

penang

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MONTHLY

ENDORISING WANDERLUST

FEATURE

12 DESTINATIONS
IN 12 MONTHS—
A DREAM
MADE TRUE

FEATURE

OWNING THE
PROFOUND
ART OF BATIK
MAKING

FEATURE

DR. WU LIEN-TEH:
MALAYSIA'S
FORGOTTEN
PLAGUE FIGHTER



“HOW MUCH TAP WATER DOES PENANG CONSUME EVERY DAY?”



x 584,666,667
bottles per day in 2023.



PBAPP was corporatised in 1999. Since then:

- **Water consumption in Penang has risen by 63.6%:** From 536 million litres per day (MLD) in 1999 to 877 MLD in 2023.
- **Population has increased by 44.9%:** From 1.23 million people in 1999 to 1.77 million people in 2023.
- **Domestic per capita water consumption has reached 284 litres/capita/day (LCD) in 2023:** The national average was 237 LCD in 2022.
- Looking ahead, we must have enough water supply to support further progress and better lifestyles in Penang. **Please reduce water consumption by 10%.** For water saving tips, please visit www.pba.com.my.

Penang has unlimited potential. However, as a “small state”, our water resources are naturally limited. **Please use water wisely.**

ENDORISING WANDERLUST

TRAVEL TO LIVE, TRAVEL TO LEARN



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RUN



Lace up your sneakers for a good cause at the **Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital Charity Run!** With the theme “H.U.G.S” (hope, understanding and group support), every donation received for the 5km charity run will be channelled to the Tabung Kebajikan Penyakit Kanser Mount Miriam to support the treatment costs of underprivileged cancer patients. Registration deadline is 13 September, so hurry up and register!

FEE	From RM45
CONTACT NO.	+6016-952 9019 (Cheryl)
WEBSITE	howei.com/event_details/mountmiriamhugscharityrun2024

CARNIVAL



Get ready for the ultimate biking experience at **Hulala Bike Fiesta 2024** motorcycle carnival. This is your chance to gather with fellow bikers, rev your engines and dive into a weekend full of thrilling activities, eye-catching bike displays and unbeatable deals.

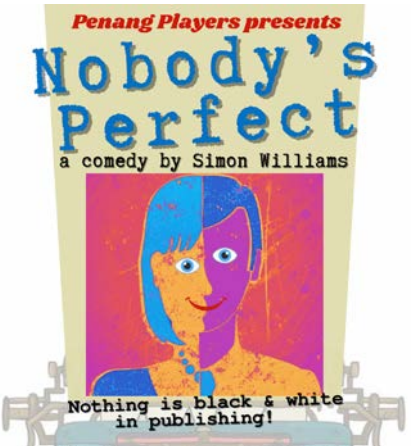
DATES	6-8 September
TIME	11am–10pm
VENUE	Auto City Concept Hall, Juru

CARNIVAL

Don’t miss the **Green Carnival**, a pet-friendly event advocating a green lifestyle. Expect approximately 50 pork-free food stalls, live performances, talks, health checks, green and environmental stalls, workshops and more! The event also offers free entrance to the 200-year-old Fort Cornwallis, so don’t miss out on this amazing opportunity to explore the historical landmark, all while supporting environmental awareness and sustainability!

DATE	8 September
TIME	8am-4pm
VENUE	Fort Cornwallis
WEBSITE	rb.gy/c6orck

COMEDY



Helen Copeland, of a publishing house specialising in romantic fiction, is looking for new female authors. A competition is declared and the winner is Lola Banbury, which turns out to be the pseudonym of an aspiring writer whose real name is Leonard Loftus. With the scheming help of his “disarmer” of a teenage daughter Dee Dee and his “charmer” of a father Gus, Leonard has to masquerade as Lola when Helen insists on visiting him to sign the contract. **Nobody’s Perfect** is a comedy by Simon Williams. Early bird tickets run until 30 September.

DATES	25 and 26 October (8pm); 27 October (3pm)
VENUE	Auditorium A, Level 5, Komtar, Penang
TICKET	From RM30
WEBSITE	cloudjoi.com/shows/1921-nobodys-perfect

ENVIRONMENT

Organised by JCI Butterworth City and MPKK Sungai Puyu, the **Go Green Campus 2024 Beach Cleaning** is a community initiative designed to raise awareness about environmental conservation and promote community engagement through the active participation of individuals in cleaning up our beautiful beaches.

DATE	8 September
TIME	7am–10.30am
VENUE	Pantai Bersih, Butterworth

CELEBRATION



Photo credit: Penang Global Tourism

The **Penang Orchid Annual Show of 2024** will showcase a variety of beautiful orchid species and hybrids. The show is expected to attract students, judges and visitors from Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and other states in Malaysia. Over 400 species of orchids will be on display during the event, with some available for purchase at the show.

DATES	21-29 September
TIME	10am-10pm
VENUE	Straits Quay

CULTURE



Yosakoi is a Japanese traditional dance event that translates to “Come at Night” in a Southern Japanese dialect. First held in 2013, the 11th edition of the **Penang Yosakoi Malaysia Day International Parade 2024** promises to be a night of spectacular performances and a celebration of the cultural diversity that makes Penang truly unique. Expect joyous Japanese street dancing, mouth watering food and other lively cultural activities.

TICKET	From RM20
WEBSITE	forms.gle/N46RJHDQqV8Gxaj49

penang MONTHLY

THE PENANG MONTHLY ENDEAVORS TO BE THE VOICE OF PENANG AND AN INSPIRING READ FOR THE CURIOUS MALAYSIAN. A PUBLICATION OF PENANG INSTITUTE, IT AIMS TO:

- 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.

LIKE WHAT WE DO? SUPPORT US!

Penang Institute is a non-profit organisation, relying mainly on research grants and donations. To keep us up and running, and to continuously give you the latest scoop on economic and cultural trends every month, you can make a contribution to Penang Institute. Tax exemption receipts will be given for donations above RM100. Please contact business@penangmonthly.com for more information.



THE UNEXPLORED BACKYARD

By Azmi Hussin

HANDY PHONE NUMBERS

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999

FIRE

994

RESCUE

991

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DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR

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THE ART OF GETTING CREATIVE AND STAYING CREATIVE



BY OOI KEE BENG

I HAVE AN iPhone 15 Plus Max. It is equipped with the best phone camera in the world and I use it quite often to capture events and people I meet on a daily basis. Visitors to my office seldom get away without posing with me in front of the “Penang Institute” logo.

But I don’t consider these many photos artistic in any way. They can be good and not good, but they are not art, and they were not meant to be art. This is mainly because I do not take these pictures in that spirit. I am just snapping to commemorate and to archive. I am not creating art.

If I were to take artsy pictures, I will probably first need a proper camera, not the multi-functional tool that the iPhone is. Holding a camera in my hand, with options of changing aperture, depth of field and colour tones, would put me in the right mood—into my creative mode. What I then shoot has more potential to be art, or even good art.

Equally essential is inspiration. I will need to feel that I am creating, or seeing something as if for the first time and wishing to freeze it to bring to others to appreciate, or framing a shot for artistic effect and not for documentation. An iPhone camera documents for the most part. The smart phone is too much a part of my daily life, and it is hard to see novelty in regular surroundings and in standard routines.

The agency of the artist is key. Accidental art is not a concept I am familiar with. An artist can come up with a piece





of art that is much better than he had expected, but he must be participating in the creative process in a decisive way. In fact, that is one reason why Artificial Intelligence cannot create art. It has no agency. There is no artist. No artist, no art.

One can be awed by a beautiful view of nature, like I tend to be when looking over George Town from Penang Hill in the evening mist. But there is no art. God does not do art. Art comes when I snap a picture of that scene. Art is man's prerogative.

I need to shift my mind out of work-life weekday mode into creative mode. Holding a dedicated camera would help that along. But what would help even more is to go somewhere unexpected scenes can appear.

Walking in the forest always helps. The lighting through the trees can be unexpectedly flirty, the animals that turn up can take unexpectedly interesting postures, and scenes can appear which are often unexpectedly novel.

Taking a trip always helps, even if it is only to some place I am familiar with. It is about my state of mind, not about what the world has to offer an amateur photographer. It is always offering something, but I am not always in the right frame of mind.

VISUAL VERSUS VERBAL

Getting myself feeling creative is key. Choice of attire is often helpful as well. A good breakfast too. You start the day geared up to be artistic, chances are, you will find the world inspiring.

I also find people inspiring when I am in an absorbent mood. Such inspiration need not be direct, it can come from unexpected angles and stimulate unexpected corners of my mind.

While photography often requires me to go places where visual stimulation can excite me, writing does not. Getting into the creative mode to write is actually much harder than getting into location to press the shutter button.

This, I believe, is because writing involves language, and the mind is always captured by language. In that sense, the process of writing is always ongoing. It involves inputs, it involves juggling of thoughts and it involves outputs.

A writer who does not read makes things impossible for himself. He is like a half-blind photographer. If you feed yourself with good language, your writing and spoken output will tend to be of good quality. The writing process requires a lot of testing of thoughts and turns of phrases in one's head—for consistency, for sustained rationality, for consequence. In that sense, a writer's job is never done, and he is never on holiday.

For such a person, taking up photography as the yin to the yang of his language obsession is good advice. While a writer can sit at his desk and read and write, a photographer would do well to travel—be it from this end of the room to the other end, or from this corner of the world to the other.

MODERN CHOICES FOR MODERN ADULT TRAVELLERS

BY SAMANTHA KHOO

EXPERIENCING NEW CULTURES, discovering fresh perspectives and finding escape—the allure of travel is undeniable. But there remains a divide between two types of travellers: those without children and those who cannot be away from them. With differing lifestyles and priorities, choosing to have or not to have children now looks like it is dictated by how a couple desires to travel, too.

LIBERTY FOR CHILDLESS COUPLES

Many today pursue their careers in order to fund their needs and wants—one of that being to travel. In fact, travelling without having to bring along a little one is a big reason why couples delay or choose not to have kids.

Jeffrey and Jacqueline Tan, newlyweds who have decided to postpone parenthood say they still want to choose how they spend their money without the financial commitment of having a baby. “We also cherish spending time together as a couple,” adding that it would be most difficult to travel with children as they would have to control the baby’s crying or manage situations.

Indeed, it can be liberating to travel without kids. For one, you can plan your itinerary to include whatever you want to see without considering if it is age-appropriate. There is absolute quiet time for you and your partner. You can also plan your vacation during off-peak seasons, which means cheaper flights, hotels, attractions and smaller crowds.

“Rather than waiting for the school holidays, my husband and I can just pack our bags and go whenever we feel like it,” says Su Hui Foo, who is in her forties. Initially, she had regrets that they could not have children, but now, she says the bright side is getting to travel off-peak. Travelling is integral to their relationship; they go abroad at least twice yearly, enjoying the benefits of off-peak sightseeing, making them feel savvy and resourceful.

FAMILY TRAVEL FOR YOUNG PARENTS

Meanwhile, many young parents vacation with their kids and see that as an excellent opportunity for bonding. Granted, stressful moments will arise, but this pales in comparison to the joy of seeing new sights.

A Family Travel Trends report by Expedia Group ^[1] found that couples with Gen Alpha children (those born after 2010) look up family play vacations, especially visiting theme parks (74%), water activities (67%) and outdoor activities (55%), which debunks the common perception that having a baby means you will not get



CAPTIONS

1. "It was quite special to see my son experience playing in nature, in the river," expresses Ng.
2. Jeffrey and his wife, Jacqueline, hold Japan dear to their hearts. They flew there to get their wedding photoshoot done. (Photo Credits: What a Date Studio)
3. Metropolitan cities like Tokyo are not stroller-friendly, so it is best to bring kids only if they are comfortable walking long distances.
4. Ng believes that one does not need to travel far to have a meaningful experience; a trip to the park or a local nature retreat also counts.



4

to travel as much anymore. Ng Zhi Yi and wife, Fiona Yong found more reasons to travel once their baby came along. From simply pursuing their careers and living a repetitive daily routine, their priorities have now shifted. Short outings to the local shopping mall or a day at Zoo Negara, and even roughing it out—just a tiny bit—at a glamping location has given them many beautiful memories.

This shift in perspective is not unique to Ng and Fiona. Many parents find that the joy of seeing the world through their child's eyes adds a new dimension to their travel experiences. "We wouldn't go out of our way to do all those things if it weren't for our son, and sometimes we end up enjoying it more than he does. He just likes to play with rocks," Ng laughs.

International travel may be daunting for new parents, but some believe this experience should be woven into their childhood. Travelling with kids requires preparation, and some may take years to muster that courage. Eiliyah Ooi began travelling with her daughter since she was a baby. "I wanted to get her used to it, so we started early. We would travel domestically at first, and then as she got older, we started to fly to Thailand, Japan and the UK," she says. Her daughter, Eryna, went on her first unaccompanied minor trip to Amsterdam when she was nine.

NO-KIDS POLICIES, ADULTS-ONLY ZONES

Due to the demand for flights, rooms and F&B bookings, family travel is a profitable sector. According to Expedia^[2], families spend 25% more per booking than other travellers, making them an impactful group in the industry. However, the industry may need to prepare for a new wave of tourism that is already picking up in other parts of the world: adults-only travel.

Adults-only does not imply PG- or SX-rated offerings. While almost all hotels are generally family-friendly, some hotels in South Korea, Thailand and the US are taking the opposite approach to provide a child-free environment for couples who prefer to travel in peace. With measures like child-free facilities or time

limits on children's access, adults can have the swimming pools, restaurants and lounges to themselves. In 2022, a Singaporean restaurant imposed a SGD10 penalty for rowdy children,^[3] which naturally sparked a debate among parents.

Ng, who worked in the restaurant line for many years, agrees with the no-child policy in certain restaurants. "When your guests are paying premium prices to dine at your restaurant, it's the establishment's responsibility to curate that experience and ambience so that guests can enjoy their meal fully. Children running around and screaming will inevitably ruin that, so I fully support this policy, even though I'm a father myself," Ng says.

EASING TRAVEL WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Many parents tell me travelling with young children can be stressful, but when they are not around, you start to miss them. Therefore, one needs to be realistic—travelling with children will not be a bed of roses. Here are some helpful tips so you are not overwhelmed when things inevitably go south:

1. Pack enough entertainment for the little ones, like books or toys.
2. Discuss with your spouse how you will deal with things going off-plan.
3. Let the children board the plane last so they don't need to sit in their spot for too long before take-off.
4. Space out your itinerary and go with the flow. Don't try to squeeze too many activities in a day.
5. If flying with a baby stroller, put it in checked luggage instead of bringing it on board. Upon touch-down, the ground crew will deliver the stroller to you at the aerobridge.

"MAAS (Meet and Assist) is a concierge service provided by selected airlines and airports. For example, if you're travelling alone and need an extra hand or guidance through the airport, a ground staff can guide you through all the airport processes and offer close assistance," Ooi advises. This is an optional request you can make when booking your flight.

When travelling with children, destination matters, too. Big cities like Bangkok, Tokyo and Ho Chi Minh City are not ideal for young children as they involve a lot of walking and are not stroller-friendly. Instead, consider South Korea, Australia and Singapore, which are much more accommodating of younger children.

"The experience is always worth it," Hannah Loh, a mother of two, says. "I'm always glad I can show them new things and get them to experience life beyond the day-to-day. When you decide to have kids, you're making a decision to raise a whole human being, and that includes showing them different cultures and ways of living so that they can have a broader mindset."

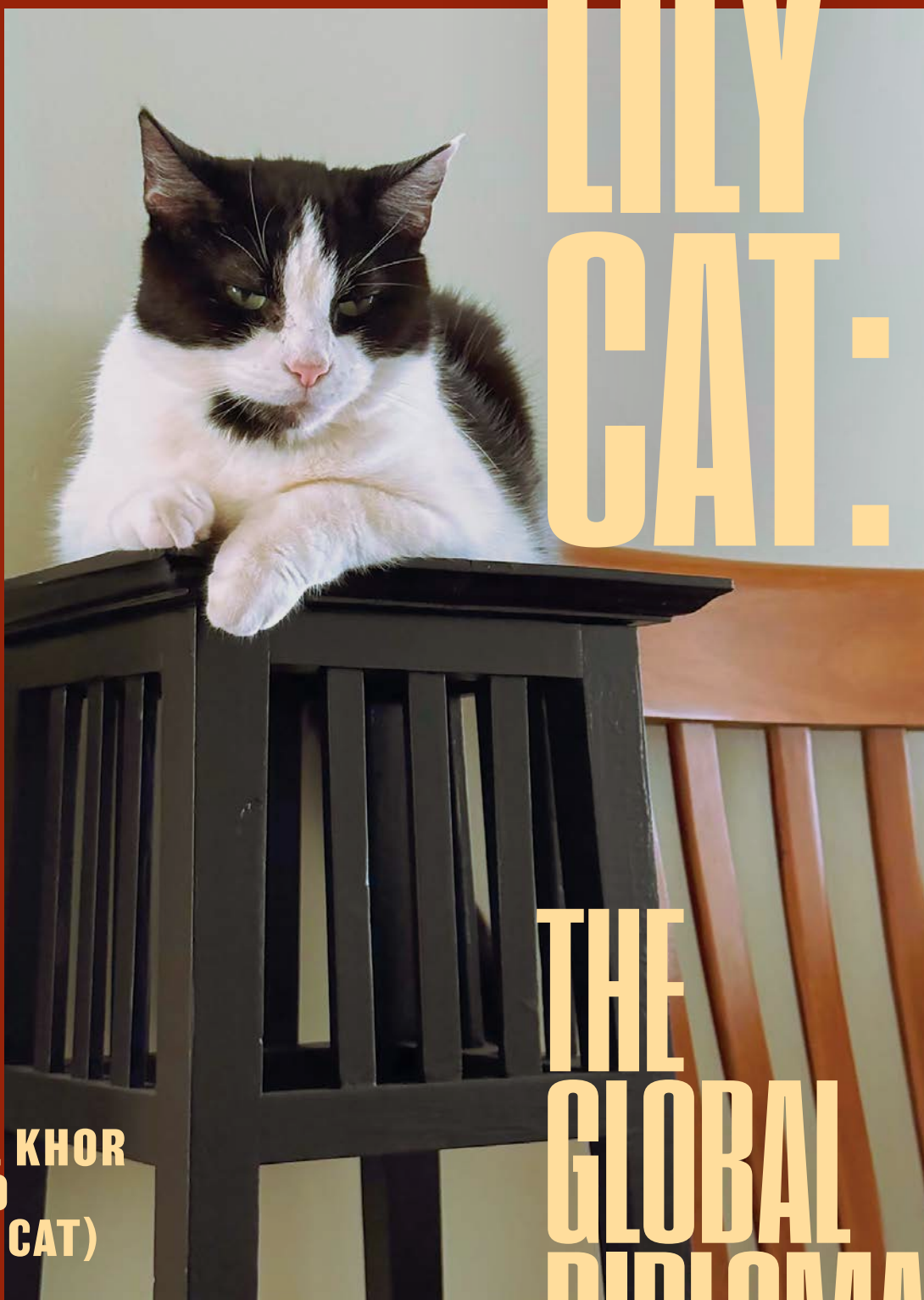
Seeing how the desire to travel influences whether couples decide to have children or not, maybe we should look at where Penang positions itself to receive these kinds of travellers. From my point of view, Penang can be rated "very friendly" whether you are travelling with or without children. We have family-friendly spots that are spacious enough for kids. We have beaches, nature getaways and theme parks (like The TOP and Escape). Travellers without kids can admire the architecture around George Town's heritage area, and when tired, stop at any of the many cafes for a drink. Plus, finding food that suits both young and old palates will not be an issue.

FOOTNOTES

- [1] https://go2.advertising.expedia.com/rs/185-EIA-216/images/Generation-Alpha_Research.pdf
- [2] <https://advertising.expedia.com/blog/travel-trends/return-international-family-travel/>
- [3] <https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2022/09/21/singaporean-restaurant-leaves-rm32-screaming-child-surcharge-for-customers-with-uncontrollable-children/29341>



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.



LILY
CAT:

BY
NEIL KHOR
(AND
LILY CAT)

THE
GLOBAL
DIPLOMAT

I WAS BORN in Manhattan, New York, so I am used to island life, though I must admit that living in Penang Island is somewhat different from being in Manhattan. Here, it feels like summer all the time, which suits me just fine. No need for huddling close to the radiators during winter. Before this, I had also lived for five years in Nairobi with my human.

It is not common for cats to be as well-travelled as I am. So, I was asked to share my travelling experiences.

Well, the first principle of being a global diplomat is to have the right papers. I know that humans need visas and passports to cross national borders. So, it was important for my humans to obtain these documents, and luckily for them, both work for the United Nations, allowing them to accompany me on my diplomatic missions.

To ensure that there is no hassle with various requirements, I had to remind my humans about pre-flight health checks. During the Covid-19 pandemic, international travel for humans were restricted and they were only allowed to board the plane if they had taken a PCR test with a negative certificate. Cats have been required to do this for many years; we always have health certificates testifying that we are free from rabies and other viruses.

My human advises that it is good to check with authorities both at the exiting and arrival points what their exact requirements are. Being quite lazy and not very bright, he hired professionals who have the right contacts in the US, Kenya and Malaysia to ensure that I had done the right medical tests and had all my papers ready for travel.

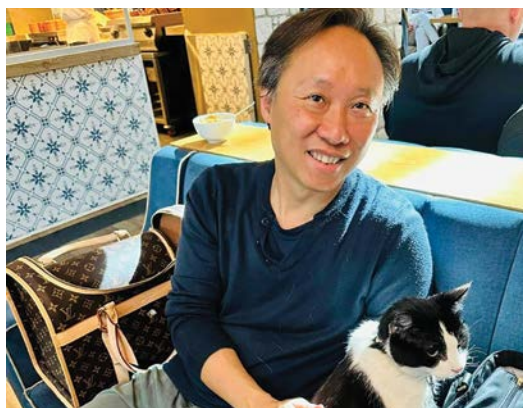
Next, comes my identification. Of course, being from Manhattan means that I already have a microchip implanted in my body which provides a basic history of my birth, upbringing and good character. Humans too have the chip, but they carry it with them in their passports. This is all very inefficient, especially if you do not have pockets and when your human travelling companion is incompetent like mine.

Before I left Kenya, the vet who examined me checked if my chip was still working. This is to allow other human helpers to locate me if my human were to lose me in the airport or if I left my carrier out of boredom. In addition to the chip, my human also attached an additional tracking device to my collar so that he could geo-locate me with his iPhone.

Since not many airlines will allow a cat to travel with other humans, it is important to choose the right airline and class of travel. When I left Manhattan in 2019, I was put in the cargo section. Luckily, my human provided me with a very spacious travelling carrier with water, dry food and a toilet pan. While not uncomfortable, I preferred not to be separated from my human.

En-route to Penang from Nairobi, I insisted that my human travel next to me. We found Turkish Airlines to be one of the most pet-friendly airlines with an amazing flight network. So, it made sense to book a seat for me from Nairobi to Istanbul and then to KL. I travelled business class and, out of pity, allowed my human to tag along as well.

To avoid being put in cargo, get your human to choose the right kind of carrier bag—i.e. it must be small enough to fit under your human's seat. In my case, I told my human to ensure that I was in a Louis Vuitton travel kit with all the relevant treats. But for goodness sake, do not give me any catnip as the last thing a cat



needs is too much excitement on the plane. Some cats, like my brother Lanun Bahati, have to take pills to stay calm. I, on the other hand, am a professional traveller and did not need such things.

At the airport, get your human to alert the authorities before arriving so that they know an important passenger is about to use their services. My human had the same travel agent send a representative to help me check in like a VIP. Just as my human had to have all his luggage scanned, they also had to scan my carrier. So, make sure that your cat's water container is small enough to meet airport requirements. Humans should know that cats get most of our water from our food so no need to pack the whole swimming pool when travelling! When going through the body scan, make sure your human is ready to take you out of the carrier.

At the business class lounge at Istanbul Airport, my human was thoughtful enough to take me to a special toilet for me to relieve myself. After all, I had been confined to my carrier for most of the six hours from Nairobi to Istanbul—although I did escape once. The stewardess was so kind and helped me back onto the lap of my human, who had dozed off! I almost decided to fire him there and then!

It was important that I got enough rest at Istanbul as it was another 11 hours to KL. The airline was very kind to us and allowed me to come out of my carrier every now and then to rest on my human's lap. I think he was very nervous about flying and frankly, all the good food and services were wasted on him. Next time, he should not be allowed to travel in business class as it is well above his station in life.

Finally, we arrived in KL and my human met with my agent's representative near carousel K. They took my human to the Department of Veterinary Services Malaysia in the airport where he presented all my papers including the health check, my pet passport and my rabies certificate. It all went seamlessly.

Upon being given the stamp of approval, I spent seven days in quarantine near the airport in a small pod arranged by my travel agent while my human got the apartment in Gurney Drive ready for my arrival. I was able to check in on him every day to monitor the work. Being an emotional wreck, my human also needed to see me every day to be reassured of my wellbeing. We arranged for a dedicated car to take me from KL to Penang, which was quite comfortable.

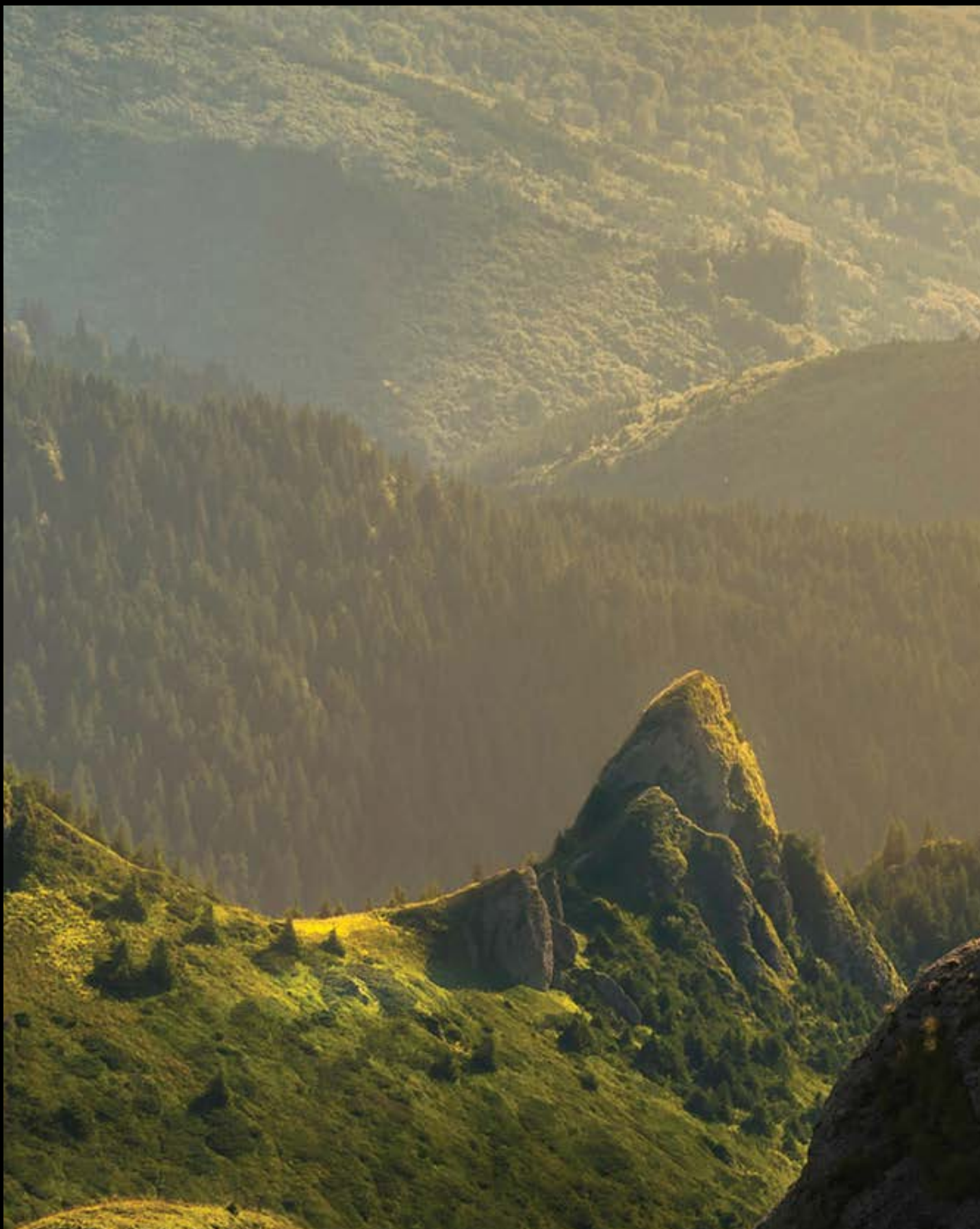
This is the story of how I travelled from New York to Nairobi and from Nairobi to KL. I hope that this is helpful to humans who want to accompany their cats on their global missions.



NEIL KHOR was the Chief of Staff and Special Advisor to the Executive Director at the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). He is now Advisor on Multilateral Affairs in the Ministry of Housing & Local Government in Malaysia.



LILY CAT, formerly known as Lyra Steiner, was born in Manhattan in 2016 and travelled with her mom, Amy Wood, to Nairobi where she shared a home with her current human, Neil Khor. She lived with Neil for five years in 99, Muthiaga Road assisted by Linet Khisvani, her second human helper. In February 2024, Lily Cat travelled to Neil's hometown in Penang, and now lives in an apartment in Gurney Drive.





ENDORISING WANDERLUST

TRAVEL TO LIVE, TRAVEL TO LEARN

BY OOI KEE BENG

A BABY SHOULD cry at birth. It must be traumatic being born, after all. The compressing comfort of the womb is suddenly gone, the noises and lights once gleaned through the mother's body now rush in unfiltered.

The first journey the former foetus goes upon is a watery slide. And then its umbilical cord is cut. No more automatic feed. Trauma indeed.

Then follows the shock of countless new impressions from a boundlessly extended world outside the mother. No wonder babies have to sleep all the time. It is good trauma therapy, and a perfect getaway.

It then grows into the world, learning to articulate its own body, and to manage the world—first through cries, then yells, and perhaps tantrums, and then through words. All the while, if it is lucky, its ignorance of the world is compensated for by loving adults. It can learn at its own pace as it travels through its young life, through time and space, exponentially decreasing its witlessness in the world, and its incapacity to survive on its own.

This learning process I would like to equate with "Travel". If you think about it, for a child to move from the comfort of home to the local shopping mall is really quite an adventure. It has to survive a barrage of signals, contacts and pointless noises. It has to learn to crawl, walk, run and climb, in order to get to places. It has to test all sorts of food and drinks, and form opinions about them that it has to communicate to its surroundings. Above all, it has to communicate. It has to learn to understand words and speak words. It has to learn to know its surroundings' preferred ways of expression and behaviour.

That is quite a journey. An odyssey, no less. Talk about being thrown in at the deep end. And that is only for starters. No easy thing being a child.

So, you cannot blame a child for thinking up ways to travel more slowly, to pick its own paths to travel, or to avoid destinations and situations it does not feel contented with. All these choices, in the end, will collectively build the child's character, and decide its psychological wellbeing.

Have you noticed how happy a child becomes when it first learns how to walk? And how shocked and pleased that it can actually pull it off? Travel begins there. Learning is a physical accomplishment, to start with. Physical skills are then followed by social skills. Getting what you want, even before words, requires interaction with other beings. And this boosts our willingness to learn and our agency.

LANGUAGE AS HIGH-SPEED RAIL

For all of us, language is the vehicle on which we travel the fastest—into life, into society and into the world. It is the high-speed rail of our trip through life. But more than just a social tool, the language we learn to read in opens up destinations beyond imagination. Children's books are a great blessing here. Then there are comics, cartoons and all the things we can access because we have learned to read. Nowadays, children have computer games to overwhelm them with imagined worlds.

At some point, the risk is high that the child—or young person—decides that he has learned enough. He does not have to respond to every new impulse. He can decide what they are within his developed worldview. He learns that he can sort and simplify them with his words, and make them predictable things with ready descriptions. That is when the young person decides to stop travelling. Lifelong learning stops because he thinks he has learned enough to get by. He now has a philosophy, an ideology, a religion.

Both the young and adults, however, can reach a point when they decide that they now know enough. They understand the world, no new thing can and should surprise them because they do have an explanation for it, and they can place it within their ready ideological tapestry.

Travel as an epistemological journey can actually stop in order to diminish the painful experience of always not knowing enough, of the world hitting you with unknowns. Curiosity has its price. It is not only cats that pay with their lives for being curious.

TRAVELLER AND/OR TOURIST

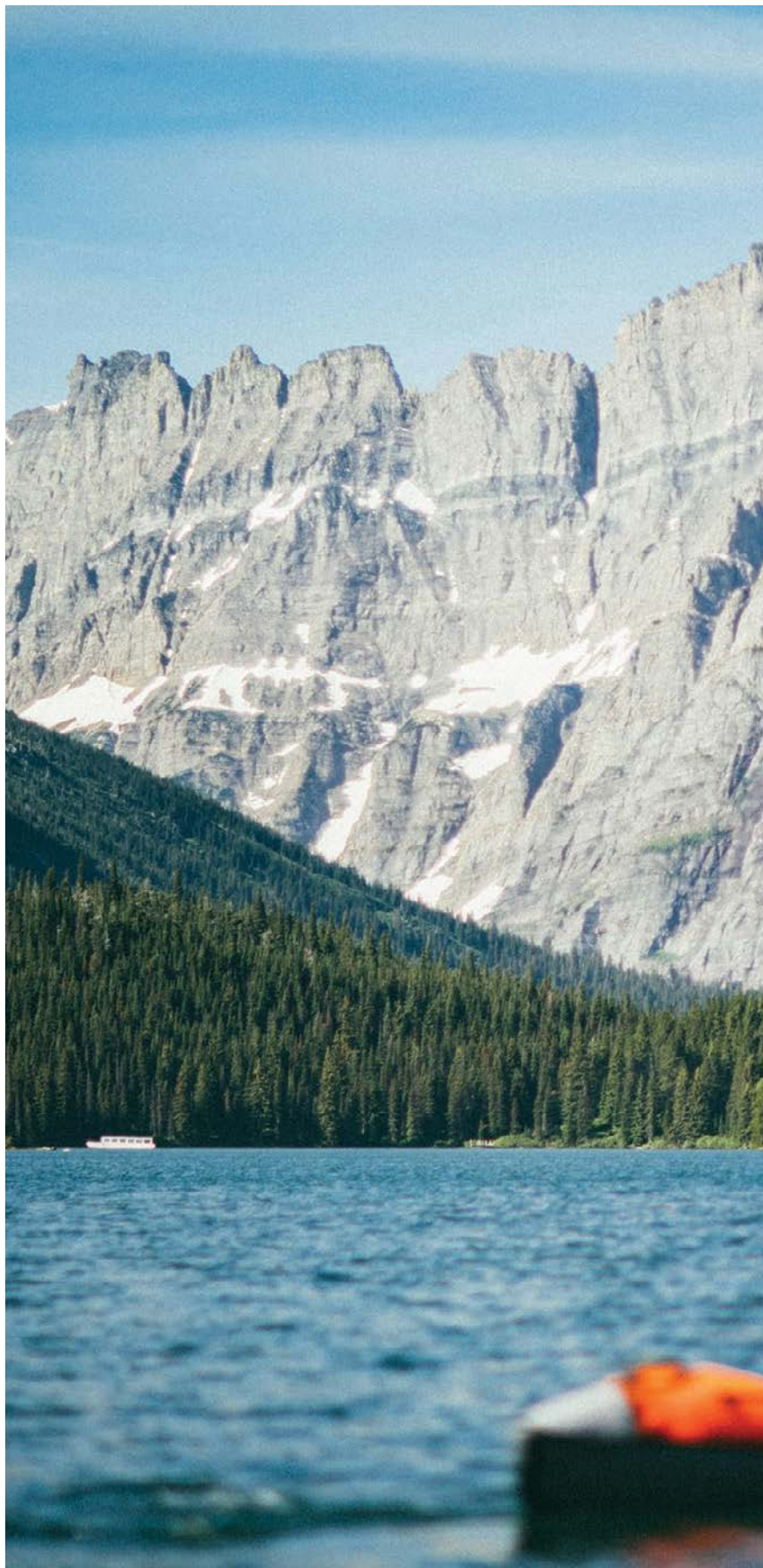
Therein lies the point of my somewhat belaboured introduction to tie travel to the search for knowledge that defines everyone's life. We are able to stop being curious, isn't that a curious observation? To keep to my line of thinking, isn't that where we actually differentiate the Traveller from the Tourist whenever we wish to malign a certain attitude we observe in a certain type of superficial traveller? The tourist is no longer suffering from curiosity. He is no longer even an observer. He sightsees, he nods his self-satisfied head, he snaps a shot to remind himself of what he cannot properly absorb, consider or remember in front of him.

In truth, there is a price to be paid for learning, for travelling. Your worldview takes knocks if you remain curious and realise that all you know is tentative.

As with the moment of birth, travel trauma remains possible throughout your life. Travelling to a situation that challenges your physical, social and intellectual habits can be exciting, but an excruciating overdose is always possible. The point where you feel flabbergasted differs between individuals, no doubt, but none of us can really adapt to everything imaginable.

At this juncture, we see why it is useful to equate travel with learning. Travel with life, in fact. Life, travel and learning are all agonising matters.

Personally, I have found it easy to sympathise with certain autistic persons. Deciding that the world is too full of impulses to handle is a totally rational position to take. In fact, one could argue that as we develop our intellectual capacity and work out ideas for ourselves, all of us seek to reach a point where we now know enough. We wish to slow down our travelling and learning, slow down the situation of being challenged.





For most of us, learning is conceptually and experientially tied to being in school. And when schooling stops, learning also stops, in a sense. We bond strongly with school chums, and we wish for each to stay the same since they also define us and help orientate us as we move into professional life.

After school or university life, we are usually tied to a career where learning is a guided tour within which we learn a job, we learn “best practices” and we climb a given ladder. We get through life, we go through the business of living, we travel less and less, we get less and less curious, we become “practical”. No time for much else. Life has taken over. We are married, the kids get in the way.

But are we not selling ourselves short? Has life taken over, or has life been taken over? Have we stopped being a traveller, and instead, accepted life as a tourist on a guided tour? Or are we just thinking wrongly about the matter of travel and learning? Are the two phenomena perhaps much more connected than we think?

Is travelling not as much like registering for a personally challenging course—sewing, ceramics, yoga—as it is like picking a destination for the holidays?

But even tourism is evolving as a concept. Too much sightseeing tourism, already made irrelevant by Instagram, has led us to consider “experiential tourism”. This is not so much about learning something as to be immersed in something. To take time with something, to step out of our daily life into something significantly different. Such an aspiration is something quite different from sightseeing tourism, and is probably a search for more meaning in the act of travelling. It is closer to using travel as learning.

WONDERING ABOUT WANDERLUST

Most relevant to our discussion is a word that is seldom used nowadays—wanderlust. As a term, it is self-explanatory enough, but having this longing is often a mixed blessing.

“Lust” is easy enough to understand. It is this desire that is almost uncontrollable, which we tend to have for certain things, most notably in a sexual context. What is problematic is that we tend to mistake it for other emotions, like love. So as not to make the feeling too complex, let us think of it as something more physical, like hunger or thirst. The need is clear, the pain is undeniable.

“Wander” is to roam, to travel, to ramble, to amble. To not want to be where one is, in short. There is traditionally, therefore, a sense that someone with wanderlust is not reliable because he might not be around the next day. Also, he cannot commit, and therefore he is often unable to go into depth on any issue. There is a touch of wonderment, of being without clear ambitions, attached to the term.

One can see how those—mainstream society, to be sure—who are less mobile, less inclined to travel, would not trust a person “suffering” from wanderlust. But is that judgment not partially a reflection of their own lack (or fear) of freedom, of a sense of adventure? I am sure the world is full of people who appear to exhibit wanderlust because they are merely running away from something, from some weakness in themselves. At the same time, there are those whose wanderlust is an episodic need to see more, hear more, experience more.

In a way, I am trying not only to equate the wish to learn with the wish to travel, but also the lust to learn with the lust to wander.



“TRAVELLING IS A VERY ACTIVE UNDERTAKING. YOU INVEST GREATLY IN IT. LIKE LIFE ITSELF, IT REQUIRES RESOURCES, PLANNING, UPROOTING OF RELATIONSHIPS. IT PUTS THINGS ON HOLD, AND CONJURES NEW TRAJECTORIES. LIKE THE PROCESS OF LEARNING.”

EMOTIONAL JOURNEYS

Our journeys are, however, never just about learning. Our epistemic needs are never without emotional longings. We have nostalgia for places—for example, for historical places. Human history is always a fountain that promises self-knowledge. The past speaks to and of the present. Observing history, either in a book or on one's travels, lands us outside our own times, humbles us and offers us spans of time that diminish our insistent egos.

Travel reminds us of possibilities in life we did not use, people we almost met, love affairs we could have had. Imaginings discarded or have had to erase. All that is on a personal level.

Travel also presents us with lives lived by other humans in other places in other times. These, we find to be exciting. We can empathise. Personally, I get ecstatic wherever nature and culture have intertwined. An old staircase in the deep forest of Penang Hill, old cypress trees planted centuries ago standing forgotten on an otherwise natural gravelly slope in Sicily, Yuan Dynasty statues in a modern park in Beijing, giant trees perched on temple ruins in Cambodia, caves in Cornwall dug centuries ago for tin-mining... Reminders that the world existed before me, and will exist after me. And that many worlds exist now alongside me in my time, of which I can have little knowledge. As I said, travel is learning... but mainly learning to be humble.

Where modern knowledge is concerned, travel as learning is more about the humanities than anything else. These are the forgotten subjects in the world of technological innovations, and they deal with knowledge whose relevance is necessarily more subjective, more contextual and more immediate. More in the realm of poetry and the search for profound expressions of the human experience.

History, philosophy, literature... These subjects are so central to the human experience that they should not even be considered subjects. They are the basis for human knowledge, fodder for the traveller.

LOSSES AND RECOVERIES

The novelty in inspiration and facts that are the profits of travel are also often accompanied by reminders of loss, if one is old enough. Of things forgotten. Of things whose importance got overshadowed by the business of life.

But we do perceive the lost significance of these things once we are made cognisant of them again. Painful, but in a sweet way. Losses remembered are halfway to being recovered.

This brings the discussion to the issue of migration. Who is a migrant? Is he a traveller, and of what kind? What condition of life is it to not live where one was born and raised? We tend to think of travellers as people who are settled somewhere, and who then take a trip—long or short—somewhere else. But then there are those who are serial migrants, who settle in a number of places over time, maybe to return home sometime in their lives, maybe not.

Then, there are the group migrants, people who move as matter of course. Today, we call these diasporic, and as something worth noting for being atypical and anomalous. This notion is worth questioning in many cases. For example, the Nusantara had always been a traveller's paradise. You got on a boat and you had countless islands waiting for you to explore, to hide among, to exploit. This has been a region of migrants, of people on the move. Landlubbers paled in comparison to seafarers here. Things have changed though.

The nation state with its jealous borders have arrived, corralling people in their pens. As a project, nation states are defensive by nature. They create citizens that are defensive by nature. Fearing the world, they fear to travel. Fearing to travel, they fail to learn. Failing to learn, they prefer to stay where they are, in mind and body. Staying where they are, they have to deny their past. Bad cycle.

Sheepishly, travellers are now the exception, and settlers the norm. Just as schooling makes us think that learning is a process that takes place in school and not a lifelong joy, the nation state makes us think that travelling is a state-sanctioned privilege and not a human right. A human need, in fact.

Be that as it may, travel as lifelong learning and learning as endless travel is something an individual can decide to pursue.

In the end, what should interest us is the meaningfulness of the life of an individual. Is meaning for him found “out there”, or is it something he finds through a sense of cultivated agency, a sense of conscious detachment, a sense of being a curious traveller?

Travelling is a very active undertaking. You invest greatly in it. Like life itself, it requires resources, planning, uprooting of relationships. It puts things on hold, and conjures new trajectories. Like the process of learning.

We have all experienced how, more often than not, learning something substantial changes the trajectory of our life, alters our ambitions, shifts our self-image. Life is a journey; an adventure we cannot avoid. Travel is life. And travelling is learning.



DATO' DR. OOI KEE BENG
picks on the past to reference the present, and picks on the present to situate the past.



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PENANG HILL AND Penang National Park are more than just natural havens; they are the beating heart of Penang's eco-tourism scene. These lush landscapes invite travellers into a world where nature reigns.

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PENANG HILL AND PENANG NATIONAL PARK: LUNGS OF THE ISLAND

**BY VIKNESWARAN NAIR,
RAMI ISAAC AND ERDİNÇ ÇAKMAK**

PENANG HILL:**A COOL AND GREEN RETREAT**

Imagine a place where the air is crisp, the greenery is endless, and the hustle and bustle of city life feels a world away. This is Penang Hill. Visitors flock here to escape the heat and immerse themselves in the hill's serene beauty. The journey begins with a ride on the historic funicular railway, a charming ascent that offers stunning vistas of the island below.

Plans for a new cable car system promise to make this natural retreat more accessible. While this development excites many, it also brings challenges.

How do we welcome more visitors without compromising the delicate balance of this ecosystem? The answer lies in sustainable infrastructure. Some of these would include boardwalks made from eco-friendly materials to help prevent soil erosion and protect the native flora, ensuring that Penang Hill remains a green sanctuary for years to come. Of course, a capacity cap should be implemented to reduce environmental pressure, protect natural resources and maintain the delicate balance of these ecosystems.

On a typical day, visitors might join guided nature walks, learning about the hill's unique plant species and the conservation efforts in place to protect them. For example, they might encounter the unique Penang Hill pitcher plant (*Nepenthes macfarlanei*), which is endemic to the area, or the vibrant array of orchids that flourish in the hill's cool climate. These walks are educational and immersive, led by knowledgeable guides who share insights about the local ecosystem and conservation strategies.

The combination of fresh air, stunning vistas and the informative narrative from guides makes these walks a memorable and impactful way to experience Penang Hill. Environmental education programmes are a cornerstone of Penang Hill's mission.

PENANG NATIONAL PARK:**A SANCTUARY FOR BIODIVERSITY**

Home to a stunning array of flora and fauna, every trail in this park tells a story, and every turn reveals a new facet of this ecological gem. For example, going towards Pantai Kerachut will lead you to a meromictic lake (there are only 19 of them worldwide) where the salt water and freshwater form two layers on the lake, and do not mix.

The park's management aims to minimise human impact while enhancing visitor experience, yet recent feedback highlights maintenance issues. Trails and facilities, including the jetties, have been reported as poorly maintained. Despite a substantial budget allocation for improvements, the condition of the park and its facilities still require significant attention to meet sustainable tourism standards. Efforts to upgrade the park have recently begun, and it is hoped that these matters are resolved soon.

Nevertheless, visitors can still embark on guided tours led by passionate conservationists. These tours often include sightings of rare bird species, encounters with playful monkeys and the serene beauty of mangrove forests.

Initiatives like the "Trash Free Hill" event underscore a community commitment to keep the park pristine. Furthermore, the park's designation as part of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve highlights its global importance.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRACTICES

Penang Hill and Penang National Park are at the forefront of sustainable tourism. The way forward now is to prioritise eco-friendly transportation and environmentally conscious experiences to enhance visitor satisfaction.

Collaborations with international conservation groups bring invaluable expertise and resources. These partnerships help elevate conservation practices, ensuring that Penang's natural wonders receive the care and attention they deserve.

Advanced monitoring systems can track environmental health, and satellite imagery and remote sensing technologies offer precise data on land use, vegetation cover and wildlife populations. This information is crucial for making informed decisions that protect these ecosystems.

Community-based tourism benefits locals economically. Engaging residents in activities such as tree planting and habitat restoration fosters a sense of stewardship and pride. More than 256,000 people made history by planting approximately 1.25 million trees throughout Penang during the "Planting One Million Trees Within a Day in Conjunction with Earth Day" event this year. Additionally, three *Maingaya malayana* saplings, a species of witch hazel once thought to be extinct until British botanist Charles Curtis rediscovered it in 1873, were planted along the Moniot Road trail.

Educational programmes targeting schools and community groups involve the younger generation in conservation activities. Including local voices in decision-making processes guarantees that conservation strategies are practical and culturally appropriate.

These efforts have to be made known to position Penang Hill and Penang National Park as premier eco-tourism destinations. Social media campaigns, travel blogs and partnerships with eco-tourism organisations help spread the word.

Ultimately, Penang Hill and Penang National Park are more than tourist attractions—they are living symbols of the island's commitment to sustainability. Visitors leave with memories of breathtaking landscapes and a renewed understanding of the importance of protecting our planet. As these natural havens flourish, they inspire hope and action for a greener, more sustainable future.

12 DESTINATIONS IN 12 MONTHS— A DREAM MADE TRUE



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SILVIA MARTY is the Senior PR Editor for a wealth management company in Switzerland, VZ Gruppe.

BY SILVIA MARTY

EVER SINCE I was a child, I have dreamt of travelling around the world. Over the years, this dream evolved into a plan with increasing levels of detail. When the pandemic brought our lives to a halt, my plan took on a sense of urgency. On the bright side, working from home during the lockdowns proved that living as a digital nomad was feasible in my job as an editor for a wealth management company. There is no need to sit in an office in Zurich to do my work. So, last July, my friends and family gathered at Zurich Airport to celebrate my 60th birthday and to launch me on my journey.

A YEAR WITHOUT SOCKS

I wanted to experience life in different places; I will still be working like everybody else, but while learning and seeing new things. A year divided into a month in 12 countries seemed to be a good framework. Ideally, the itinerary should take me around the globe from one destination to the next. Nice and warm climates ranked high on my list—coming from a country with long, cold winters, a year without needing to wear socks is an appealing concept.

Out of the countless possibilities, I chose six countries that I had visited before (Sweden, Greece, Samoa, Argentina, Morocco and Spain), and six that were new to me (Estonia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, New Zealand, Japan and Rwanda). I decided to book my flights and accommodations on a rolling basis, which soon turned out to be a good idea. Since I was travelling alone, everything I carried had to fit into a suitcase, a backpack and a handbag. All my other belongings went into storage. My luggage was checked when my guests arrived on the visitors' terrace for a relaxed happy birthday and going away party.

NECK AND LEGS!

I was greeted at Stockholm Airport by Erik, an old Swedish friend and the first of many super hosts. The following day, we went sailing, criss-crossing Stockholm's archipelago for an entire week with perfect conditions. It was a glorious start to the year ahead—nothing beats summer in Scandinavia with its endless days!

On the way back, I broke a shoulder blade and two ribs, but I was lucky because the bones grew together within a couple of weeks without surgery. And I was still able to visit some of my favourite museums, restaurants and bars in the city aptly dubbed Venice of the North.

It was a very entertaining overnight ferry trip to Tallinn and a scenic bus ride to Rõuge in the Southeast of Estonia. Rõuge is my friend Mirjam's hometown, and we spent a great week in her summer house. She introduced me to lots of friends and

arranged a couple of singing lessons so I could join her and her choir—one thing the Estonians are passionate about. For the rest of the month, I had the whole property, which offers spectacular views over green fields, to myself, skinny dipping in the pond under the starry skies and foraging fresh food from the garden and surrounding forests. I might have devoured more mushrooms in four weeks than in my entire life.



SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

A short flight took me to Athens, where I stayed in Exarchia, a buzzing corner of this megacity. My favourite hangout spot was the colourful food market that stretches an entire street, and my favourite activities were sketching and practicing yoga at dawn on a hill next to the Acropolis. I joined a couple of walking tours with local guides, learning lots of interesting facts about its history and politics, street art and food culture. An extra benefit for single travellers is meeting like-minded people—I am still in touch with friends I made on these tours.

Of course, no visit to Greece is complete without a trip to the islands. Two friends from Switzerland joined me on a sailing trip to a handful of picturesque places in Athen's archipelago.

The next stop was a former plantation near Fort Galle in Sri Lanka's lush forests. It had been converted into an ayurvedic resort—perfect to gain back my mobility with daily treatments and yoga practices for three weeks. I even got my first taste of meditation after years of fruitless attempts. Another skill that I happily added to my toolbox before moving on to Malaysia. My super host for the last week had turned a ruin in the jungle into an amazing mansion. From there, it was a short drive to Fort Galle, a compact and pretty UNESCO World Heritage Site.

EAT, PRAY, LOVE

Penang's rich and unique mix of people and cultures were the primary reasons to put George Town on my list. I love the spectacular city nestled between the hills and the sea. Excited by the street art and other surprises waiting around every corner, it felt perfectly safe to roam the colourful neighbourhoods day and night. This UNESCO World Heritage Site has so many different flavours and lives up to its reputation as a pan-Asian food hotspot: my palate visited all of Southeast Asia within a couple



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CAPTIONS

1. Learning to sail in Greece.
2. Island hopping in the Philippines.
3. Early morning yoga on this beautiful plantation turned ayurvedic retreat in Sri Lanka's lush hills.
4. At Kamakura, Japan, when hundreds of cherry trees along the main street and all around town were in full bloom.
5. I met so many kind and friendly people. Everybody went out of their way to help and gave their all to communicate with me.

of blocks. I stayed with another super host who had converted one of the many colonial houses in George Town into a stylish AirBnB. He generously shared insider tips to the city and introduced me to his friends—a great gift!

By the time I had to move on, it was mid-December, and the next destination on my list was covered in snow. Not ready for the socks, I decided to spend the holidays in Bali, one of my all-time favourite places. I was greeted by my “adopted” Balinese family, made new friends and even met my old flame from the other side of the world! We spent a couple of weeks together, adding a romantic episode to my trip. After a brief trip to the Philippines, we returned to Ubud, which has everything we love—from the graceful people and their unique culture to the best yoga schools, traditional music and Bachata nights, gorgeous accommodations, delicious food and pockets of lush, unspoilt nature.

YOU CAN'T MAKE OLD FRIENDS

After all that bliss, it was time to discover Wellington, where the Aotearoa New Zealand Festival of the Arts had just opened its doors. I saw some interesting exhibitions and enjoyed lots of great performances, including plays, concerts, ballets and comedy shows. This city has it all—from hills dotted with pretty Victorian houses, rolling down to the coast with its mid-century buildings to a glitzy financial district, thriving restaurant scene as well as beautiful beaches. I took the ferry across the strait to the Southern Island to visit my old friend Nicky, who had moved back to her home country almost 20 years ago. As the saying goes: You can't make old friends!

Japan had been on my wish list for decades, and my expectations kept growing over the years. When I finally arrived, I experienced the full cherry blossom season from the very first blossoms to the last days when carpets of petals turned the landscape into ephemeral mosaics. I stayed in

my Japanese super host's beach house in Kamakura, a lovely small town on the coast south of Tokyo during the week and ventured into the big city over the weekends. A highlight on top of all the other highlights was a trip to Nara, the first imperial city in Japan, and to Naoshima, an island turned into an open air museum. It would take a full page to describe this experience—safe to say, it exceeded all my expectations!

A SAD THOUGHT
TO BE DANCED AND
AN ASTONISHING CHANGE

The trip to Buenos Aires was very long, and the change from spring to fall got to me—time for socks and sweaters. I delved into Argentina's history and current affairs on several walking tours with extremely knowledgeable guides, brushed up my Castillano (the Spanish spoken in Argentina) and took a couple of Tango lessons. There are some 20 milongas every night, where people revel in the “sad thought to be danced”. I even hired a professional dancer for two milongas—a brilliant idea for those who want to dance on a level that would take years of training.

It was high time to visit my friend Alice in Kigali. She returned to Rwanda 12 years ago to start a branch of an NGO that helps businesses grow, changing the lives of hundreds of entrepreneurs, their employees and families. 30 years since over a million people were killed in a genocide, I witnessed how the local economy is thriving, all social indicators have improved significantly, and women now have a say in the country's development. What a refreshing contrast to all the bad news haunting us! It was a great privilege to get to know some of the women at the forefront of this impressive turnaround.

TOP OF THE WORLD

Since I had added Indonesia and the Philippines to my original list and stayed longer than planned in some places, Samoa and

Spain were put on the waiting list, while Morocco became the last destination of this trip.

I landed in Marrakesh on Eid, an important Muslim holiday. While I expected lots of festivities, the medina was deserted (but for the cats). After visiting Villa Majorelle—one of the most enchanting gardens I have seen—I drove to Essaouira, my main destination. I love this charming small town on the coast for its relaxed atmosphere, and the wind keeps temperatures at a pleasant level. I had a riad—a traditional house built around a central court—to myself most of the time; my cosy room on the rooftop became my last home-office away from home.

LOOKING BACK—AND FORWARD

How has this adventure changed me? I am now confident that I can live in many places and manage perfectly well on my own. That I will never get bored in my own company. That I have amazing friends at home and abroad and can meet wonderful people wherever I go. That I get by with much less baggage and without a fixed address—it is the people we care for that count.

I wanted to discover places, get to know people, meet old friends and learn new things. All these have been more than fulfilled. I immersed myself in different cultures, improved my language skills and my understanding of current affairs, tasted lots of unknown flavours, sang in a choir, foraged for mushrooms, tried my hand at sketching, became a competent sailing crew member, deepened my yoga and meditation practices, danced Bachata and Tango, finished a book project, started a new one and found inspiration for the next one.

At the end of my trip, I am even more grateful for how privileged I am. When I landed in Switzerland 365 days after my departure, my loved ones welcomed me home with open arms. It must be true what they say: those who are firmly rooted can wander far with a light heart.

AN ODE TO A CITY IN TRANSITION

BY MIRIAM
DEVAPRASANA

I AM WALKING down Jalan Gurdwara towards Hin Bus Depot—and though I have walked this route many times this year, something about it feels different today. Perhaps it is the faces that peek out along the *kaki lima*; a familiar foreignness in the eyes of all those I walk past. It translates to the way they speak the national language—is it Bahasa Malaysia or Bahasa Melayu? Does it even matter?

Regardless, there is a twirl at the tip of their tongue which differs from mine, even if to untrained eyes, we might all look the same.

Today, I look up and pay attention to shop signs and realise there are many tailors in the area with no patrons, but the man who sells knock-off clothes has a steady line of customers with curious hands. The smells have also piqued my interest—luxury remains behind closed doors, and there is no space to mingle with the trails of bone broth from Sup Hameed or fishy Laksa goodness from the stalls in the corner.

There is, however, a kind of heavy spice, buoyed by a different kind of weight from the humid heat and dust, sweeping past the *kaki lima* and into the open doors of shophouses with every passing car. People rarely walk past here anyway. It depends on who you are, and where you come from. This side of the street is frequented by the *others*, and where the *others* linger, we try not to trespass.

The scent brings me back to 11 years ago, when, along with a group of youths, I walked the streets of George Town close to midnight, passing rolled mats and care packages to the homeless. We were only five minutes into the walk when we bumped into a group of refugees at the corner of Jalan Buckingham, whose persistence in taking the packages was rather inspiring. They beat the locals to it, and we had to endure an earful of “Why do you care for them more than us?” and “Haiya, like this now how, you shouldn’t give them, later go to waste.”

The latter was uttered by a petite aunty who curled up along the *kaki lima* with only the clothes on her back. I remember walking past her, the heavy scent of spiced curries from a nearby Nasi Kandar joint mixing with a kind of stale pungency from unwashed bodies and droppings. I would recognise her a week later, sitting under the iron rod sculpture opposite the Goddess of Mercy Temple, never really talking to anyone, never really begging, always looking ahead. She was a stoic fixture in a space where pigeons ruled and incense filled the air, only ever leaving her post to collect food passed out by the road. I remember buying her a *bao* from Little Angel Café one day, just because; I had never seen someone inhale Char Siew Bao the way she did. Then, I never saw her again.

Yet, the same pungent smell lingers in another memory, with a trail of liquid from a black trash bag with memories of the night before against the warm buttery goodness of pastries fresh from the oven. The mingling of night and day is strong enough to carry over to Love Lane, where the dutiful Penang Island City Council (MBPP) workers sweep away remnants of beer cans, bottles, cigarette buds and leaves into a pile just by a man and his guitar, painted into the wall. He

reminds all those who walk past him that there is a kind of achievement or hope that comes with walking the distance.

There are other men on the street—other older men who speak to each other from one shophouse to another as they sweep their section of the *kaki lima*. Some sit by the corner of the street inhaling packets of Nasi Lemak and Teh Tariks while they talk about the politics of the day, creating scenarios and reimagining a Malaysia that could have or would have been. These are the few hours when Love Lane is occupied by people of a different generation, who would arise early enough to sit with the quiet, and think about what it means to live a different life, before living out their reality. It is clearly discernible from the sights and sounds you would find at night, with those who choose to lose themselves to escape from having lived out their realities.

Today, however, that same morning chatter is less and less present, and old faces no longer greet me. I don’t know if they have necessarily moved anywhere; this has always been their home. Perhaps, I say to myself, they are simply gone, and the ghosts of the past are all I have to carry with me.

I search for the same pungent smell, only today it is marred by the stink of fresh paint. I turn to my right and out from the depths of heritage shophouses is a sore thumb of a white building sticking out for all to see. Is it a car park? Is it a modern row of shophouses? Is it a mall? Is it an arts space with a rooftop? Why is this here, and how has this been allowed to be erected? No one really has an answer. But we all know why this is allowed to exist. We just don’t want to verbalise it.

Sometimes, I can’t help but feel lost in the city I call home. Here, café breakfasts cost at least RM30, even at some *kopitiam*s, and people prefer croissants over Roti Bakar. Here, the flavoured lattes and creamy, green coloured teas are superior to Teh Tarik and Kopi Peng. I wonder if one day we will be able to get away with RM5 lattes and not complain about the blend. Because we have all become coffee connoisseurs, right?

As I transition with the city, I can’t think of a better way to pay homage to her, other than saying goodbye to every version of life she has provided, and all the people who make the city. It often feels like I blink and when I open my eyes, the city changes and transitions, as if I had left for years and years. When, in reality, I had only been gone for a week.

Yet the city transitions every time, and every time I return to her, I realise that all I can do is stand, watch and see her become a place for all—all kinds of people, all kinds of languages, all kinds of sights and sounds and smells; all kinds of beings, a mixture of past and present transitioning towards the future.

While luxury is eager to remain behind closed doors, kept at bay from the realities of the streets, I sometimes hope that the heavy, spiced, pungent smells I have come to hold on to lingers, along with that of heavy machinery and grease. And as long as the keepers of working-with-hands remain, so will these smells—capes, even if it means that urban management has seriously failed in its drainage systems.



MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA

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EASY WALKWAYS PROMISE ENDLESS BENEFITS: THE CASE OF BATU FERRINGHI

BY GLENN KHO HE

CAPTIONS

1. Map of all streetlights along Jalan Batu Ferringhi.
2. A photo showing pedestrian infrastructure on the right but not on the left despite the stores being on the left.
3. Widened pedestrian path along Batu Ferringhi equipped with principles of universal design. From left, Tanjong Bunga ADUN Zairil Khir Johari, former Council Member of MBPP, Kaliyappan P. Renganathan and Seri Delima ADUN, Connie Tan.



GLENN KHO HE

is an A-level student who will be pursuing a Politics and International Relations degree in the UK at the end of this year.

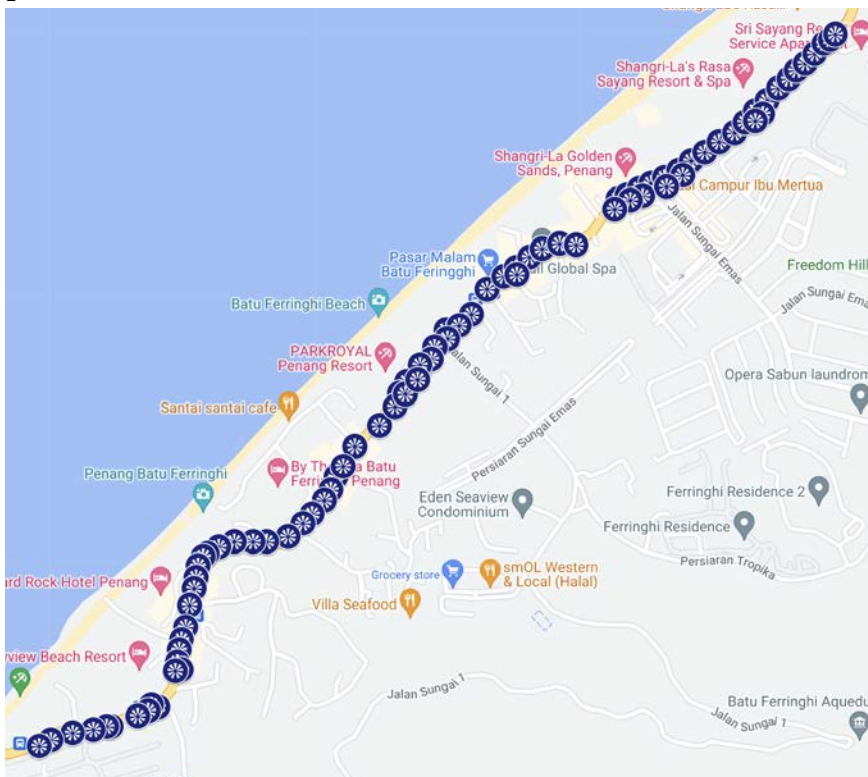
PEDESTRIAN SAFETY IS not a priority on Malaysian roads. Why? According to a Stanford University study, it is because Malaysians do not walk. Instead, we were ranked the third “laziest”, documented in facts and figures and popular culture, most notably using the “power of the hand” when crossing the road.

Despite the almighty hand, the Malaysian Ministry of Transport has stated that 542 pedestrians die each year from road accidents. This alarming number highlights the poor walkability of Malaysian roads and the need to ensure pedestrian safety.

Batu Ferringhi is an example of a place that sees large amounts of foot traffic and cars, especially during peak hours with the kilometre-long bustling night market. The walkability of Batu Ferringhi plays a crucial role in its tourism-centric economy, with most tourists choosing to walk from their resorts, providing foot traffic for the numerous local businesses. These walkways can also serve locals, should they have time to slow down and explore.

Unfortunately, Jalan Batu Ferringhi’s walkability—or the lack of it—has hindered the growth of businesses here, largely due to the issue of one-sided infrastructure. Most of the pedestrian infrastructure is located on the resort side of Jalan Batu Ferringhi, leaving the inland side, where

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most of the local shops are located, with insignificant amounts of infrastructure for anyone to utilise. Foot traffic for the stores cannot reach its highest potential because many would not risk walking on that side of the road without proper infrastructure—for safety reasons.

The bigger walkability issue that Jalan Batu Ferringhi faces, like many pedestrian paths in Malaysia, is the universal accessibility of the path itself. Existing pavements tend to be one high step above the road, creating a barrier for not only the disabled but also the elderly, pregnant women and families with kids (and strollers) who wish to use the pavement. The step can make it difficult for them to get up onto the walkway. Thus, they put themselves in danger by walking on the side of the road.

Pavements along Batu Ferringhi also lack tactile paving for the visually impaired, with only tiles at the end of pavements to indicate to them when to stop. The gap left between the ends of pavements may cause them to veer off course into open drains or even oncoming traffic.

The call for improved walkability and disability access has been sounded many times by the media and civil society, and one would think that a locale considered the Tourism Belt would have allocation for such improvements. It is not rocket science.

That said, the current pedestrian infrastructure upgrade was initiated in two phases between 2020 and 2021 by the Tanjong Bunga state assembly person, Zairil Khir Johari, where the stretch from Rasa Sayang Hotel to Hard Rock Hotel, which is under his jurisdiction, are widened and upgraded with tactile pavings and pedestrian ramps, costing RM780,460 for the 1.72km stretch.

According to the BBC, 95% of Singapore's pedestrian walkways and public transport stands are disabled-friendly with the government implementing schemes such as the "Green Man Plus" programme which allows those with concession cards to gain more time when using pedestrian crossings. Such innovations could be replicated step-by-step here in Batu Ferringhi and more widely in Malaysia, especially with an ageing population slowly becoming a reality.

To be sure, walkability along Batu Ferringhi is not a complete disaster. One of the positive aspects of this stretch of road is its ample street lighting, illuminating the way for pedestrians to walk around at night in a safer environment. It has been proven that street lighting does help reduce crime—a study by the American Economic Association found that night time crime indexes in cities like New York decreased by 36%, thanks to better lighting. Streetlights also reduce road accidents.

Resorts like PARKROYAL Penang and Shangri-la Rasa Sayang Resort and Spa have managed to grow trees that cover approximately 374m of the 494m of tree coverage in Batu Ferringhi. Tree coverage has been proven to reduce the temperature felt by pedestrians, which is extremely helpful in the Malaysian heat. When it is not sticky warm outside, people would be more encouraged to walk, thus reducing the number of cars on the road.

To make this strip more walkable, more trees along the pathway are necessary. Melbourne, Australia has pursued such a policy with their "Urban Forest Strategy" which aims to increase Melbourne's tree coverage from 22% in 2012 to 40% by 2040. Such a policy should be considered and implemented by the state government and the city council.

The tourist hub's existing infrastructure has been satisfactory—blockages are relatively rare. One question begs to be asked: is it because Malaysians do not walk, and so there is little need for supportive infrastructure, or is it because there are inadequate facilities that deter Malaysians from walking?

FOOTNOTE

[1] <https://support.yoodo.com.my/hc/en-us/community/posts/9501670524313-Malaysia-Ranked-The-Third-Laziest-Country-In-Stanford-University-Study>



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HOTEL

FEESES

A BOOST
FOR
PENANG
TOURISM

ONE OF PENANG'S crucial industries is tourism. The state has continuously drawn visitors from near and far, and efforts have been needed to generate income for the upkeep of the state's many assets.

BY KEVIN VIMAL

Introduced in 2014 under the former Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng, the hotel fee collection imposed on all hotels has undoubtedly contributed to the growth of the tourism sector in Penang, specifically setting high standards in the hotel industry. This fee, priced at RM3 per room per night for hotels and resorts rated four to five stars and RM2 per night for lodgings rated three stars and below (dormitories, budget hotels, hostels and boarding houses), is collected and channelled toward the appropriate agencies to promote Penang as the preferred destination.

This tax is now applied in other Malaysian states that rely on tourism as a major industry, namely Melaka at RM2, and Kedah's Pulau Langkawi with a fee ranging from RM1 to RM9.

The Penang Island City Council (MBPP) is the authorised body in charge of collecting the fees from the hotels on the island. Meanwhile, the Seberang Perai City Council (MBSP) spearheads the exercise on hotels on the mainland.

While these two local councils are tasked to only collect the fees (hotels are supposed to use the Penang Hotel Fee Online System to make payments), the state Finance Department and the Penang State Exco for Tourism and Creative Economy (PETACE) office play an even greater role by managing and deciding on relevant tourism promotional activities using the funds collected.

I spoke to MBPP mayor, Rajendran P. Anthony, recently, and I was told that a total of 119 licenses have been issued to 119 active hotels on the island to promote tourism-related packages.

"Since it was first introduced, there have been no complaints by the guests, and everything is progressing positively," he said.

"Before implementing this programme, the state government has held various dialogue sessions with the public, non-governmental organisations as well as hoteliers to ensure they were all aligned with this hotel fee collection," he added. A sum of RM72mil was collected since the fee was imposed in 2014. Also, 88% of hotel fees were collected from hotels on the island, with the remainder coming from Seberang Perai. To diversify and increase state revenue, the government decided that starting at the end of 2023, hotel fees collected will be included in the State Consolidated Revenue account as state revenue.

The breakdown of the hotel fees is as follows: 2014 (RM3,686,310), 2015 (RM8,590,989), 2016 (RM9,395,560), 2017 (RM9,796,332), 2018 (RM9,595,311),

2019 (RM9,406,481), 2020 (RM3,514,257), 2021 (RM92),^[1] 2022 (RM3,832,692), 2023 (RM10,628,531.34) and 2024 – until April (RM3,719,144); total: RM72,165,699.34.

I did probe him further about how exactly these funds were used, and he directed me to PETACE, as they would be the perfect candidate for this question.

The state government has vowed channel part of this revenue to Penang Global Tourism, Penang Convention and Exhibition Bureau (PCEB) and for tourism programmes. For the year 2024, an allocation of RM1mil was given to PETACE to be used for tourism-related programmes.

Now, this piqued my interest. Therefore, I approached Wong Hon Wai, the EXCO in charge to ask how this sum was used. He was tight-lipped, but told me that the state government is currently reviewing the hotel fee.

Therefore, I moved on to ask an influential figure in the Penang hotel industry, the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) Penang chapter chairman, Tony Goh, about what the hoteliers thought about the hotel fee. After all, it has been 10 years since it was first implemented—and from what I read in the news about disgruntled hoteliers in Melaka who were not in favour of their need to impose hotel tax on their customers, I thought it best to ask if they were *okay* with it.

He said the decision to introduce the hotel fee collection was one of the best decisions made by the Penang government, which directly impacted the positive growth of the tourism sector in Penang. However, Goh has urged the state government and the related parties to conduct regular meetings to discuss the progress of the funds collected, and to introduce the latest promotions about Penang to tourists and visitors.

"This fee has been a launchpad for many hoteliers in Penang," Goh said.

Another industry expert, Gulab Mahatam Rai, who is the current general manager of Lone Pine Penang (Attribute Portfolio Resort), commended the Penang government for introducing this initiative that has been instrumental in uplifting the tourism sector in Penang.

The collection of hotel fees was temporarily ceased following the Covid-19 outbreak a few years back, and the exemption was lifted and the exercise resumed as usual on July 1, 2022. Now, the question remains, how best can the hotel tax be used to make Penang more recognisable as a travel destination? Could it be this marketing that landed MBPP the ASEAN Clean Tourist City Award 2024-2026? Or being listed by CNN as the No.2 Must-Visit City in the world in 2017? Maybe.

FOOTNOTE

[1] The collection reduced sharply due to hotel fee exemption following the Covid-19 outbreak.



KEVIN VIMAL believes that writing has the power to unfold many amazing things in this world.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK WITH WiT'S YEOH SIEW HOON

BY CAROLYN KHOR

TRAVEL HARDLY COMES to mind when we talk about innovation, yet that is precisely what Yeoh Siew Hoon has accomplished over the past two decades. At a time when Malaysia was just beginning to embrace digital connectivity, Siew Hoon envisioned crafting intimate travel experiences by harnessing the web, scaling her influence by leaps and bounds. With decades of experience in travel journalism across the Asia Pacific, and a passion for discovering new places and opportunities, forging her own path was just a natural progression. At the core of her journey is a journalist whose love for travel drives her every endeavour.

STARTING WiT

The concept of online travel bookings has its roots circa 1996, when companies such as Expedia and Booking.com were founded, but the 9/11 incident in 2001 was what gave it the final push.

“Disruption often leads to innovation,” Siew Hoon says.

“When WiT started in 2005, it was a platform to share how technology was changing customer behaviours, and how the travel industry needed to adapt and cater to these new travellers whose behaviours were influenced by technology.” She adds that, at the time, only big players in the travel industry were taking advantage of the rapid changes that were happening.

Launched in Singapore in 2005, WiT swiftly expanded its footprint across the Asia Pacific, reaching major cities like Tokyo and Seoul, and extending into the Middle East and Europe—an achievement driven by unwavering passion and commitment.

In 2014, WiT’s acquisition by Northstar Travel Media marked a new era, with the company now operating as a wholly owned subsidiary of the Northstar Travel Group, enabling expansive global growth and serving diverse segments of the travel

industry. Building on this momentum, Siew Hoon spearheaded the launch of Travel Weekly Asia and M&C Asia, further cementing Northstar’s strategic entry into the Asian market.

“Back when I was working in print and writing about travel, I saw how people’s habits were changing—more and more readers were turning to the web for information. And I thought to myself that sooner or later, the Internet was going to change the travel industry too.

“I’ve always believed that the best way to learn is to do. And I wanted to learn how this new space was going to evolve, so I decided to start WiT. The Internet has made it easy for entrepreneurs—anyone really—to find their own tribe. Honestly, starting WiT was not a lightbulb moment; it was a slow, organic process.”

SUCCESS STORY

WiT runs competitions for travel startups in several countries such as Singapore, Japan and South Korea. In 2014, Klook, now a major marketplace in tours and activities, won the competition in Tokyo a year after its founding in Hong Kong.

This year, Klook is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

The platform, which started with offering tours and activities, has since expanded to cover hotels, car rentals and other ancillary services such as insurance and SIM cards for travellers. Recently, it has also ventured into event tourism, becoming the official experience partner for Taylor Swift’s concerts in Singapore.

“Our role is to spark ideas, facilitate connections and build networks to help startups such as Klook build industry partnerships to scale their business. Together, we grow the industry.

“Most indie travel providers build things out of passion and put new niche ideas to work. It’s all about connecting what you love to sustainable business models,” she notes.



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Trailblazer Yeoh Siew Hoon, the Founder and Editor of Web-in-Travel (WiT), found her niche by combining travel and technology, growing her passion alongside a flourishing community of tech-savvy travel enthusiasts.



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CAPTIONS

1. Siew Hoon at the WiT Indie Conference held annually at Penang Institute.
2. Siew Hoon with her Golden Retrievers.

WiT INDIE PENANG

Having just concluded WiT's fifth edition of the WiT Indie Conference at Penang Institute in July, Siew Hoon expects to continue with the sixth edition at the same location next year.

"WiT Indie or WiT 2.0 is an offshoot of WiT," she explains. "With WiT, we witnessed the dawn of online travel and saw how major companies came to dominate the space. It is important that smaller travel players find their place in this competitive landscape because this enriches the travel ecosystem—and that's good for travellers who are increasingly looking for local, hidden gems."

"WiT Indie is about uncovering these local, hidden gems and helping them use technology to run their businesses in a better way, without losing their sense of purpose and passion."

Siew Hoon, who hails from Penang, has always felt connected to her hometown despite being now based in another country.

"I have seen tourism in Penang evolve. Since I was a young kid, looking at foreigners in buses and trishaws, I wondered what they found so interesting about this place. In many ways, I felt like tourism just happened to Penang, without much say from locals like us."

"Yet, we all travel for local experiences and to connect with local people. Much of Penang's charms are in the small businesses, hidden gems and local neighbourhoods, and we ought to find ways to connect these small, hidden gems to travellers in a meaningful, deliberate way."

"That's why I thought it would be good to have a platform to empower small businesses. Technology democratises their ability to attract the kind of customers they want," she says.

Furthermore, with social media and

the Internet, anyone—especially small stakeholders—can build a customer support base.

"The key is collaboration and partnerships. Work with anyone and everyone who can help you expand your outreach and spark your thinking with new ideas. After all, if you love what you do, you want to share that love with as many people as you can."

Her wish is for WiT Indie to grow into a bigger, regional event with Penang as the hub, attracting indie travel businesses from across Asia. This year, it attracted delegates from markets in Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand. "Of course, it needs the local Penang industry support to anchor the event here, and we are grateful to Penang Institute for hosting our event the past five years."

This year's two-day WiT Indie event featured specially curated exclusive tours organised by My Indie World, led by Penang-born Henry Beh. Highlights included visits to the Yeoh Jetty in Weld Quay, where an audio recording shared Siew Hoon's personal story as the daughter of a first-generation immigrant to Malaya; a tour of Green Acre durian farm in Balik Pulau, owned by Eric and Kim Chong; and a private viewing of the Fish Bowl Room at China House.

WiT AND THE WITTIER SIDE OF SIEW HOON

WiT will be held from 14 to 16 October in Singapore. During the pandemic, WiT Singapore 2020 was the first travel conference to go fully hybrid, setting a precedent for a new model in event organisation.

Siew Hoon's contributions have garnered acclaim from various esteemed institutions, including the Singapore Tourism Board, which honoured her as Tourism Entrepreneur of the Year in 2014. The WiT Singapore conference, a cornerstone event with which she is associated, has also received several accolades, including Most Innovative Marketing Initiative and Trade Conference of the Year.

"It's a fast-changing world, especially now with the advent of Generative AI, whose full implications we have yet to fully comprehend. You just have to stay nimble and agile, and dare to do."

Siew Hoon's love for writing extends beyond writing about travel. She is the author of several books, including *Around Asia in One Hour: Tales of Condoms, Chillies & Curries*, children's titles such as *Adventures of Habibie The Turtle* and *The Story of Baitong and Boon*; she also hosts the "A Life in Travel" podcast.

When asked about her favourite pastime, she answers without skipping a beat: "Walking on the beach with my furkids—two goldies, Bowie and Florence."



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

WISE TO HAVE TRAVEL MISHAPS, MISFORTUNES AND MISADVENTURES COVERED

BY IVAN NG



IVAN NG graduated from the University of Mount Union in Ohio, US, and is currently in the insurance business. He is also an avid pickleballer and coaches squash as a side hustle.

FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://www.mavcom.my/en/2023/12/27/malaysia-soars-to-69-9-million-air-passengers-in-10-months-exceeding-projections/>

[2] <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2023/04/21/post-covid-revenge-travel-has-gone-big-and-the-revenge-is-sweet/>

[3] Curtailment means you are forced to return home due to circumstances such as serious injuries or illnesses including death, and involving you (the insured person), your immediate family members or travelling companions. Such events may be compensated.

Insurance companies generally define "immediate family members" as the smallest family unit, made up of parents and their children. Some insurance companies define it as the legal spouse, children, parents and their siblings, parents-in-law, grandparents, grandparents-in-law, grandchildren, siblings, siblings-in-law, nieces or nephews of the insured. Do check the fine print of your travel insurance plan.

TRAVEL HAS SURELY picked up with the pandemic now in our collective rearview mirror for the most part. The numbers are proof—the Malaysian Aviation Commission (MAVCOM) reported that passenger traffic reached 69.9 million in the first 10 months of 2023, to a point where they had to revise their projections upwards for the year.^[1] There was an almost 250% increase in passenger volumes among European airports in the first half of 2022.^[2] People are eager to see the world again after being cooped up at home, and to make up for lost time.

However, an element often overlooked when it comes to planning vacations is travel insurance. I know people often hear the word “insurance” and instinctively want to slowly back away from the conversation.

Growing up around life insurance agents, these things come more naturally to me, but that made purchasing it on my own for the first time only slightly easier than for the general public. Like other kinds of insurance, purchasing a travel insurance plan for the duration of your trip comes with peace of mind. Travel insurance protects you from unexpected hiccups leading up to and during your vacation. These include unexpected trip changes or cancellations, lost or damaged belongings and medical emergencies.

While you are still able to purchase your travel insurance on the day of departure, it is advisable to purchase it once your tour or flights have been booked. This is to ensure that any delays or cancellations that fall within the terms of the policy will be insured.

MEDICAL EMERGENCIES WHEN TRAVELLING

When talking about insurance, most people instantaneously think about medical treatments. Yes, travel insurance acts as a shield for you and your travelling companions in the event of a medical emergency during your trip. This includes clinical visits due to illness or treatments required due to an accident.

Once, I was on vacation in Thailand to attend a Loy Krathong celebration. There was an accident involving handheld fireworks when it misfired and hit the ground, and the subsequent debris struck one of the members of our travelling party in the eye. We managed to get our friend to the hospital in an ambulance and she received treatment at a reputable hospital. It was because she had travel insurance that she was able to get a reimbursement for the treatment she received during the trip.

However, hospitalisation due to pre-existing conditions is usually not covered by travel insurance, unlike medical insurance that most of us have—I hope you have one for yourself. In most cases,

the medical claims will be on a reimbursement basis rather than the cashless standard that we practice at our local hospitals. This means that in the event of a medical emergency during your travels, the most common solution is to pay first and then file a claim for reimbursement upon your return. This is primarily attributed to the limited infrastructure and logistical complexities involved in Malaysian insurance companies directly settling bills at hospitals overseas. Clients are reminded each time they purchase a travel insurance plan to keep all itemised invoices and reports for any treatments they sought during their travel so they can submit their claim upon return. There are one or two players in the market offering cashless systems (functions like a medical card); therefore, do check if the plan you are purchasing offers a cashless system or reimbursement.

Follow-up medical treatment upon your return is also something that many travel insurance plans cover. This means that after receiving treatment in the country you have visited, you may still be entitled to reimbursement for any follow-up required.

While the medical-related coverage is something that will put us at ease should the need for any treatment arise during a trip, these are not the most common claims in my experience dealing with travel insurance.

TRAVEL INCONVENIENCES

One common occurrence when travelling is discovering that your checked baggage has been damaged. It is a bummer to find yourself standing at the baggage claim, eager to step out of the airport to start your vacation, only to find that your bag is cracked, or a wheel has set off to a different travel destination. While some airlines may compensate you for the damage, the amount may not be sufficient to replace the bag with something of equal quality. If so, obtain a report from the airline's counter at the baggage claim area so you can file a report when you have returned. Then, you may shop for a reasonably priced replacement and submit the receipt with the report upon your return. Just make sure you are aware of the maximum reimbursement amount that your plan offers. That being said, one should not expect a one-for-one replacement if the damaged bag is from a designer brand. Reimbursements are meant for you to regain functionality for your travelling.

Then, there is the most common travel irritant—flight delays. These and certain deviations to the trip are also covered by travel insurance—usually with a six-hour delay allowance. The caveat is that the delay must be due to a mechanical issue or weather conditions. This means that if the delay is caused by operational issues of the airline, like combining two existing flights due to low volume

of passengers, it is not eligible for compensation. Deviations like missed connections due to a delay or cancellation, overbooked flights or even having your journey rerouted are all things that fall under travel insurance coverage.

In the event of a personal matter that has caused the cancellation, postponement or curtailment^[3] of your trip, most travel insurance plans do offer some form of coverage.

The insured may also be compensated if a natural disaster or severe weather is affecting the trip, regardless of whether it is happening at the point of departure or at the destination country. As an extension of this, any damage or destruction of the insured's home due to a natural disaster is claimable.

While the world has recovered from the Covid-19 pandemic, most travel insurance plans will also reimburse the sum insured should there ever be another government-mandated travel restriction due to an epidemic outbreak.

WHAT IS COVERED?

Each travel insurance plan is usually determined by the coverage amount and the number of days you will be travelling. There are also annual travel insurance plans for those who are frequent fliers, making it more cost-effective. The coverage period should include the day of departure from Malaysia and the day of arrival back on home soil.

The traveller's age will also affect the eligibility for travel insurance. Generally, you should see most plans covering up to age 80. Some insurance companies will offer protection for travellers over the age of 80, but that will come at a significantly higher cost. Families going on a vacation may also find that some insurance companies offer family plans, which will usually be more affordable than buying separate plans for each person. However, this only applies to the immediate family members: parents and their children below the age of 23. There is also another catch—if the child aged 18 to 23 is no longer a student, but a working adult, they cannot be considered under the family plan.

Therefore, be sure to check out the available plans in the market and get yourself insured before you travel. Your insurance agent would be the quickest point of contact for travel insurance. They can usually provide multiple options for comparison. Even if they do not personally deal with travel insurance, chances are they have someone they go to for that. Alternatively, sites like RinggitPlus and even Wise have a list comparing existing plans in the market. While each plan is similar at its core, it is important to read the terms and conditions carefully as well as the benefits available to you.

OWNING THE PROFOUND ART OF BATIK MAKING



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HAVE A strong affinity to textiles—probably because when I was a wee girl, I would often wander among rows and rows of rolls of fabric, while my mother, who was a seamstress, slowly picked out the materials she needed to make clothes for her customers. When I started working and began travelling around Southeast Asia, I would make it a point to stop by a textile store to pick up a few metres of fabric to bring home—my most treasured being the Cambodian Silk Ikat (known as *chong kiet* in Khmer) and the Royal Pahang Silk.

These fabrics cost me a small fortune, but it does not matter as I appreciate the art form. It carries with it centuries of cultural significance, as artistry and history interlace, creating something tangible and wearable. Malaysia boasts a rich tapestry of its own, yet this often-overlooked gem deserves greater recognition. Therefore, when I heard about the IKAT 2.0 Penang Edition that was held in April this year, a collaborative effort between EDT, a creative studio, and Yayasan Hasanah to spotlight east coast batik, I knew it was an event I couldn't miss.

It was during the event that I met Md Ghani Mat, the master artisan and *adiguru* of batik block craft. There are only three such artisans left in the country, himself included. Unlike using wax to draw on fabric to create the designs, blocks circuited with strips of copper are hammered to a desired shape and melded with acid and fire on a block. The completed block is then dipped in wax and stamped on the fabric, creating rhythmic patterns before the dyeing process begins.

Ahmad Fathil Othman, more fondly known as Padil Osman, is a batik and watercolour artist who showcased his batik *canting* techniques during the tour. To *canting* is to apply liquid wax using a fountain-pen-like tool called a *canting* on the fabric. Once the drawings are done, it goes through the dyeing process.

"It starts with a white cloth, and after *mercanting*, I'll have to dip dye the fabric seven to eight times to create multiple layers—until the colour is deep and vibrant enough. It usually takes one month to complete the process. I once did a two-metre piece, and it took me three months to complete," he said, adding that these creations need time and cannot be rushed.

There are also ancient secrets when it comes to extracting colours from different types of local wood, roots and leaves. Natural dye artist, Nawwal Abdul Kadir, works with jackfruit wood, mangosteen and rambutan skin, among others, to create dye. She also explained that all leaves with medicinal value can be turned into natural dye. Her expertise, not only as an artist, but a researcher at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, is in the development of colour for these dyes. One of the colours that she has developed using a special technique is metallic gold from chengal wood. For colours to appear vivid and to prevent them from ever fading, fabrics are dipped approximately 50 times.

Batik originally uses natural colours from natural sources. These patterns and techniques are not merely aesthetic embellishments, but repositories of cultural knowledge, passed down through generations. Over time, and with a better understanding of science and the elements, these artisans were able to further develop their craft. When people understand the time, skill and passion that goes into creating a single piece of batik, they are more likely to value and support the art form. Unfortunately, many do not.



5

Some would argue that, well, batik is not exclusive to Malaysia, it is Indonesia's—true and not true. Early examples of batik originating from the Nusantara region have been found all over the world, using almost similar techniques that have evolved over time. There is batik in the far east in Japan and to the west in Africa, however, the patterns are distinctively different. Indonesia's batik, for example, displays animal motifs, some with religious meaning to depict stories. Malaysia's batik, especially those from the east coast, carry floral motifs, serving as vibrant emblems of the country's lush landscapes and plant species.

Technically, it is not so much about the preservation of batik as a textile, but the artisans themselves. It is because of them that Malaysia continues (maybe not for long now) to have batik as its versatile artistic tapestry. We are down to a handful of batik artisans, the preservers of the culture to the next generation. To support Malaysian batik makers, all federal civil servants and ministers are required to wear batik every Thursday, effective 21 August 2023. While it is a great move for batik visibility, it does not do much to tell the general public why this trade needs support—most do not even know that purchasing printed batik does nothing to support batik artists.

Clearly, more work needs to be done in articulating the importance of preserving *real* batik—the block makers, the *canting* artists, the screen makers and the dye-developers are the ones keeping Malaysian batik alive by honouring laborious and time-consuming techniques passed to them from generations past.

We do not necessarily see a lot of branding when it comes to batik. I am happy to see brands like Kapten Batik in major shopping malls—though what made me chuckle was that the co-founders, Farhan Omar and Ekram Faiz, had to travel to Indonesia for inspiration.

There are also Malaysian designer brands like Rizman Ruzaini who have made a name for themselves, debuting their Spring-Summer 2024 at Dubai Fashion Week, and went on to open for the Autumn-Winter 24/25 edition recently. They have used batik in their previous collections, but imagine if Naomi Campbell and Lady Gaga (who have recently worn their collections) donned the Malaysian batik? My guess is that a #doneclaim war will erupt in the social media sphere. However, what I feel should be the foundational focus of these fashion successes are stories of these humble but highly skilled batik artisans. By championing their craft, maybe fellow Malaysians will be willing to learn, hone and be stewards of it, catching the remnants of wisdom from these craftsans before they are no more.

FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://www.therakyatpost.com/news/2023/08/23/civil-servants-now-free-to-wear-batik-anytime-compulsory-on-thursdays/>

[2] <https://www.bfm.my/podcast/enterprise/open-for-business/from-bazaars-to-boutiques-the-rise-of-kapten-batik>

CAPTIONS

1. Padil Osman showing one of his works that depicts a dragon.
2. Padil Osman colouring the batik.
3. An incomplete segment of a batik block.
4. Md Ghani Mat melding the copper strips together.
5. Making one batik block can take weeks to complete.



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.

LEST WE FORGET

LOCAL HISTORY MATTERS MOST IMMEDIATELY

BY EUGENE QUAH TER-NENG

IN THE GRAND theatre of social media—where cat videos reign supreme and discussions about anything often devolve into spirited debates—one of my simple joys as a local history writer is to come across a simple, appreciative comment like, “Thank you, this is so interesting. I’ve learnt something new.” My friend, Mike Gibby, the author of many Penang local history books, shares a similar experience, “I’ve lost count of the number of times people have said to me after a talk, ‘I didn’t realise [history] was so interesting’.”



This enthusiasm for local history stands in stark contrast to the collective trauma of high school history classes. You remember those, don't you? The droning of a teacher^[1] about dates and names while students engaged in the noble art of staying conscious through sheer force of will. It is no wonder these nostalgic recollections are often filled with accounts of falling asleep during class.

But wait! Before we gather our verbal pitchforks and torches to storm the bastions of Malaysian academia, let us pause for a moment of reflection. The existence of dull history textbooks, dear readers, is not confined to the hallowed and, often, humid halls of Malaysian schools. No, it is, unfortunately, a universal affliction.

The British-born American historian Charles Loch Mowat calls the need for textbook writers to constantly “compress and simplify” to satisfy the all-powerful syllabus set by bureaucrats “an occupational hazard”. However, the main reason history textbooks are boring is that they especially love to regale us with tales of long-dead monarchs and their family squabbles, which, to the average reader, hold about as much relevance as listening to your neighbour recount how many durians his cousin, Ah Leong of Air Itam, ate.

HIS AND HER STORY

Local history—as its name implies—is the study of the history of a particular locality, usually a well-defined geographical area. It is essentially the reconstructed story of a particular town, village or building. Depending on where you live, your locale may be part of a grander historical narrative, but it is generally not about the rise and fall of empires, or the earth-shattering events that reshaped continents.

The word *historia* in Greek means an inquiry, narrative or account. It later entered French as *histoire*, which means both history as well as story. Isn't that delightful? It is as if the French knew that history without a good narrative is about as appealing as a sandwich without filling—a sad lump of unappetising facts.

THE SCIENCE OF STORYTELLING

But why do narratives hold such power over us? William Storr tells us in his groundbreaking book, *The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better*, that “There is a lot of scientific research informing compelling ideas about how storytelling is key to communication, influencing and changing minds for the better.” It turns out our brains are wired for narrative, craving stories like a Penangite craves hawker food after returning from overseas.

Consider the tale of penicillin's discovery. A Form Five science book I flipped through at a bookstore read:

“Today in History—Sir Alexander Fleming had studied the effects of Penicillium sp. on the growth of bacteria on the sterile agar culture that you performed in Experiment 1.4. Sir Alexander Fleming became the first person to discover antibiotics.”

Riveting stuff, isn't it? About as exciting as watching paint dry. But frame it as a story and you have a better chance of getting people's attention:

“On 3 September 1929, the professor of bacteriology at St. Mary's Hospital Medical School, a Scotsman, had just returned to his London laboratory. He had been holidaying in his Suffolk home in August. Before his vacation, he had stacked plates of Staphylococcus aureus bacteria cultures ‘in one corner of his bench, out of the sunlight’ for his assistant to work on during his absence.

Just as he started to examine culture plates, Dr. Merlin Pryce, his former assistant, walked into the laboratory. The professor picked up the top plate, lifted the cover and uttered, ‘That's funny.’ He noticed some mould at the edge of the culture, and around it a clear area where the bacteria had not grown. Dr. Pryce also looked. ‘That's how you discovered lysozyme,’ was his terse remark to his former boss. The professor's name was Alexander Fleming, and he had just discovered penicillin, which would start the antibiotic revolution that would save millions of lives.”

WHICH WOULD YOU PREFER TO READ?

Earlier textbooks on Malayan history were focussed on the deeds of the kings and great men of Europe—and especially of Great Britain. They were written as a narrative.

A quick look at our recent school history textbook—I have with me the 2018 version—shows a worrying regression. There is nary a single engaging narrative in sight—history is presented using information boxes, bullet points, leading questions and suggested fun activities that are seemingly unrelated, such as making model ships using water bottles and paper.

The Science of Storytelling shares that “Stories, particularly true ones, become magnetic because we all want to know the answer.” If our history textbooks do not tell stories, it does not bode well for creating a populace that is interested in its own past. A society is essentially a group of people who share a common narrative; one that has no interest in learning about its past can prove to be a quite problem.

MAKING HISTORY

My friends, this is where local history can truly shine and engage public imagination. It is not about dusty tomes and impenetrable academic jargon, but the story of the school you attended and where you carved your initials into a desk (don't deny it, we have all been there). It is about the old factory that used to be the lifeblood of your neighbourhood, now transformed into a hipster coffee shop that serves drinks with names longer than some academic dissertations. It is about finding out who owned the creepy house down the road, which you always thought was haunted as a kid. It is the story of your family and the neighbourhood that you grew up in. Local history is more relatable and thus, interesting.

We need more people to do local history in our country. While professional historians play a crucial role, there simply are not enough of them, and many do not focus on local history. This is where you, the amateur historian, come in. Armed with curiosity and perhaps a slight obsession with old photographs and documents, you too can become a detective of the past. Start by looking around your neighbourhood. Is there anything that

“ARMED WITH CURIOSITY AND PERHAPS A SLIGHT OBSESSION WITH OLD PHOTOGRAPHS AND DOCUMENTS, YOU TOO CAN BECOME A DETECTIVE OF THE PAST.”

seems “funny” or out of place? That is often the first step to uncovering a fascinating local story.

Remember Fleming’s “That’s funny” from earlier? Well, that phrase has led to many of my own local history discoveries. For example, “Why is there a Miami Beach at Batu Ferringhi? That’s funny.” [See *Penang Monthly* May 2023 issue] or “Why are there military structures on top of Pearl Hill? Wait... Why can’t I find Pearl Hill on any map before the 1970s? That’s funny.” [See *Penang Monthly* July and August 2022 issues]. Look around your own neighbourhood and see if you can find anything “funny” to investigate. Before long, you too will be doing local history.

SOURCES AND TRUTH

You may be wondering why history seems to be revised and rewritten all the time. “While the past does not change, what can and does change is our perception of it,” Gibby offers. All history is a reconstruction—we are piecing together what has happened, preferably from primary sources and official records such as birth, marriage and death certificates, letters, court documents, newspaper reports, photographs, video recordings and eyewitness accounts. Marcus Langdon—one of Penang’s top history researchers—likens local history research to a crime scene investigation. As one unearths more evidence, the story becomes more detailed, and the plot thickens.

William Dalrymple, the renowned Scottish historian, bestselling author and host of the hit “Empire Podcast” says, “My view of this is that it’s absolutely fine for historians to re-examine history. And new perspectives are welcome, but they have to be based on primary sources, they must be carefully studied [and] judiciously interpreted.” He cautions, “When

new evidence appears, one should be open to reinvestigating the past. But it can’t just be political opinion, nationalistic muscle flexing or religious bigotry that drives the re-examination of history. It has got to be based on fact, and it should be a fair interpretation of sorts.”

Local history is more than just a subject; it is a gateway to understanding our communities, our roots and ourselves. By engaging with the stories of our immediate surroundings, we not only learn about the past, but also gain a deeper appreciation for the present.

So, the next time you walk down a familiar street or pass by an old building, take a moment to wonder about its history. You might just uncover a fascinating story waiting to be told. After all, every place has a tale, and in Penang, those tales are as rich and flavourful as our celebrated street food.

For those interested in Penang’s local history, here are some valuable resources:

1. Singapore National Archives (<https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/>): Offers digitised newspapers from the 1830s onwards, government records and rare books related to the Straits Settlements.
 2. Google Books (<https://books.google.com/>): An excellent resource for historical texts.
 3. Penang Heritage Trust Discussion Group on Facebook: A community of history enthusiasts ready to guide your research.
 4. *Penang Monthly* e-archives: A treasure trove of local historical information.
 5. Arkib Negara or the National Archives of Malaysia (<https://ofa.arkib.gov.my/portal/index.php/en/>): A bit hard to navigate, but there are some gems to be found in it.
- Happy researching!

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9. William Storr (2019), “The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better”
10. Danny Wong Tze Ken, “History in the Malaysian Public Sphere,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Volume 96, Part 1, No. 324, June 2023 pg. 1-19.

FOOTNOTE

- [1] To be fair, teachers are required to teach according to the textbooks, and few have formal training in history. Some are probably just as unenthused as their students going through textbook material.



EUGENE QUAH is an independent researcher and writer who is working on a book tentatively called “Illustrated Guide to the North Coast of Penang”. He rediscovered the joys of writing after moving back to Penang from abroad.

DR. WU LIEN-TEH



MALAYSIA'S FORGOTTEN PLAGUE FIGHTER

BY JOAN LIAO

I'VE HEARD OF many great people who contributed to the development of Malaysia and our region—from Mat Salleh's rebellions against the British to Onn Jaafar's struggle for Malayan independence, and from Sun Yat-sen's trips to Nanyang to fund the Chinese Revolution, to the founder of Malaysia's most vibrant urban centre, Kapitan Yap Ah Loy.

However, I had never heard of the contributions of Dr. Wu Lien-teh until I moved to Penang from East Malaysia. A brilliant Malaysian physician who played an instrumental role in modernising China's and Malaysia's healthcare, Wu Lien-teh saved Manchuria when it was hit by a deadly pneumonic plague in 1910. His work on the plague also contributed heavily to the development of many modern medical protocols.



2

Known in his hometown as Goh Lean Tuck, Wu Lien-teh was born in George Town, Penang, in 1879 to parents from Taishan. He enrolled in Penang Free School, where he excelled at his studies, leading him to apply and win the Queen's scholarship. In 1896, he was admitted into Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge to study medicine. In commemoration of his admittance, the women of his family made the college crest of Emmanuel College in Peranakan beadwork for him, replacing the English lion with a Chinese lion.

Wu was an exceptional student even amongst his peers in Cambridge—his achievements won him plenty of scholarships and prizes. In finishing his Bachelor's in 1899, he became the first Chinese from Malaya to graduate from Cambridge. He stayed in Europe for a few years afterwards, studying medicine in prestigious institutions across Europe, earning his Master's and PhD. Returning to Malaya, he worked with the Institute for Medical Research in KL to research on tropical diseases.

He returned to Penang in 1904 to start his private practice on Lebuhr Chulia. It was also around this time that he met and married Ruth Huang, the daughter of a Chinese revolutionary, Wong Nai Siong. He was soon invited to Tientsin, China by Yuan Shikai to become the Vice-director of the Imperial Army Medical College in 1908. However, in 1910, he was sent to Manchuria following reports of an unknown plague spreading in the region.

The Manchurian Plague of 1910-1911 was a devastating pneumonic airborne plague that killed 60,000 people. Wu was quick to implement measures to stop the disease. He conducted a postmortem autopsy on a deceased victim to identify the cause of death, a rare practice during that time. When he discovered that the

pathogen was airborne, he developed and mass-produced a gauze mask and established quarantine in high-infected areas. To prevent the plague from spreading from the frozen dead to the living population once the Manchurian winter ended, mass cremation of the deceased was implemented. All these protocols were revolutionary at the time, and greatly modernised medical practices in China. His work on the plague led to him being nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1935.

He spent a little more time in China to establish and lead new and modern medical institutions, such as the North Manchurian Plague Prevention Service, the Chinese Medical Association and later, the National Quarantine Service. He also sat on advisory boards for the League of Nations. As a major national and international medical figure, he chaired many conferences on health and medicine, and gained international recognition for his medical research.

The Sino-Japanese War that broke out in 1937 drove him back to Malaya. He started a private practice in Ipoh, Perak along Jalan Brewster. He often provided free medical care for the poor in Ipoh and gave generous support to local education—he held a pivotal role in establishing the Perak Library. He closed his practice in 1959 and retired to Penang, passing away at the age of 80 a year later. He was commemorated with the naming of a road, Jalan Wu Lien-teh in Ipoh; a neighbourhood, Taman Wu Lien-teh in Penang, and a mural at SJK(C) Hu Yew Seah in Penang.

THE DOCTOR'S FORGOTTEN CONTRIBUTIONS

Wu's efforts in containing and eradicating the plague in Manchuria as well as a later cholera epidemic in China saved millions—and likely prevented a wider epidemic. He

implemented policies that we now see as standard practice in controlling the spread of unknown infectious diseases—procedures such as autopsies, the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and preventive measures like quarantine and cremation.

The gauze mask, developed and used by Wu to prevent infections, has since developed to become the modern-day N95 face mask, which was crucial in limiting the spread of the SARS-CoV-1 and Covid-19 viruses in recent pandemics.

He was also an avid social activist during his time. He campaigned heavily for many socially progressive practices, such as the banning of the opium drug trade, education for women and shaving off Qing Queues (which symbolised Chinese subservience to the Manchu conquerors).

A pioneer in anti-narcotic efforts, he chaired numerous conferences, including Malaya's first anti-opium meeting in Ipoh in 1906. He was also against the racist treatment of people by the British colonial government at the time, which saw him rejecting an offer for a higher position at the Institute for Medical Research in KL.

Wu is a pivotal figure in Malaysian history. He represents the close historical ties of Malaysia with China, and stands as a testament to how nations can benefit from closer cooperation. He embodies the spirit of learning and education, inspiring Malaysians to pursue science for the betterment of society.

Despite his contributions, he remains relatively unknown in his homeland. He is a household name in Ha'erbin in Manchuria, though. As we reflect on the pandemic that ravaged the world three years ago, his contributions, more than ever, were a huge help to our capabilities in combatting Covid-19. Lacking in recognition or not, he is a worthy hero, and one that Malaysians should all be proud of.

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2. Wu, Y.-L. (2016). *Memories of Dr Wu Lien-teh: Plague Fighter*. Areca Books.

CAPTIONS

1. Portrait of Wu Lien-teh between 1910 and 1915.
2. Wu Lien-teh's gauze mask design.



JOAN LIAO is a Sabahan who moved up from KL to experience living as a Penangite. She also participates in advocacy, giving voices to those forgotten by society.

PDC REPURPOSES AND ENHANCES URBAN SPACES

WHILE RENOWNED FOR creating industrial parks, townships and residential developments, Penang Development Corporation (PDC), since its inception in 1969, has also been instrumental in revitalising Penang's urban landscape, propelling the state's growth into the 21st century.

PDC provides a comprehensive suite of supportive services such as property management, engineering, event management, facilities management and maintenance, which are delivered through two subsidiary companies: PDC Setia Urus, which provides commercial and residential buildings with property management and engineering services, and Assets Care Solutions, which handles the maintenance and enhancement of industrial buildings, most of which are leased to multinational corporations (MNCs).

A LOOK AT PDC SETIA URUS

Dubbed the "Total Property Solutions Partner", a notable project of PDC Setia Urus is the Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak (KOMTAR), which began as an urban rejuvenation project in 1973. After several decades, it was due for a facility upgrade. To comply with modern benchmarks of energy efficiency, safety and comfort, PDC Setia Urus oversaw the revamp of its facilities—from toilets to advertisement spaces, and electrical circuit supply to security systems. They also transformed a major section of the building to house the Urban Transformation Centre (UTC), allowing all key government agency services to operate under one roof.

PDC Setia Urus also specialises in supplying event management and space rentals, particularly within PDC-owned properties. For instance, PDC Setia Urus governs the space rental and maintenance of Sia Boey Urban Archaeological Park, a former trading area in central George Town that dates back to the 19th century, now transformed into Malaysia's first urban archaeological park in the middle of this land-scarce city. ^[1] This park is also where PDC Setia Urus plays host to many events, such as art markets and mini concerts, through active collaboration with different agencies. This creates a pull factor for families and visitors alike.

PDC Setia Urus's portfolio includes other significant events such as the annual KOMTAR Tower Run and George Town Festival (GTF). The company has also partnered with government agencies on initiatives like the Semarak Gemilang campaign and blood donation drives.





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3



4

A LOOK AT ASSETS CARE SOLUTIONS

Complementing PDC Setia Urus is Assets Care Solutions, a facilities management company handling the comprehensive maintenance and enhancement of industrial buildings. They consider the physical aspects of development and the overall user experience, tailoring facility management to the tenants' needs, providing corrective maintenance against breakdowns or complaints, and adopting SMART practices—i.e. specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-sensitive—to reduce delays.

Today, Assets Care Solutions boasts an impressive portfolio under its care, including renowned industrial buildings like GBS@Mahsuri, GBS@Mayang, Innoplex, Technocenter and SME Center.

REJUVENATING PENANG'S URBAN SPACES AND PUBLIC AMENITIES

With solid foundations set, one need not look further than George Town and its surrounds to see how PDC works its magic in urban rejuvenation and restoration.

Along Gat Lebu China, the previously abandoned Wisma Yeap Chor Ee was restored to its former glory after it was equipped with modern facilities while preserving its original architecture. Today, it houses the Penang Science Cluster, a state-funded NGO that provides STEM programmes to young learners. Through PDC's work, heritage and usability blend seamlessly.

Another example is Penang Institute's main heritage wing. Conceptualised, designed and constructed from scratch, the building's fusion blend of white-and-black complements its natural setting with the architectural heritage of a bygone era, as seen in both its interior and exterior finishes. This building houses Pen-

ang Institute's conference hall; its respective research programmes today stand as a testament to PDC's capability in imagining and creating future spaces nestled in a heritage setting.

PDC also maintains Penang's public housing through a series of rejuvenation schemes that include the repainting, repairing and replacing of worn out facilities and other components. Not only do these beneficial schemes safeguard the safety, security and living quality of its residents, they also raise the cityscape's aesthetic value.

"With evolving urban trends, PDC is constantly reimagining the future possibilities of Penang's urban spaces so that they can correlate with its evolving identity. This will add value to the lifestyle and living quality of Penangites," PDC's Chief Executive Officer, Aziz Bakar remarked.

FACING FUTURE REALITIES

As the state looks towards the Penang2030 vision of becoming a family-focused, green and smart state, PDC recognises the immense importance of good property and building management in creating sustainable, livable and prosperous cities. Relevant to this end is also the cultivation of a symbiotic relationship between property and tourism—for everyone ranging from locals, tourists, businesses and industrial entities. Through its trustworthy subsidiaries that are PDC Setia Urus and Assets Care Solutions, and its overall role in ensuring that Penang's landmarks and amenities complement future needs and aspirations, PDC will continue to uphold its pillars of excellence towards a distinctly robust Penang identity that reaches across Malaysia and beyond.

CAPTIONS

1. Upgraded playground facilities at Sia Boey Urban Archaeological Park.
2. GBS@Mayang is managed by Assets Care Solutions.
3. Public Housing Rejuvenation Scheme at Bukit Gedung Type R Flat officiated by Penang Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow (first from the left) and accompanied by PDC's Chief Executive Officer, Aziz Bakar (second from the left) and Member of Parliament for Bayan Baru, Sim Tze Tzin (third from the left).
4. KOMTAR is the first one-stop commercial, recreation and government administrative centre in Malaysia.

FOOTNOTE

- [1] "Exploring the past at Penang's Sia Boey Archaeological Park", New Straits Times Online, 26 February 2024, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2024/02/1017920/exploring-past-penangs-sia-boey-archaeological-park>, accessed on 27 May 2024.



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A REVIEW OF 63-65: NOTES FROM A SEPARATION

BY WILLIAM THAM

FACTS, ANECDOTES AND SPECULATIONS

THE PRESENT

N AN ALTERNATIVE PRESENT haunts Boo Junfeng's "Happy and Free", a speculative karaoke video commemorating "a Malaysian Singapore that never came to be", which "provoked [...] a deep sense of unease, loss, longing and finally, melancholy". Played on screen at the Penang Harmony Centre as part of the *63-65: Notes From a Separation* performance workshop, Boo's uncanny vision of a united Malaysia and Singapore was showcased alongside an artificially recreated speech by Tunku Abdul Rahman, prepared specifically for the audience. Resurrected through voice cloning technology, a digitised Tunku reads the proclamation of Singapore's separation in Parliament. But it is still too polished and seamless, and his unrecorded emotions remain elusive.

Released from an imagined archive, these videos and other artefacts bring the one-time state from the south back into focus almost 60 years after Malaysia and Singapore parted ways. The importance of the past is ever-present, as seen from how the trauma of a botched decolonisation reverberate in fiction, film and graphic novels. Two shared years as a country keep etching themselves into national symbols and histories, against the divisions enacted through separate currencies and institutions. But is it possible to re-interpret this moment in the present, even under the weight of decades' worth of historical narratives? Perhaps. Uncertainties remain over the past—and among the workshop's participants, facts, anecdotes and speculations over the Separation were not easily distinguishable. Some questions remain open. What exactly do the stripes and stars on the Malaysian and Singaporean flags signify? What place do family histories occupy within national narratives?

ORIGINS

The seeds of *63-65* were sown during the Movement Control Order. Perusing online

versions of Malaysian Parliamentary Hansards from 1965, Fasyali Fadzly, a Johorean theatre practitioner and educator, juxtaposed the documents from immediately before and after 9 August, when parliamentarians of newly diminished countries continued to negotiate the details of lives apart. This research was the impetus for a series of performances with his Singaporean colleagues, Shaifulbahri Mohamad of Bahri & Co, and Nabilah Said, which explores the nuances of merger-and-separation through an assortment of documents taken from their imagined archive.

For Nabilah, the archive was an active, contested place. "A historical archive presents itself as objective, but we know there can be no one objective historical narrative—what gets captured is already a subjective selection," she remarked.

Curating and revisiting these artefacts became an attempt to "collectively try to make meaning of and add 'life' to history". But any history also invites counterfactuals. Take, for example, other possible turning points such as Penang's vote on secession in 1949, Johor's own short-lived secession movement on the eve of Merdeka, or the "Lima Negara" of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei, commemorated on record sleeves before the Brunei Rebellion's outbreak. Had things gone differently, national boundaries in the archipelago could have been transformed.

While a documentary theatre format featuring the "multimedia staging of documents, and the notion of theatre as a forensic activity", could have lent itself well to interrogating the Separation, the *63-65* team went further in shifting the focus from practitioners to audience members.

The audience is the key element of any dramatic performance, and here, we co-created the session by interpreting and creatively transforming the materials provided. The most crucial aspect of *63-65* was the degree to which participants engaged with the material on hand. While stressing the session's educational nature, Fasyali remarked on how it was an attempt to be egalitarian. Thus, their approach ran in



contrast with the top-down approaches of formalising official national histories.

“Think of it like attending a history class, but with a more interactive, hands-on approach,” he remarked. By reflecting upon history as objectively and democratically as possible, Fasyali saw this as a way to “uncover and explore complex emotions and historical connections”.

Rather than to judge the decision to part ways, the session provided a collective opportunity to contextualise why the Separation unfolded the way it did—all while grappling with the emotions of the time. Snippets of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s mediated weeping on camera, regretful *pantun* declaimed by parliamentarians in KL, and the vague hope of some sort of future together played on screen, past emotions worked their way into present.

It was possible to reinterpret a time when Singapore’s cabinet threatened to collapse over the secret meetings that resulted in the Separation, while people such as Professor Wang Gungwu at the University of Malaya were coming to terms with the new reality of two nation-states, condemned to negotiating “the fundamental contradictions in post-colonial nation building”. But the lived effects of the Separation on the ground were just as important: Fasyali acknowledged how “people at the time of separation had to choose where to reside, facing emotional and practical challenges.”

Now, presented with copies of speeches from President Yusof Ishak and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, each fearing for their newly independent state, the uncertainties of 1965 re-emerged.

FUTURES

Yet 63–65 was not entirely serious; it was also subversive and hopeful. Fragmented speeches, deliberately taken out of context, invited fresh interpretations through a blackout poetry exercise, where we read the figures of history against the grain of posterity. A sharing session allowed us to think about what possible futures looked like, even if the impacts of the Separation continued to structure daily life.

Nabilah saw the Separation’s legacies etched into the very fact of Singapore’s independence, with its discourse of survival and self-sufficiency. “Merger and separation as points of history can definitely feel esoteric—even academic—but it continues to shape Malaysia–Singapore relations and identities in ways we don’t always have space to talk about.”

Hailing from the south, Fasyali saw the Separation not as finality, but as an ongoing negotiation of the links between the island and mainland. “As a Johorean, I’ve always felt that we have a unique relationship with Singapore and its people compared to the rest of Malaysia. I’ve never felt separated from Singapore, either geographically or mentally.” These linkages played out in the geography of his childhood *kampung*, where Singapore’s water supply was channelled from its river over the Causeway to where several family members worked, dimming only when he moved to KL.

Thus, 63–65 offers not only a chance to engage with history, but also the broader process of memory. Like a stage play, remembrance is performed differently each time, distorting as much as it preserves.

Having already performed in Singapore, the team envisioned a three-year project that would culminate with the 60th anniversary of Separation in 2025. Depending on resources, they could stage a documentary theatre performance or work in collaboration with not just audiences, but also historians, politicians and artistic practitioners. To this end, the need for grants and arts funding was crucial to keep having such conversations.

Returning to Wang Gungwu, perhaps of greater importance than history is the future—he imagined that “the future country was a question mark whose answer depended on those who actively worked to shape it”. Even today, ideas of nations are always open to reconstruction, in line with Nabilah’s observation that 63–65 was never just an engagement with the past alone: “[W]e also want to speculate about the future—so it’s not only about looking back.”

FOOTNOTES

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THE



LANGUR



**PENANG BRIDGES URBANISATION
WITH WILDLIFE WELLBEING**

BY GRACE SUDITA



PROJECT

BEING BORN IN the year of the Monkey, I am often reminded of my connection to them. As soon as the year commences, my mother would hurry into Popular bookstore on the third floor of Gurney Plaza to purchase one of those Feng Shui horoscope books, eager to have a brief outlook on what the year ahead would hold for us both. I recall my childhood days growing up in the southern town of Sanur on the island of Bali, dashing out of the classroom with my schoolmates to the monkeys sitting on the brick wall by the gardens once the lunch bells rang, all of us giggling incessantly as we imitated their yawning expressions and mannerisms.

LANGUR ENDEMIC

As I moved to and from the opposite ends of the Andaman and Java Sea, hopping from Singapore to Bali to Myanmar and now, Malaysia, I noticed an uptick of monkeys assimilating into the urban community area, popping up in playgrounds, lounging by the foot of a bus stop or even having a bicker with a mate by the pool.

Here in Penang, the dusky leaf monkey, also known as langur, is a frequently sighted species. They are often spotted in the stretch that links Teluk Bahang and Batu Ferringhi, but I have also caught them roaming around the vicinity of my apartment complex in Tanjung Bungah, perched on the pool deck.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has listed dusky leaf monkeys as “Endangered” under its Red List as a result of anthropogenic activities such as the development of forested areas, e.g. the building of roads and condominiums, the conversion of the wilderness into plantations as well as logging. With the continuous development of Penang, one can only fear the worst for the langurs and their compatriots.

BUILDING BRIDGES

But brighter days are ahead for the langurs and other arboreal creatures living in Penang.

The Langur Project Penang (LPP) is a community-based research and conservation organisation focusing on creating a harmonious co-existence between humans and the growing urban wildlife. Founded by Jo Leen Yap, an accomplished wildlife researcher with a PhD in Zoology/Mammalogy, 2024 marks the eighth year of the organisation’s establishment. It does a multitude of conservation projects ranging from community awareness hikes to publishing research papers. In recent years, it successfully built two wildlife crossings for langurs to cross from one side of a four-way road to the other.

The construction of LPP’s two canopy bridges—the first in Teluk Bahang and the second in Lembah Permai—has been a longstanding vision of the organisation. Wildlife crossings assist primates and other arboreal mammals in the vicinity to cross roads safely and reduce roadkill.

The assembling of LPP’s first bridge in Teluk Bahang was featured in the BBC’s three-part docuseries, *Pri-*

mates, released in 2020, which highlighted the process. LPP follows in the footsteps of many other conservation efforts worldwide in using upcycled firehoses donated by the local fire station to construct these bridges. These are suitable in that they are durable and can withstand both rain and the blistering sun here in Penang.

COMBATING MISINFORMATION

Among a host of other challenges, LPP faces the local stigma that considers the monkey population as pests. While writing this article, I stumbled upon a local forum page where demeaning and abusive comments were directed at the helpless monkeys, telling other commenters to shoot them or leave live firecrackers in their food. One comment reads: “A pet dog, sling-shot, water jet, poisoned food, hell even a hunting rifle, why not. They breed like rabbits, so don’t feel guilty about killing some of them. If anything you’d be doing everyone a favor.” As I read through the comments on this forum, I came to the realisation that people seem to have forgotten that this land was their home long before it was ours.

To combat this growing trend of maltreatment and misinformation, LPP often hosts community-based activities to engage and educate local citizens, taking them on hikes and producing informative leaflets in the three main languages: Malay, Mandarin and English. The “Ada Monyet?!” guide gives brief but educational pointers and guidelines on how to deal with monkeys if you happen to be in the same vicinity as them. The most crucial points to remember are as follows:

- NEVER approach and feed the monkeys. Your innocent act of kindness can cause sickness to the animals and having litter in their home will do them no good. Langurs, in particular, are fruit-eating herbivores with a unique trait of swallowing the seed whole; the seed passes through their digestive tract undamaged. Because of this, they are able to excrete the seeds in a new location, spreading the fruit and thus the tree into new locations.

- KEEP a safe distance. If you approach a monkey, they may feel threatened and lunge out in self-defense. It is recommended to keep a good distance of four to five metres.

- AVOID showing teeth and making direct eye contact. They would feel at ease without your penetrative gaze. Bearing a smile showcases that you are submissive and weak. Wearing a calm expression and showing no teeth would alleviate any concerns the monkeys have towards you.

- WALK confidently or at a brisk pace. Showing confidence asserts your strength and the monkeys should no longer be a worry for you. If you are on a walk, consider carrying a hiking stick or any long stick you can forage. Gently tap the stick on the ground as you walk to keep the monkeys at a distance.

There is still a vast amount to do in preventing further damage to the langur population and that of other arboreal creatures that call Penang home, but with the continuous conservation work LPP does and with the collaborative efforts of the local community, a positive future looms ahead.

If you would like to get involved with LPP, scan the QR code to reach key pages on their website, or check out their social media pages on Facebook, X, YouTube and Instagram under the handle @langurprojectpenang or @langurpenang.

SCAN THE QR CODE
FOR MORE INFORMATION



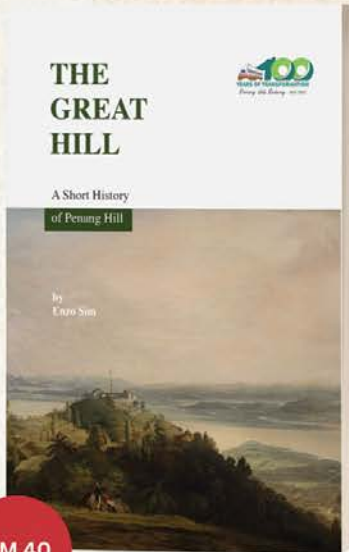
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GRACE SUDITA is often referred to by her friends as “BBB” (British, Burmese and Balinese) because of her unique ethnic background. In her free time, she spends time adding gazillions of films to her watch list on Letterboxd and yet rarely actually watches them.

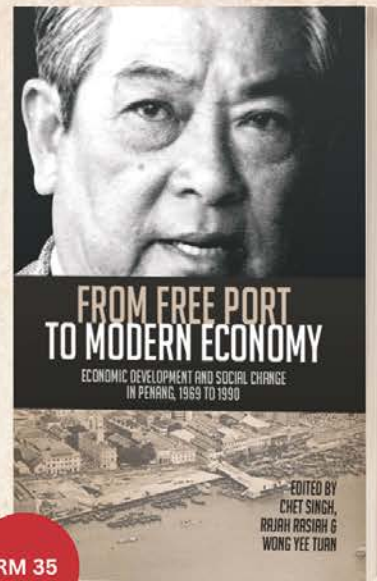
BEST-SELLERS



RM 40

THE GREAT HILL: A Short History of Penang Hill

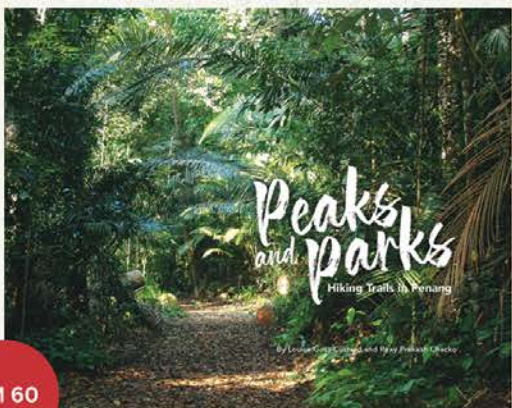
The Great Hill celebrates the Penang Hill railway's centenary with a concise and captivating history, highlighting its transformation and profound legacy.



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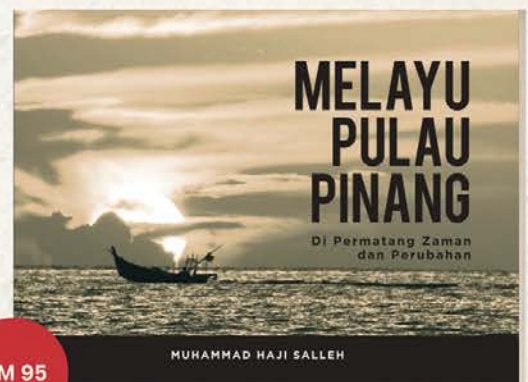
This collection of articles delves into Lim Chong Eu's transformative role as Chief Minister of Penang, revitalising the declining port and shaping it into the thriving industrialised society it is today.



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The Malay community in Penang is presented through various historical lenses, covering environment, philosophy, literary speech, economics, and intellectual expression.



1

THE EBB AND FLOW OF CRABS AND ART

BY
**KOH
KAI
TING**



KOH KAI TING is an artist exploring our relationship with water—rivers and seas—through myths and hidden histories.

MY FIRST VISIT to Pulau Ketam was during the Pulau Ketam International Art Festival in 2016. I was in charge of the printmaking studio located inside a temple, along with a Canadian artist and two artists from the US.

On my first day on the island, I was tasked to decorate the jetty, continuing on until late in the night. It was then that I witnessed a group of dogs chasing and hunting a cat. I was stunned because the cats I knew were usually fiercer than dogs—my cat would often scale walls to fight my neighbour's dog. As I stood there, the dogs turned their attention to me—and because I could not outrun them, I had to fend them off with my sandals. Eventually, a resident came to help chase them away. He explained that these dogs were wild, unlike dogs on the mainland. It was my first glimpse of the island's untamed nature.

Most of what constitutes Pulau Ketam is built on pillars above the mudflats. During the day, wild dogs lurk beneath, emerging only at night. The encounters I have had with them usually occur while using the restroom. The island's old houses have toilets with rectangular holes in the ground that are covered by planks. I encountered the dogs again while using one of these; they could easily jump up from the mudflats. It was frightening, to say the least.

Pulau Ketam is divided into two layers: the upper layer belongs to humans, while the lower layer perpetually belongs to other creatures. Animals lurking in the mudflats eagerly await to rule the upper, and as soon as humans move out of their homes, they take over.

I found this fascinating, so in November 2018, I returned to the island for a year-long residency.



2

GETTING TO KNOW PULAU KETAM

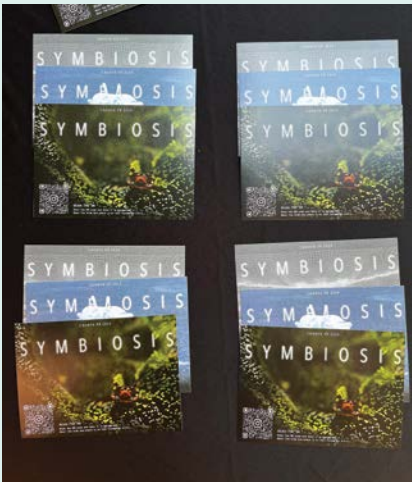
I stayed in the *gǎng wěi* (港尾) area, far from the bustling tourist hub near the main jetty. As the island is predominantly occupied by the Teochew community, I immersed myself in their rich traditions. The locals have managed to preserve their customs, offering me a glimpse into their fascinating culture. One of the most captivating is the Teochew Opera, a traditional form of entertainment deeply rooted in their heritage. Despite not fully understanding the dialect, I found myself captivated by the intricate stage setup and the laid-back atmosphere of the performance.

During my first trip, the Pulau Ketam Art Association's studio had yet to be ready. I stayed in Xing Man Tang Lodge located next to a *líng cuò* (陵厝), a clan temple that serves as a significant cultural centre on the island. Most *líng cuò* here worship Tua Peh Kong (a Taoist deity also known as the "God of Prosperity") and serve as communal gathering spots.

The locals gather during important dates on the lunar calendar for communal prayers and celebrations. It was during one of these interactions that I learned about the traditional fishing practices of the community. Long before the advent of modern materials like plastic, they used plant fibres to weave fishing nets. To enhance its durability, they coated these nets with lacquer from mangrove trees, giving rise to the term "*leng chu*" in Teochew (or as mentioned earlier, *líng cuò*, in Mandarin) which literally translates as "net house". This intricate process not only preserved their fishing nets but symbolised the interconnectedness within the community. *Leng chu* also marks the beginning of residential clusters as immigrants from China settle and build their homes around these communal centres.



3



4



5

CAPTIONS

1. The Penang Hill Vampire Crab (*Geosesarma faustum*).
2. A barbershop inside a wooden stilt house in Pulau Ketam.
3. Dilapidated buildings are out of bounds for humans.
4. Interactive postcards distributed during Symbiosis, the Cahaya XR Industry Showcase at The Habitat.
5. A typical house in Pulau Ketam.
6. The author presenting her project during the Cahaya XR Industry Showcase at The Habitat.



6

INSPIRED BY CRABS

The vibrancy of life in Pulau Ketam and its inhabitants is reflected in its colourful houses. From the sea, one would be mesmerised by the beautiful hues of the sky and sea, juxtaposed against the island's bold aesthetic.

It was also during my residence that I had the pleasure of experiencing a delightful tea known as *páng xiè jiǎo* (螃蟹脚), translated as “crab legs”, introduced to me by the owner of a fishery. This unique tea blends the flavours of algae with the soothing aroma of tea. Interestingly, *páng xiè jiǎo* is made from a parasitic plant found on old tea trees. The branches of this plant bear a striking resemblance to crab legs.

One may think it interesting to have a unique blend of tea referring to crabs, seeing that the island is named “crab island”, but the association does not end there. I began to notice crab motifs everywhere, influencing various aspects of their life.

This led me to reflect on the phenomenon of Carcinisation, where different species have evolved into crab-like forms throughout natural history. It is noteworthy that the term “cancer” itself derives from the Greek word for crab. While in modern times, cancer refers to a group of diseases characterised by abnormal cell growth, the Greek physician Hippocrates observed similarities between crabs and certain tumours marked by swollen veins. This observation underscores a peculiar

connection where elements of our own physiology seem to have evolved into crab-like forms.

As my residency at Pulau Ketam drew to a close towards the end of 2019, I found myself deeply entrenched in the notion of everything evolving into crab-like forms. However, what truly cemented this idea in my mind was my understanding of Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), a powerful artificial intelligence (AI) technology used for image generation.

In the world of AI, GANs rely on training sets consisting of vast collections of images to refine their ability to generate new visuals. Much like how Google's Deep Dream AI famously began to perceive dogs in everything after being trained on a large dataset of pet photos, I too, found myself perceiving crabs in a multitude of objects and scenes. It was as if my mind had been trained on a dataset of crab narratives.

Therefore, in 2022, I did a solo exhibition at the Gajah Gallery, inspired by my residency experiences in Pulau Ketam. Titled “Pasang Surut” (Ebb and Flow), it drew inspiration from a Perak folklore “Pokok Pauh Janggi”. In this story, the world is depicted as a giant lake with an island where a cosmic tree stands. A giant crab resides on this island, and when the crab climbs the tree, it creates a low tide; when it returns to the water, it causes a high tide. This concept is fascinating because it follows Archimedes' Principle; it also offers a

playful way to view the world. It wanted to depict the ebb and flow of life echoed by the tidal rhythms on the island.

The idea of crabs influencing both natural and human history became a central theme that my team of artists sought to explore further through the immersive medium of virtual reality during the Cahaya XR mentorship. Our journey began with our first fieldwork at The Habitat Penang Hill, where Ahmad Zafir Abdul Wahab, the Executive Director, introduced us to the Penang Hill Vampire Crab. This encounter reminded us of a folklore about the Titiwangsa mountains—where the Highland Crab saved humans during a great flood. In gratitude, humans gave their body hair to the crab, which the crab then used to absorb water, allowing it to breathe outside the water. This story highlights a deep kinship between humans and crabs.

The connection deepened when we spoke with Ombak Potehi, who shared the story of *tián dū yuán shuài* (田都元帅), also known as the Southern China Opera God. According to legend, the deity was abandoned as a baby and raised by a hairy crab, which nurtured him with bubble saliva. Because of this, the deity is often depicted with a crab motif on his mouth, marking the bond between crabs and humans. These stories enriched our project, providing a cultural and mythological foundation for the “Crab Chronicle” VR experience, documenting a relationship that is discreetly symbolic.

WORLD FISH

HELPING TO SUPPLY PROTEINS TO A HUNGRY AND WASTEFUL WORLD

BY IAN MCINTYRE



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.

THOSE RESIDING IN Penang may not be aware of international institutions operating in the state outside the presence of multinational companies (MNCs) in the manufacturing and services sector. One of those institutions is WorldFish, a leading research organisation working to improve food security and nutrition since 2000, headquartered in Batu Maung, Penang.

Often overshadowed by our electronics and electrical sector (E&E) along with other renowned MNCs, WorldFish collaborates with international, regional and national partners to enable transformative innovations, tools and practices to advance aquatic food systems through its cutting-edge research.

Having all the technology in the world is insufficient if there is inadequate food to whet the appetite. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, food security and the supply of fish proteins have gained much attention.

WorldFish's Director General Essam Yassin Mohammed recently shared their role in the sustainable management of the ecosystem, and in supporting economic infrastructure factors within the bionetwork, especially water bodies and coral reefs.

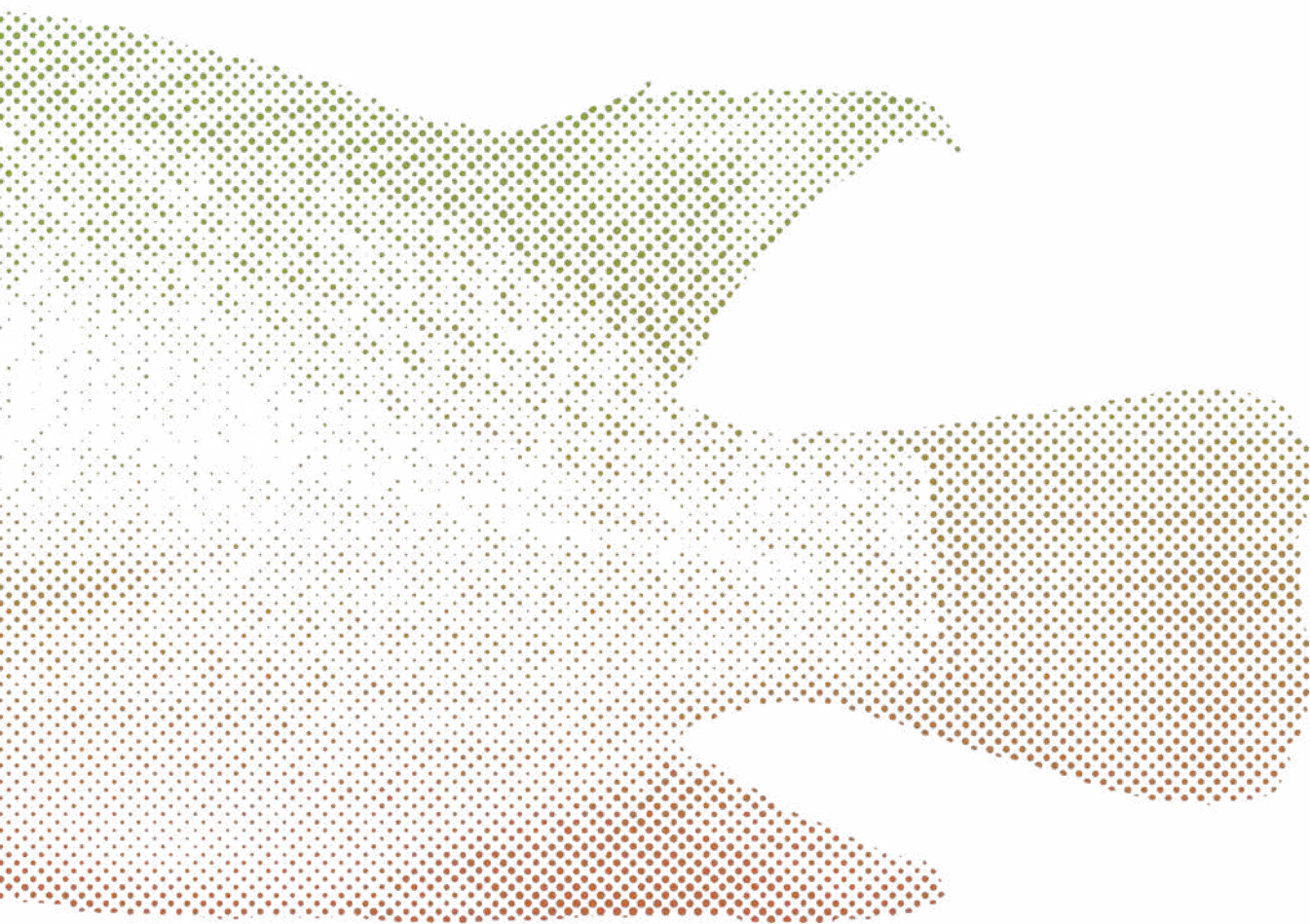
"We need the economic value factored into the analysis of such projects, but we

also cannot forget the surrounding ecosystem and what climate change poses of late," he says, adding that the main hindrance WorldFish is experiencing now is its ability to provide a sustainable level of seafood to arrest the global supply chain shortfalls of food stocks.

Essam identifies food waste as the primary challenge, citing the alarming level that one-third of the total output of food that the world produces end up as waste. While there is no denying that the growing population is also a factor—expected to reach nine billion by 2040 from 7.88 billion in 2021—Essam adds that wastage as the main contributing factor is also ironic, since many people continue to perish from starvation at the same time.

According to Essam, the food supply is bountiful, but acute shortage originates from food wastage in developed countries, and from improper handling, such as the lack of refrigeration. He adds, "We can increase output through our food chain and systems, but on the same token, we must reduce wastage."

However, in terms of providing food security, WorldFish has been successful in multiplying the tilapia species through genetic improvements through aquaculture schemes in fish farms, also known as



Genetic Improvement of Farmed Tilapia (GIFT). With scientific interventions, the tilapia can grow larger and breed faster.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation stipulates that, by 2032, fish consumption is projected to reach 21.2kg per capita globally—up from 20.4kg in the base period (average 2020–2022). Differences across continents will persist and increase, as the strongest growth is expected in Asia, which already has the highest per capita consumption of seafood, Essam notes.

Another interesting point is that currently, Asia as a region (excluding China), contributes around 50% of global fish and seafood production, with Africa contributing around 6.6%. There is immense opportunity in aquaculture to produce abundant and nutritious food that improves livelihoods. With Asia as the region with the most experience and expertise in aquaculture, WorldFish has recently begun a programme called the Africa-Asia BlueTech Superhighway, which focuses on south-south collaboration.

It is not just overfishing, development and pollution that are affecting fish supply, Essam also acknowledges that climate change is altering fish breeding, and in some cases, endangering certain species,

and the task ahead to save the planet of aquatic life needs stronger willpower from all stakeholders.

With all these challenges ahead, it is not rocket science to deduce that food price hikes will worsen and will continue to affect lower income groups, with malnutrition as a result. Hence, Essam believes there needs to be a policy intervention by countries to address poverty and hunger on top of malnutrition.

As for its role in Malaysia, WorldFish recently collaborated with the Malaysian government on its GIFT initiative through the Agriculture and Food Security Ministry to boost Malaysia's aquaculture sector, handing over 20,000 genetically improved farmed tilapia fingerlings to the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Food Security, Arthur Joseph Kurup last year.

The second handover of the latest generation of GIFT to the Malaysian government was conducted during the 21st International Institute of Fisheries Economics and Trade (IIFET) Conference in Penang.

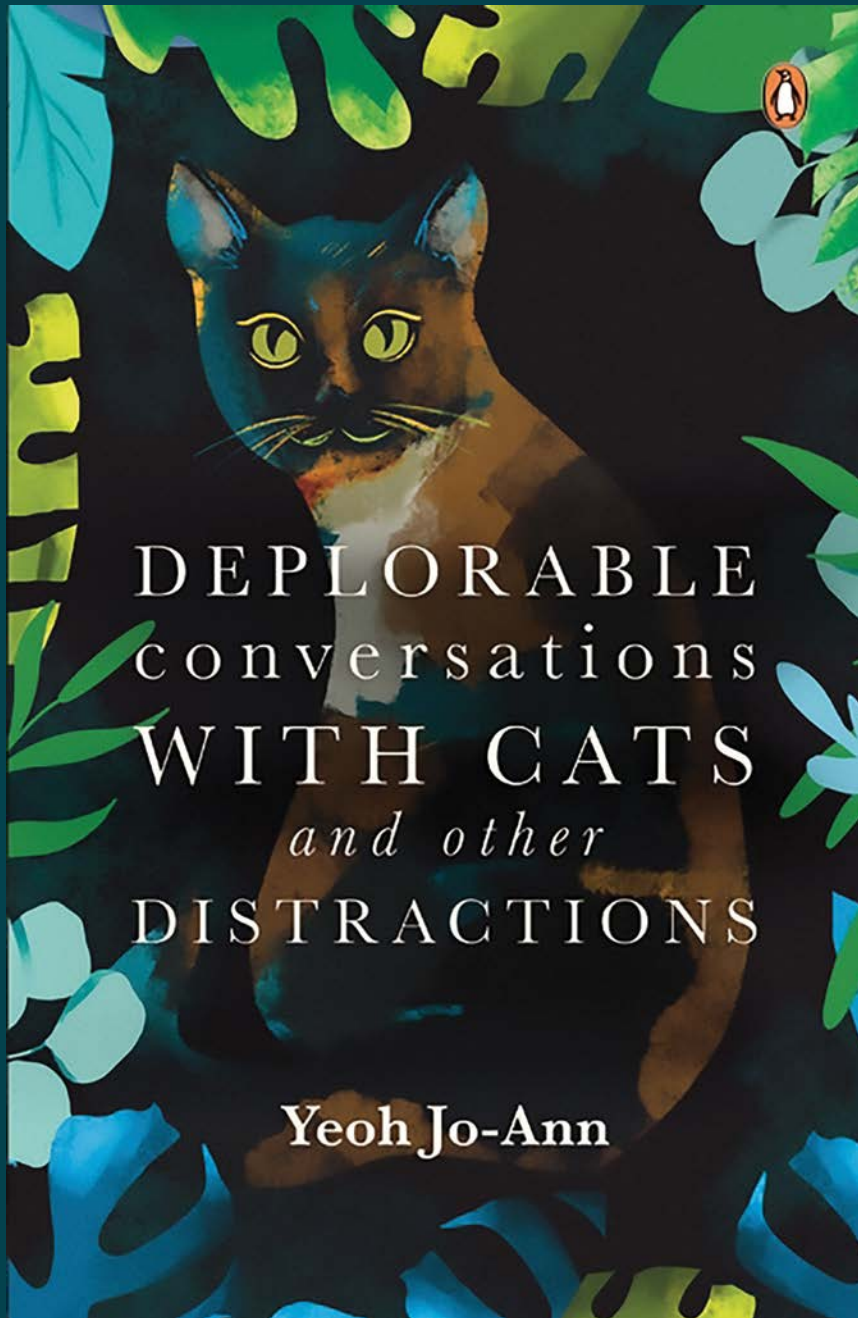
“WorldFish GIFT represents our commitment to scientific innovation in aquaculture. By providing these genetically improved fingerlings, we support Malaysia's efforts in achieving food security and

sustainable fisheries. Our collaboration with Malaysia highlights the importance of cooperation in fostering resilient and productive aquatic food systems,” Essam notes.

Joseph Kurup meanwhile said that the collaboration with WorldFish on the GIFT highlights the government's commitment to enhancing food security, adding that it plays “a crucial role in meeting the growing demand for fish, supporting our small-scale farmers and strengthening the resilience of our food systems.”

For nearly 30 years, GIFT has benefited millions worldwide with its fast-growing tilapia. Launched in 1988, GIFT has shown how a food systems approach can enhance nutrition and livelihoods. It is estimated that over 50% of global tilapia production comes from GIFT and GIFT-derived strains. This strain is crucial in providing a sustainable income for small-scale farmers.

The GIFT project was developed through a pioneering selective breeding programme launched by scientists and researchers located in Batu Maung. It has made tilapia faster-growing and adaptable to various environments—and the fish is now produced in 14 countries, contributing significantly to poverty reduction and hunger alleviation.



A STORY ABOUT COPING, CO-DEPENDENCY AND COMMUNITY

BY ANNA TAN

A book review of *Deplorable Conversations With Cats and Other Distractions* by Yeoh Jo-Ann

THE WEEK COCONUT, his late sister's cat, starts speaking to him, Lucky Lee has to decide if he has gone mad, he is dreaming, or if the cat really is talking to him—which brings to mind CS Lewis' oft-quoted passage from *Mere Christianity* about whether Jesus was a liar, a lunatic or the Lord.

Luckily, the stakes are much lower here.

No one is asking you to believe in Lucky. You just need to be amenable to meandering through Singapore and Malaysia, flitting from desperate present to secretive past, through varying episodes of grief and depression as he tries to figure out his life without the one person who has defined it so far: his sister, Pearl.

And when I say meander, I mean meander. *Deplorable Conversations With Cats and Other Distractions* is a long read. It wanders almost purposelessly down random thoughts, jumping from person to person, in an omniscient narrative that lets you know what almost every character in the story is thinking. Except Coconut. No one knows what Coconut is thinking, except the cat herself.

At times, this narrative style irks me. It feels too much like head hopping, tossing you from one person's thoughts to another. Stick to one person, I want to yell. Yet, it all somehow works cohesively. Reading the other characters' reactions towards Lucky's strange actions just adds to the humour and surrealism of the situation.

A TRULY MAGICAL LOOK AT SOUTHEAST ASIA

Deplorable Conversations is set in modern Singapore and Malaysia, with westernisation and gentrification as constant touchpoints. There are brief stops in other countries in the region, mostly on the hunt for food or coffee. As a Malaysian reader, there is much to love—the places and spaces they inhabit are familiar ones, the sounds and expressions pleasant to the ear. Yeoh is not afraid to dip into Malay, Hokkien and a little bit of Cantonese. And the food! There is so much food you will probably be salivating throughout the book.

Yeoh is a keen observer of society, expressing the older generations' frustrations with the younger even while the latter collectively roll their eyes at the outdated views of their parents' generation. "Go to school and learn English, then forget how to be Chinese," Mr. Thiang gripes right on the first page. Why else would those crazy kids next door put up white paper lanterns for Christmas?

It reads like real life, albeit a *tai tai*-esque version of it. The only thing that is out of place in this ultra-realistic setting is the talking cat. The talking cat that only talks to one person in the whole book, not even to her beloved owner, Pearl.

"She didn't need me to," Coconut says. And no other cat speaks to Lucky.

Is the talking cat a coping mechanism? Is it Lucky's own mind telling him what to do? After all, there are

many times when Coconut sounds just like Pearl. And what does she mean that he needs it? Because his bully of a sister is not around to direct his life anymore?

There is little closure to Pearl's death except time. Lucky waits and waits for her return, hoping against hope that they will find her, that she is strong enough—she was always the strong one—to survive, and that it is only a matter of time before she strides into the house again to tell him what to do.

She never does.

ON FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

At the beginning, Pearl seems to be a benign image, a beloved sister lost. But the more you delve into Lucky's memories, the more you discover that she is a bully who takes out her anger and issues on her younger brother without remorse. Despite Lucky's neutral tone and even the longing that comes through, I find myself despising Pearl. She is not a nice person, and it is obvious she has inherited their father's disdain for weak-willed Lucky. "She meant well" is an excuse for Pearl's behaviour, but it does not mean it had had positive impact.

A thought that captures me at various points is: Would Lucky have been a different person without Pearl? I think so. After all, he has always lived in her shadow, even before she became a famous TV personality. There is a strange co-dependency to their relationship that does neither any favours.

Half of the novel is Lucky's journey to discover his inheritance; a road trip that takes him to discover his father's roots in Malaysia. It is a search for meaning amid loss and grief—including a disenfranchised grief born of family secrets and the practical support that had always been withheld from oh-so-flighty Lucky. What would he have become if given a fighting chance? If he had not been subsumed in Pearl's personality all these thirty-odd years?

Maybe Pearl's death is the best thing that could happen to Lucky. Maybe it is not a tragedy after all.

Because ultimately, Lucky has a great support system and a community that rallies around him in his time of need. They may not always do it the right way, but their presence (and meddling) is the solid foundation that redirects his path, madness or not.

The book is a delightful read, both hilarious and poignant. Lucky has two obsessions that keep coming up throughout the novel: architecture and coffee. They are possibly Yeoh's own obsessions, an insight into the author herself—Yeoh's degree is in Architecture, though she never practised (just like Lucky!), and when I met up with her in Penang, she had many opinions about coffee and coffee culture—though I am not sure if those were formed before or after writing the novel.

If you have ever needed a novel about coffee, cats and architecture that hits close to home, this is the book for you.



In 2018-2019, **ANNA TAN** lived in Uxbridge, West London while pursuing an MA in Creative Writing: The Novel from Brunel University, London under a Chevening scholarship. She is the author of the Absolution series. Anna's books are available in print from shopee.com.my/teaspoonpublishing or in print and ebook at teaspoonpublishing.com.my/shop.

PERSPEXTIF:

REDEFINING MUSEUM VISITING EXPERIENCES THROUGH INNOVATIVE COLLABORATIVE CURATION

BY NICOLE CHANG

MUZIUM & GALERI TUANKU FAUZIAH (MGTF) began approximately 50 years ago after Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) introduced the Fine Arts programme, a pioneering move among Malaysia's higher education institutions. Since then, USM has been acquiring artefacts and various works of art.

The museum and art gallery officially opened in 1982 but was formally inaugurated as MGTF in 2007. It is known to many as a university museum. However, since 2021, MGTF's curatorial team has been curating engaging experiential visits to promote the paradigmatic shifts advocated by the director, Hasnul Jamal Saidon. Striving to reinterpret the museum's role beyond a venue/space, the team recently experimented with co-curation, embracing collaborative efforts.

A DYNAMIC MUSEUM VISIT

PerspeXtif, a two-month exhibition showcased at MGTF from March 18 to May 25 this year, explored a collaborative curatorial approach under the leadership of Tetriana Ahmed Fauzi from USM's School of the Arts (SOTA) and Afzanizam Mohd Ali (MGTF's curator). The exhibition featured 16 selected pieces from MGTF's permanent collection, including paintings, drawings, print art, photo collages, digital prints, mixed media and ethnographic objects.

These were displayed alongside individual or group interpretations presented in various forms and formats by 36 invited co-curators, primarily art and design lecturers and their supporting crew of different disciplines from several public universities. These interpretations ranged from sculptures, installation art, drawings, photography and animation to documentary videos, wall and framed displays. Some incorporated interactive elements to encourage visitor co-creation.

"This is the first experiment. Usually displayed as static objects with fixed meanings and presentations, these museum collections are now being re-examined, revived and re-presented in new forms," explained Hasnul, the advisor to the curatorship.

Hasnul pointed out that diverse curatorial approaches were applied, including re-reading the

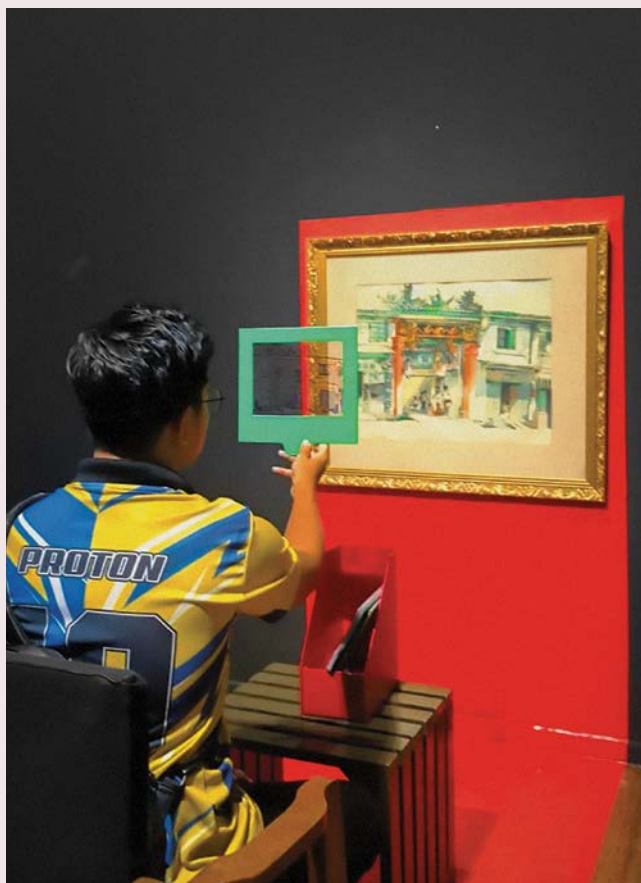
Table 1: The Paradigmatic Shifts advocated by Hasnul Jamal Saidon.

(Source: Chang, 2022)

FROM	TO
Producer/curator-centred	User/Audience-centred
Passive	Interactive/ Participative
Content-creating	Context-creating
Homogeneity	Trans-cultural
Competition	Collaboration
Separation	Convergence
Centralized	Highly networked
Monopoly	Synergy
Independent	Inter-dependent
Control	Empowerment
Hierarchy	Web of Relationship
Linear	Non-linear
Mass media	New media
Offline	Online
Then	Now
Exclusive	Inclusive
Managing	Inspiring
Static	Change
Reacting to Change	Be the Change
Fixed	Choice & Flexibility
Thing	Time
Describing	Experiencing
Knowing	Being
Sequential	Simultaneity/ Concurrent
Singular-discipline	Multi-discipline
3-4 Dimension	Trans Dimension
Physical	Mental-emotional
Body	Mind & Soul
Form	Information
Universe	Metaverse
Pointing Faults	Solving Problems
Fighting Darkness	Emitting Light

featured pieces from a perspective of personal experience and reinterpreting the original pieces as intertextual sources. Some looked at techniques, elements and design principles, while others interpreted historical and factual events.

"The themes revolve around socio-economic circumstances, human relationships, heritage and culture, information explosion, free-market capitalism and globalisation of local cultures and landscapes, feminism, emotional values and well-being," Hasnul said.



1



2



3

CAPTIONS

1. A secondary school student participating in the curated interactive activities designed by Liew Ting Chuang from Saito University College and Tetriana's group from SOTA, USM.
2. Curatorial tours were conducted for art practitioners, academicians and students from art academies that include Saito University College, SOTA USM, The One Academy and others.
3. Visitors engaging with Sarena Abdullah's interpretation of Redza Piyadasa's artwork through wall text that elucidates the artist's pursuit of postmodernism.

4. Azizan Paiman (UiTM Perak), Zaime Sahibil's group (UMS) and Mohd Fuad Md Arif (Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam) drew inspiration from original works by Joseph Tan and Latif Mohidin, ultimately developing new narratives and creating innovative artworks.



4

EXHIBITION OUTREACH AND VISITOR ENGAGEMENT

The outreach and reception of PerspeXtif was impressive, actively engaging visitors—including students and educators from schools, colleges and universities within and beyond Penang—in a deeper appreciation of the museum's collection, prompting them to contemplate the narratives of the original pieces further.

Participating as a co-curator, Liew Ting Chuang from Saito University College views this exhibition as a meaningful platform for his students, particularly in enhancing their understanding of the art history module. "I brought them to visit PerspeXtif not only to learn from MGTf's collected works and the new interpretations but also to expose them to the co-curatorial approach, to witness the possibilities of collaboration."

"Besides highlighting the museum's permanent collection, which has long been preserved and stored, PerspeXtif offers co-curators the opportunity to research and develop new creations or narratives inspired by the original works and further inquiries based on the art, and, at the same time, pushes artistic boundaries by integrating new and contemporary ideas and technologies," shared Ishak Ramli, who travelled from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM Perak) for the exhibition.

Echoing Ishak's opinion, Safrizal Shahir (SOTA USM) added that "it is a valuable exercise for practitioners, and adds on new values and dimensions to the original work."

Impressed by the exhibition's reception, Zaimie Sahibil from University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) adopted

a similar approach to guide his final-year students in co-curating their final-year showcase at UMS. "It offers a new platform to deepen our understanding of the museum's collection through an active and participatory learning process."

Azizan Paiman from UiTM Perak shared that allowing visitors to touch the artefacts on display enabled a "direct and close connection" with the precious objects, "bridging our usual distance with the museum's exhibits and fostering a more intimate experience".

FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS

Group review discussions have identified several areas for improvement to enhance the curatorial process. The team plans to refine the spatial arrangement and on-site settings to create a more cohesive and effective presentation of the diverse narratives throughout the co-curated exhibition.

"It would be beneficial to include art dialogues or conversations during the exhibition to enrich the presented narratives," suggested the Dean of SOTA, Sarena Abdullah. She also added that it is "crucial to document this curatorial project for our local art archive to support future reference and research".

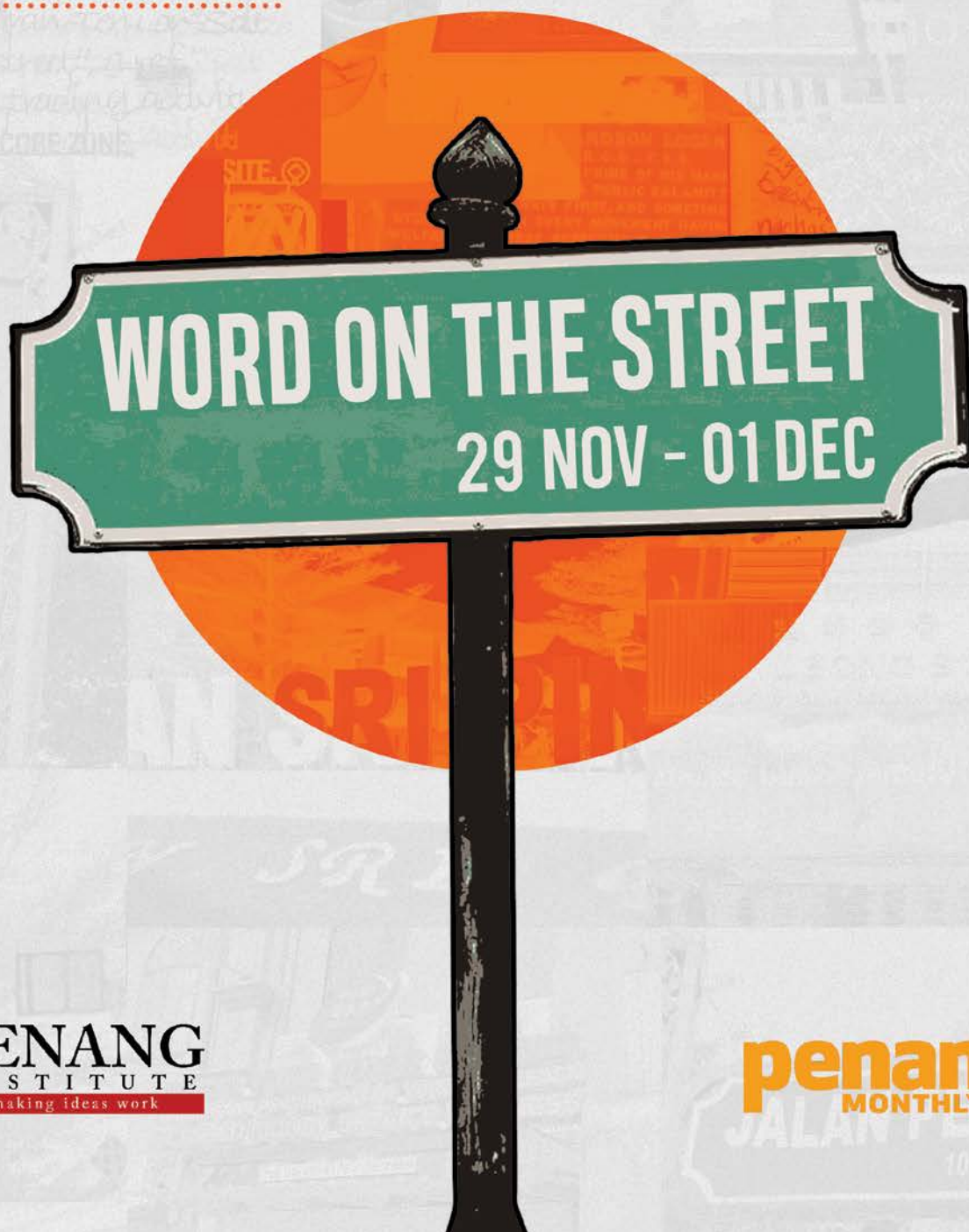
Safrizal emphasised the importance of a well-strategised pedagogical approach to effectively disseminate benefits to various targeted groups of visitors across different levels.

According to Tetriana, MGTf's core curatorial team plans to expand PerspeXtif to other platforms in Penang and KL.



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