

IPOH SHUFFLE

In Malaysia's third-largest city, a heritage revival is bringing the past back to life in glorious technicolour. **Jonathan Evans** visits this former industrial boomtown to see how Ipoh's renaissance has attracted a new generation of curious visitors





ABOVE:
The Birch
Clock Tower
Memorial from
1909 stands
near the centre
of the old
town.
CIRCLE:
Ernest
Zacharevic's
'Old Uncle with
White Coffee'
(2014) mural
decorates the
side of
OldTown
White Coffee.

At first glance, the suburbs of Perak's state capital reveal little to surprise a seasoned Malaysia visitor. There's a substantial Indian enclave where *sari* vendors and electronics shops ply their trade, alongside stalls selling bright garlands that spill out onto the pavements. On elegant bridges crossing the serene Kinta River, pedestrians wander in and out of the city centre while anglers patiently await their catch. Hardware retailers, convenience stores, and food courts reminiscent of countless conurbations throughout South-East Asia

overlook the streets' steady procession of cars, motorbikes, and cyclos.

It's not until you arrive in the old town that the buildings assume a different shape, size, and colour. In this Toytown-esque pastel-world, where yellow and red taxis weave among turquoise and white colonial buildings, cavernous kopitians teeming with locals sit alongside achingly hip cafés. 19th-century villas sporting a fresh lick of paint stand proudly amid timeworn terraces. Rows of shophouses showcase mini-museums and smart bistros, punctuated by witty

murals. In the most endearing fashion imaginable, Ipoh has perfected the retro-modernist hipster ideal of old-world settings matched with 21st-century creature comforts.

Miners descended on Ipoh from its earliest days, drawn to abundant tin reserves in the Kinta valley, and by the early 1900s it had become one of the region's most profitable industrial centres. Stately period architecture still gleams under the ferocious sun: **HSBC Bank** (1931), the neoclassical **Chung Phye Thin building** (1905), and the grandiose **railway station** (1917), dreamed



Lim Ko Pi's Malaysian eatery and *kopitiam* on Jalan Sultan Iskandar.

up by colonial designer Arthur Benison Hubback.

The mining industry survived formidable challenges, but its heyday had long passed by the 1970s, when declining prices rang the death knell for tin. In the early 2000s, two NGOs set out to safeguard the city's future: first the Perak Heritage Society in 2003, then the nonprofit ipohWorld in 2004. The latter organisation – spearheaded by Scotsman Ian Anderson – has been instrumental in reviving Ipoh's fortunes, raising funds to restore the derelict miners' clanhouse. **Han Chin Pet Soo** re-opened as a free-entry museum in 2015, stuffed with memorabilia and mannequins depicting the miners' hardscrabble lives, and is now Ipoh's number-one attraction.

Putting the seal on a series of landmark projects, Ipoh's timing could not have been more fortuitous. In 2012, **Burps & Giggles**, the city's first art café established by Ipoh-born developer Dexter Song, flung open its doors to jazzy murals, Instagramable pastries and third-wave coffee. That same

V OldTown White Coffee began in Ipoh and is now a successful international franchise.



year, architect Ng Sek San converted a Chinese opera performers' hostel into **Sekeping Kong Heng**, a modern guesthouse pioneering a retro-hospitality concept. And in 2014, Lithuanian artist Ernest Zacharevic partnered with **OldTown White Coffee**, Ipoh's signature drink franchise, to bring his irreverent talent to the streets in a mural series, #TheArtofOldTown.

Spurred on by eye-pleasing, old-world-referencing ventures in UNESCO-designated George Town, other creative entrepreneurs repurposed old city spaces – retaining their faded surfaces, grate doorways and signboards – and fuelled the design economy with eminently photographable, nostalgia-laden outlets. In newly commercial hotspots like **Jalan Panglima (Concubine Lane)** or **Kong Heng Square Artisan Market**, Ipoh visitors would now just as likely feast on *ais kepal* (iceball, a shaved-ice-and-syrup confection popular in the 1960s) as the town's celebrated beansprout chicken.

But what's most heartening about Ipoh's renaissance is

how – by contrast with gentrification efforts in, say, Singapore's art-deco Tiong Bahru district – traditional businesses remain threaded into the tapestry of the present-day boom. In and around Jalan Panglima, you'll find restaurants that predate the hipster explosion by decades – **Lou Wong**, **Wong Koh Kee**, **Restoran Thean Chun** – while trendy cafés sit alongside bakeries, launderettes, and a Sinhalese bar that could have graced the streetscapes of the 1960s. Uncle Thiru, 78, an affable Chennai native and longtime Malaysia dweller, faced the closure of his barbershop until Dexter Song offered him a relocation to Kong Heng Square in the glass-encased **New Star Salon**.

Past and present are virtually interchangeable in this organically grown environment – not just in the suddenly hip, “shabby-chic” peeling paintwork of ancient buildings reclaimed by creeping vines, but in the vintage threads and vinyl, displayed against original tiles and artfully scuffed concrete, on sale in the town's trendiest boutiques.

Likewise, muralist Zacharevic's site-specific artworks, a goldmine for selfie-snappers, affectionately acknowledge the past. ‘Old Uncle with White Coffee’ on Jalan Tun Sambanthan is etched alongside OldTown's outlet, while ‘Evolution’ – a (somewhat weathered) paean to tin's golden age – is inspired by Chinese ink painting, and decorates the wall of Han Chin Pet Soo.

Far from being a stand-alone



HAVE YOU BEAN YET?

Get caffeinated and sated at the city's finest food-and-drink hotspots.

Restoran Lou Wong Tauge Ayam Kuetiau

This evergreen icon serves poached-chicken rice with crunchy beansprouts amid a spartan set-up.

[f RestoranLouWong](#)

The Happy Eight

Ipoh's classiest art-café, a design lover's dream, also has a front-of-house boutique and an upstairs hostel.

[thehappy8.com.my](#)

Plan B

This smart brunch spot's sizeable menu covers local and international cuisine with aplomb.

[bit.ly/2NPSxS3](#)

OldTown White Coffee Grand

Chow down on Malaysian classics at this upscale offshoot of Ipoh's famous *kopitiam*.

[ipoh.mboutiquehotels.com](#)



experience for photo-hungry tourists, the series has stimulated a revival of public art in Ipoh. **Wisma Chye Hin** on Jalan Sultan Idris Shah exhibits murals, signage and street iconography across four storeys, while **Mural Arts Lane** – a once-forgotten alleyway between Jalan Masjid and Jalan Sultan Iskandar – is emblazoned with portraits by teacher Eric Lai.

That same instinct for creative reinvention – a trait that makes Ipoh's all-our-yesterdays aesthetic both stylish and sustainable – is on show at **The Happy Eight**, a café, boutique and hostel on Market Lane. In this beautiful, naturally ventilated space, salvaged wood has been refashioned by artisans into bottle holders and birdcages, while old sewing machines have been transformed into dining tables.

While Ipoh is Malaysia's third-largest city by population, the old town's modest size and somnolent ambience – despite the tourist droves – lend it the intimate character of a picturesque village. A naturally photogenic zone on a walkable scale, it has formed the perfect canvas for

entrepreneurs to turn their creativity into cash. As if to officially confirm Ipoh's creative rebirth, in 2016 and 2017 the Other Festival brought light installations, music, poetry and art to illuminate the old town and Kinta's riverfront.

Ipoh's myriad attractions, combined with direct-flight routes, are ensuring the crowds – whether they're drawn by history, or merely Instagram photo-ops – keep coming. This is a city with sensual diversions for every taste and generation – and unlike the crumbling walls that form its backdrop, Ipoh's vintage retrofit shows no sign of fading yet. **6**

ABOVE

Despite the tourist droves, Ipoh retains a picturesque modesty akin to an idyllic village.



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Ipoh makes a strategic base for a number of scenic excursions into the limestone-studded landscapes that surround the city, with the cool climes of the Cameron Highlands just two hours away. Closer to the city, at The Banjaran Hotsprings Retreat – a luxury hotel/spa resort that’s just a short drive from the old town – a unique nightspot, Jeff’s Cellar, has just been named one of the “World’s Most Magnificent Bars” by CNN.

We asked the resort’s management team how this surreal subterranean restaurant came to be.

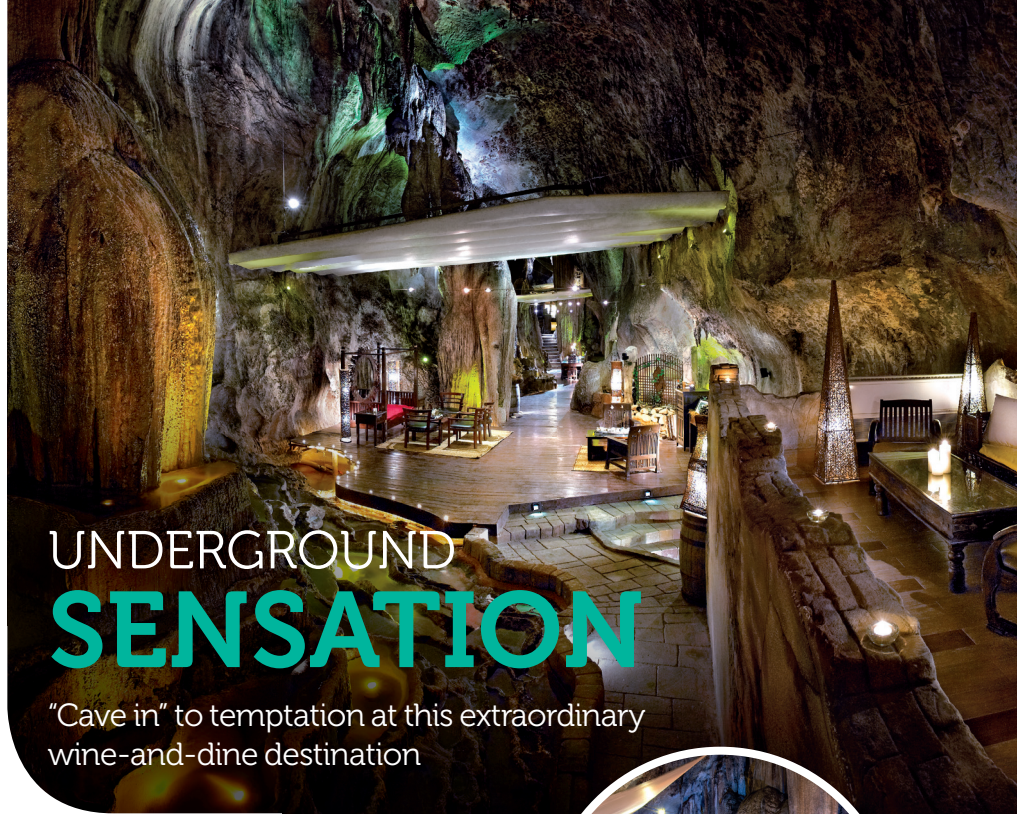
Is it correct that Jeff’s Cellar was in its first incarnation Mr Cheah’s private wine cellar, accessible only to hotel guests, rather than a full restaurant open to the public?

When we launched The Banjaran, the retreat including Jeff’s Cellar was only accessible to in-house guests to maintain privacy and exclusivity. Jeff’s Cellar was in the beginning just a wine bar, but we gradually expanded it into a fine-dining restaurant.

However, in June last year when we introduced the Dine & Dream program, we decided to open up Jeff’s Cellar to non-staying guests with prior reservation to gain access.

What prompted you to make the Cellar available to paying diners?

We wanted to share this unique dining experience with everyone. [At the same time] the



UNDERGROUND SENSATION

“Cave in” to temptation at this extraordinary wine-and-dine destination

management was conscious of the need to preserve the cave’s natural splendour while transforming it into a bar. Jeff’s Cellar does not have an in-built kitchen, and therefore waiters have to carry dishes more than 50 metres up a staircase. The restaurant area can only fit around 20 to 25 guests in a single sitting.

How did the contractors and designers manage to transform the cave into what it is now?

The design and planning of The Banjaran takes advantage of existing site conditions by respecting the topography, and preserves many natural elements by incorporating them into the design. This includes water bodies, landscape and vegetation, as well as the existing caves.

Jeff’s Cellar is built into a grotto with some of the most spectacular cave concretions in the world. Its magnificent formation, with large stalactites and stalagmites, has created fantastic underground scenery, and none of these were destroyed during construction. Instead, we worked around it with our designers.

What can guests expect from the food and drink at the Cellar?

Locally sourced and imported ingredients are cleverly used to titillate the palate with delicate international flavours. The [five- or seven-course] set menus befit the high standards of the restaurant’s surroundings, serving dishes that feature lobster, foie gras, smoked scallops, Wagyu beef and more. There is a wide range of unique and rare wines to select from and guests can also visit Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah’s private wine cellar, which houses more than 2,000 bottles of his prized collection.

If you had to describe a night of dining (and drinking) in the Cellar in one sentence, what would it be?

A timeless, magical, and enchanting place for those seeking refined cuisine, the finest wines, and unforgettable memories.

📍 thebanjaran.com/cuisine/jeffs-cellar

