



# George Town, Penang

Sree Kumar

# George Town, Penang

Photographs taken on a Sunday in July, 2009.

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# Sunday Flea Market

Gompang performance



# 喬治市

聯合國世界文化遺產



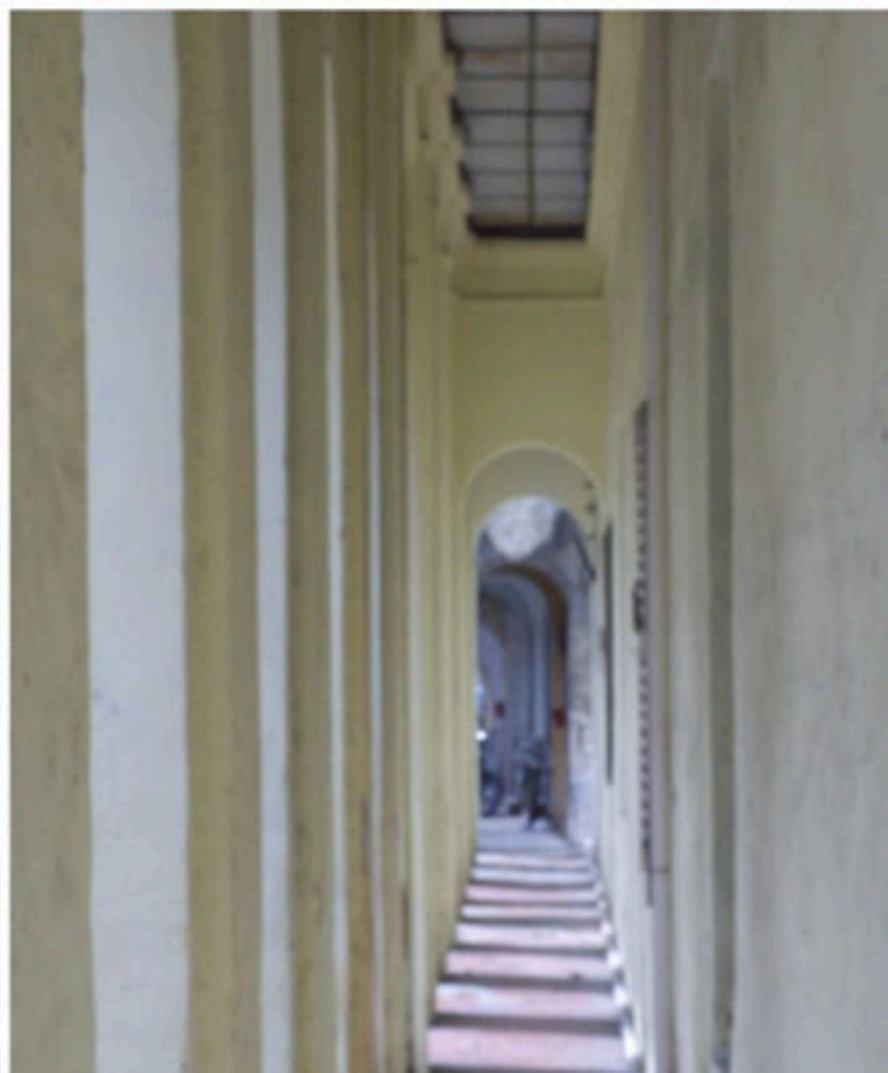


















# Ganesh

Flower market and Chinese, Kwan Yin, temple



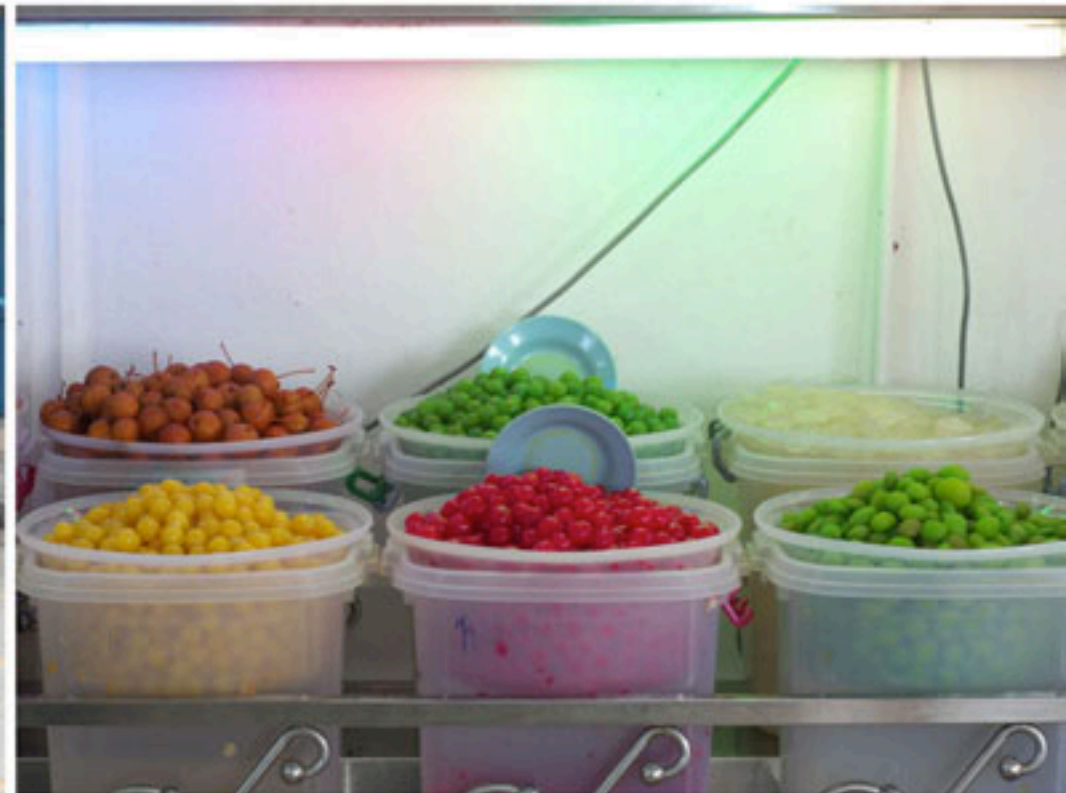


















# Nagore Durgha Shariff

Nattukottai Chettiar's temple on the far left





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P5101

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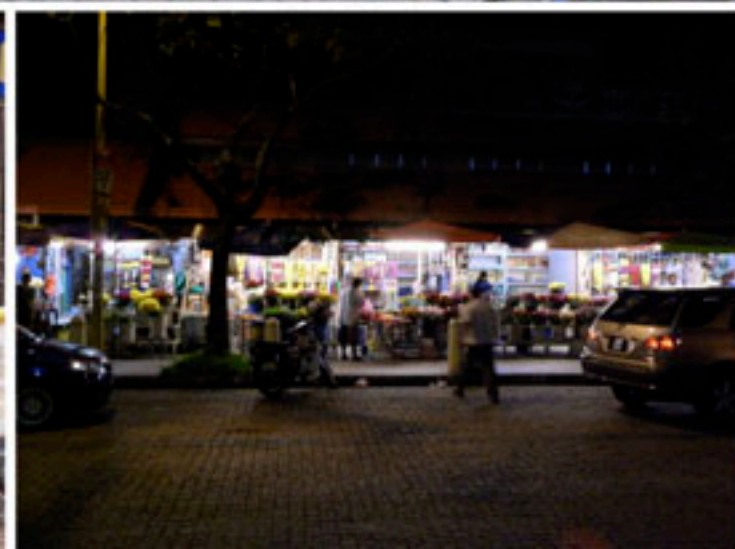


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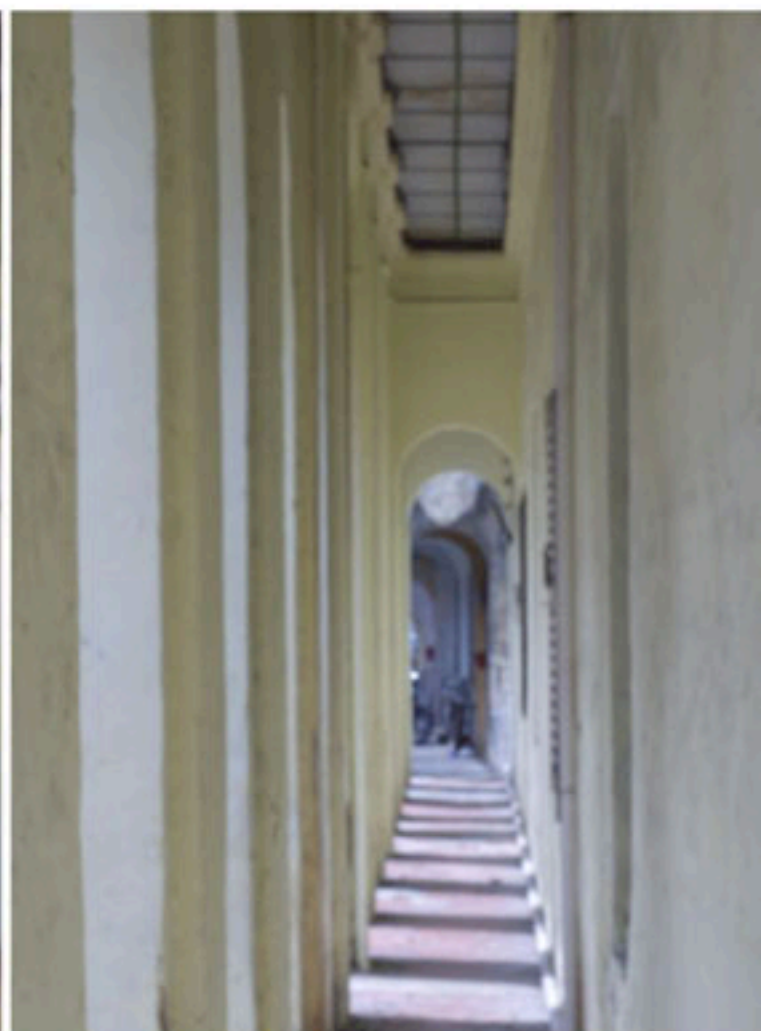
WANTAL BHARATYA  
10/44 PANN (S&B)  
10/44 SIDA MALAYA

417  
10/44  
SIDA

















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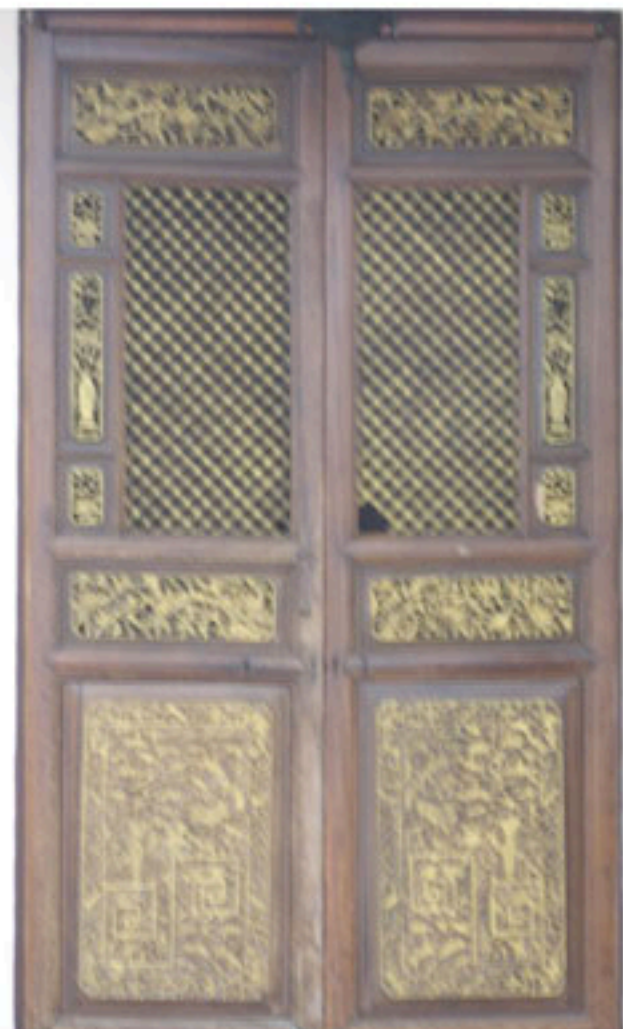
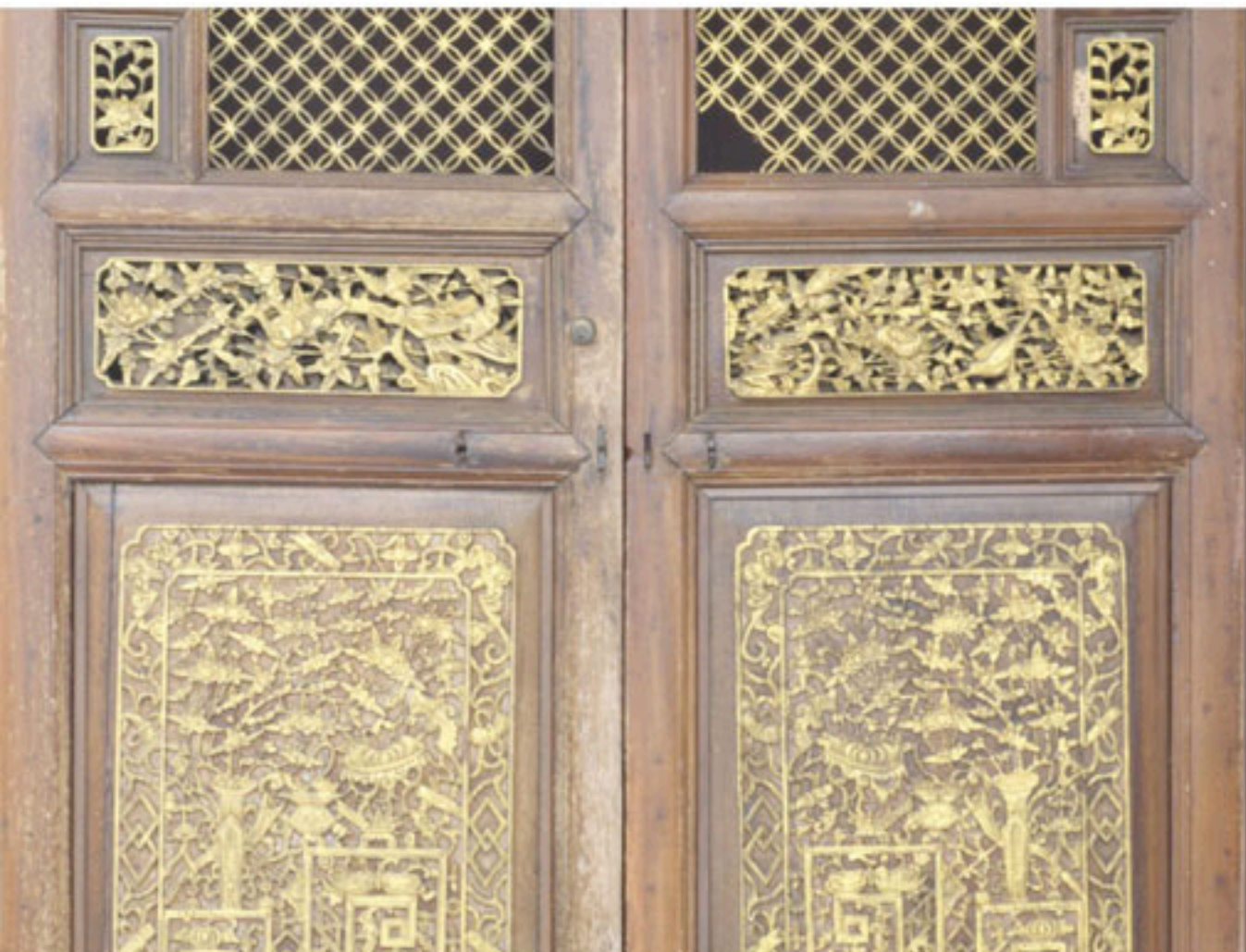
KAWASAN  
DILARANG MENJAJA  
DENDA \$1000



CHOP  
LUM  
SEONG  
洪成茶室



PGJ 8











Feel the Clean  
Membersihkan & Melancarkan Enjin

東方酒店 ORIENTAL

MAY GARDEN  
PREMIER  
梅花餐館

P

193





# Street Scene

Indian sundry shop and Chinese coffee stall



ANG JAHIT  
**Richard** TAILOR  
PELBAGAI BARANGAN BATIK &  
TEMPAHAN PAKAIAN SERAGAM  
521, LEBUH CHULIA,  
10200 P. PINANG



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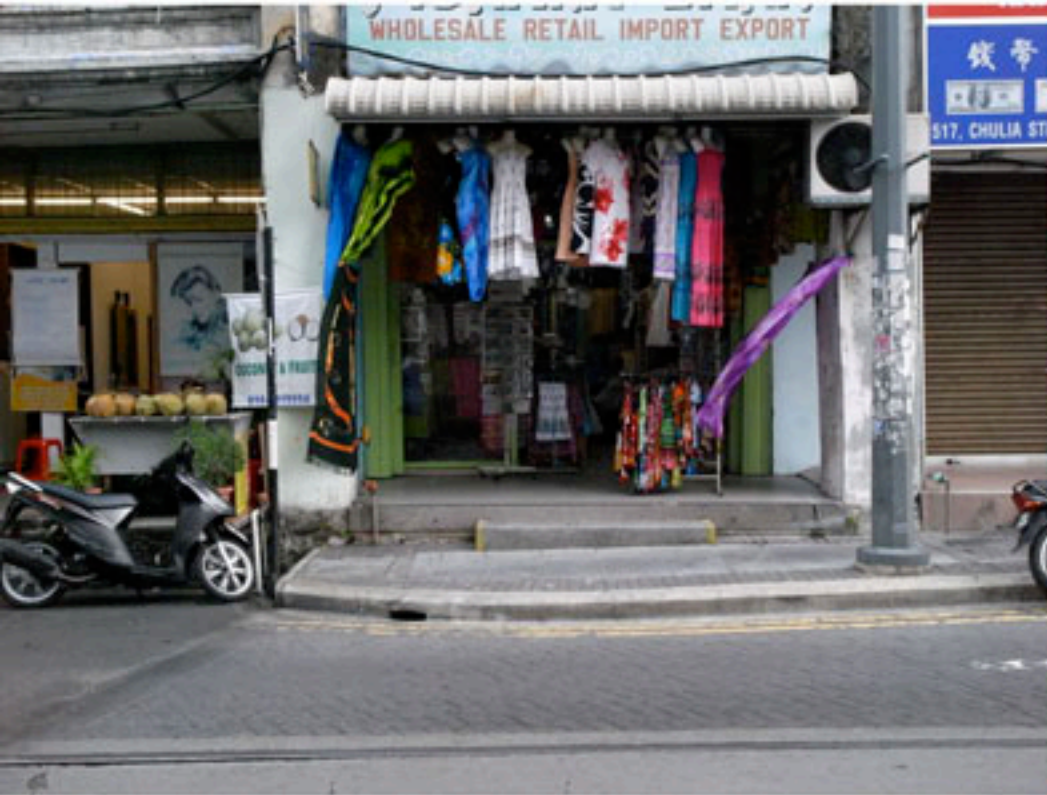
NEW TOKYO PHOTO STORE



商舖依商店

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Chinese wine shop



五福書院

五福書院

五福書院

五福書院

五福書院











LEBUH ARMERAN



LEBUH ARMERAN



End of the road

## A Journey in Time

When I first went to Penang, I was twelve years old. The images in my mind are fleeting, at best. It was a very hot August when we, the family, arrived on the island. I can remember taking the ferry from Butterworth and watching the waves as the vessel cut across the Straits.

On Penang, the memories are of traffic jams, streets of colourful shops and restaurants, cinemas, and hotels. There are recollections of going to the snake temple, the Burmese temple, Penang Hill, the reservoir and the botanical gardens. We did not do much in George Town. It was simply not of serious interest at that time.

Some eight years later, I went back to Penang. This time I took the train from Singapore, transferring onto the morning express from Kuala Lumpur after an overnight journey. The railway journey ended at Butterworth where, once again, I took the ferry across. This time I was alone. It seemed almost exotic being in Penang. There were nightclubs, cafes, coffee shops, trishaws, hawkers and all manner of street life. I took lodgings at the Burma Hotel, a small Chinese-run establishment. I could not afford an air-conditioned room so I settled for one without. With high ceilings and a swirling fan, the room was cool for most of the day.

Around the corner from the hotel was an Indian coffee shop where, on most mornings, I had a breakfast of parathas and coffee. I spent the days walking around George Town, the esplanade, the markets and the numerous second-hand bookshops. Often I went to the Magnolia Snack Bar, the cafe in the Cold Storage, to have a sandwich and ice-cream for lunch.

Some days I took the local bus to Batu Ferringhi and Tanjung Bungah. These places were untouched in those days. There were Malay kampongs and fishing villages dotted around the coast road all the way to the end. On one occasion I went to Penang Hill where I had a “western” lunch at the rest house. Another time I took a bus to the botanical gardens which was full of belligerent monkeys.

The nights held a different attraction altogether. I found a nightclub where a local band sang Beatles, Tom Jones and Engelbert Humperdinck songs. The hostesses were Chinese and Malay girls wearing long slit skirts showing their smooth thighs in the dim light. It became pleasurable to spend the evenings here. The real adventure was when I left the club at around midnight, having to dodge the “birds of the night” lining the road outside. They stood ready, next to trishaws, waiting for customers. I was young, inexperienced and too shy to pursue any on offer.

In 1991 I stayed for four days in Batu Ferringhi, with a companion. There were new hotels on the beach while on other side of the road were fruit orchards cut by narrow paths. It rained for most of the time. We travelled to George Town on the local bus. It was a Sunday and the town was quiet. The area around the mosque and the Hindu temple were busy with shoppers. We ate at an Indian restaurant and spent some time walking through the wet streets. George Town had a living population within it. Although it was quiet, there was a sense of a city that had life. There were hawkers; people living in old, handsome, buildings; and there was a vibrancy in the streets. The landmark E&O Hotel, however, was in a state of disrepair. The old charm had vanished and it stood waiting for a saviour.

My subsequent trips to Penang were too short and uneventful: I went on business. Then, after several years, I travelled to Penang as a visitor. The world had changed. I could now afford to stay at the once exclusive E&O Hotel. It had undergone a rejuvenation and had been restored to its former glory. In my younger days, it was only for the rich or the colonial white society. All of a sudden I had a sense of where Somerset Maugham and Noel Coward had stayed in their travels through Malaya. There was an unmistakable nostalgia pervading the hotel. It was, in its time, a favoured watering hole for the colonial elite. The E&O was one of a chain of hotels run by the, Armenian, Sarkies brothers at the turn of the last century. They were friends of the weary traveller, running upmarket lodgings, stretching from Surabaya to Singapore, Penang and then on to the Strand in Rangoon. Its often forgotten that these cities were the favourite holiday destinations in Southeast Asia for the well to do in the British colonies. Steamers plied these routes long before air travel arrived. For the Dutch, on the other hand, it was Bandung and Surabaya.

Travelling as an older person, wizened to the ways of the world, is a much richer experience. Now I wanted to see the city, a place where history and culture collided. George Town was an eye-opener. It had decayed beyond my expectations. It was no more the living, breathing space that I had seen when I stayed there thirty-six years earlier. The old cinemas had gone to seed: they stood as silent sentinels of a time past. Amidst the decay, there were jewels of interest. The Chinese temples were in pristine condition, as were the mosque and the Hindu temple. Several old Chinese Peranakan houses had been restored while the Indian quarter had been revitalized. The stalls and restaurants served good food as before. There were more hawkers than I could remember the last time. But the trishaw men were as crafty as in the old days.

The local buses had become air-conditioned, with questionable driving skills. The esplanade still held the usual charm for the evening constitutional and there was now an ordered calm to George Town. Gone were the disordered traffic jams, only to be replaced by more orderly ones. Now there was pollution not just from the traffic but from the annual slash and burn orgy taking place across the Straits in Sumatra. There were now many nightclubs but they had become “Western” to attract the Europeans and Australians. There were the new “yuppy” bars and cafes. But there still remained the occasional old-fashioned bar for the British soldier. In one I saw the badges of regiments that served in Malaya until the pullout in 1972.

I made the usual pilgrimage to Batu Ferringhi and was aghast at how development had scarred the landscape. The kampongs had all gone, replaced by expensive flats and homes on the other side of the road. Hotels had sprung up where none existed before. Fruit orchards had been cut down to make way for condominiums: the price of progress. The botanical gardens, meanwhile, seemed to have withstood the ravages of time and man. For the first time I discovered the Nattukottai Chettiar temple near the waterfalls. I never knew of this place when I was younger. The Nattukottai Chettiars have a long history in Southeast Asia. They came from south India with the first English colonials, and sunk their roots in Rangoon, Penang, Malacca, Singapore, and even as far as Saigon. They were moneylenders and, over time, amassed enormous wealth. Their beautiful temples are testimony to that wealth and frugality. History is meant for the older person I am told: I can now believe it. George Town will soon become a world tourist destination, devoid of its vibrant life. If the city council does not do so, then UNESCO in its eternal wisdom will help it along on that path.

I can only keep the memories of forty-four years of intermittent travel to Penang and that may be far richer than all that the tourists can hope to find.

*Sree Kumar*  
*9th September 2009*

#### **About the photographer**

Sree Kumar is an amateur photographer and essayist. He studied in Oxford, London and Singapore, where he now lives.



WELCOME TO THE ISLAND OF RAMPOLAH

مسجد جامع  
RAMPOLAH  
ALTAH LAKSI



George Town, Penang

Sree Kumar