



## Good life Travel with Mark Footer



**Clockwise from far left:** street art off Love Lane, in George Town, Penang; Little India, in George Town; Komtar Tower dominates the city skyline; a mural by deaf-mute artist Louis Gan graces a wall in an alleyway off Chulia Street Ghaut; the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion; food stalls on Lorong Baru, George Town.

invaluable. Slang for “great”, it carries nuances of pleasure, ease, cool, amusement and general bonhomie.

It is *syiok* to glide into a hawker centre for breakfast, lunch, dinner or any of the other meals that seem to stretch throughout the day. The set-up varies little: tables and chairs in the middle, Chinese, Malay, Indian plus maybe Japanese and Thai cook-stalls around the sides, ceiling fans pirouetting vaguely overhead – although the temperature doesn’t ever drop much below 27 degrees Celsius – and not much in the way of walls. At four ringgit (HK\$7) a plate there’s never any doubt that you’re getting your money’s worth. There’s everything from chilled Bintang beer to freshly-squeezed lime juice at the drinks stall. Few meals are completed in a hurry.

It is *syiok* to drop by a spice merchant in Little India for a clutch of aromatic holiday memorabilia, delving into the

vast sacks and barrels, mingling with the other people in the shop – never less than a cricket team’s worth – who might have been customers, staff, friends or distant cousins.

*Syiok*, too, to board a trishaw – 30 ringgit for an hour’s pedalling and only slightly garbled commentary by the veteran pilot – and spin along streets whose very names trumpet Penang’s history: Victoria, Armenian, Farquhar, Light (of course) and Stewart. And where would George Town be without Love Lane?

And it is *syiok* simply to wander the streets, admiring the triumphant form-follows-function shophouses, which open right onto the five-foot-way pavements, are narrow but deep, and flooded with light and air via an interior courtyard. Renovated or dilapidated, some following their traditional calling, others teetering on the edge of the dustbin of history,

every single one is a cultural crown jewel, cocking a valiant snook at the 232-metre-high Komtar Tower, an incongruous cylindrical erection on the fringe of the old quarter, a “monstrous carbuncle” in Charles Windsor’s vocabulary, or what American writer Bill Bryson would have classified as a hideous example of the “Far Queue” – to put it politely – school of architecture.

Here and there, George Town’s public spaces are etched with murals by Lithuanian artist Ernest Zacharevic, whose work evokes comparison with Norman Rockwell’s oeuvre. Complementing these, wrought-iron sculptures – each a nugget of George Town life – spotlight a gallimaufry of diverse subjects, such as the Indian soothsayers who used parakeets to tell fortunes, Ting Ting Thong (sugar, sesame seeds and nuts) rock candy and the hole made by a cannon ball in the 1867 riots.

Each sculpture takes on the role of a still-life guide.

While other Asian islands have plumped for the sun-sea-and-sand formula, Penang’s street cred comes from its vibrant culture. George Town steps into the international limelight every summer, when its arts festival – conjured from practically nothing in 2010 by textile tycoon Joe Sidek – draws acts as diverse as a Japanese interpretation of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, Iranian experimental theatre, a Spanish troupe who mix flamenco with breakdance and Polish puppeteers enacting the last days of movie legend Marlene Dietrich.

Yet with a metropolitan landscape that’s more or less a living museum, a heritage that doesn’t need labelling by international busybodies and a lingua franca that outstrips Esperanto, George Town does the culture jive 365 days a year. Or 366 in 2016.

