

# PROPERTY REPORT

Luxury real estate, architecture and design

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# THE PEARL OF PENANG

**A recently renovated mansion on Penang island is rich in multicultural influences, just like the island itself.**  
| By **SOFIE LISBY**

**P**erched 400 ft up on one of the only plateaus on a prominent hill overlooking Penang sits a 9,000 sq ft mansion. Built in the 1970s by a successful local business man for his elderly mother, the house was the first on the hill, and the original owner and its architect, Dennis Liew, were able to pick the best spot on half an acre of flat ledge for optimal use of natural light and stunning views over the Andaman Sea and the Straits of Malacca.

Unlike Penang Hill, which is famed for its panoramic views over Georgetown, this hill is one of few elevated areas on Penang facing northwest, and on a clear day one can see as far as Langkawi island and the Thai-Malay border some 30 miles away. The current owners – he is British but born in Japan and raised in Pakistan, she is from Penang – first discovered the house through her sister and were blown away by the views and sheltered location. They decided that if it was ever put up for sale, they would buy it.

A couple of years later, it was theirs.

THE ORIGINAL POOL WAS  
REPLACED WITH A LARGER,  
15 METRE POOL



“ HAD THIS HOUSE BEEN LOCATED IN SINGAPORE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN WORTH SEVEN TO EIGHT TIMES MORE. ”

INDEPTH  
Penang



ON THE TEAK AND MARBLE TABLE FROM GOA SIT PIECES FROM THE OWNERS' ROYAL BURMESE LAQUERWARE COLLECTION.



THE STAIRCASE WAS HAND MADE AND ASSEMBLED ON SITE.

Penang was for centuries one of the most significant trading hubs in Southeast Asia and the island is rich in Malay, Chinese, European and Indian influences. Over a year of renovation, during which the house was stripped of all its interior fittings to allow for a complete overhaul, some of the city's well-known multiculturalism found its way inside.

"We have quite a few antique collections that we have picked up over the years in Myanmar, Japan and China," explains the owner. "When we took over the house it had been rented out for a long time and nothing had been done to it for 40 years. So while it's a really well built house, the fittings and fixtures were very 60s and 70s, and we removed everything and worked with the empty shell to get something that was quite contemporary. We even worked with the layout to open up the house and create more light."

Only a pinkish, creamy marble floor was preserved, thanks to the good judgment of architect TY Au, a local Penangite, who

recognised the Langkawi marble and urged the couple to keep it. From the main entrance on the second level, guests are received in a spacious entrance hall, graced to the left by a winding staircase leading to the third floor, and extended vertically by 32 ft ceilings. On the floor lies a massive antique rug and on a Goanese marble top table inlaid with satinwood sit four vases from a 30 piece collection of royal Burmese laquerware.

The eye is drawn to the windows straight ahead, the demarcation line between the living room and large balconies overlooking the pool and garden area. The living room is flanked to either side by 1840s Goanese cabinets inlaid with satinwood and black wood. The seating was custom made in Thailand and designed to mimic the imagery in the antique rug, which the owners bought in Turkey. The large vases behind the sofa are from the early Qing period and were added for their vibrant colours.

Laid out over three floors, the house spans an impressive



FEATURING AN ENSUITE BATHROOM AND ITS OWN PRIVATE BALCONY, THE GUEST ROOM PROVIDES ABSOLUTE PRIVACY. THE WOODEN BENCH IN FRONT OF THE BED IS AN ANTIQUE CHINESE DAYBED AND THE RUG COMES FROM AGRA IN INDIA.

3,000 sq ft on each floor. The top floor comprises three bedrooms including the master bedroom occupying some 1,000 sq ft, including relaxation and study areas and a 350 sq ft en-suite bathroom with indoor and outdoor showers. Each bedroom is wrapped with a balcony from which guests can enjoy panoramic views over the ocean and fitted with custom made poster beds from a bedmaker in Singapore using Burmese teak.

In addition to the entrance and the living room, the second floor also comprises the fourth bedroom and a dining room furnished with antique colonial Indian furniture, one of which is a dining table that can be extended to comfortably seat 14 people. Framed in a half circle by a wide balcony, the windows can be opened up completely to allow for an outdoor dining experience.

The lower floor features several changing rooms for the pool area, table tennis, a kitchen and a wine cellar where the couple enjoy entertaining. Throughout the house, white walls complement terracotta tiles or hard wood floors, highlighting the

furniture, rugs and decorative items, while the high ceiling and integrated lighting and unobtrusive air conditioning provide a tranquil, contemporary ambience.

"We bought and renovated the house for private use so we have done what works for us," says the owner. "We have grown up and young children and each floor works quite independently of the others. One could essentially live on the second floor and never have to go to any of the other floors."

The couple also owns properties in the UK and Singapore as well as in Penang's Georgetown. They like the island for its rich history and an increasingly active cultural scene which includes arts, music and film festivals, not to mention Penang's unofficial status as the food capital of Malaysia. During the Georgetown Festival in June, they lent one of their colonial properties to artists to hold a pop-up art exhibitions.

"Penang has everything going for it," says the owner. "Since Georgetown was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site

INDEPTH  
Penang



THE DINING ROOM CAN COMFORTABLY SEAT UP TO 14 PEOPLE.

a lot has happened. There are excellent boutique hotels and restaurants. Things move along at a slower pace but there is excellent connectivity to Singapore and other big cities in the region and the arbitrage compared to elsewhere is very favourable. Had this house been located in Singapore it would have been worth seven to eight times more."

It is easy to see why Penang has for years been among the top rated retirement destinations in the world. The demand prompted the local government in July last year to raise the minimum price for properties purchased by foreigners from RM500,000 to RM1 million (US\$157,000 to US\$314,000) for strata titled properties and RM2 million (US\$631,000) for landed properties, which has somewhat dampened demand. Prewar houses within the UNESCO World Heritage site are scarce and are usually snapped up whenever they come on the market.

The owners say the house has already appreciated since they bought it, but that doesn't make them consider selling. Rather, they will use it as a retreat, dividing their time between different homes. "This house is rather unique" the owner says. "Penang has a lot of heritage houses and a lot of newer houses, but there is nothing quite like this." ■

Apart from items bought on their travels, the couple also furnished the house with pieces from:

China Collection, Singapore  
Past Perfect, Singapore  
Asiatique, Singapore  
Divani, Penang  
Janine, Kuala Lumpur.



LOCATED IN THE LIVING ROOM, THIS GOANESE CABINET IS INLAID WITH ROSE AND IRON WOOD.