

# HERITAGE HONED

*As George Town gets buzzy as a heritage destination, neglected buildings are gradually being transformed and lovingly restored into heritage hotels scattered across the Penang city. JENNIFER CHOO points you in the right direction*

A SUITE IN MACALISTER MANSION



THE FORTUNES OF Penang have waxed and waned from when the island was a thriving 18th and 19th century entrepot but lately the Pearl of the Orient has been regaining its lost lustre with a vengeance. From *The Economist* declaring that Penang was "getting its mojo back" to upper crust hipster magazine *Monocle* dedicating substantial column inches to reports on the island's property market, Penang is abuzzed with political change, economic vitality and a booming tourism industry.

Although Penang has always been a popular tourist destination, attracting foodies and sunseekers with its sublime street food (as voted by *TIME* magazine) and long stretches of beach, it is only since its UNESCO World Heritage Site designation in 2008 that Penangites are waking up to the idea of heritage tourism.

Fortunately, Penang's inner city has remained largely intact despite long periods of neglect and rent control decline. And it is within this UNESCO Core heritage zone where boutique hotels have been

flourishing. Working within the guidelines of the World Heritage Committee, which administers the UNESCO's World Heritage programme, clear restrictions are in place to preserve the integrity of the buildings. But even within these margins, some establishments have stood out. Here are four of the finest that Penang has to offer:

### HONOURABLE MANSION

Although Macalister Mansion lies a little further afield from the core UNESCO zone, it deserves to be singled out for its unique take on conservation – eschewing the more conventional vintage style for a mix of heritage, design and art. Located on tree-lined Macalister Road more synonymous with the famous Sisters *Char Kuay Teow* than cutting-edge design, this lavish "wedding cake"-style colonial mansion underwent an incredible makeover. Singapore-based Ministry of Design (MOD) led by Colin Seah who spearheaded the chic heritage hotel movement in the southern island state, took the dilapidated building

from a historical footnote to putting it on the map as the first Design Hotel in Malaysia.

The project is designed and branded as a lifestyle-oriented residence consisting of five F&B outlets and eight rooms so visitors feel like they are spending a weekend at an eccentric art collector's mansion rather than a conventional hotel. Conserving the original architectural features was a key component to the design agenda and, at the expense of the bottom line, a decision was made to keep to the original layout of the house. Where necessary, features were replicated like the stunning scalloped porch sheltering the main door. Wherever possible, original details such as the galvanised spiral staircase leading to a viewing tower, generous balconies and wooden trusses were restored.

Seah tells a particularly good story about finding the original ornate grilles abandoned in a huge heap in a dark corner of the building and how it was like a jigsaw puzzle finding the right grille for the right window. Infusing contemporary design into the project was more of a bold statement than a delicate balancing act, and Seah deftly juxtaposes various elements like Tom Dixon lamps with vintage Italian tiles in the Living Room and pastel armchairs against whitewashed baroque cornices in the Dining Room.

The art was inspired by Penang's colonial past and more specifically by Penang's British Governor Colonel Norman Macalister culminating in an oversized 2.5m high fractal bust of Norman Macalister that makes an indelible impression as visitors enter the grounds.

[macalistermansion.com](http://macalistermansion.com)



ANGLO-INDIAN BUNGALOW

## LABOUR OF LOVE

Meticulously restored and mindfully conserved, it is no wonder that 23 Love Lane took the top award in the conservation category at this year's Malaysian Institute of Architects annual PAM (Malaysian Institute of Architects) Awards. 23 Love Lane is unusual because it is an ensemble of four separate structures that were built in different eras.

The first structure is a two-storey bungalow that dates back to the 19th century and the collection grew as the original owners acquired three other buildings over the span of a century. Through the years, this collection underwent various incarnations including a backpackers' hostel named Oasis Hotel. Today, each building has been lovingly restored within a walled landscaped garden and renamed to reflect their respective provenance - the Anglo-Indian Bungalow, the Straits Eclectic Block, the 1920s Jack Roof Annex and the Indian Shophouses.

Being conservation buffs, the present owners were determined that quality should not be compromised and that the project would be a living laboratory for conservation. They engaged a distinguished team of consultants: BYG Architecture that had previously undertaken restoration/adaptive reuse projects such as Brittany House, St. Joseph Novitiate and Spices Residence; the conservation team who restored the Suffolk House that won the Award of Distinction in the 2008 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Culture Heritage Conservation; conservationist and historian Dr Gwynn Jenkins; and Tan Yeow Woo who lent his expertise on the Chinese Gate that doubles as the hotel's entrance.

To mitigate the feeling of being a museum, the owners have kept the furnishing homey and the art, contemporary and colourful. In fact, many of the pieces are from the owners' own large Malaysian (Malay, Chinese, colonial) antique collection so that nothing feels out of context.

[23lovelane.com](http://23lovelane.com)



THE LIBRARY IN THE ANGLO-INDIAN BUNGALOW



HOTEL ENTRANCE



POOL LOUNGE & GARDEN



CENTRAL COURTYARD

## SEVENTH HEAVEN

Winners of the 2007 UNESCO Award of Distinction for heritage conservation and regular Conde Naste Hot List nominees, Malaysian Chris Ong and Australian Karl Steinberg's latest baby lives up to

expectations. Named Seven Terraces, the project occupies almost an entire block of Anglo Chinese terraces on one of Penang's historically rich residential streets.

Perfecting the duo's now signature refined heritage aesthetics, Seven Terraces

celebrates the blossoming of Straits Chinese or Peranakan culture in the 18th and early 19th century fusing Malay, Indian, Chinese and Indian influences to create its own complex and tropical, Anglo-Asian style.

The essential character of the buildings has been preserved by keeping to its original elegant proportions although the terraces are now united into one large property overlooking a rectangular courtyard, a nod to the Straits Chinese terrace-house vernacular. Each unique suite features an elegant mix of historical features and antiques sourced from local estates and collectors over the last three years, and combined with Ong's personal collection dating back to when he started collecting at the age of 12. He also went to great lengths to abet the fantasy of a gracious bygone era by hiding modern conveniences from view but, and here's the brilliant part, without sacrificing their accessibility.

It is a task that has been fulfilled with aplomb because it truly feels like time has stood still at Seven Terraces.

[seventerraces.com](http://seventerraces.com)



STEWART LANE SUITE

RECEPTION AREA




BISTRO TANG

## HALL OR NOTHING

Traditional Chinese medicine is the unlikely starting point for Ren I Tang, an intriguing new addition to the Penang heritage hotel scene. Ren I Tang, meaning Hall of Benevolence, is the translation of Yin Oi Tong, Southeast Asia's oldest Chinese medical hall, which served the local community for some 124 years at Lebuhraya Penang.

Although the medical hall ceased operations years ago, the new Ren I Tang has been impeccably restored and converted into a charming guesthouse with 17 loft-like rooms. The project prides itself for its sustainable design approach including an almost exclusive use of recycled materials. For instance, the timber used for the roof trusses, beams and floors were either found on site or sourced from scrap and timber yards, while the furniture and decorations dotted across the property were salvaged or re-purposed from timber and artefacts that were left behind.

The spirit of sustainability is also championed via the guesthouse's day-to-day operations with energy saving systems such as Inverter Air Conditioning Systems, Hybrid Hot Water Systems and LED / Energy Saving Lighting as well as the reliance on open air wells and the courtyard for natural ventilation in the common areas.

The conservation of tangible and intangible heritage continues particularly on the airy ground floor that pays homage to the buildings' storied past with the incorporation of a medical hall, a museum gallery and a resource centre dedicated to traditional Chinese medicine. With the revival of this traditional trade, Ren I Tang has brought the historical landmark to a full circle. 

[renitang.com](http://renitang.com)



THE ROOM'S RUSTIC CHARMS