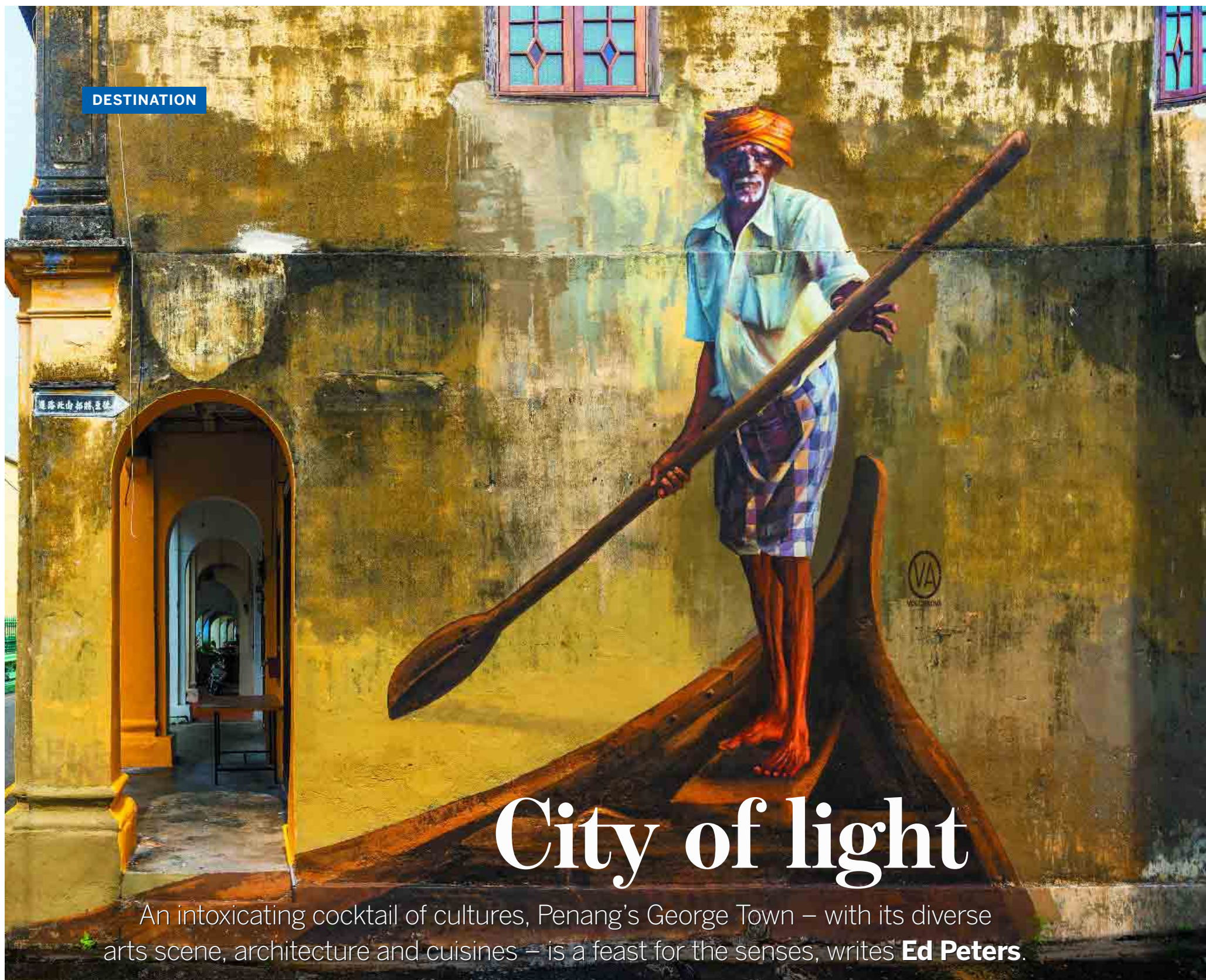


DESTINATION



City of light

An intoxicating cocktail of cultures, Penang's George Town – with its diverse arts scene, architecture and cuisines – is a feast for the senses, writes **Ed Peters**.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was light. Or, in this case, Francis Light, an illegitimate English freebooter who turned Penang into the premier Asian trading hub of the 18th century, earned himself a fortune and sired six children for a Thai-Portuguese princess. Or so the better sort of legend has it.

Today, it's tourists as much as traders who head to Penang; but the island retains more than a little of the cosmopolitan richness of the Light era, especially in the old quarter of George Town, which is lined with the shophouses that are the icon of the Chinese Asian diaspora, and dotted with museums, boutique hotels and the sort of whimsical tycoon's mansion – Cheong Fatt Tze's blue one is

a prime example – that were part status symbol, part adult adventure playground.

Yet the core attraction is George Town's vibrant ambience: if someone could work out how to bottle that, they'd outsell the iPhone 6S. Never mind that some random factotum from Unesco slapped the place with a World Heritage bumper sticker, it's a hypnotic blend of Malaysia's three main cultures and races – Chinese, Indian, Malay – and many more besides.

"Europeans, Arabs, Armenians, Jews, Burmese, Thais, Bugis, Ambonese, Javanese, Acehnese, Rawanese, Minangkabaus [from the highlands of western Sumatra], Tamils, Malabarais, Gujaratis, Bengalis, Parsis, Cantonese, Hokkiens, Hakkas, Teochews, Hainanese, Ceylonese, Sikhs, Japanese, Filipinos –

all these were active participants in the creation of a cosmopolitan city," says Khoo Salma Nasution, who wrote the definitive *Streets of George Town* guidebook and is director of the Lestari Heritage Network.

Not so much a melting pot as a super-sized smoothie, part of George Town's appeal lies in its sheer modesty. It's an honest-to-goodness, everyday community, where people live and work, rather than some sort of ersatz, touristic showpiece. Nobody's hawking tacky George Town trinkets or blathering about the "George Town experience". Even the sales clerk at the World Heritage office, on Carnarvon Street, seems slightly taken aback by a request to purchase a map, and has to scabble through several cupboards to

find one that's up-to-date. Welcome to the Malaysian laid-back island idyll, which – just to shade in a little contrast – produced such diverse characters as Jimmy rhymes-with-shoe Choo and that very well-known politico Anwar Ibrahim.

Naively, in the weeks preceding this trip I bought a second-hand phrase book, wrote out a score of flash cards, and learned to count up to *sembilanpuluh sembilan* (99) in Bahasa Malaysia. Yet even before I stepped outside the airport arrivals hall it was blatantly apparent that everyone spoke English, or perhaps Minglish-lah, not only to me but to each other, although some Chinese are happier nattering in hwayu (overseas Chinese language), as they dub Putonghua.

But one Malay word – *syiok* – prove