

SINGAPORE

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Property

For Philip and Chrissy Hampden-Smith, buying Sutera House in Penang, Malaysia, was serendipitous, and they bestowed on the distinguished property the tender loving care that it deserved after serving tenants for 40 years.

By Katie Roberts; photography by Adam Chew





Lazy Days
in Penang

The mammoth 9,000-square-foot Art Deco-style property stands prominently on Pearl Hill, just outside Georgetown, Penang's capital. Philip and Chrissy first came across the house many years ago, through Chrissy's older sister, who worked as an estate agent. She suggested that Philip might know the new tenants: they had relocated from Sri Lanka, and he had previously lived there.

Over afternoon tea it emerged that they had friends in common. But it was the property that Philip recalled most from the meeting; he commented to Chrissy on leaving, "If that house comes up for sale we should buy it, because the view is amazing."

Five years ago, the Singapore-based couple were on one of their regular trips to visit family in Penang, where Chrissy grew up, when Philip chanced upon a For Sale advertisement. The brief description of a "house on Pearl Hill" sounded

reminiscent of "Margaret's View", as Philip then knew it. "It had been put on the market that weekend, and we bought it on the spot," he says. It fitted their search brief: a large house with sea views, near Georgetown, that could accommodate their six UK-based children on visits during university and school breaks.

Trips to Penang became more regular for the couple as they began to work on the house. Philip had previously dabbled in restoration, but says he's no authority. His two previous projects were a Georgian-era UK farmhouse, and a 17th-century Portuguese trader's house in Galle Fort, Sri Lanka, in the late 90s; he was one of the first foreigners to buy property in the historic port city in 1998.

"My modus operandi is to find a good architect who can work as the project manager too. It keeps things simple, as there are no arguments between the two of them," he says.



“We needed big furniture for big rooms



Malaysian artist S.S. Teck's paintings are a highlight at the base of the staircase



Extra-deep and extra-long sofas and chairs were custom-made by Asiatique in Singapore

Spacious interiors

"The house had been rented out continuously since the 70s and was in need of work," says Philip. "It would have probably been easier and cheaper to demolish, and build from scratch, but well-known Penang architect T.Y. Au persuaded us not to. He convinced us that it was an unusual house for Penang. His plan was to bring it up to the present day with new windows and a new pool; he suggested minimal changes to the outside to retain the Art Deco shape."

The renovation took about 18 months, and was finished in mid-2013. Each floor is an expansive 3,000 square feet in size. Full-length glass windows and doors offer panoramic views. Three of the four bedrooms, including the 1,000-square-foot self-contained master suite, are on the top floor. Both the top and middle floors have wrap-around verandahs, which Chrissy confesses are one of her favourite features of the house.

The entrance is on the middle level, where the kitchen, living and dining rooms, powder room and guest suite are located. Langkawi marble flooring in the living area was retained, while other floors were redone in hardwood and terracotta tiles. "We made it very open plan; if you have too many rooms you spend your whole life opening and closing doors," says Philip of the palatial room dimensions.

Downstairs, the ground floor is also open plan, and has access to the pool and lawn. There is a huge family room, a wine cellar, a separate kitchen, maid's quarters, a gym and changing rooms. In anticipation of guests staying, they installed an oven worthy of a Michelin-star chef and a hotel-quality integrated air-conditioning system; they also painted the entire house in top-notch paint to withstand the humidity. While all this came at a price, Philip and Chrissy are quick to point out that a Singapore dollar goes a lot further in Penang, where expenses are significantly lower than here.

Freestyle decoration

The eclectic mix of furnishings and décor includes the old and the new. Some items were purchased or custom made specifically to suit the scale of the rooms.

"We needed big furniture for big rooms," says Chrissy. Large five-by-four-metre carpets were purchased in Istanbul, as this size is hard to find in Asia, while the 14-seater Madras Georgian dining table was bought at The Past Perfect Collection in Singapore. "The cabinets are from Goa, and we have Burmese furniture and Chinese antiques too. It's a mix, but it all comes together."

Philip says the renovation project went off without a hitch. The buying process was efficient – drawing up plans, engaging structural engineers and getting approvals was all straightforward. "Communication is easy here, because everyone speaks English. The contractors employed Burmese workers; they were fantastic and demonstrated great workmanship," he said.

History

Sutera House was built by a well-known Penang family on pearl-shaped Pearl Hill (previously named Mount Olivia, after Sir Stamford Raffles' first wife). Owning the hillside meant the family was able to select the perfect position with superb views, courtesy of its altitude, about 400 feet. The balcony has a north-facing aspect, with 180-degree views from west to east; Langkawi and Kedah Peak are visible.



The guest suite

“My modus operandi is to find a good architect who can work as the project manager too

Shophouse projects

Philip and Chrissy have subsequently invested in two historic shophouses in the UNESCO-listed section of Georgetown, and T.Y. Au is overseeing their renovation. One of them, in Victoria Street, used to be a “godown” (or warehouse) for storing garlic and onions; the Clan Jetties are close by.

“In anticipation, we’ve bought a 16-light chandelier from an old house in India,” says Philip. “It weighs about 250 pounds (113 kilograms), and will fill the space under the soaring 18-foot (5.5-metre) ceilings.” Renovation of the other shophouse in Ceylon Lane is underway too, and the couple is thinking of renting it out as a homestay with a contemporary interior.

As with Sutera House, the shophouse projects are bound to attract attention. “When we stay at Sutera, people randomly come by to see it, on the off chance that we’ll invite them to have a look inside. Even friends of friends call up for a peek,” says Philip.

As plans are afoot for Sutera House to be rented out for short-stay holidays, they will soon get their chance.

Where is Penang?

Penang is a large island off the northwestern coast of Malaysia, with a population of approximately 1.5 million. It’s a hotspot for visitors, owing to its interesting heritage, Georgetown’s UNESCO-listed historic old town and the island’s established reputation for incredible food. It also has several international schools and world-class hospitals. Development is happening apace: new restaurants and boutique hotels are springing up and an Angsana resort development is underway. Two bridges connect Georgetown with the Malaysian mainland, and there are regular flights from Singapore.



Royal Burmese antiques and a Cantonese Qing Dynasty antique vase are displayed in the entrance hall

Recommendations in Penang

China House (café, restaurant, bar, gallery and live music)
chinahouse.com.my

Clove Hall (restored black-and-white boutique hotel)
clovehall.com

David Brown's Restaurant and Tea Terraces (take a three-hour walk or funicular to the top of Penang Hill)
penanghillco.com.my

Seven Terraces (boutique hotel, incorporating Baba Bar and Kebaya Restaurant)
seventerraces.com

Sutera House (for short-stay holiday rentals)
phampdens@gmail.com

T.Y. Au (architect)
archtyau.com

Tek Sen Restaurant (Straits Chinese kitchen)
 18–20 Carnarvon Street, Georgetown

Via Pre (Italian kitchen)
via-pre.com