



## do it... old school in... ipoh

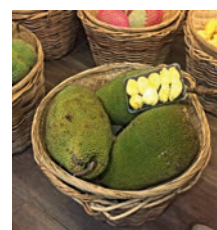
*Tigerair's new service to northern Malaysia means the lovably timeworn delights of this old mining town — as well as the nearby Cameron Highlands — are just a short hop from Singapore. Jonathan Evans finds the area's rich heritage being vividly brought to life*



Since a rash of mural-strewn cafés, indie fashion emporiums and retro foodie outlets opened in Ipoh, ukulele-toting hipsters have flocked to the Old Town for its newfound boutique comforts. But in truth this northern settlement has been Malaysia's unofficial home of cool for decades, a vintage curio in and of itself. Perak's low-rise state capital is endearingly lived-in, the paintwork around its pastel-shaded shophouses and stores chipped and faded, with homogenous conservation efforts nowhere to be seen. It feels uncrowded, calm, content, effortlessly shabby-chic and truly multicultural.

Tipped off by staff at The French Hotel, we duck under old arcades in a ferocious rainstorm and sniff out taugé ayam at Lou Wong eatery (not to be confused with Lou Leong's opposite), and nearby Restoran Ong Kee. After two helpings of chicken rice with rich, salty sauce and crispy beansprouts (it was that good), we jump in a tiny red cab, whose cheery driver is giving his wife a lift, purr down Jalan Sultan Yussuf, and make for Lorong Panglima, where the traditional and modern fuse in the most fascinating way.

Down Concubine Lane, where Chinese tin tycoons once kept their mistresses, and opium and gambling dens proliferated, you'll now find craft stores, mini-hostels and cafés, where »



Clockwise from top left: An Ernest Zacharevic mural on Jalan Sheikh Adam; an exhibit at Han Chin Pet Soo history museum; jackfruits on offer; Cameron Highlands



Clockwise from above left: One Stop Budget Hotel on Jalan Sultan Yusuff; a bazaar at Kong Heng Square; a colourful shopfront on Jalan Sultan Iskandar



smiling owners offer you popsicles and soybean curd. On Jalan Bijeh Timah, Han Chin Pet Soo, an imposing tin miners' clubhouse dating back to 1893, has been lovingly restored both outside and in, and reopened in February. Free, guided tours take you through two storeys vividly re-creating the hardships (tough conditions) and modest pleasures (opium, prostitution) of mining life, complete with murals by the local PIA College of Art & Design.

The semicircular loop joining the neo-Renaissance HSBC Bank (1931) with the Birch Memorial clock tower (1909) links Ipoh's key colonial buildings. Opposite Old Town White Coffee's brilliant white shophouse are the Ipoh Royal Club and High Court; the Town Hall and Old Post Office stand opposite a railway station so vast it has a hotel inside; and finally the Town Padang Mosque leads back through to the newly converted hipster block. There is engaging public art and pristine architecture everywhere you look; this is Malaysia's most underrated city by a mile.

The packed-to-capacity kopitiam Thean Chun

There is engaging public art and pristine architecture everywhere you look; this is Malaysia's most underrated city by a mile



(aka "Hall of Mirrors") is our final foodie stop before the climb to Cameron Highlands — and it's worth waiting almost an hour for the Ipoh *kuey teow* (chicken noodle soup), since traffic and another storm turned our 90km ride into the mountains into a four-hour odyssey. On this sinuous ascent, Ipoh's limestone surrounds give way to lush fern and pine, the temperature drops 10 degrees and dense mist rises from the valley to shroud the scene in a melancholic cloak. This hill station, the size of Singapore, takes in thousands of greenhouses, scattered lavender and strawberry farms, and a series of small tourist towns.

Skip the mass-market magnets of Ringlet and Brinchang, and head through to Tanah Rata, whose mock-Tudor cluster Greenhill Resort houses a number of cosy B&Bs. Tanah Rata is also the Highlands' colonial heart. The Smokehouse Hotel (1937) transports this Englishman to the taverns of the Home Counties — a period delight serving traditional fare (bangers and mash!), yet retaining a refreshingly »

## ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

### THE FRENCH HOTEL

60 Jln Dato Onn  
Jaafar, Ipoh;  
[frenchhotel.com.my](http://frenchhotel.com.my)

### RESTORAN TAUGE AYAM LOU WONG

49 Jln Yau Tet Shin, Ipoh,  
+60 (0)5 254 4199

### RESTORAN ONG KEE

51 Jln Yau Tet Shin, Ipoh,  
+60 12 556 6669

### HAN CHIN PET SOO

3 Jln Bijeh Timah, Ipoh,  
+60 (0)5 529 3306

### OLD TOWN WHITE COFFEE

3 Jln Tun Sambanthan, Ipoh,  
+60 (0)5 311 2757;  
[oldtown.com.my](http://oldtown.com.my)

### THEAN CHUN

73 Jln Bandar Timah, Ipoh,  
+60 (0)5 255 3076

### DO CHIC IN B&B

J13 & J14 Block Jasmine,  
Greenhill Resort, Tanah  
Rata, Cameron Highlands,  
+60 192 286 689;  
[dochicin.tumblr.com](http://dochicin.tumblr.com)





From top:  
Another Zacharevic  
mural on Jalan  
Dato Maharajalela;  
comfort eating at  
Burps & Giggles  
café; the Butterfly  
Garden at Kea Farm



unstuffy aura even as we supped our Highlands Earl Grey in an elegant parlour. For the full high-tea-in-the-tropics experience, Cameron Highlands Resort takes the cake with its dark panelling, snooker table, lush vistas and golf course out front.

This is not a place to rush through in one day. The narrow roads, frequent logjams and changeable weather make progress frustratingly slow. Patient exploration pays real dividends: the rolling green expanses, neatly trimmed into rectangular boxes that lend the scene an otherworldly quality, are just one draw here. We stroll through the Mossy Forest, picking berries, cinnamon and mint 2,000m above sea level, and take a lesson in tea processing at South-

## ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

### SMOKEHOUSE HOTEL

By the Golf Course, Tanah Rata, Cameron Highlands, +60 (0)5 491 1215

### CAMERON HIGHLANDS RESORT

By the Golf Course, Tanah Rata, Cameron Highlands, +60 (0)5 491 1100; [cameronhighlandsresort.com](http://cameronhighlandsresort.com)

### BOH SUNGAI PALAS TEA ESTATE

Sungai Palas, Cameron Highlands, +60 5 496 2096; [boh.com.my](http://boh.com.my)

### BUTTERFLY GARDEN

43rd Miles, Kea Farm, Cameron Highlands, +60 12 529 5568; [cameronbutterflyfarm.com.my](http://cameronbutterflyfarm.com.my)

### BARRACKS CAFE

1 Jln Geraja, +60 111 464 8883; [facebook.com/thebarrackscafe](https://facebook.com/thebarrackscafe)

East Asia's largest plantation, BOH Sungai Palas Tea Estate. But we find the most undersold attraction to be the Butterfly Garden at Kea Farm. Tucked away below street level, it's a spectacular showcase where giant winged beauties cling like bats to the roof, and flutter over a whole range of other creatures to "aww" (rabbits) and "eww" (snakes, scorpions) at.

Back in Tanah Rata, make time for dinner at Barracks, an impeccable restoration project where British wartime headquarters have been converted into a café adjacent to a bijou garden. As we munch on a Grenade Curry Chicken Bun and slurp a mocktail opposite two Bangladeshi shop workers, it's clear this area's fondness for recycling its rich history is just getting into its stride. ☺



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