers meant that Nibong Tebal was already the biggest producer of sugar in Province Wellesley by the 1850s.

Today, many have forgotten about Nibong Tebal's sugar legacy. However, what continues to capture people's imagination are the dark secrets that haunt each of the sugar moguls' legacies. From as early as 1829, Khaw Boo Aun had led the Teochew branch of Ghee Hin Kongsi—a secret triad with lodges across British Malaya—out of Nibong Tebal.[3] On top of his notorious iron-grip influence over thousands of farmers, Khaw also used Nibong Tebal to secretly launch boats for the Larut Wars,[4] in which a series of inter-triad conflicts were fought over a decade.

While the head of the Ramsden family never visited Malaya, a grandson, John Ramsden, was dispatched to oversee the plantations.[5] In 1948, he was shot twice in the head and killed in a murder that still remains unsolved.[6] Soon after this tragedy, the family liquidated all Malayan assets, effectively abandoning their investments in the region on the eve of the Malayan Emergency.

Since then, both their economic and political empires have decisively crumbled. The Byram Estate's Caledonia House, once a glittering symbol of the Ramsden family's wealth, is now but an abandoned ruin better known colloquially as the haunted 99-Door House. By the 1890s, the colonial government had begun to suppress the Ghee Hin Kongsi, resulting in the massacre of hundreds of its members and its eventual decline and dissolution.

The sugar industry itself also saw a downturn. Declining prices compelled plantations to switch to rubber, which would itself drop in value by the 1960s, forcing a second switch—this time, to palm oil. What remains of this agricultural heyday are names: Jalan Byram, named after the Ramsdens' original Yorkshire estate, and Lorong Boo Aun, named after the sugar tycoon himself.

FARMLAND, FISHERIES AND FACTORIES

Primary industries like fishing and agriculture continue to play a substantial role in Nibong Tebal's modern economy. Where

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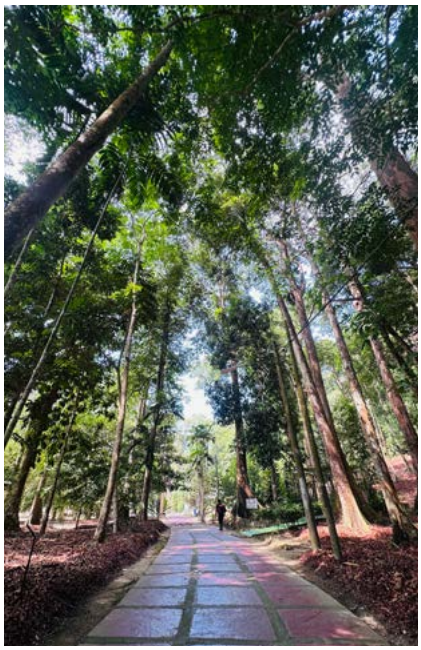

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the mouth of the Kerian River meets the Penang Strait, there is a fishing village known as Sungai Udang (not to be confused with a Melakan town with the same name). Due in part to the overexploitation of fishery resources, deep-sea fishing has given way to aquaculture in recent years. With over 100 licensed farmers, Sungai Udang occupies the largest fish farming area in Penang.[7]

A mere 10-minute motorbike ride away, you'll find the Sungai Acheh paddy fields, which contribute at least 1,300ha of land to Seberang Perai's reputation as Penang's "rice bowl".[8] Populated by rows of Malay *kampung* houses, these farmers' houses also create a veritable architectural heritage that draws from the farmers' ancestral roots in Perak and Kedah.

Among the agricultural products of Nibong Tebal, perhaps none fetch as high a price in weight as the famous *Ohr chee*—also known as the D200 or Black Thorn—durian.[9] Registered as recently as in 2013, the Black Thorn durian originated in Kampung Lima Kongsi, and was created by Leow Cheok Kiang, who was awarded the Darjah Setia Pangkuan Negeri, which carries the title "Datuk", just this past July.

On the other hand, various developments—including the modernisation of its primary industries—have seen Nibong Tebal inch towards a more cosmopolitan future. The Nibong Tebal Paper Mill, founded in 1975, is one of the country's largest paper manufacturers. Despite initial disputes, land from the Byram Estate is slated to be developed as part of the Batu Kawan Industrial Park 2 (BKIP2),[10] building upon the light industries that are already housed in the town and attracting foreign investors. Meanwhile, Nibong Tebal is also home to the USM Engineering Campus, established there in 2001.

NIBONG TEBAL'S NATURAL CHARM

Ecotourism accounts for the majority of Nibong Tebal's most enduring tourist attractions. Apart from mangrove forests, there is also the Bukit Panchor State Park, which is as much a recreational park as it is a hub for scientific research (see *Penang Monthly*'s March 2025 issue for an article about Bukit Panchor). Showcasing lowland dipterocarp forests, streams and swamps to even wildlife sightings, the park is a well-maintained, family-friendly attraction, with chalets available for rent and a campground for the more adventurous traveller. The park also has two caves, Gua Tongkat and Gua Kelawar, the latter of which is known for its population of bats, as its name suggests.

As the only state park in Penang,[11] it also serves as a demonstration forest, with plots established for the purpose of exemplifying forest management strategies. Thus, the park also includes tree nurseries, growth plots and High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF) plots, meant to nurture and maintain the 224 species of trees found across all 446ha of its land.[12] Some tree species are identified with QR code displays, which then provide a digital pamphlet that details the specific characteristics, traits and fun facts about the trees in question.

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FAMILY TRADES: A LIVING HERITAGE

Nibong Tebal is also known for a slew of family-run businesses, most of which have operated for decades, with traditional techniques quietly passed down through generations. The most popular of these businesses is Chop Chuan Guan, a traditional Teochew biscuits and sweets shop that has been in operation for more than 150 years.[13]

One of the sweets they specialise in, a chewy peanut treat known as *ak-am*, is incredibly rare—they are only one of two traditional shops that continue to produce it. The process of making *ak-am* is time-consuming and laborious, and a single batch can take up to half a day to produce. Chop Chuan Guan also preserves Teochew bridal traditions by continuing to provide dowry packages, which include special biscuits and sweets. The shop is run entirely by members of the family and continues to draw visitors from out of state for its tasty sweets as well as its nostalgic interior.

Take a five-minute walk from Chop Chuan Guan and you'll find Restoran Law Cheang Kee, which serves Teochew-style home-cooked dishes. Known for its crab porridge and assortment of other seafood dishes, it takes full advantage of its direct

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access to Nibong Tebal's bountiful supply of high-quality seafood.

Another family specialises in soy sauce production, focusing on honing and preserving traditional methods of soybean fermentation. The Thein Heang Soon Soy Sauce Factory in Nibong Tebal has been running since the 1960s—across three generations. Many factories now opt to use hydrochloric acid to ferment their soybeans; apparently, this reduces the fermentation time from a few months to just a few days. While this may be efficient, the soy sauce lacks the complexity produced by traditional processes, resulting in manufacturers adding artificial flavouring and food colouring to the final product.

At the Thein Heang Soon Soy Sauce Factory, rows of large vats filled with soybeans, saltwater and mould are left to ferment naturally under the sun, producing a sweet and rich aroma. This factory manufactures two kinds of soy sauce, as well as oyster sauce and chilli sauce. In all of their products, the use of traditional methods of production is evident—the ingredients for the other sauces are slowly wood-roasted overnight in a large stone oven.

RELIGIOUS SITES IN NIBONG TEBAL

While we are inclined to think of George Town when we think of Penang's architectural heritage, Nibong Tebal also boasts its own collection of pre-war streets and shophouses.[14] Concentrated in Nibong Tebal's old town, some of the streets have also been adorned with murals.

This architectural history also manifests in the myriad of places of worship in Nibong Tebal, most of which were built more than a century ago. For instance, the Church of St. Anthony, founded in 1891, was established by a missionary who came to Penang to look after the needs of Indian Catholics, who arrived from India to work on the rubber plantations.

Plantation managers also allocated land to build Hindu temples like the Sri Sithi Vinayagar Devasthanam. This temple began with a single statue of Ganesh, and served as a makeshift worship space for the Tamil workers. As the British colonial government began to push for more plantation facilities to serve as community centres, including building tennis courts for British workers, the elaborate Devasthanam was constructed in 1924.

The Kwong Hock Keong Temple (高渊广福宫福德正神) recently celebrated the 160th anniversary of its founding. Although the temple itself was relocated to its present location in the late 1990s, the Tua Pek Kong statue that the original temple was built for is still in use. It was brought to Penang from China in 1864 and serves as the centrepiece of worship. The temple also worships other deities, including Taitokong, who is mainly worshipped by members of the Hokkien community.

Today, there is an open-air hall in the temple's compounds, which is used to host community dinners and weekly group activities to engage the town's elderly population. It also has its own garden, and grows fruits and crops for worship, like sugar cane.

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AWAKENING A HIDDEN HISTORY

As the Penang mainland gains prominence and interest, local leadership have started to take steps to preserve and promote its cultural past. These efforts culminated in the annual Nibong Tebal Festival, which was held for the first time in January 2024.[15] The festival highlights a host of local cuisines and attractions, attracting both out-of-state and international attendees.

The Nibong Tebal Cultural Heritage Project, implemented by the Penang Arts Education Society (Arts-ED), also launched a cultural guide for the town. The project was funded by Think City's Seberang Perai Small Town Grants Programme, and resulted in an illustrated and informative booklet about the town's history. Titled *Navigating the Legacies of Nibong Tebal*, it was published in Bahasa Malaysia, English and Chinese to increase its accessibility. Now, the booklet can be found in tourist hotspots all across Nibong Tebal and has also been released digitally.[16]

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In April 2025, Nibong Tebal's Kampung Bagan Buaya was designated a traditional village zone.[17] The local government pledged to protect the village from over-development, providing funds to maintain its facilities, such as for the renovation of its Sepak Takraw court.

The plan to acknowledge, preserve and publicise Nibong Tebal as an attractive intersection of heritage, history and tourism has been picking up steam in recent years and shows no sign of slowing down. On top of encouraging more visitors to drop by, it also serves to honour the memory and traditions of Nibong Tebal's residents, who have been quietly upholding this rich culture for generations.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Kerian River.
2. The 99-Door Mansion. As it is privately owned, it can only be viewed from afar. (Source: Art's Thur via Google)
3. A growth plot at Bukit Panchor State Park.
4. Paved walkway at the Bukit Panchor State Park.
5. Fermentation vats at the Thein Heang Yoon Soy Sauce Factory.
6. The daily seafood market at the Sungai Udang jetty. Seafood is placed in piles on the floor and the selections vary from day to day.
7. The main building of the Kwong Hock Keong Temple.
8. Entrance of the Sri Sithi Vinayagar Devasthanam temple.
9. Nibong Tebal welcome sign.
10. A mural to commemorate the Nibong Tebal Festival.

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TEIOH NUAN NING
is an undergraduate student of literature and art history who writes about people and culture. In her free time, she enjoys music and theatre.

THE PULAU BURUNG LANDFILL

1

MANAGING PENANG'S DIRTY BACKYARD

BY IAN MCINTYRE

PHOTOS BY SAMUEL GOPAL

CAPTIONS

1. A mountain of waste at Pulau Burung.
2. Ladang Byram and Pulau Burung are neighbours located at the same area.
3. Pond scum and waste in the river. Pond scum happens when there is excess nitrogen and phosphorus from runoffs.
4. Entrance to the Pulau Burung landfill.
5. A village located a stone's throw away from the landfill.

FOR EVERY THRIVING place, there is always an underbelly where waste and other discards are accumulated. Unfortunately, much like the majority of such places in the world, Penang's own slumbering, reeking landfill may be reaching its maximum capacity in 2035, or even sooner, in 2028.

Meet Pulau Burung; and though its name characterises it as an island, it is no island but a location within the Nibong Tebal district, about 60km from Penang's administrative capital of George Town across the 11km strait. Each day, the inhabitants of Penang, both in Seberang Perai and Penang Island, generate over 2,200 tonnes of waste, of which 80% is channelled via barges to the Pulau Burung sanitary landfill.

It is a coastal site within the Jawi state constituency, whose representative is state executive councillor, H'ng Mooi Lye, who oversees local government matters as well as town planning. This is also the first time that a major landfill—the primary one in Penang—comes under the immediate jurisdiction of a state exco member who happens to have oversight over local government, which includes waste management.

Pulau Burung's neighbour is the Byram Forest Reserve area, which many would consider perfect as a green covering to absorb the carbon emissions discharged from such facilities; however, in the case of Penang, Byram may not be effective enough. Already, there are rising concerns of leachate spilling into the mangrove forest area. Not to mention, there are about 100 village households located near the sanitary landfill; residents have to be tolerant of the stench, and at times, of worrying fumes generated from the disposing procedures adopted within the location.

SMELLS LIKE TROUBLE

The 33ha landfill began as an open dump site, managed by the Seberang Perai City Council (MBSP) in the early 1980s, solely to handle simple household wastes. In the early 1990s, it was upgraded to Sanitary Landfill Level I, requiring waste to be covered with earth. In 1994, it was transformed into Sanitary Landfill Level II, with the construction of a perimeter bund to contain waste and prevent contamination. In 2001, a contract was awarded to a private firm to develop the landfill into Sanitary Landfill Level III. This phase included advanced pollution control systems like a leachate collection pond and gas collection chambers.

Last year, H'ng disclosed that the state had taken over control of the landfill from the private contractor, with plans to further rehabilitate the entire area to support the growing demand for waste collection. There is no end in sight, however, and workers at landfills can only wince in agony in seeing pile after pile of rubbish being laid out to be compressed and subdued daily.

A large part of the landfill is also contaminated—approximately 11.3ha—when an open fire razed through it twice in 2022 and again last year. Contamination happens when a range of chemicals are heavily present within the buried waste materials.

During the 2022 fire, 400 residents living close by had to be evacuated because of the toxic fumes. 10 schools also had to be closed. Parts of the mainland was shrouded in what the public feared most—toxin-infused smog. The fire and rescue authorities, together with other specialists such as engineers from the Department of Environment, took 20 days to douse it, while the National Security Council declared Pulau Burung a Level One National Disaster Area. It meant that the affected ground area was practically destroyed, while the surrounding air was polluted at unhealthy levels.

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The fire that started in July 2024, where about 0.8ha of Pulau Burung once again caught fire, was blamed on the hot weather. To compensate the situation, the state government had then proposed that the leftover wastes be recycled into energy, mooting a fresh legislation in the state assembly sitting, using Act 672 of the Solid Waste and Public Cleansing Act 2007. Of course, the question of having a state-of-the-art incinerator began its rounds, yet again.

SMELLS LIKE A BREWING CONFLICT

H'ng said that an Integrated Solid Waste Management Centre (ISWMC) is an option to reduce the amount of domestic waste sent to the landfill, and can potentially extend Pulau Burung's lifespan beyond 2035. The 538,000 tonnes of waste produced by the state annually potentially pollutes the grounds, not considering toxins dumped by illegal backyard industries engaging in plastic recycling efforts, which former state executive councillor, Phee Boon Poh, is confident that the state has managed to evict.

In the last decade, the state has reportedly "led the way" in reducing plastic use. Phee had proposed a new incinerator model designed to convert waste into energy more cleanly and efficiently than other models.

Here, the veteran statesman is vehemently opposed by the country's oldest environment advocate—the Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), also known as Friends of the Earth, whose outspoken president, Meenaskhi Raman, said that any measure to manage waste is laudable, but declared an outright "no" to installing incinerators. A member of the Global Alternatives for Incinerator Alliance (GAIA), the group is extremely concerned that "incinerator peddlers will start cajoling the state government with their technologies again. From pyrolysis to waste-to-energy plants, these technologies have been paraded as the final solution in waste disposal. Some are pushing for zero landfill by offering incineration. But, in actual fact, incineration also needs landfill space to dispose bottom ash. Fly ash, which is more toxic, is characterised as hazardous waste, and should undergo a stabilisation process before storage," said Meenaskhi. She is lobbying for the strict enforcement of mandatory waste separation in the state through updated infrastructure, a good collection system and safe recycling.


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CLEARING THE AIR

Pushing for better waste management, both Phee and H'ng are indeed urging residents to separate their waste. Penang's recycling rate is currently over 50%, the highest in the country. Pleas by civil societies about the below-par performance in managing Pulau Burung saw state authorities take the lead—a settlement agreement was reached last year; the state government has agreed to buy out the rights and ownership of the facilities at Phase III of the landfill from a private contractor. This was signed and sealed on 18 December 2025. The company will receive RM35mil for transferring full rights and ownership of the facilities on the site to both councils, MBSP and the City Council of Penang Island (MBPP).

This brought some relief, especially after the state reviewed the progress of the landfill management project in 2022, and discovered numerous non-compliances and

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delays on the operator's part in developing the project. Their service was terminated on 1 August 2022.

As mentioned, Penang is currently considering legislating Act 672, a federal law aimed at standardising regulations for solid waste management and public cleanliness to ensure efficient, sustainable and effective waste management, and to boost the circular economy. So far, only Perlis, Kedah, Pahang, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Johor and KL have adopted this act.

MBSP has consultants who are to undertake efforts such as a materials recovery facilities plant for daily processing of 2,000 metric tonnes of municipal solid waste (MSW), engineered vertical landfill cells (6 numbers) for a daily landfilling capacity of 1,400 metric tonnes, basal treatment using lime stabilisation technique designed with a leachate collection system equipped with gas collection structures for future gas flaring or capturing, and raw leachate pond for equalisation of leachate from various streams. They have also completed the first engineered landfill cell and raw leachate pond.

LIVING WITH THE STENCH

I reached out to a Penang-born, Thai-based environmentalist, Khoo Kim Siew for his opinion on landfills; he realistically replied that there is no solution in the near future over how to reduce waste landfills other than the political conviction to do the necessary, while also penalising those entrusted to manage such facilities, but had failed. He has called for a holistic approach where both the authorities and their common critics—i.e. civil society organisations—band together to generate a strong and loud enough campaign to boost waste separation, recycling and waste reduction.

While the two sides debate on solutions and responsibilities, residents surrounding Pulau Burung continue to live with the pervasive stench in their living spaces.

Security guard at SJK (T) Ladang Byram, C. Putinitra, said that at times, one needs to bear with the stench, which comes at any time of day, depending on the wind direction: "Our nose is probably used to it, but one can see the discomfort visitors have to deal with when coming into the area."

After the 2022 fire, when she was forced to be relocated, Putinitra said that there is hardly any excitement now except for the stench. There is the occasional open-burning, which landfill workers conduct to rein-in certain types of waste, which can be disposed through peat burning.

The 30-over students at the Tamil vernacular school are largely spared from the stench because their classrooms are insulated.

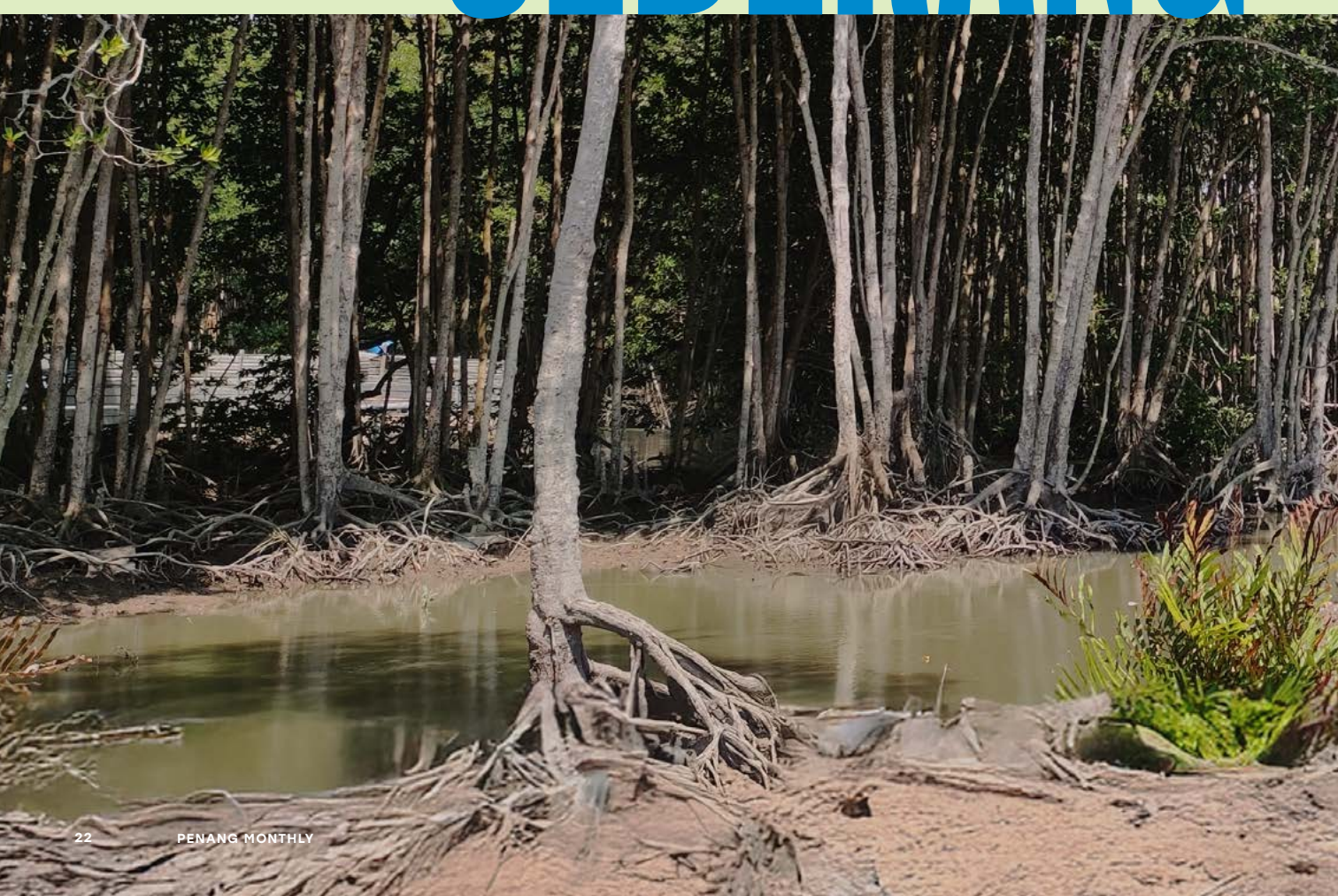
About 500m from the landfill is Kampung Kebun Baru, whose residents are largely small-scale farmers living off a small palm oil estate. Villager, Ahmad Razaleigh Hussein, said that they are overjoyed to hear reports that MBSP, the lead agency managing the landfill, has plans to expand the facility. "I heard there would be modern amenities such as shop lots erected here—this shows development," he said, adding that this would lead to efforts to rehabilitate the landfill and prevent a recurrence of toxic fire at the site, causing air pollution.

"We hope it will work out, so that we no longer have to deal with the stench or peat fires," he said, noting that authorities had been engaging more with the villagers here following the fire outbreak in 2022. There are about 40 families living next to the landfill.

"We live pretty average lives. Our children play outside at times. It is just that we are mindful that there is a landfill nearby."

IAN MCINTYRE is a veteran journalist with over 25 years of experience reporting for the mainstream and alternative media. He subscribes to a belief that what is good for society is likewise beneficial for the media.

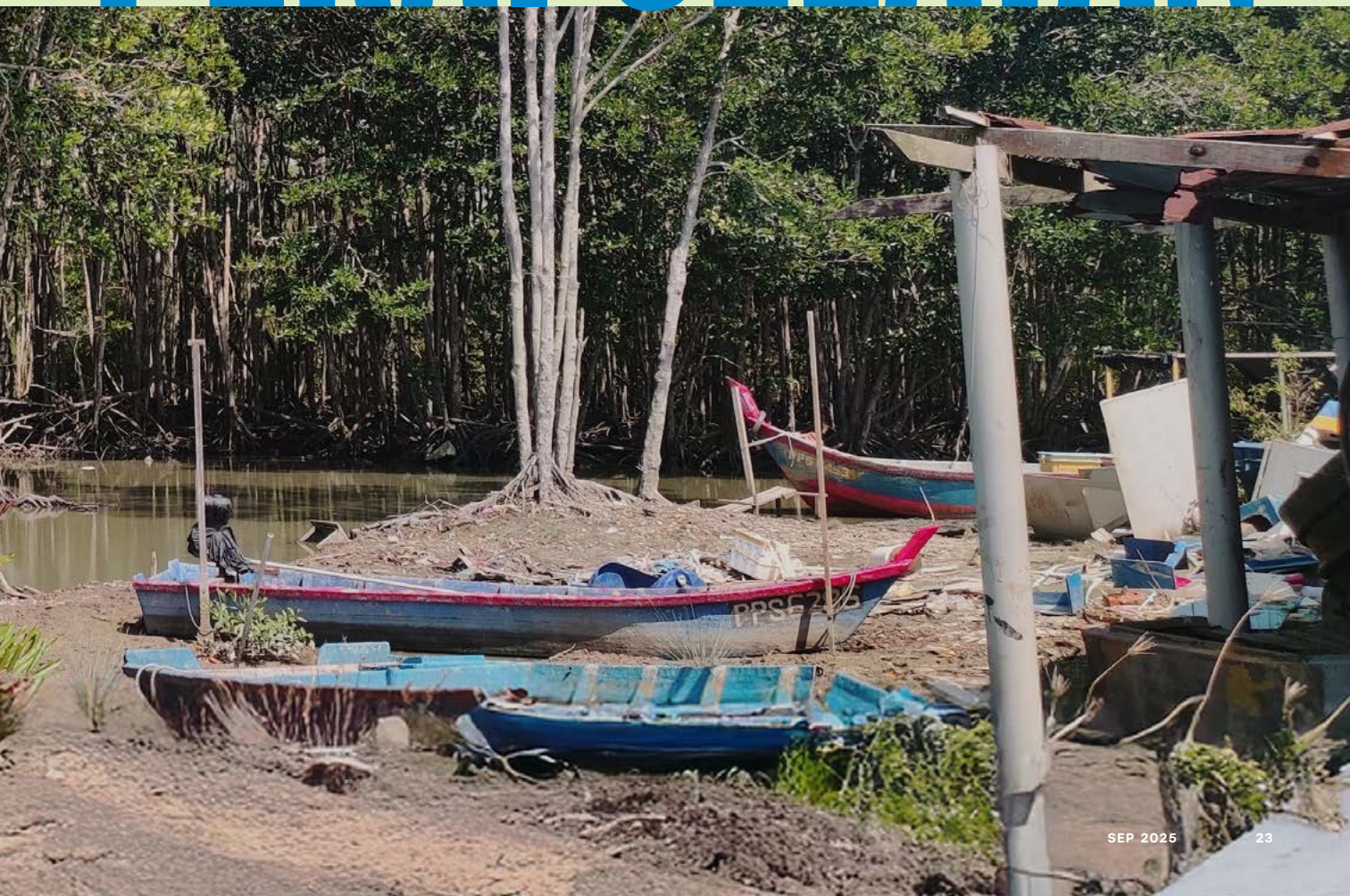
ENJOYING THE BRACKISH RIVERS OF SEBERANG



BY
HUSNA SHAFIRAH

ESTUARINE ZONES PLAY vital roles in nurturing marine biodiversity; they protect against coastal erosion and support the local fishing economy. In the south of Penang's mainland, the estuaries of Sungai Kerian, Sungai Chenaam and Sungai Jawi quietly sustain much of the region's coastal life.

PERAI SELATAN



SUNGAI KERIAN ESTUARY: A RIVER OF ABUNDANCE

Sungai Kerian forms part of the southern boundary of Seberang Perai, marking the state border between Penang's Nibong Tebal and Perak. The more popular middle course of Sungai Kerian boasts various eco-tourism attractions such as river cruises and firefly-watching tours, especially in Teluk Ipil and Tanjung Berembang; the mouth offers a walk through the heart of Nibong Tebal's fishery heritage.

The Sungai Udang fishing village, near the mouth of Sungai Kerian, is lined with rows of two-storey multigenerational houses that double as shops, restaurants and seafood processing facilities. Vibrantly coloured ice boxes and crates, racks of drying seafood products, trolleys and small trucks filled with fresh seafood paint a picture of a community that lives and breathes the sea.

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Following the road towards the riverbank, you arrive at the Seng Giap Sungai Udang Port, where fishmongers and customers eagerly wait for fishermen to return with fresh catch. Unlike in urban fish markets where seafood is neatly laid on ice-covered tables, here, baskets of fresh seafood stir up a flurry of offers and negotiations as soon as they are hoisted up by fishermen.

Kampung Sungai Udang also thrives at fish farming—Sungai Kerian's stable, brackish water is suitable for breeding fishes like hybrid groupers, barramundi and tilapia—and is an aquaculture hub in Penang. Seen from above, the neat grids of individual pens form a mosaic of glimmering water tiles. These fish farms produce a substantial amount of frozen and fresh fish for local and international markets each day.

A white gravel lane by the riverbank opposite Sungai Udang winds near Byram Estate, where the infamous Caledonia House is tucked away. Accessible via Jalan Byram, the narrow lane, stretching from Kampung Bharu to Pulau Burung, is reserved for bicycles and motorcycles, making it perfect for locals and visitors seeking to enjoy the beauty of the Sungai Kerian estuary in quietude. Towards the sea, to your right, is a closer view of the fish farm ponds, accoutred with ribbons of silver foil to deter birds from preying on the fish.

SUNGAI CHENAAM: A RIVER FOR THE PEOPLE

Established in 1975, Kampung Sungai Chenaam was born of a collaboration between the Penang state government, the Department of Irrigation and Drainage, and Malaysia Agriculture Bank (BPM). Originally a vast Api-api forest—mangrove forests dominated by *Avicennia*, commonly known as Api-api—the area was reclaimed to house poor families. The land reclamation project, which saw the transformation of a muddy, mangrove area to a liveable *kampung*, benefitted 200 families in Seberang Perai in its first phase in 1983, before expanding to include 100 more in 1996 under PPRT (Program Perumahan Rakyat Termiskin).

Streams run through Kampung Sungai Chenaam, irrigating the paddy fields and palm oil plantation owned by villagers. These streams are connected to Sungai Chenaam, a small waterway that leads to the Malacca Strait. The name "Sungai Chenaam" is said to have originated from a story: a father and his child were gathering *lokan* (river clams) at the river. The child, who was hungry, whined: "*cek nak am*" (I want to eat) repeatedly, inspiring the name of the village and river.

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While scoping this location, I came across a middle-aged man with his four grandchildren at Sungai Chenaam Jetty. He turned out to have been among the first batch of villagers who settled in the area in the early '80s.

"In 1975, I was in Form 4; this area was full of Api-api and Jeruju. I still remember that they used to pay RM15 a day to clear the land. I witnessed the project come to life—from the land reclamation to the building of the houses."

While he no longer resides in Kampung Sungai Chenaam, he returns occasionally to reminisce and spend time with his grandchildren, who are always excited for a visit to the river.

Beyond Sungai Chenaam Jetty, a scenic trail called Denai@Kampung Sungai Chenaam features a boardwalk path that leads into a mangrove forest and wetland conservation area. Modest in length, the trail concludes with a small gazebo, which offers a shady spot to rest and take in the view.

During high tide, occasional splashes of water beneath the wooden planks often signal the presence of mudskippers. Darting through the water with their puffed-up cheeks full of air, their fairly large population size in the area reflects a healthy and stable mangrove ecosystem. Meanwhile, in the canopy above, mangrove branches serve as perching spots for a variety of bird species, including white herons, kingfishers and occasionally, the majestic Brahminy kite or Lang Merah. The low height and sparse branches of the mangrove trees allow bird watchers to get up close and personal with these birds.

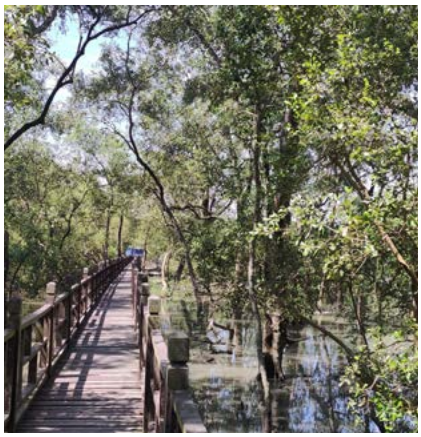
Kampung Sungai Chenaam's residents are actively involved in mangrove conservation efforts with local authorities. One of these is the annual forest bathing programme conducted by the Seberang Perai City Council (MBSP), inspired by *shinrin-yoku*, the Japanese practice of immersing oneself in the forest. Last year's forest bathing included the planting of 500 *Rhizophora apiculata* saplings to support Sungai Chenaam's riverbank. Such continued collaborations are crucial in maintaining a riverside environment that supports both ecological integrity and community engagement.

SUNGAI JAWI: A RIVER THREATENED

Originating inland, near Simpang Ampat, Sungai Jawi—supposedly from the Jawi trees which used to grow in abundance

along its banks—flows southwest through Bukit Tambun before emptying into the Malacca Strait. Today, the estuary is better known for its dense thickets of nipah palm and *Rhizopora*—key components of the local estuarine ecology.

Sungai Jawi is an important waterway for fishermen in Bukit Tambun, providing both access to the rich fishing grounds of the Malacca Strait and a sheltered route for daily boat landings. Before 2005, Bukit Tambun Jetty served as the main departure point for ferry passengers bound for Pulau Aman. This changed around late 2006, when it was fully replaced by Cassia Jetty in Batu Kawan, also known as Batu



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Musang Jetty. In earlier days, ferries from Bukit Tambun would cruise along Sungai Jawi, passing the Sungai Junjung confluence before heading out to sea.

Aside from visitors drawn to the area by the allure of fresh seafood and the daily bustle of local fishermen, the Sungai Jawi estuary is a popular spot for anglers—its appeal marked by the numerous fishing spots pinned on Google Maps by fellow fishing enthusiasts. Its brackish water is home to the tarpon and barramundi—sought for the thrilling fight they put up once hooked.

Accessibilty is possible through Jalan Industri Seri Juru through a small, unpaved lane hiding behind an industrial area that stretches along Sungai Jawi to the coastline. In the early mornings, this lane comes alive with anglers trying their luck using fresh shrimp baits. Some prefer to come during low tide, when they can access the river through the riprap rocks along the riverbank. High tides, on the other hand, bring fish closer to the shallow edges of the river mouth, making it ideal for net fishing, especially for species like the bluespot mullet.

During my visit, I observed two fishing styles: the first, by a pair of local fishermen, used a *pukat rentang*—a long, rectangular net with floaters on the top edge and weights on the bottom. The net was arranged in a circular fashion around their boat. Then, they began tapping on the hull, creating sounds and vibrations that drive the fish towards the net. Meanwhile, on the riverbank, foreign workers—possibly employed in the industries nearby—used a cast net. Working as a team, three of them threw rocks into the group of fish in the middle of the river to drive the fish towards the bank. The remaining two, who stood with the net in hand, casted them over the approaching fish.

This riverside scene reveals the diversity of fishing methods in the area—where traditional Malay fishing techniques meet the adaptive ways of the foreign workers. It is a subtle reminder that Sungai Jawi remains not just as a source of livelihood, but also as a meeting ground of skills, stories and survival.

Yet, beneath this vibrancy lies a fragile balance: Sungai Jawi, which flows through industrial areas, is vulnerable to pollution. Over the years, NGOs, such as Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), have raised concerns over the contamination of Sungai Junjung and Sungai Tengah—tributaries that feed into Sungai Jawi. Left unchecked, continued environmental degradation will no doubt inflict serious harm to the ecosystem as well as the livelihoods and quality of life of its residents.

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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Mangrove forest near Sungai Chenaam Jetty.
2. Two foreign workers casting net at Sungai Jawi.
3. Mosaic of aquaculture ponds by Sungai Kerian. (Image from Google Earth)
4. Wooden walk path at Denai at Kampung Sungai Chenaam.
5. Seng Giap Sungai Udang Port.
6. Fishermen organising their catch at Sungai Chenaam Jetty.
7. The two banks of Sungai Kerian.

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HUSNA SHAFIRAH is a final-year student of Applied Language (Hons): English for Intercultural Communication from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). She enjoys writing about culture and lifestyle along with the smell of freshly printed magazines.

PLACEMAKING FOR AND BY RESIDENTS: PARTICIPATORY MAPPING IN NIBONG TEBAL

BY CAROLYN KHOR

CAROLYN KHOR
is a former ministerial press secretary, a former United Nations volunteer and an independent researcher/writer.

THE NIBONG TEBAL Cultural Heritage Project, an extraordinary grassroots effort, has brought to life the stories of diverse communities in this southern township on Penang's peri-urban fringe. Spearheaded by Arts-ED, a Penang-based arts and education non-profit, this participatory mapping project places local voices at the centre of heritage documentation—literally putting them on the map.

While Arts-ED has long been involved in community-based arts and education initiatives, from its early days mapping George Town's living heritage to engaging schoolchildren in Balik Pulau and Sungai Pinang, this Nibong Tebal effort goes a step further in community participation. Instead of researchers simply extracting information, residents were invited to share feedback on the outputs, from deciding banner locations to debating language choices.

From the outset, the team prioritised resident participation and inclusion, such as collecting data through community stories, then curating and verifying them collaboratively before shaping the final outputs. Considerations were taken on aesthetics, location, representation and inclusivity for the final map outputs.

The project was carried out with the support of a six-month Seberang Perai Small Towns Grant from ThinkCity, from November 2024 to May 2025. It culminated in a cultural assets map, a historical timeline of the district and a collection of oral histories. The mapping, published as illustrated booklets and infographic posters, will be distributed to schools, *suraus*, temples and community centres across the district, alongside a dedicated website for online presence.

PARTICIPATORY MAPPING

"We're showing that everyday people's stories are valuable, and deserve to be visualised, preserved and shared."

The senior manager of Arts-Ed, Chen Yoke Pin, added that the bottom-up approach went beyond simply documenting stories; it also involved other forms of community engagement such as collaboration and mutual support. To achieve diversity in representation—helpful for painting a more accurate story—Chen said her team held focus group dialogues and cross-cultural sessions to ensure broad and inclusive representation.

"And in the process, [the different communities] began listening to each other, maybe for the first time," said Chen.

It's not just about capturing stories; the initiative also provides visibility to Nibong Tebal's lesser-known cultural assets and helps communities reconnect with their cultural roots and local history.

Calling the initiative a "special platform for local community members to share personal stories of growing up and living here", Chen said the outputs are more than just data—they are a testament to a participatory process that has strengthened Nibong Tebal residents' sense of ownership and identity.

"Our aim is to increase inclusivity and build bridges among local communities through a common appreciation of shared heritage," she said.

STORIES FROM FOUR DISTINCT COMMUNITIES

The project engaged residents from four sectors of Nibong Tebal's diverse population: the fishing community of Sungai Udang, residents and school communities in the old town, estate workers from Caledonia Estate, and paddy farmers and inshore fishermen in Sungai Acheh. Through fieldwork and interviews, the six-member team worked closely with locals to identify and document both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, from family-run food traditions and community rituals to forgotten landmarks and folk tales.

Most residents are accustomed to seeing their neighbourhoods represented in a homogenous context, such as on mosque maps, Chinese temple newsletters or school directories; the new map's inclusive storytelling is a novelty.

"They started seeing themselves in relation to each other. A fisherman heard the story of a café owner, an estate worker listened to stories from a temple committee head. This was unusual," Chen added.

Language played a central role in the dialogue. Initially working with limited funding that allowed for just two languages, the team chose Bahasa Malaysia and English. Chinese was later added after members of the Chinese community volunteered funds to support the printing. As for Tamil, upon consultation with the Indian community, it was pointed out that many younger residents could no longer read the script. Instead, partial translations and oral communications were agreed to be more effective.

"What was interesting was how other communities, Malay and Chinese, were also listening in on that conversation. It deepened mutual understanding about the realities of each group," said Chen, who also shared how trust was built with residents through open and genuine conversations. She said that being visible and approachable in the community and sharing their past work helped build credibility and trust.

"It's about how they fit into the community. And it gives people a sense of what it is all about. Like a tapestry, you weave them together," she said.

Project coordinator, Amanda Chin, 25, who is one of the two youngest team members, shared her experience as a first-time field researcher. "Being young, I felt I was seen as non-threatening," she reflected. "People opened up. But I also saw how important it was to build trust and how much these little interactions mean."

She also pointed out that more could be done to involve youth and women in future efforts. There is an untapped potential in engaging younger people, especially in language-specific communities.

Despite the rise of digital storytelling, Chen believes printed maps still carry a certain charm and function. "A visitor once asked me, 'Who still prints maps?' I told them, yes, people do still print maps. We're not always working with the young, who are more comfortable with digital tools. For older folks and even the middle-aged, a physical map like this helps them see the stories of a place more clearly and holistically, even romantically," she said, adding that there is a kind of nostalgia in holding something physical.

FINAL TOUCHES

While the final maps benefit from the expertise of a creative director and a graphic layout team, Chen acknowledged that producing the visuals, layout and illustrations remained a challenging and time-consuming process. But the effort was worth it—once completed, the printed maps become the community's asset.

Its physical format also creates space for community investment. Rather than being freely distributed en masse, additional printed copies were sponsored by community groups who value them more because they had a stake in their production. "They provided the funds, so they appreciate the maps more. They also decide who would receive them and this gives the maps even more meaning."

This model of community-funded distribution also facilitated community engagement about where banners should go, what languages they should feature and who should access them. Such involvement signals that the maps have become more than tools, said Chen. They have become symbols of local pride.

The Nibong Tebal participatory mapping effort is a quiet shift in the way people and places are documented. They have drawn a new kind of map—one that charts the unseen connections between people.

***Note:** For more on Arts-ED's work in community-based arts and heritage documentation, visit www.arts-ed.my.

GETTING TO KNOW SEBERANG PERAI SELATAN

BY HAJAR ARIFF

HAJAR ARIFF graduated from Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) with a Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Industrial Statistics. She is an introvert who lends her time to activism whenever the need calls.

WHEN PEOPLE THINK of Penang, the mind often jumps to George Town's heritage streets, Batu Ferringhi's beaches or Balik Pulau's famous durian farms—all located on the island, and in the Timur Laut and Barat Daya districts. But over on the mainland, Seberang Perai Selatan (SPS) is quietly making its mark as a unique blend of farmland, factories and townships. Here, we explore SPS through some eye-opening numbers.

WHO LIVES IN SPS?

Home to about **188,000 people,** SPS is Penang's least populous mainland district, and recorded the state's **lowest growth rate** in 2024, at just **0.7%.** Its population has remained mostly steady over the past three years, shaped by a mix of Bumiputera, Chinese and Indian communities. The aging population is also gradually increasing. Compared to the island, where the population density is at 4,782 people per km² in the Timur Laut district and 1,431 people per km² in the Barat Daya district, SPS is much less crowded, with a density of **780 people per km².**

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE, 2022-2024

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM

Year	Population ('000)	Age group (%)		
		0–14 years	15–64 years	65+ years
2022	185.5	20.5	74.1	5.4
2023	186.8	20.4	73.7	5.9
2024	188.1	20.2	73.4	6.4

WHAT DRIVES SPS'S ECONOMY?

AGRICULTURE

Farming, livestock, fisheries and aquaculture are flourishing industries in SPS, with each subsector playing a key role in driving the district's agro-based economy. In 2023, palm oil dominated the field at **107,800 metric tonnes,** followed by paddy at **11,200 metric tonnes** and pineapple at **3,700 metric tonnes.** Sales from the livestock subsector brought in an impressive **RM991.4mil.** Marine fisheries landed **5,300 metric tonnes** of catch, with sea-based fishing contributing **98.5%.** Production from the aquaculture subsector totaled **33,100 metric tonnes** from both freshwater and brackish water sources, with sales bringing in **RM408.57mil.**

AGRICULTURE BY SUBSECTOR, 2023

Source: Agriculture Census 2024, DOSM

Subsector	Production quantity ('000)	Sales value (RM)
Crop	129.3 tonnes	138.78mil
Livestock	0.3kg of edible bird's nest, honey and other by-products 196,652.1 eggs 66,659.6 live animals 22.7L of milk	991.41mil
Captured fisheries	5.3 tonnes	94.70mil
Aquaculture	33.1 tonnes	408.57mil

INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE

Batu Kawan continues to lead the way in SPS's industrial growth, with **1,214** manufacturing establishments recorded as of 2024. These are mainly concentrated in **Bukit Tengah (569), Bukit Tambun (323)** and **Perai (322).** The area has become a hotspot for economic development, driven by the Batu Kawan Industrial Park (BKIP), and a range of mixed development projects.

Further south, **Nibong Tebal** is also emerging as a key industrial hub with **425** manufacturing establishments. These are spread across **Jawi (232), Sungai Bakap (152)** and **Sungai Acheh (41),** reflecting steady growth in the district's southern corridor.

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM

SMEs

With over **12,000 small and medium enterprise establishments** recorded in 2024, SMEs form a foundational economic landscape in SPS. A majority of them are micro and small enterprises, with Batu Kawan hosting nearly **7,500** SMEs, and Nibong Tebal approximately **4,700.** While specific sectors are not detailed, these businesses typically operate with fewer than **75 employees,** with annual sales below **RM15mil.** Their presence reflects more than just numbers. They represent thousands of families, local entrepreneurs and workers, whose livelihoods are supported by these ventures.

INVESTMENTS

Approved investments in SPS's manufacturing projects between 2019 and 2023 reveal a dynamic landscape, consistently **driven by Foreign Direct Investment (FDI),** which significantly **outpaces Domestic Direct Investment (DDI).** While showing fluctuations, the period was marked by a remarkable surge in 2022, with FDI soaring to **RM6.51bil** and DDI reaching **RM2.50bil—**their highest points over five years, demonstrating a recovery after a dip in 2021. Although investment levels in 2023 were slightly lower than previous highs, the continued strong interest shows that SPS remains an important and active player in the manufacturing sector.

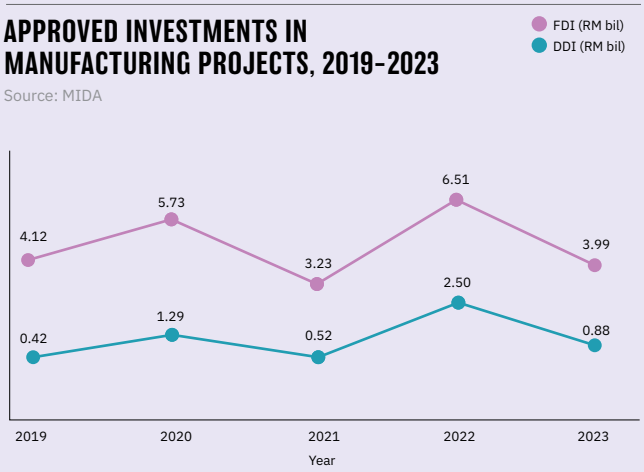
DISTRIBUTIONS OF SME ESTABLISHMENTS, 2024

Source: SMEMalaysia & Department of Statistics, DOSM

Area	Micro	Small	Medium
Batu Kawan	4,991	2,287	166
Nibong Tebal	3,657	991	66

APPROVED INVESTMENTS IN MANUFACTURING PROJECTS, 2019-2023

Source: MIDA



WHERE DO PEOPLE LIVE?

Living quarters in SPS has seen a consistent increase over the past five years, reaching **69,200 units in 2024.** This steady growth, beginning from 63,200 in 2020, indicates a **healthy demand** marked by ongoing residential development in the district. However, SPS currently has the **fewest living quarters** among Penang's districts—most others have at least over 100,000—suggesting that SPS is still the **least urbanised area** within the state.

NUMBER OF LIVING QUARTERS ('000), 2020-2024

Source: NAPIC

CURRENT EXISTING INVENTORY

While many housing categories remained unchanged between Q4 2024 and Q1 2025, there was notable growth in specific segments. The **2- or 3-storey terraced homes** saw the **largest increase,** with an **additional 568 units,** underscoring their continued popularity. Interestingly, **town houses** experienced a significant proportional jump, nearly doubling with **224 new units.** These additions, alongside **modest increases in 2- or 3-storey semi-detached and detached homes,** indicate **ongoing development** and an **increasingly dynamic housing market** that caters to diverse preferences across SPS.

Housing Categories	Q4 2024	Q1 2025
Single-storey Terraced	15,903	15,903
2–3 Storey Terraced	17,826	18,394
Single Storey Semi-Detached	3,085	3,085
2–3 Storey Semi-Detached	4,021	4,103
Detached	11,155	11,202
Town House	252	476
Cluster	668	668
Low-cost House	3,395	3,395
Low-cost Flat	3,746	3,746
Flat	760	760
Condominium/Apartment	2,755	2,755

Source: NAPIC

INCOMING SUPPLY

Incoming supply represents units currently under construction or nearing completion. As of Q1 2025, we can see a **notable surge** in **2- or 3-storey terraced houses,** with **1,284 units** slated for completion, marking a substantial increase from the previous quarter. **Condominium/apartment** units also contribute significantly to the incoming supply, though their numbers saw a **decrease to 2,510 units** from Q4 2024 (3,490), indicating a **catalytic completion schedule** for high-rise developments in the district.

Housing Categories	Q4 2024	Q1 2025
Single-storey Terraced	131	152
2–3 Storey Terraced	800	1,284
Single Storey Semi-Detached	36	36
2–3 Storey Semi-Detached	326	480
Detached	18	65
Town House	336	368
Cluster	0	0
Low-cost House	0	68
Low-cost Flat	727	727
Flat	0	0
Condominium/Apartment	3,490	2,510

Source: NAPIC

PLANNED SUPPLY

There is a **notable drop** in **new planned units** across most categories compared to Q4 2024, with 2- or 3-storey terraced units **decreasing from 403 to just 42 planned units.** There are also **no new condominiums or apartment** projects planned this quarter. This may suggest that developers in SPS are **prioritising the completion of current incoming projects** before embarking on new large-scale ventures to shape a future supply landscape that balances ongoing construction with a more measured approach, before a new round of planning starts.

Housing Categories	Q4 2024	Q1 2025
Single-storey Terraced	0	0
2–3 Storey Terraced	403	42
Single Storey Semi-Detached	220	164
2–3 Storey Semi-Detached	112	44
Detached	5	5
Town House	192	0
Cluster	410	410
Low-cost House	0	0
Low-cost Flat	0	0
Flat	0	0
Condominium/Apartment	1,607	0

Source: NAPIC

TOWNSHIPS

Between mid-2024 and early 2025, **118 residential properties** were **sold in Batu Kawan** across 16 projects or townships, while **Nibong Tebal** saw **282 homes** being purchased in 71 residential areas over a much wider territory. Yet, the story goes beyond project count. Batu Kawan is being shaped as Penang's next strategic growth node, anchored by key projects like IKEA, Design Village and sprawling integrated townships. In contrast, Nibong Tebal's surge reflects its maturity and organic expansion through smaller-scale neighbourhood projects.

Batu Kawan and Nibong Tebal, two key areas in SPS, have shown distinctly different residential property price trends between 2021 and 2024. **Batu Kawan** experienced a **significant surge,** with its **median price rocketing from RM290,000** in 2021 **to** a remarkable **RM515,000** in 2024, reflecting its rapid development and increased demand. In contrast, **Nibong Tebal** saw its **median price decline from RM368,000** in 2021 **to RM280,000** by 2024, indicating market softening. This divergence highlights the varied influences of development, infrastructure and demand on property values within the same region.

BATU KAWAN RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY MEDIAN PRICE, 2021-2024

Source: Brickz

NIBONG TEBAL RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY MEDIAN PRICE, 2021-2024

Source: Brickz

HOW DO PEOPLE GET AROUND?

KTM Komuter stations in Nibong Tebal and Simpang Ampat link the district to Penang Sentral, Butterworth, while the **Second Penang Bridge** and **PLUS** enhance road access. **Rapid Penang** buses also serve the area, with routes connecting Nibong Tebal to Penang Sentral, Bukit Mertajam, Simpang Ampat, Sungai Jawi and Sungai Acheh. However, there's still room to strengthen local coverage and broaden the route. **Rapid Penang On-Demand (RPG On-Demand)** service is available in SPS, covering selected areas in Transkrian/Nibong Tebal and Batu Kawan. This offers locals an alternative to traditional buses, allowing them to travel via the RPG On-Demand van.

Source: myrapid.com & Google Maps

ROAD AND HIGHWAY ACCESS

- Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah Bridge (2nd Penang Bridge): The 24km bridge links Bandar Cassia to Batu Maung and George Town on Penang Island.
- North-South Expressway (PLUS): Runs through SPS and provides vital access to the rest of Peninsular Malaysia and the Bandar Cassia area.

KTM KOMUTER (NORTHERN LINE)

- Nibong Tebal > Simpang Ampat > Butterworth stations: Gateway to ETS trains and the Penang Ferry Terminal.

RAPID PENANG BUS SERVICES

- Route 801 runs between Nibong Tebal Depot and Penang Sentral (~39km) connecting SPS to Butterworth and the Penang Ferry Terminal.
- Route 802 connects Bukit Mertajam to Nibong Tebal via Simpang Ampat and Sungai Jawi.
- Route 803 connects Nibong Tebal to Sungai Acheh.

WHAT MAKES SPS SPECIAL?

SPS's charm lies in its **deep-rooted village culture.** Through the **Malaysian Homestay Experience Programme (PPHM),** visitors can immerse themselves in *kampung* life, and experience traditional cooking to paddy field walks.

4	1	60
homestays	Kampungstay (Located in Nibong Tebal)	operators

Tucked just outside Nibong Tebal, Bukit Panchor State Park is Penang's best-kept wild secret. It sprawls across **445ha of lush lowland rainforest,** swampy boardwalks and limestone bat caves. Nature lovers can wander quiet jungle trails, pitch a tent under the trees or watch kingfishers dart between branches.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR SPS?

Changes are taking shape in SPS. Flood risks are being tackled through **major mitigation projects** along Sungai Jawi and Sungai Kechil, while the proposed **25.5km Northern Corridor Highway** promises smoother traffic and stronger regional links, with bidding still underway as of October 2024. Adding to the momentum is the ambitious **Meditech City** in Bandar Cassia, set to turn SPS into a rising hub for healthcare, eco-tourism and global business.

Source: loyalgroup.com.my, NCER Economic Region Strategic Development Plan (2021-2025) & Department of Statistics, DOSM

Project	Details
Sungai Jawi Basin Flood Mitigation Project	Federal government allocation involving tidal gates, pump houses, embankment works and river widening.
Sungai Kechil Flood Mitigation Project	To improve flood control. Includes river deepening, bund construction and drainage upgrades.
Northern Corridor Highway (NCH)	A proposed 25.5km expressway under NCER. It will cover Bandar Baharu and relieve the PLUS Expressway.
Meditech City, Bandar Cassia	Expected to generate RM13 bil in gross development value and create 12,000 jobs. Facilities include hospitals, medical campuses, a medical supply hub, wellness centres, eco-tourism sites, hotels, sports and rehabilitation centres, and a logistics and distribution hub.

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TAN SOOI BENG

THE REVIVALIST OF DYING CULTURAL ARTS IN PENANG

1

BY RACHEL YEOH

NO STRANGER TO George Town's heritage and cultural scene, Tan Sooi Beng has, for decades, been consistently sowing her love for music and traditional sounds among the young people of Penang. Now an Honorary Professor of Ethnomusicology at the School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), she has published a number of books including *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera* and *Potehi Glove Puppet Theatre of Penang: An Evolving Heritage*.

Penang Monthly sits down to chat with her after she recently received the 20th BOH Cameronian Arts Awards (BCAA) Lifetime Achievement Award as recognition of her outstanding contributions to dance, music, theatre and musical theatre.

Rachel Yeoh: Prof. Dr. Tan Sooi Beng, you are well known—at least to me—to be the "Potehi Ambassador" of Penang. Can you tell me how your childhood has influenced your interest in glove puppetry?

Tan Sooi Beng: I grew up in Ayer Itam with my grandparents. We lived in a small house next to the market. At that time, in the 1950s to 1960s, Ayer Itam was still a village. The community was close-knit, and often held festivals to celebrate special days on the Chinese calendar. During these festivals, they would put up Chinese opera or puppet theatre. My grandma would take me there, and the sounds I heard during these festivals would continue ringing in my head. For the most part, I had a good time playing with my friends, and I can also remember the glitter of the costumes and the lights—I don't remember the details of the shows.

When I was about six, my parents moved to a housing estate in Tanjung Bungah. I went to stay with them and attended school at Convent Light Street. It was there that I became very "anglicised". From then on, I was no longer exposed to these Chinese festivals, apart from when I chanced upon one on the street—but there was no long-term connection.

RY: By being "anglicised", I guess that was when you picked up piano instead, and desired to be a concert pianist.

TSB: Yes, in the end I became a very good pianist, and wanted to major in piano. I got a scholarship to Cornell University and I studied under Malcolm Bilson. I learnt to play many types of pianos, including the Mozart piano. I actually really liked it, but I had to practise all by myself in the basement of the hall, where the practice rooms were. I began to ask myself, "Is this what I really want?"

RY: How did you go from being a pianist to being an ethnomusicologist?

TSB: There was a Javanese gamelan ensemble at the university. The Cornell University graduate students, who had been researching gamelan music in Java, exposed me to the music. Cornell also brought in Pak Sumarsam, who had been teaching at the Wesleyan University, to mentor us for a while.

I found a Southeast Asian music community in Cornell, although I was the only Malaysian music student then. There, I learnt what Southeast Asian music is about. Before that, I never knew about the different types of Southeast Asian gong ensembles that can be found in Thailand, Indonesia, Sabah and Sarawak.

I decided to study at Wesleyan University after that as it was famous for its World Music Programme. I studied African music, Japanese music, Chinese music, Indian music, all kinds of music. This was how I went into ethnomusicology, which is the study of non-Western music—we did ethnography, but we also connected music to society, politics, social circumstances and how community music changes if the political situation or social context changes.

I did my Masters on the Phor Tor Festival (Hungry Ghost Festival) in Penang. I came back to do research, but didn't know anything about the music and theatre that were staged. So, I just followed the musicians who performed for the *saikong* (Chinese ritual specialist) at the different temples during the festival. It was very exciting.

I recorded their music and wrote something about it, but my main focus was on how the Phor Tor Festival was attracting many young people and different types of Chinese communities. This was in the early 1980s—a decade after the National Culture Policy was introduced. The Chinese community, especially in Penang, felt very threatened—their culture may be eroded because it was not recognised as national culture. So, they started to promote it in a big way. They collected money for Chinese schools, Chinese town halls, private hospitals… Phor Tor was one way to raise funds and to speak about their problems.

With the Phor Tor was also the *ko-tai*[1]—I also studied about Chinese Opera then—and it was very interesting because they had sketches between the singing. These dramas covered Chinese culture and social ills—like telling the younger generation not to smoke, drink or gamble. They also allowed Chinese politicians and activists to speak about Chinese culture and the importance of the collection of funds for Chinese schools and hospitals.

When I finished my thesis, I came back to join USM. It was a different ballgame. There was no music being taught at all in USM— there was only the Seni Lakon (performing arts) programme. I joined it, and had students who were very musical. However, they had no background in playing Western music at all. The department wanted me to teach Western music, theory and choir to these students, even though these didn't make sense to them. So, I devised the "Music of Sound" methodology, which I have since been practising for the past 20 to 30 years.

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I wanted to "decolonise" music by showing that anyone can make music—even if one could not afford to buy Western instruments—using everyday materials like bottles, tin cans and so on. You can use your voice by singing or chanting, and you can also use your body parts for percussion. Together with the USM students, I developed Music of Sound or *Muzik Bunyi-Bunyian*. The students were encouraged to visit different sites in Penang, and collect sounds and conversations they hear. Then, they bring these materials back and put them together into a musical piece.

At the same time, I introduced the traditional music of the Wayang Kulit and Bangsawan theatre. The students were taught by traditional masters in residence at USM. We also incorporated traditional music with the sounds of the environment. We came up with a whole piece on the Jetties just using sounds. We took Music of Sound compositions to the schools, and they were very well received. It was my first step toward "decolonising" music.

After that, I started working with the Ministry of Education (MOE) because they wanted to revamp the music curriculum. I was one of the advisors helping to promote local music in secondary and primary schools. MOE started pilot schools in every state that taught traditional music. St. George's Girls' School was where we did the pilot in Penang Island. I helped the MOE with the textbooks for the appreciation classes. Later, the MOE started the Sekolah Seni, which is a specialised school in certain states for traditional dances and theatre.

In USM, I started the music department. I made sure that Malaysian and global music were taught.

RY: What was the first traditional musical instrument that you picked up?

TSB: It was the gamelan in the US! There were many instruments in the ensemble, but I liked to play the *bonang*, which is a set of small, horizontal mounted gongs. You can improvise it over the main melody.

In USM, I joined the gamelan classes that were taught by Pak Omar, a veteran musician who used to perform at the palace in Terengganu. At the same time, I learnt how to play the different drums in the Wayang Kulit ensemble from the *dalang* who came from Kelantan.

RY: **Did your music background help you learn these different instruments quicker?**

TSB: Yes, definitely. Traditional musicians don't think about concepts; everything is "done" in their head because they grew up with it. But for musicians like me, I try to analyse it in my own way. When I learn drumming patterns, I use my Western training to conceptualise what traditional musicians are playing.

My colleague, Patricia Matusky, and came up with a textbook[2] on the music of Malaysia for university and high school students. We analysed different types of Malaysian music using both Western and Southeast Asian concepts. In Southeast Asian music, we think in cycles, and these cycles mirror the lunar calendar. The cyclical repetition involves "special events" or "festivals" within the said calendar. When applied to gamelan music, all instruments have to play together at these special points of the cycle. When they improvise, they follow this framework.

RY: **You have researched on how Malaysians naturally mix cultures such as food, language, music and dance. However, there is still not a lot of appreciation for music and dance, unlike for food and language. Do you think there are ways to make it more mainstream and widely appreciated?**

TSB: I think the only way is to do more performances. In Penang, we did quite a lot of this through Music of Sound. In the 1990s, George Town was going through a phase of renewal. The city was becoming very dilapidated, as communities who had lived there for generations had to move out after the repeal of the Rent Control Act. A group of us, with Arts-ED under Janet Pillai, and dancer, Aida Redza, decided to use the arts to raise consciousness of younger people who had moved out of the city, and those who still went to the schools there—they did not know what Penang culture was. I re-oriented the Music of Sound programme to bring back a sense of belonging to the younger people in the city; Janet used theatre and Aida used dance.

I had a group of young people recruited from schools within George Town, and we ran a six-month programme with them—during weekends and school holidays. We brought the children to different places in George Town—Little India, Kapitan Keling Mosque, Kuan Yin Temple and St. George's Church. The children collected sounds and movements, and converted these into music. We helped them make their own songs and dances, we put these together and called it "Kisah Pulau Pinang". This empowered the children because they were really engaged in the project. They spoke to their parents, grandparents and people in the city, collecting stories and folk songs. They created their own music and dance compositions.

We invited the community, those whom they interviewed, to watch the show. Some people even cried because it brought back memories of the past. Our shows were held in the streets and the audience would just stop and watch.

RY: **What year was this?**

TSB: It was in 2008.

RY: **I guess that is why our art community today is more vibrant compared to 20 years ago.**

TSB: When George Town received its UNESCO World Heritage listing, Ho Sheau Fung, Liew Kung Yew and I were invited to curate the George Town Heritage Celebrations. It was the first time that the Kongsi's, mosques and temples opened their doors to people of different religions and ethnic backgrounds. People began to move in and out of their spaces. We tried to bring back street culture to Penang. I think it has taken off since. Other groups also had their own festivals on the streets. The Chinese New Year festival that is organised by the clan associations of Penang has expanded to many streets in the city.

RY: **Prof, throughout your career, educating, researching and shaping ethnomusicology in Malaysia, which project are you most proud of, and what made it particularly fulfilling?**

TSB: I would say the Potehi revitalisation project. When I started it, Potehi was really dying because people didn't understand the language anymore. It was performed in temples for temple gods. There were no audiences.

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CAPTIONS

1. Music of Sound; Tan in the 1990s.

2. A portrait of Tan.

3. Ombak Potehi and Team ITO from Japan showcasing "The Monkey King Adventures: Love of Onibaba" during George Town Festival 2023.

4. A group photo of the team behind "The Monkey King Adventures: Love of Onibaba".

5. Music of Sound; the plastic bags held by the children represented birds flying.

FOOTNOTES

1. Stage performance in the Hokkien dialect, usually dedicated to deities.

2. *The Music of Malaysia: The Classical, Folk and Syncretic Traditions.*

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Together with Liew Kung Yu, Ong Ke Shin, Foo Wei Meng and Chew Win Chen, we started researching on Potehi. We interviewed the four remaining Hokkien puppet theatre troupes—in the past, there were over 10 in Penang. We came up with a box set sponsored by George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI). This box set, similar to how the Potehi boxes were, held many things. There was a book about its history, puppet manipulation, a CD of the songs and music, and posters from these groups.

However, I felt that publication was not enough to bring something back to life. So, I banded a group of young people and we called it Ombak Potehi. They went on to study and performed it with the Beng Geok Hong puppet troupe run by two ladies who had been performing with their families for a very long time. They followed them around; these puppeteers were very busy. They had no audience, but they were travelling all the time, going to the temples.

RY: How did you know that the art of Potehi was dying if there was no audience?

TSB: I realised that when I was studying Phor Tor. After many years of research, one of the older performers sadly remarked that Potehi is dying, as there are no young apprentices and no audiences for their shows. She asked me if I could help to revitalise the form.

Ombak Potehi apprentices have learnt the traditional manipulation skills, music and stories from the Beng Geok Hong heritage masters. To attract local audiences, we recreated local stories such as "Kisah Pulau Pinang" with local characters and languages. The stories were based on interviews with elders about the multicultural histories of Penang.

I am very happy to say that Ombak Potehi celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. The apprentices are creating waves *(ombak),* and are reaching out to schoolchildren all over the country. Potehi will survive!

RY: What is next for you? Do you have anything you want to dabble in or explore still?

TSB: As President of the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance (ICTMD), a non-governmental organisation in formal consultative relations with UNESCO, I hope to work with international colleagues on collaborative projects that use music and theatre to reach out to those who are disadvantaged. This would complete my legacy.

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.

FLASHES IN THE DARK

LEARNING TO PROTECT FIREFLIES

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IT WAS A particularly cool night. The crickets and rustling trees humbled the group into quietude. If not for distant car honks and the call to prayer from a nearby mosque through the darkness, it was easy to assume we were far from the city. But here in Bukit Kiara, in the heart of one of KL's few green lungs, we huddled together on the lookout for tiny glows of fireflies.

BY LIANI MK

PHOTOS BY ARIEFF ZAFIR

For me, this was unlike my previous explorations to understand these little wonderful insects. The last time I did this, I was floating on a boat that snaked through the rivers of Matang's mangrove forest reserve in Perak. The landscape was shadowed by trees that blinked with synchronised flashes from a congregation of fireflies. Aside from these glows, we were completely wrapped in darkness and silence. That reporting trip for the Malaysian environmental portal, *Macaranga*, brought me into the world of firefly conservation and the researchers and communities working to protect their glow. In most places that offer firefly tours, including at Penang's Nibong Tebal riverbanks, the search for fireflies involved boat tours in far-flung areas away from the city.

But tonight, I had joined a group of over 100 participants walking along the fringes of Taman Tun Dr Ismail (TTDI) at Bukit Kiara in a densely forested site that was once a private rubber estate. "It feels like magic," someone murmured in the darkness. Even the former Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability, Nik Nazmi, and his family attended the walk, describing the urban forest on social media as a "treasure trove of biodiversity still full of mystery", and one that requires protection from overdevelopment.

As part of this year's World Firefly Day celebration on July 5, researchers, families and firefly enthusiasts had gathered in Bukit Kiara to spot these rare insects. It is also a way for researchers to connect science with public curiosity and encourage community-led biodiversity conservation.

AGLOW: SCIENTISTS BRING FIREFLIES INTO FOCUS

"When you see them, it's unforgettable," said Tan Boon Hua, the vice president of Friends of Bukit Kiara (FoBK), as we spotted a firefly larva, *Lamprigera*. The *Lamprigera* is known to be one of the largest (if not the largest) firefly species in the world. In Bukit Kiara, the size of a *Lamprigera* larva can reach up to 10cm.

The *Lamprigera* is just one of nine firefly species found in Bukit Kiara, and has been the subject of FoBK's citizen science projects. Researchers and community members study their behaviour and habitat in collaboration with the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) and the Urban Biodiversity Initiative (UBI).

Recently, Bukit Kiara's firefly populations made the news with the recent rediscovery of the *Pteroptyx gombakia* (last spotted 100 years ago). Unlike congregating fireflies like *Pteroptyx tener*, which gather and flash in synchrony along mangrove riverbanks, *Pteroptyx gombakia* is a solitary species that prefers upland forests, and is much harder to study.

Leading the night's walk was FoBK, alongside Monash University Malaysia's Wan Faridah Akmal Jusoh. The entomologist and her research assistant, Tan Wei Jack, are behind the rediscovery of *Pteroptyx gombakia*. As we walked along, Wan Faridah helped guide participants through the night and pointed out different firefly species that glow faintly in the shadows.

The walk was just one part of a growing effort to bring attention to Malaysia's fireflies. To help expand public knowledge, Wan Faridah and her team also held a Firefly Identification Workshop earlier in the morning at Bukit Kiara. Participants ranged from students and school teachers to botanists, conservation volunteers

CAPTIONS

1. The world's largest firefly larvae, *Lamprigera sp*, is found in Bukit Kiara, among eight other firefly species.

2. World Firefly Day 2025 brought together researchers, citizen scientists, enthusiasts and other members of the public to learn and appreciate fireflies in Malaysia.

3. A microscopic ventral view of the *Pteroptyx gombakia* species that was recently rediscovered after being last seen a century ago.

4. As bio-indicators, fireflies can shed light on the health of its ecosystem.

and neighbourhood residents. Each of them peered curiously into microscopes to get a closer look at these tiny creatures.

Joining virtually from Australia was renowned entomologist, Lesley Ballantyne, also the scientist who formally described and named the *Pteroptyx gombakia* in 2015. Her talk offered a rare glimpse into the world of firefly taxonomy as an underfunded and underexplored field. "There are still so few firefly taxonomists," Ballantyne shared, "and so much we don't yet know."

That sense of mystery of the unknown clearly fuels Wan Faridah's passion. "Being a taxonomist is like being a nature detective," she said during the workshop. "You'll see under the microscope how cute they are!"

Her energy was clearly contagious. Participants clustered around microscopes with fascination, observing firefly wings, eyes and awkwardly, even their reproductive organs. Indeed, as each new specimen came into view—including the *Pteroptyx gombakia*—the room buzzed with excitement and curiosity.

MORE TO LEARN ABOUT FIREFLIES IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia has long played a leading role in global firefly conservation. In 2010, Malaysia hosted the Second International Firefly Symposium, which gave rise to the *Selangor Declaration*, the world's first reference document on firefly protection. Today, Malaysian researchers like Wan Faridah and conservationist, Sonny Wong, continue this legacy as co-chairs and members of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Firefly Specialist Group.

Yet, even with its progress, experts stress that more investment in research, local collaboration and habitat protection is needed.

"We need stronger, more consistent long-term research to understand how fireflies are adapting or disappearing in different parts of Malaysia," said Wan Faridah.

Bukit Kiara is a good example of this urgency. Despite its designation as public green space, this urban forest is not free from threats. Light pollution

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from surrounding developments can disorient fireflies. "The artificial lights confuse them and prevent them from finding mates," explained Wan Faridah. That is why, during the walk, participants were asked to use only red-tinted torches; these are less disruptive to the fireflies' communication.

On top of that, habitat loss poses another growing concern. Tan Boon Hua of FoBK warned that ongoing development near the forest edge, such as a water reservoir, clearings, lighting infrastructure and large-scale housing development, could severely impact the delicate habitat that supports the fireflies; these fringe areas are found to be the most densely populated with them.

"These fireflies are sensitive to even the slightest changes in light and humidity," Tan explained. "Once development pushes too close, we risk losing them before we even fully understand them."

Bukit Kiara itself sits on what was once a rubber estate, and recent construction projects that include a new reservoir have already impacted some nearby firefly habitats. These changes, Tan noted, are a reminder of how quickly biodiversity can vanish in the face of unchecked development.

COMMUNITY AND CONSERVATION

For community members and researchers, fireflies offer a spark of wonder and a call to action to protect the larger forest ecosystem.

"You can't conserve what you don't know," added Wan Faridah. "Better data and stronger policy will help us protect not just individual species, but entire ecosystems."

"It started with curiosity," said Wan Faridah. "But the more we learned, the more we realised how rare and magical these creatures are, and how important it is to protect the spaces they live in."

Her eyes lit up as she described the moment people first see fireflies. "Once they see them, they remember," she smiled. "There's something magical and emotional about that tiny flash in the dark."

Of mixed indigenous roots, **LIANI MK** is an independent writer, journalist and artist covering indigenous knowledge, migration, language, film and culture in Southeast Asia. With a background in history and Southeast Asian Studies, she also engages in media advocacy with a regional feminist organisation.

AZMI HUSSIN

A LIFE IN LINES, A LEGACY IN LOVE

BY IVAN GABRIEL

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.

AZMI HUSSIN, a beloved Penang-born cartoonist and visual storyteller, passed away on 5 March 2025 at the age of 40 from a heart attack. He left behind a legacy far greater than the pages he had filled. He was a husband, a father of three, a friend to many and an icon whose pen was ever busy, sketching the everyday joys and struggles of Malaysians.

Born on 13 September 1984, Azmi discovered art not in studios, but in the quiet encouragement of his grandmother, who recognised his gift and urged him to nurture it. She remained his pillar throughout his life, and her support and belief in him laid the foundation that solidified his career—one that was defined by perseverance, humour and heart. Just as she stood by him, Azmi, too, exemplified the same for his children—he was a rock that championed their dreams with the same tenderness.

His journey began modestly. On weekends, he was a familiar sight along Armenian Street and Beach Street, as he would be seen drawing caricatures. Tourists and locals would line up to be immortalised by his quick wit and quicker pen. These early encounters were never just transactions or a way to make ends meet for Azmi; these were conversations, moments of laughter and connections that made Azmi a beloved figure in the community.

Even when he was not out on the streets, he would continue drawing. His many markers of different widths continued to tell stories. He even landed himself a monthly column on *Penang Monthly* from September 2018 until his untimely death.

His dedication to chronicle through his caricatures led to national recognition through record-breaking feats. In March 2017, Azmi successfully attempted to set a record in the Malaysia Book of Records by drawing 320 live caricatures within 24 hours. Two years later, in

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CAPTIONS

1. One of Azmi's artworks featured during "CARI".

2. Azmi depicted the struggle and humour of Malaysians in his art.

3. Azmi at the narrow entrance of his studio.

4. Azmi drawing caricatures of attendees during the launch of The Forum for Leadership and Governance (The FLAG) at Penang Institute's South Wing.

5. Azmi inking a sketch in his gadget-free studio.

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August 2019, he set a Malaysia Book of Records title for creating the longest coffee painting in the country, with a 101m-long assembly depicting over 100 locations in Penang, including its skyline and notable locations from Pitt Street to Seberang Perai. The painting was made entirely using coffee brewed from 100% Arabica beans provided by Starbucks, who also supported the project. He achieved his third Malaysia Book of Records title in December 2021 with his comic strip titled "SAGA Kami", which measured 151m in length. The comic narrates a heartwarming story centred around a Proton Saga car, illustrating its journey after being bought and sold through various Malaysian families of different cultural backgrounds. The official recognition and launch event took place on 12 December 2021 at Penang City Stadium, where veteran cartoonist, Mohammad Nor Khalid (famously known as Datuk Lat), was present to honour the achievement.

These projects were not just personal milestones for Azmi, they were a celebration of Malaysian stories, captured in lines that echoed everyday truths. Despite the accolades he obtained, Azmi remained humble, continually evolving as an artist in search of a unique voice and identity.

On 31 August 2024, he held his first solo exhibition, "CARI", at Hin Bus Depot. The exhibition showcased over 50 works spanning his decade-long artistic journey, including caricatures, coffee paintings, murals and pop art pieces. The title of his exhibition, meaning "to find" in the Malay language, reflected his ongoing quest for artistic identity.

These shows that he put forth were the fulfillment of a quiet promise, one that led him to Hin Bus Depot; that venue held special significance to him.

A decade earlier, in January 2014, he was standing outside the refurbished bus depot with his son. It was Hin's first opening exhibition. Azmi turned to him and said: "*Suatu hari nanti, Abah akan ada solo exhibition kat sini*."[1] Those words, once a dream, became a reality of great poignancy. It was a full-circle moment for him and his career, and those who knew how much that meant to him were touched when they walked through the walls of that exhibition.

After a year filled with accomplishments and meaningful projects, 2025 had a different course in store. His passing came as a shock to many. Tributes poured in almost immediately, donation drives were swiftly organised, and copies of his books, produced in collaboration with the George Town Festival (GTF) and George Town World Heritage Incorporation (GTWHI), sold out quickly. Additional donation drives and print sales at Hin Bus Depot and Cultprint Studio further demonstrated the deep affection and support the community had for him and his family.

His impact was evident, not only through his art, but through the lives he touched: his wife, children, friends and countless supporters, who grew up smiling at his illustrations. Azmi was a man of the people, and his stories of family, Malaysia, struggle and humour were what he saw of us all—reflections of his community. He gave voice to the small, powerful truths that were often overlooked in grand narratives. His art was both a mirror and a love letter to Penang.

Though Azmi Hussin has laid down his pen, his lines—bold, kind and full of life—will continue to draw us closer to who we are and what we hold dear.

FOOTNOTE

[1] Translation: "One day, Abah will have a solo exhibition here."

PENANG'S TOURISM FACES THE CHALLENGES OF SUCCESS

BY IAN MCINTYRE

MORE DIRECT FLIGHTS? Heavier traffic on weekends? These may be surface-level indicators that make Penang's tourism scene look like it is faring well. However, senior hoteliers have claimed that the state may be approaching a glut in hotel rooms—this has caused a stir and a subsequent re-examination of the sector.

IAN MCINTYRE is a veteran journalist with over 25 years of experience reporting for the mainstream and alternative media. He subscribes to a belief that what is good for society is likewise beneficial for the media.

After all, the state has been a key contributor to Malaysia's tourism for decades. The "Pearl of the Orient", Penang's traditional brand name, has the hallmarks of everything touristy—pristine hills, beaches, a mix of retail and heritage, not to mention man-made attractions like a bird park in Seberang Perai to theme parks in Teluk Bahang. It remains a street food paradise.

Hotelier, Adrian Praveen, sounded a warning recently that there are simply too many rooms in the state. His assertion has the backing of the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) Penang chapter chairman, Tony Goh, and his vice-president counterpart, Khoo Boo Lim. There are already approximately 17,000 rooms registered with MAH.

But with short-term rentals on platforms like Airbnb or the semi-rural homestays in Seberang Perai Utara and Selatan, and Balik Pulau, the exact numbers are unclear. "We may have 20,000 rooms. And when there are significant bottlenecks in traffic, we wonder where these road users stay," Goh said.

The office of Penang's Executive Councillor for Tourism and Creative Economy (PETACE) has released data showing that the Penang International Airport (PIA) recorded a significant rise in foreign arrivals last year with a notable increase from China, Thailand and Taiwan. China was behind the most dramatic increase, with arrivals surging by 218.86%, from 37,711 in 2023 to 120,245 in 2024. Other notable increases were recorded for Taiwan (19.34%), Thailand (41.28%) and the UK (27.14%). The US, Australia and Japan also saw modest growth, with arrivals increasing by 7.13%.

The average hotel occupancy rate has generally remained around 62%, mirroring rates and occupancy levels of short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb. This indicates a consistent trend across different accommodation types. However, some quarters within the hospitality industry are concerned over an oversupply of rooms in the state despite reports of robust tourism activities.

"It is more of a perception issue," said the Mayor of the City Council of Penang Island (MBPP), Rajendran Anthony. "It is a supply-and-demand factor. We are approving new hotels because the applicants see a demand for it. If there were adequate rooms, then the other forms of accommodation should not be thriving as well."

CAUSE FOR CONCERN

It all started following poor hotel occupancy rates in Penang during the Hari Raya Aidilfitri period, which usually generates huge tourism inflows. Praveen, who manages the Arrowood (Hospitality) Group, shared that in Bali, Indonesia, unchecked development of hotels and villas has led to crashing occupancy rates. It also caused a strain on the environment and losses to investors. In response, the authorities had to freeze approvals for new hotel permits.

He also added that in Barcelona, Spain, the growth of short-term rentals spiralled out of control, leading to conflict between tourists and local residents, who were priced out of owning homes. "What's happening in Penang is a tamer version of what happened in both these destinations." Though Penang does regulate short-term stays such as Airbnb accommodations, he still thinks something must be done; when an inevitable price war brews, especially among online travel agents, rooms become cheaper; the operating costs, however, remains high. "This is why hoteliers continue to struggle in hiring experienced hoteliers. Instead, they rely on young and foreign workers or interns," Praveen explained. He wants Penang to incorporate a monitoring system called Accommodation Development Rights (ADR). ADR is a framework that helps the authorities to increase bona fide rooms at the right pace; not too fast or too slow.

ADR works when the authorities use it to review the annual average hotel occupancy rate in Penang. If the rate is below 80%, then it is obvious that the hotels are not fully utilising their room inventories. For example, if Penang has around 13,000 rooms and the annual occupancy rate is below 72%, it means that nearly 3,600 rooms go unoccupied every night. "Allowing for more rooms to be built under such conditions isn't growing the industry," Praveen stated.

Several hoteliers also echo Praveen's call for better control over the supply and demand. They also pointed out that there are many day trippers travelling by road to Penang. They come in the day but overnight elsewhere, namely in Kedah or Perak, where room charges are relatively lower than in Penang.

Tourism remains one of Penang's most vital economic pillars. However, according to a report published in *Travel and Tour World,* Penang's tourism is grappling with rising operational costs, a shortage of skilled workers, and an oversupply of accommodation options.[1] The report recommends a comprehensive marketing campaign to revitalise tourism and boost visitor spending, and the adoption of the ADR system to tackle oversupply.

SKIES ARE CLEARING

PETACE exco, Wong Hon Wai, said that despite the concerns of MAH, the hotel occupancy rates in Penang still rank as among the highest in the country, clarifying that "the recent and upcoming additions to the state's hospitality capacity should be viewed as a strategic move aligned with Penang's growing tourism and business demands." Since August 2023, a total of 13 new hotels have commenced operations in Penang, contributing an additional 2,311 rooms to the market. A quick calculation brings the total hotel rooms to approximately 22,500.

Many of these new establishments are international brands such as Ascott and Marriott. Penang is already a prominent destination for Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE). Reputable hotel brands are key in securing large-scale international events, he explained.

The latest data from Tourism Malaysia confirms this positive trajectory. In 2024, 8.2mil tourists stayed in hotels across Penang, compared to 7.2mil in 2023—an impressive 13.3% leap in just one year. It reinforces the claim that the expansion in hotels is being matched by rising visitor number. "The hotel industry has to be agile, continuously evolving in response to emerging challenges while increasing their marketing," said Wong.

HITTING THE SWEET SPOT

For strata buildings with commercial titles which are already zoned for commercial activities, Airbnb proposed for short-term rental accommodations (STRA) to be allowed by default. However, its residents must collectively vote via their Joint Management Body (JMB) or management corporation on whether conditions or restrictions around STRA should be implemented.

Mich Goh, Airbnb's Head of Public Policy for Southeast Asia, India, Hong Kong and Taiwan, said: "We strongly believe that as tourism gradually recovers, STRA and Airbnb's community of hosts and guests will be a key driver for Penang's tourism industry, and more broadly, the Malaysian economy." She cited its pre-pandemic contribution of USD125.9mil to Penang's GDP and support for 5,900 jobs. Airbnb guests spent a total of RM4.4bil in Malaysia, which included accommodations, transport and supporting local restaurants and retail stores.

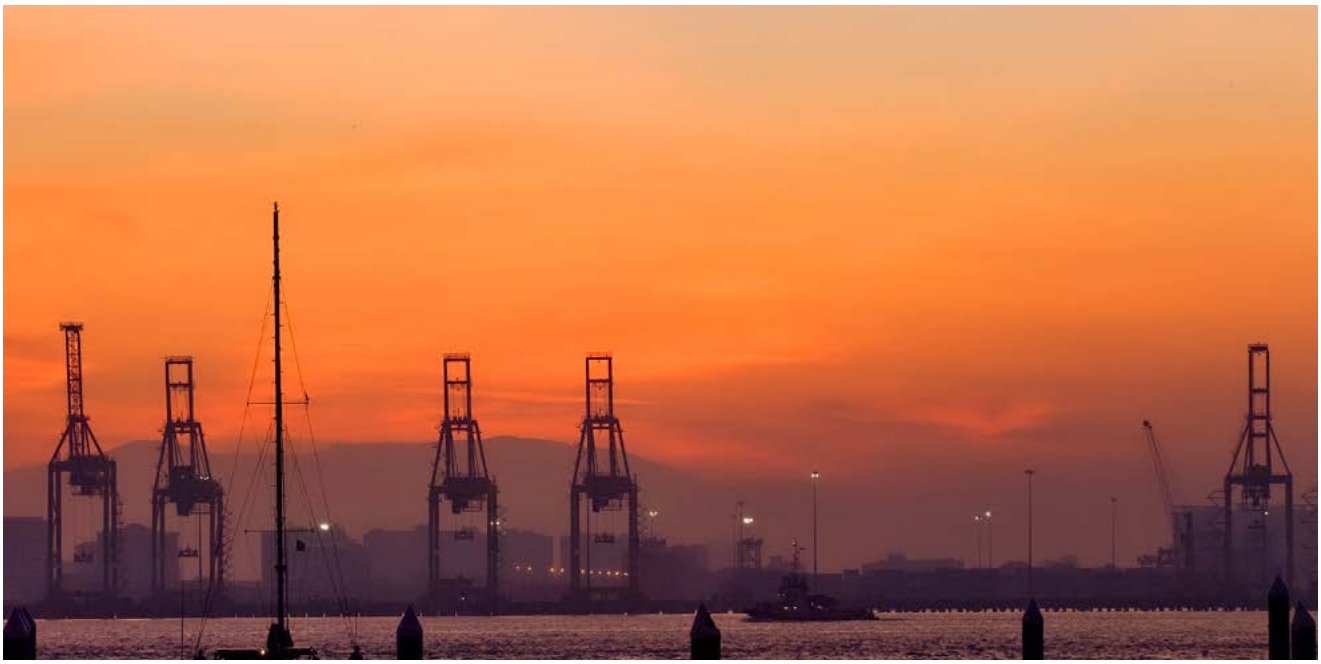
To this, Khoo said that MAH wants to collaborate closely with the state to secure a win-win outcome for all. In the meantime, all efforts must be in concert towards making next year's "Visit Malaysia 2026" a success.

FOOTNOTE

[1] https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/penang-faces-significant-challenges-in-the-hospitality-industry-with-labor-shortages-increasing-operational-costs-and-potential-oversupply-of-accommodation-urging-for-strong-marketing-and-monitorin/

A SHORT HISTORY OF PENANG'S PORT, FERRIES AND WHARVES

BY ELIZABETH SU



BRITISH WRITER AND philosopher, Julian Baggini once wrote, "Looking out over the port of Dover, with the endless stream of boats coming in and out, every British citizen is reminded that belonging here has never been about blood or genes. It's simply about being at home on this discrete island and being aware of the privileges and responsibility that brings."

In the same way, I would imagine, the privilege of having a port in our midst is a distinct reminder of home and the glorious feeling of belonging on "this discrete island" of Penang. Penang Port connects us with the world, reaching out to different shores, providing us with the privileges of connectivity with other maritime cities and nations.

Today, Malaysia has seven major ports: Port Klang (largest port, located in Selangor), Johor Port, Port of Tanjung Pelepas (second-largest port, located in Johor), Kuantan Port, Penang Port (the oldest port), Bintulu Port and Kemaman Port.

THE PENANG PORT

In 1786, George Town was established as Britain's first Far East trading post, and thrived as the first port of call east of India for traders. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the subsequent increase in international trade, Penang was declared a "free port" in 1872. The Port of Penang was managed by two public authorities: the Federal Malay States Railway at Prai Wharf and the Penang Harbour Board at Swettenham Pier.

On 1 January 1956, the Penang Port Commission was established under Penang Port Commission Ordinance 1955. It took over all the undertakings of the Penang Harbour Board, including the ferry services and the Prai Wharf undertaking of the Malayan Railway Administration. However, in 1969, Penang's free port status was repealed by the Malaysian federal government.

On 1 January 1994, Penang Port Sdn Bhd, a company wholly owned by the Minister of Finance (Incorporated), was licensed by the Penang Port Commission to operate, manage and maintain all port facilities and services. Penang Port, the main gateway for shippers in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia and the southern provinces of Thailand, was now effectively corporatised.

Two decades later, in January 2014, Penang Port Sdn Bhd was successfully privatised under Seaport Terminal Johore Sdn Bhd, which took over the former's ferry service, settling the port's debts of over RM1.2bil, paying for the capital dredging cost (dredging of the seabed from 11.5m to 14.5m) and providing capital injection to develop the area surrounding the port. Three months after, it was reported that the ferry service was losing money (apparently, it had been in the red since 2004); some industry observers suggested that Penang's ferry operation should learn from how Hong Kong's Star Ferry became a successful and commercially viable entity.

On 5 August 2016, MMC Corp Bhd announced it was acquiring a 49% stake in Penang Port Sdn Bhd from Seaport Terminal Johore Sdn Bhd for RM200mil in cash; the acquisition was completed on 27 March 2017. Thereafter, on 3 April 2017, MMC Corporation Bhd announced it would acquire the remaining 51% stake in Penang Port Sdn Bhd (PPSB) for a cash consideration of RM220mil in order to gain full control and be in a position to determine its future strategic direction. The acquisition was completed in October 2017, making Penang Port a full subsidiary.

THE FERRIES AND TWO BRIDGES

When I first boarded the iconic double-decker ferry connecting George Town to Butterworth on the Malaysian mainland, I could not help thinking how much Penang's ferry service reminded me of the Star Ferry in Hong Kong. In fact, the Penang ferries started operation approximately six years after Hong Kong's Star Ferry, then known as the Kowloon Ferry Company, did so.

Sadly, the last day of 2020 marked Penang's ferry service's final operation day—ending more than 120 years of operations.

Sometime between 1893 and 1894, the inaugural regular ferry service was initiated by a local entrepreneur and later prominent Straits Chinese businessman, Quah Beng Kee. Together with his four brothers, they were known as the Beng Brothers. The original fleet consisted of three large steamers and seven launches that shuttled between Penang's Kedah Pier and the Bagan Tuan Kecil Pier in Butterworth, occasionally connecting to nearby towns on the mainland such as Bukit Tambun in the south.

In December 1924, the Penang Harbour Board took over the ferry services and implemented facilities for conveying motor vehicles. From 1925, cars were transported across on floating decks towed by the launches, until a steam ferry vessel named "Seberang" was introduced soon after. By the beginning of 1928, the number of passengers and vehicles using the ferry service had increased to such an extent that an order for two larger steam vessels was placed with the Singapore Harbour Board.

However, the 1970s witnessed an exponential growth of the ferry service. This led to the building of a bridge connecting Seberang Perai with the island of Penang. The first Penang bridge, a cable-stayed structure with a length of 8.4km, was the first road connection between the peninsula and the island. When it opened on 3 August 1985, the central span had six lanes, while the rest of the structure had only four lanes. The entire bridge was widened to six lanes in 2009. However, it proved to be insufficient to relief traffic congestion, and the second Penang bridge was built. Also known as the Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah Bridge, the latter is 24km long with a length over water of 16.9km; it won the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE)'s Brunel Medal Award in 2015. This cable-stayed structure is the longest bridge in Malaysia, and was the longest in Southeast Asia until the Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Bridge opened in Brunei in 2020.

BUTTERWORTH DEEP WATER WHARVES

In 1974, the first container was discharged at Butterworth Deep Water Wharves (completed in 1968). Today, it handles mainly break bulk cargo with a 1.05km linear berth. The wharves are capable of handling 2.5 million tonnes of cargo per annum, and includes a vegetable oil tanker pier comprising two berths equipped with pipelines that directly transfer liquid cargo to and from the tank farms for import/export operations.

The term "break bulk" comes from breaking down large consignments into small pieces to load onboard ships in the past. Today, it refers to any oversized cargo that cannot be shipped in containers. Break bulk is non-unitised and non-containerised cargo. This means it is transported in the vessel hold or on deck rather than in containers, and is ideal for transporting project cargo, parts for oil rigs, power plants, construction material (bulldozers and cranes), or anything else (such as silos, tanks, boilers, pipes and cylinders) that will not fit into a standard intermodal container. Intermodal shipping is the transport of goods using two or more different modes of transportation, with cargo carried in a sealed shipping container throughout. The cargo itself is not handled during modal transfers; this improves security, reduces damage risk and minimises labour costs.

IT BEGAN WITH PENANG PORT

Penang Port's growth and performance is inextricably linked with its evolving ecosystem comprising warehousing and logistics, ferries and wharves, free commercial zones and investments in port infrastructure.

On 1 February 2021, North Butterworth Container Terminal (NBCT) was gazetted as a free commercial zone (FCZ), enabling Penang Port to be the focal point for shipping and transshipment activities. An FCZ promotes business and trading activities through entrepôt trade and is located near the port to ease the transport of goods and products. It differs from a Free Trade Zone (FTZ), which focuses on the manufacturing of goods and other industrial activities, and deals mainly with the trading and transportation of goods to other locations.

Last September, Penang Port announced that it was awaiting government approval for its RM2.2bil expansion plan, which is part of the long-term concession agreement, which runs until 2055, submitted in 2023. Since becoming a private entity under Seaport Terminal Johore Sdn Bhd, Penang Port has invested over RM700mil in upgrading its infrastructure, including improvements to ferry services, berth expansion, IT systems and the development of a modern cruise terminal.

From a modest trading post, Penang Port has inevitably charted and will continue to chart the future of Penang. It stands as a reminder that Penang's future depends on it staying open and connected to the rest of the world.

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ELIZABETH SU is a Harvard Mason Fellow (Class of '97). She is very curious about people and the world around her, and believes that asking questions is a great way to learn. Elizabeth teaches, writes and loves storytelling

THE MAJIE IN PENANG

A PROUD HERITAGE OF WOMAN POWER

BY MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA

THE MODERN WOMAN was a term that gained traction in Newfoundland in the 1890s, which brought about voting rights for women. This expression was later picked up by glamorous advertisements and magazine spreads in the 1920s; such women were characterised by their liberal dressing and views. During that time, Republican-era China also had its version of this woman. She was an independent career woman, politically motivated and lived in the city.

However, another kind of modern woman walked the streets of George Town. She wore a crisp white and black samfu, her hair neatly plaited or pinned in a bun. She took a vow of celibacy, rejecting marriage and the expectations of traditional womanhood. Her resistance was quieter, more enduring and far less photographed or celebrated. She was the *majie*.

The *majie* may not have fitted the image of modernity, but she embodied its deeper transformations. Through financial independence, migration and lifelong labour, she was both breadwinner and caregiver, sustaining families across borders through decades of uncertainty, war and independence.

WEAVING INDEPENDENCE

The *majie* were Chinese women who worked as lifelong domestic helpers, many of whom came from Shunde in Guangdong Province. Their story sits at the intersection of social history, cultural resistance and shifting economic realities of early 20th-century China. They defied convention, choosing to build independent lives instead of marriage and motherhood, and to define their identities on their own terms.

To understand the emergence of the *majie*, we must first look to the Pearl River Delta, where women's labour played a central role in the region's domestic economy.

By the early 20th century, the Pearl River Delta region had become a major centre for silk production, and women formed the backbone of this cottage industry. Unmarried women, in particular, held greater economic value, as they were not subject to marriage-related taboos that restricted female labour. Many families chose to keep daughters at home rather than marry them off, preserving a vital source of income. Daughters were highly valued, in contrary to other parts of China, where female infanticide was common.

As industrialisation advanced, the value of single women only increased. With fewer family obligations and having the physical dexterity that was so prized in silk work, women dominated the production line. Some silk-reeling factories even operated with an all-female staff.

As women (and men) migrated to towns for factory jobs, village-based sericulture declined. Mechanisation reduced the need for male labour, prompting many men to seek work abroad, in places like Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong. This shifted the domestic labour force balance, and women became primary breadwinners and gained more influence in family affairs.

Because local economic conditions of the times enabled women to remain unmarried—with paid work and economic self-sufficiency—many began to challenge the expectation of marriage and motherhood altogether.

In traditional Chinese society, an unmarried woman's primary duty was to serve her parents and contribute to the household, though her efforts were often overlooked or attributed to male relatives. Typically, this role ended with marriage. However, in cases where a family faced a particular hardship, some daughters remained unmarried to continue fulfilling their filial obligations. These women became known as *zhēn nǚ* (贞女), or "chaste women".

This tradition of celibacy, centred in Shunde, dates back to the 18th and 19th centuries. Among these women were a distinct group known as *zì shū nǚ* (自梳女), or "self-combing women". They took formal vows to remain unmarried for life.

What set them apart was not only their rejection of marriage, but the ritual through which they asserted this choice. In a ceremony known as *so hei* (梳起), meaning "combing up", a woman's hair was styled into a bun similar to that of a married woman, symbolically asserting adulthood and independence.

While some have attempted to translate *zì shū nǚ* as "sworn spinsters", the term fails to capture its cultural depth. Unlike the Western notion of a spinster, often associated with age, social exclusion or failed marriage prospects, the *zì shū nǚ* made their vows during typical marriageable age, usually between 15 and 29. Their decision was not a last resort, but a deliberate act of autonomy, often driven by a desire to support their families and pursue work.

The decline of the silk industry in the 1930s pushed many Cantonese women from the Pearl River Delta to seek work abroad. At the same time, the Great Depression led British colonial authorities in Malaya to tighten immigration policies, which mostly affected male Chinese labourers. The 1933 Aliens Ordinance imposed quotas on male immigrants, initially capping entries at 1,000 per month, which drove up the cost of passage for men due to high demand. The same quota did not apply to women, leading to a sharp rise in female migration.

While many women immigrants found employment in agriculture, tin mining and rubber tapping in states like Perak and Selangor, most entered into domestic service in urban centres like Penang, Ipoh and KL. Families were typically either wealthier Chinese homes or European households, which were seen as relatively accessible, familiar and respectable. The growing presence of women workers (also known as *amahs*) gradually displaced the Hainanese men who had been employed as houseboys. In time, the practice redefined domestic service as women's work.

It was from this convergence of defying socio-cultural traditions and economic downturn that these *majie* figures emerged as a wave of Cantonese women arriving to port cities across Southeast Asia, including Penang.

Not all *zì shū nǚ* became *majie*. Similarly, not all *amahs* (female domestic servants) were *majie*. The term *majie* originates from the Cantonese *ma-cheh*, meaning "mother and sister". Other related terms in circulation included *amah-chieh*, *ah-yee*, *ah sum* (aunt) or *jie-jie* (elder sister), all of which point to roles of domestic care, seniority or familial closeness.

In China, the *zì shū nǚ* had not been allowed to live in their family homes, since they were considered married women. Many were forbidden from returning to their villages in old age; their deaths were thought to bring misfortune. In response, the *zì shū nǚ* formed close-knit bonds with one another, sharing rented rooms and building mutual support. These ties evolved into chosen kinship or a sisterhood, fostering enduring systems of solidarity and collective care.

A LIFE OF SERVICE

Similar forms of social affiliations emerged for the *majie*, which was especially important as they emigrated for the first time, and arrived in port cities like Penang, Singapore and Hong Kong. These *majie*, often from the same village, grouped together to form associations known as *kongsi*, pooling wages to rent shared accommodations called Kongsi Fong.

Picture a young *majie*—she has just arrived at Weld Quay, and probably felt disoriented but hopeful, carrying only a small bundle of belongings. If she had no relatives or friends to take her in, she would have made her way down Market Street, turned onto Pitt Street, and passed the Goddess of Mercy Temple before slipping into Stewart Lane. At number 25, she could pay a small fee to lodge at Kongsi Fong, until she found work.

Many *majie* began their domestic careers handling every household task on their own, which earned them the title *yat keok tek* or "one-leg kick" in Cantonese. Wealthier families, especially Europeans, often employed multiple servants for specific roles such as cooking, cleaning, childcare or housekeeping. Working for expatriate households typically came with better pay, clearer job scopes and improved living conditions.

Although the average *majie* served their employers for approximately 10 years, some remained with them until retirement, forming strong, lasting bonds with the families they worked for. Despite their modest wages, *majies* were incredibly frugal, faithfully sending money home to support their families in China. They remained devoted daughters across oceans, anchored by duty, while building lives on foreign shores.

By the 1970s, the *majie* and (more broadly) the *amahs*, became a vanishing presence. Some continued to live with their employers into old age, while others retired quietly in their communal *kongsi* homes. A few returned to China, but many chose to live out their days in vegetarian halls or retirement homes.

In Malaya, *majies* lived through some of the nation's most turbulent and transformative decades, including the Japanese Occupation, the fight for Merdeka and the early formation of Malaysia. As domestic workers, they helped families hold together during times of immense uncertainty. Their story compels us to reconsider what we mean by modernity and independence. Though they may not fit the silhouette of the "Modern Woman", they were women who redefined their identities.

While Singapore has preserved much of the *majie*'s historical record, it is heartening to see Penang reclaiming its place in that narrative. This year, the particular efforts by the Penang Shunde Association, Chan Lean Heng, Chen Jialu and Soonufat Supramanium (aka Sir Soon) among many, are breathing new life into these stories. From March to April 2025, in conjunction with International Women's Day, they organised a talk entitled "Who are the Majies?", a film screening of "Thoe Jia, A Simple Life", an exhibition named "Majie: Mother, Sister, Aunt and Grandmother", a guided neighbourhood walk to the historical sites in George Town where the *majie* used to live, and a site-specific theatre performance called "The Letters Never Sent 落叶归根".

Through these programmes, the *majie* are once again being seen—not as footnotes in history, but as full, complex women whose lives shaped Penang. Today, as we rely on a new generation of domestic workers, the legacy of the *majie* reminds us to see their labour with the dignity, humanity and gratitude it deserves.

***Note:** This article draws primarily from the historical research and documentation by Janice Loo of the National Library of Singapore. The writer has adapted and interpreted this material with additional context and contemporary reflection, particularly in relation to Penang.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Identification cards of the *majie.*

2. A poster of the exhibiton on the *majie* titled "*Majie:* Mother, Sister, Aunt and Grandmother" held in April.

3–7. Snapshots from "The Letters Never Sent 落叶归根" a production on the life of the *majie* by The Letters Never Sent Production Team. Photos by Thum Chia Chieh.

MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA is a dabbler of creative expressions and a budding researcher rooted in sensitivity, vulnerability, faith and human connection. Check out more of her writing on mdev16.wordpress.com.

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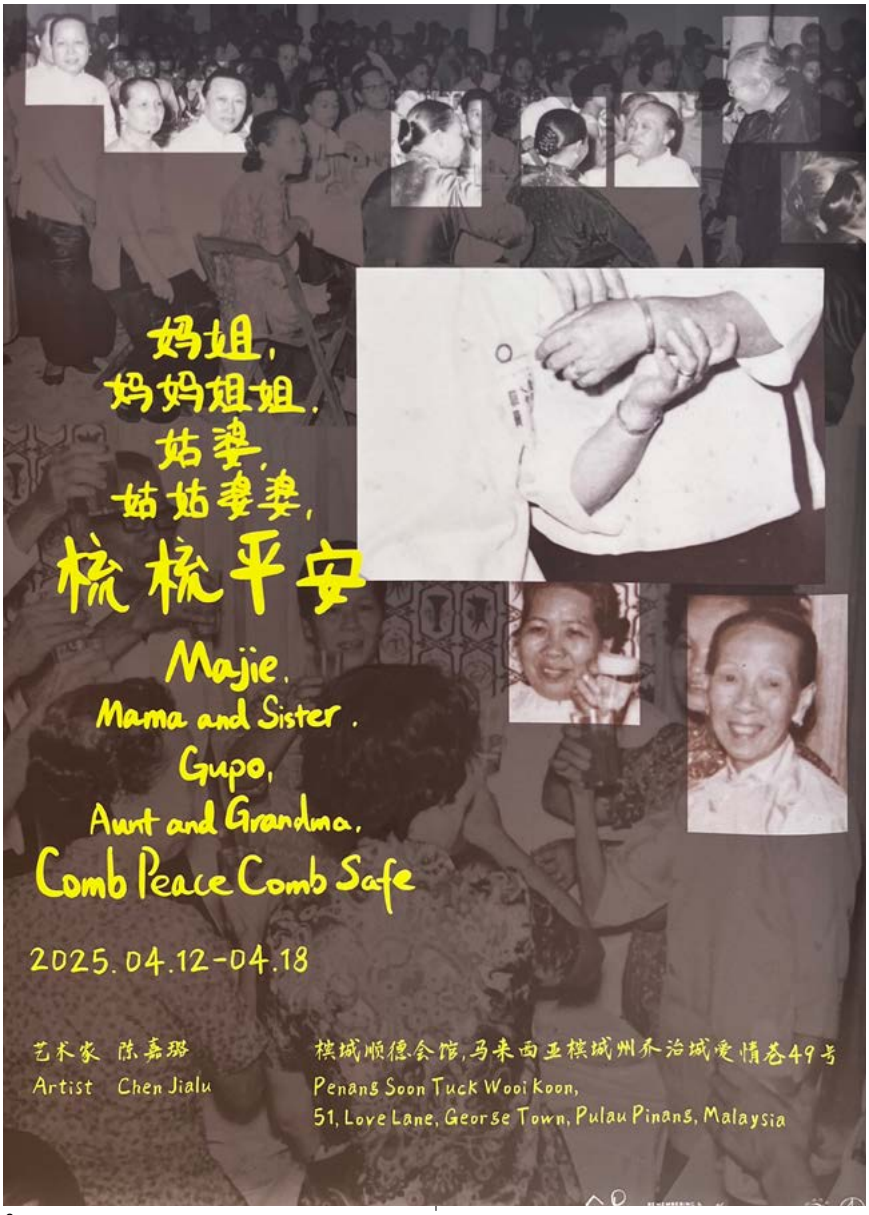

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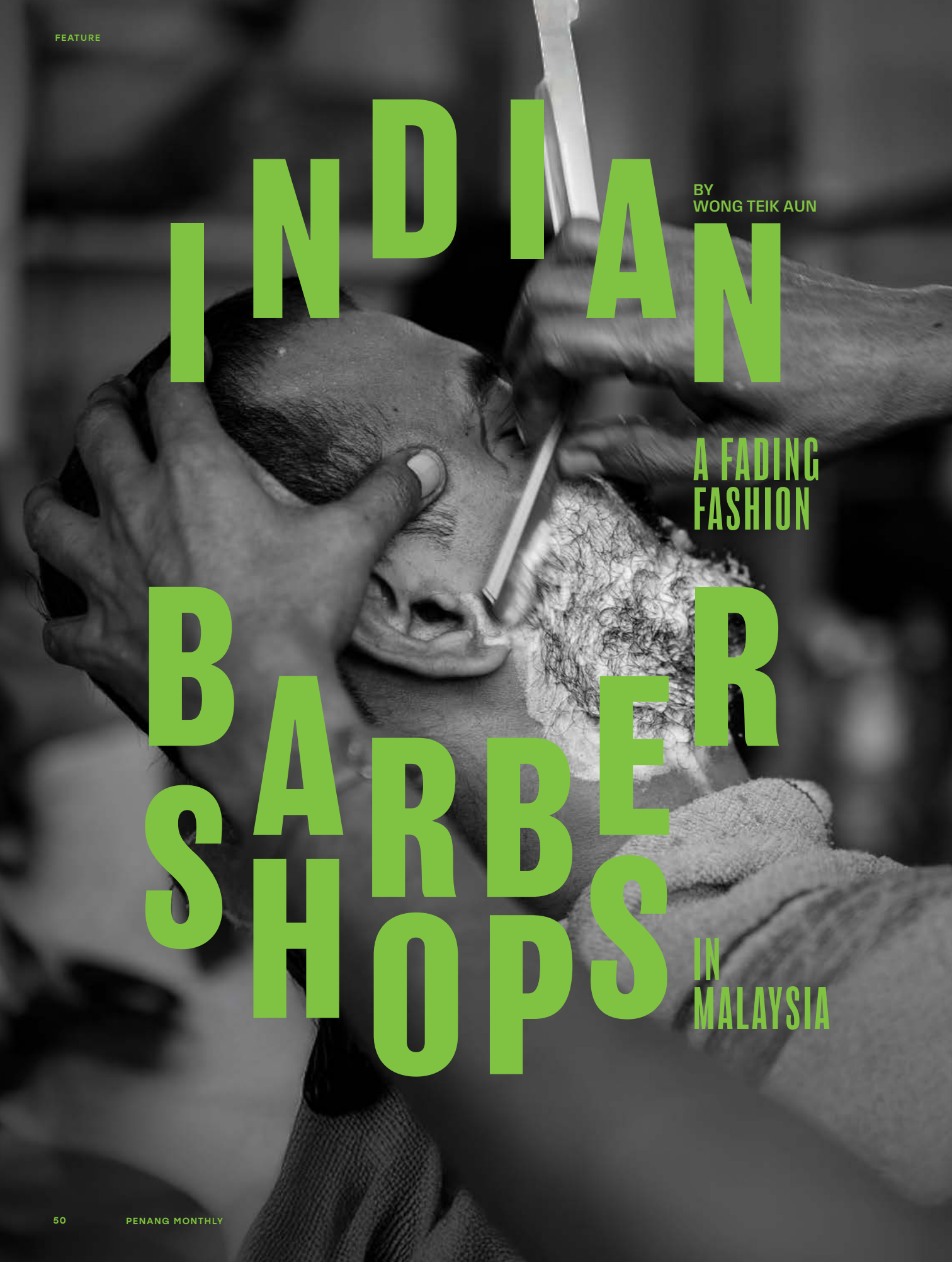


INDIAN BARBER SHOPS

A FADING FASHION IN MALAYSIA

BY
WONG TEIK AUN

INDIAN BARBERSHOPS HAVE become a unique institution in Malaysia, rooted in local history and the country's cultural fabric.

Beyond offering haircuts and shaves, Indian barbershops play a pivotal role as vital community hubs. They primarily serve the working class of all ethnicities, but it is also common for high-ranking Malay government officials and rich Chinese *towkays* (businessmen) to patronise them. In pre-independence Malaya, when literacy rates were low, they also served as information exchange centres, where news was shared, gossip flowed and ideas took shape. Some even say they contributed towards spreading and gaining support for the idea of Malayan independence.

In a manner akin to Western bartenders, these Indian barbers lend a sympathetic ear to their predominantly male customers, contributing to the overall emotional well-being of the community. Their shops serve as a vital meeting place for all ethnicities, and it is common for them to provide Chinese *Lau Fu Zi* and Malay *Gila-gila* comics for the entertainment of all. They are frequently also a gathering place for unemployed youths to hopefully connect with and find employment from the customers.

In a nutshell, traditional Indian barbershops are inclusive community spaces. They are a distinct and unique Malaysian cultural heritage that helps foster social cohesion and that provides a vibrant location for the exchange of information, stories and support.

I (the main author) grew up in Penang, and fondly remember my father taking me to the neighbourhood barbershop as a boy. I am from a working-class Chinese family, and patronising an Indian barbership was an eye-opening cross-cultural experience. There was a distinctive vertical pole with spinning coloured stripes outside; this marked it out as a barbershop. The storefront signage was in Malay, English, Tamil and Chinese, and the customers were similarly multilingual and multi-ethnic. However, the in-store radio was invariably tuned to a Tamil station that dished out loud, catchy music interspersed with sombre newscasting. There was an altar to the many Hindu deities prominently displayed and faithfully prayed to. The walls had huge mirrors and many pictures of handsome Bollywood, Kollywood and Hollywood stars.

While waiting, I enjoyed browsing the many tattered *Lau Fu Zi* and *Kungfu* comics, in which the pictures rather than words conveyed the plot. The vintage barber chairs were monstrously huge, and a specially designed wooden plank was placed across the arm rests for children to sit on. Perched high on the wooden plank, I felt like a little prince!

As far as I know, most of my friends, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, also patronised these barbershops. However, in our teenage years, these shops started to gain the reputation of being uncool; after all, they were not offering the latest hairstyle trends from Hong Kong. We began patronising modern unisex hair salons, and I even once had my hair dyed brown.

When furthering my education overseas, I learned to cut my own hair in front of a mirror, mainly to save cost. Since it was difficult to cut the back portion, I kept it long and it was coincidentally also cool to sport long hair then. I even briefly kept a ponytail, and once had my hair braided by a friend.

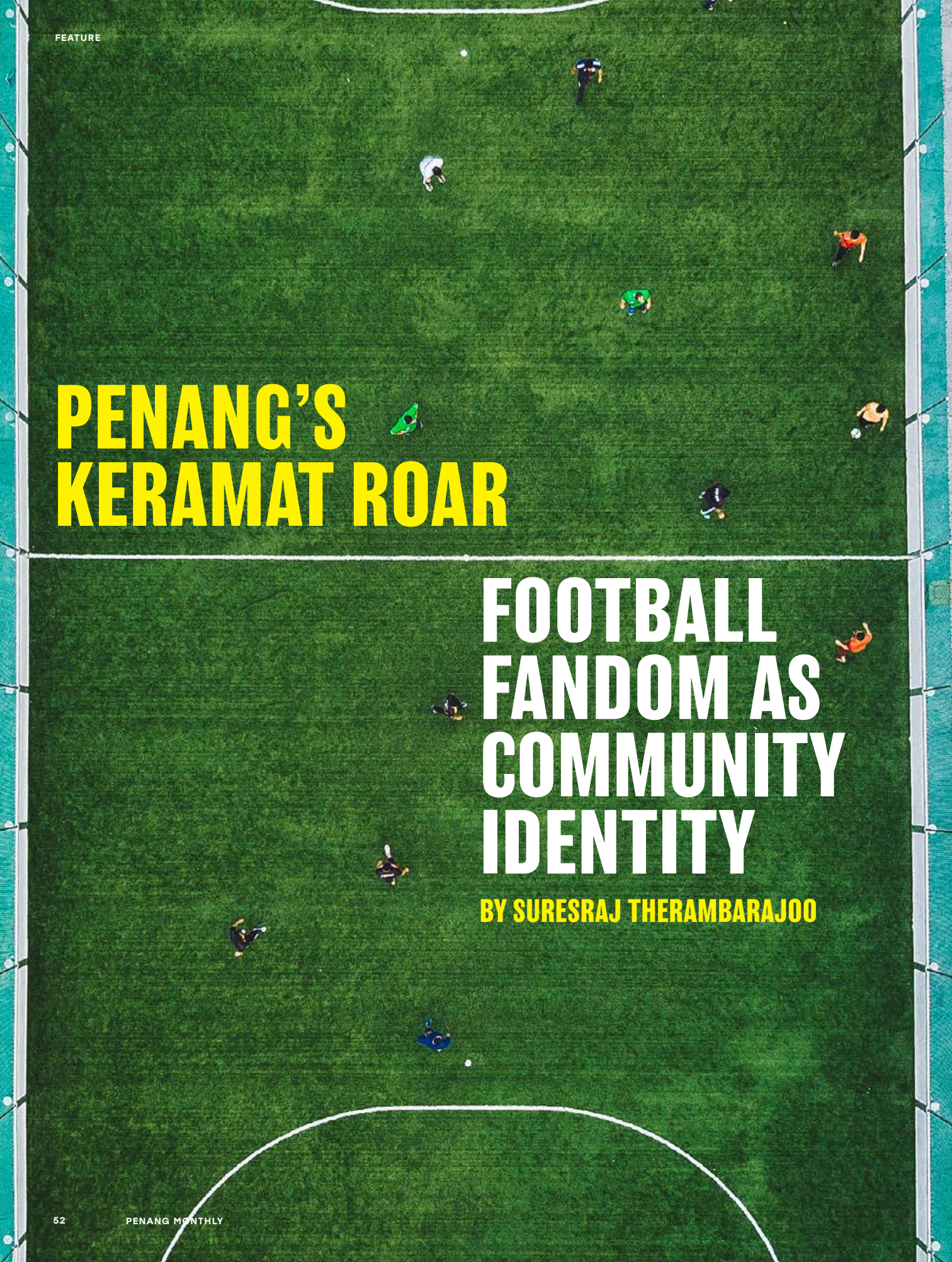
However, upon returning to Malaysia, I reverted to traditional Indian barbershops and conventional hairstyles. As a working adult, I value and appreciate their economical and efficient service.

The Indian community is an integral part of Malaysian society. However, the institution of traditional Indian barbershops is threatened by social change. Ironically, traditional Indian beliefs also contribute to the undesirability of barbering as a vocation; it is associated with the low *Pariah* caste. Consequently, local Indian youths, particularly those of some means, are not attracted to this sector. This has resulted in a reliance on foreign workers to work as barbers. The limited ability of foreign workers to communicate with customers, let alone banter and joke with these, now detracts from the overall barbering experience.

Many customers also now prefer modern barbershops and unisex hair salons in shopping malls for convenience and comfort. With rising living standards, customers are willing to pay more. Some traditional Indian barbershops have evolved and transformed into modern hair salons to keep up with the times, but the simple, no-frills and down-to-earth nature of traditional Indian barbershops is still cherished by many, especially of the older generation, and it will be a shame if this unique Malaysian cultural heritage is lost to the sands of time.

***Note:** This article was co-written with Mohammad Reevany Bustami, Marlina Jamal and Vinesh Maran Sivakumaran.

WONG TEIK AUN is a senior faculty member at a private institution of higher learning.



PENANG'S KERAMAT ROAR

FOOTBALL FANDOM AS COMMUNITY IDENTITY

BY SURESRAJ THERAMBARAJOO

SOMETIMES, YOU DON'T need a map to know where you are. You just need a sound.

In Penang, it originates from the corner of Jalan Dato' Keramat. Not from traffic or the honk of Rapid Penang buses. It is from somewhere deeper—inside the City Stadium—yes, the oldest city stadium in Malaysia that is still in use.

It starts as a murmur. A slow clap. A drumbeat. Then comes the roar! The Keramat Roar, they call it. And once you've heard it, you don't forget.

I remember hearing it as a boy. Standing shoulder to shoulder with strangers who somehow felt like uncles. Watching legends like Merzagua Abderrazak, a Moroccan crowned as the "Best Import Player" for three consecutive years from 1996 to 1998 under the tutelage of Moey Yoke Ham, move across the pitch with grace and grit. Listening to the auntie behind me shout tactics louder than the coach.

It wasn't just football. It was home.

A CLUB THAT CARRIED A COMMUNITY

Long before the hashtags and headline deals, Penang Football Club (or Penang FC) was already making history. Born in 1921, this club is older than the country itself. It saw colonial rule, independence and Reformasi. Through it all, the club kept playing.

Back then, the team wore blue and gold, not for branding—but because that's what the island's heart felt like. Golden spirit. Blue-collar grit.

In the 1970s, Penang ruled the Malaysian football scene with pride. The 1974 Malaysia Cup victory was led by some of the finest players the nation had seen—Shukor Salleh, the midfield maestro whose calm presence made him the heart of the team. And Isa Bakar, a forward with an eye for goal and feet that danced. These men weren't just players—they were Penang personified. Local boys raised on the island's rhythm, who went on to wear the national jersey with honour.

A GENERATION LATER, PENANG ROARED AGAIN.

In 1998, Penang lifted the Premier 1 League title, repeating the feat of 1982. Then, in 2001, the club added the FA Cup to its trophy cabinet. The late-1990s featured new heroes—names like Mazlan Wahid, a dynamic forward who led the line with fearless energy; R. Ravindran, a dependable presence in defence; and Khairul Azman, one of the best goalkeepers of his era, if only briefly part of the Penang setup.

Different players. Different eras. But the same badge. The same roar.

STILL KICKING

If you have been to Penang's City Stadium, you'll know it isn't big. It definitely isn't shiny. The plastic seats don't recline. The toilets sometimes don't flush—but it is sacred ground.

Here, Faiz Subri hit that impossible physics-defying free kick that stunned the world. The curve of that ball—looping, dipping, changing its mind halfway—was a metaphor for Penang itself. Unpredictable. Defiant. Beautiful in motion.

In this stadium, Hokkien curses and Tamil prayers intermingle in the same sentence. It is where the Nasi Lemak stall does double duty as post-match therapy. Everyone, regardless of race or wallet size, becomes part of one voice—that roar. It doesn't come from the players. It comes from the people.

Truth be told, the last few years haven't been kind. Penang FC has bounced between divisions, finishing 11th in 2024, struggling to find rhythm. Bigger clubs have more money. More sponsors. Flashier players.

From my point of view, in Penang, football was never about the table. It has always been about the terrace. Even when we lose, the fans still come back. We are the ones who sing louder when we're behind. We wear the same jersey. We chant the same chants. We are the ones who bring our children not to see victory, but to feel loyalty. Why? Because the support here is not conditional. It is cultural.

Some might ask, "What's the point?" "Why care so much about a football team?"

But that's like asking why Penangites care about heritage houses, or Nasi Kandar, or why we argue over which Char Koay Teow stall is best. It's not about logic. It's about identity.

To many, Penang FC is more than a football team. It is a time capsule. It reminds us that unity is not something you legislate. It's something you practice—row by row, chant by chant, season after season.

I don't know if Penang will lift another cup next year. But we will be there. There will be youngsters in the front row. The old men in the back. The drummer whose hands never stop. The girl who knows every player's stat by heart.

Now, will you join us and be part of The Keramat Roar?

DR. SURESRAJ THERAMBARAJOO is an educator and strategic policy analyst based in Spain. A curious traveller and avid reader, he values good conversation, shared laughter and the connections that bring people together.

AN AGING ARTIST

TEOH SHAW GIE'S MIDLIFE

BY TEIOH NUAN NING

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CAPTIONS

1. *Overlooking the Fleeting Moment,* 2025

Hung high upon a wall, this leather sculpture of a swollen, middle-aged body gazes downward. He is not an active observer, but a suspended witness—placed at a height where other people's lives rush past beneath him in fleeting moments.

This is not a sculpture about movement, but about immobility—a state of being where the body no longer seeks, struggles, or expects. It watches, endures, and lingers—just long enough to miss the moment as it passes.

2. The entrance of O Sculpture Studio, located at Hin Bus Depot.

3. Gazing Toward an Unknown Distance, 2025

A middle-aged man tilts his head upward, his gaze fixed on something far beyond the present—a distant place, a longing, an untold possibility. His eyes hold the quiet ache of yearning: for escape, for renewal, or for a dream long delayed.

This work captures a silent conflict—the mind reaching outward, while the body remains bound. The "unknown distance" may not be far in space, but far in possibility: a different life, a different self, or simply a place never reached, only imagined.

TEIOH NUAN NING
is an undergraduate student of literature and art history who writes about people and culture. In her free time, she enjoys music and theatre.

"I'M A FAT, middle-aged man. I'm unattractive. My life is full of pain."

Artist and teacher Teoh Shaw Gie (赵少杰) declared these maxims about himself while grinning from ear to ear. In his solo exhibition, *Archaeology of Midlife* (中年考古學), which was hosted at O Sculpture Studio from 21 June to 27 July 2025, Teoh explored the pains and insecurities of his midlife with a beer-bellied sense of self-deprecating humour.

The exhibition was composed of a variety of leather sculptures depicting the naked human form, which Teoh describes as intimate self-portraits of his soul. Despite blatantly rendering the male genitalia in each of his sculptures, the exhibition felt neither provocative nor erotic, but reflective. From loneliness to struggles with physical health, the pieces collated at O Sculpture represented a holistic view of the daily difficulties of living as a middle-aged man.

"People ask if I'm having a midlife crisis," Teoh admitted openly. "But it's not a crisis. I'm just being true to myself, like looking into midlife mirrors."

Unlike conventional portrayals of middle-aged life, Teoh is neither depressed about the rapid passage of time nor incensed by regret. People die or grow apart, relationships erode, and time inevitably passes. Through sculptures that "balance on their little penises", Teoh hoped to make jokes to release the worries and pressures that accompany the process of ageing. He dutifully recounted the trials of midlife, doing so without defeatism or despair.

In "The Dream Is Too Far, the Belly Too Heavy, the Wings Too Small", which is a small sculpture of a pot-bellied figure with comically tiny wings, Teoh represented the limitations of having dreams in one's midlife. "This is a realistic problem. We can only dream about having a good life, but in the real world, our wings are small and our tummies are too heavy."

It's a sobering reality, but the artist jokes that the piece was inspired by his itch to travel abroad after watching his Facebook friends do the same. "[But] the flight ticket is too expensive. Either way, we cannot do whatever we want. We cannot fly." Weighed down by his belly and the burdens of life, neither can the little man.

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MUSEUM OF THE SELF

Teoh viewed the various works in this collection as a single artistic accomplishment. While each sculpture may explore different themes, they are visually uniform. Cumulatively, they tell a cohesive story of midlife struggles, like a museum display, thus begetting the exhibition's archaeological implications.

He represented his physical pains with the forests of thorns. In some pieces, the limbs of the figures were arranged as disembodied appendages, which revealed the deconstruction of his own sense of self as he aged. Two figures struggled to hug as their large bellies got in the way, depicting the difficulty of maintaining intimate, platonic bonds between middle-aged men.

As a Catholic, Teoh was christened Stephen, a name that means "crown" or "wreath". Teoh embraced this identity in the exhibition's centrepiece, titled "The Echo of Solitude, Unheard", in which a bust bore a grin, despite wearing a crown of thorns. It embodied Teoh's cheery temperament and set the tone for the rest of the exhibition: a resigned but optimistic archaeology of midlife.

THE ARTIST AS A SCULPTOR

According to Teoh, each of his sculptures began with a papier-mâché core. Then, he stretched a layer of leather over that inner structure, and polished and painted until the end result suited his liking. He chose leather as his primary material because it was a material that would change—usually forming a patina—as it aged, expressing its own process of transformation.

Still, the leather was coloured to resemble Tang dynasty tomb figures, as he was heavily influenced by the pottery of that era. Beyond their aesthetics, the tomb sculptures also represented an archive of past memories, something he sought to capture with this project.

As an artist, Teoh's first and most frequent love is not sculpture but installation art. His previous exhibition, titled *You left the raindrops here*, was an installation of objects that belonged to his parents, who passed during the pandemic. Dedicated to their memory, the exhibition eventually travelled from Penang to Taiwan.

This multidisciplinary background influenced Teoh's construction of *Archaeology of Midlife*, down to its curation. Each sculpture was locked inside a glass box with a hand-drawn backdrop that resembled topographical maps. The hypnotic and repetitive patterns created a visual echo that represented Teoh's own spiralling mental state. The walls of the exhibition space were also adorned with lines of poetry in both English and Mandarin. He collaborated with Taiwanese composer, Liu Tao-Wen, to create an instrumental accompaniment to the exhibition. The use of a wide range of artistic forms stemmed partly from Teoh's artistic process, which prioritised the message of his art above all else.

"I'm not a sculptor," insisted Teoh. He sees himself as a storyteller; sculpture just happens to be the best medium for this story. As his joints and muscles began to ache, he questioned the integrity of his body. His physical self might be limited, but he could create endless physical manifestations through sculpture. To Teoh, this was the true freedom of art.

The exhibition ultimately found a home in O Sculpture Studio, which began as sculptor Low Chee Peng's personal workshop. After eight years of sculpting, Low made the decision to move his workshop elsewhere and convert the space into a studio, which has consistently hosted monthly exhibitions over the past three years.

A TEACHER'S GIFT

By day, Teoh is an art teacher at an independent high school in Bukit Mertajam, where he also directs the school's publishing department and internal newspaper. His ethos as an educator made the exhibition uniquely accessible, especially to those with little experience in art.

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"You may need an artistic education or upbringing to understand most fine arts exhibitions. But how many people have that?" Every visitor unwittingly became his student as he meticulously walked them through each step in his artistic process. The exhibition also provided a bilingual 50-page catalogue that expounded the purpose and meaning of every sculpture displayed.

The success of this exhibition also served to empower his students' ambitions, proving that art can be pursued as a serious career. So far, his students have blossomed into a wide range of vocations: architect, musician, barista and more, many of whom visited the exhibition to congratulate their former teacher.

In "The Navel Blossom (Born of This Land, Raised by It)", Teoh explored his duties as a teacher, referencing a famous Chinese proverb that likens teachers to candles, destined to burn themselves out to light their students' paths. "Why should I burn myself out and disappear? I can give myself to nurturing the future generation so they grow into beautiful hibiscus flowers instead. I prefer this metaphor."

As it stands, *Archaeology of Midlife* will be Teoh's last exhibition about himself. His next project returns to the memory of his parents, as he collects 10,000 cassette tapes to create a chronology of their lives.

CAPTIONS

4. The artist (in green) and a group of visitors.

5. *The Dream Is Too Far, the Belly Too Heavy, the Wings Too Small*, 2025

6. *The Echo of Solitude, Unheard*, 2025

7. *The Navel Blossom (Born of This Land, Raised by It)*, 2025

REFERENCES

1. https://guangming.com.my/趙少傑把雙親-遺物化成裝置藝術

2. Catalogue (clearer pictures of the pieces are in here): https://drive.google.com/file/d/1htBwcoJ-kbUHJ2XlXoyukOj8qIFqXW7I/view?usp=sharing

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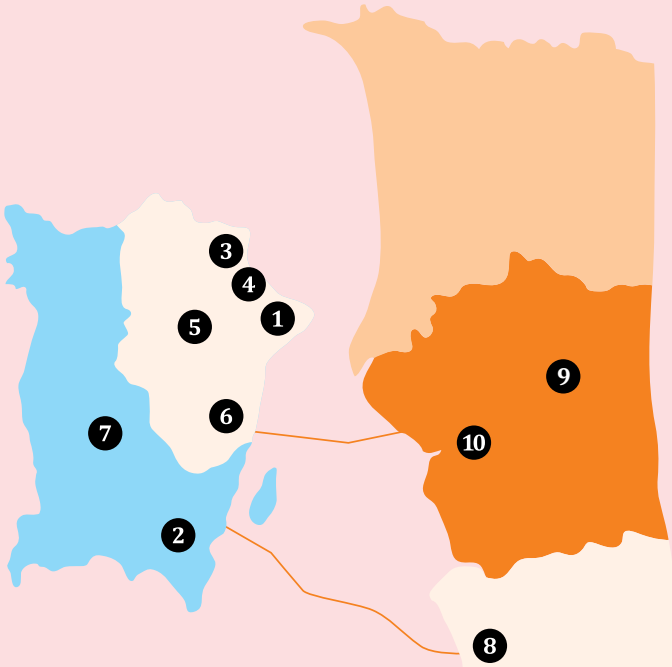
HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



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
32 Mansion

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

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

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