

# *Walk on the bright side*

Easygoing Ipoh in northern Malaysia has set the bar high for hip gentrification and heritage preservation. But even before the influx of Instagrammable cafés and trendy hotels, this one-time tin-mining boomtown was full of nostalgic character. **Jonathan Evans** finds Ipoh's past and present inextricably intertwined as he meets the entrepreneurs making this lovable old city prosper once again

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **SCOTT A WOODWARD**



**I**mmaculate streets where red and yellow taxis chug past shophouses of faded white and pink. Bustling, decades-old *kopitiams*, or local coffee shops, decorated with turquoise walls and original floor tiles. Heritage buildings gleaming proudly under the sun, and side streets enlivened by the humorous murals of “Malaysia’s Banksy”, Ernest Zacharevic. Locals handing out flyers for arcane museums under “five-foot way” porticos that provide much-needed shade from the blazing midday sun.

Such is the instantly seductive spell cast by the old town of Ipoh which, despite being voted Asia’s sixth-best destination by *Lonely Planet* in 2016, retains the aura of the Malaysian tourist industry’s perennial underdog — too quiet and quaint for night owls, perhaps, or too small for an extended stay. But at a little under three hours by train northbound from Kuala Lumpur, ringed by a picturesque valley of limestone karst and sandwiched between a triptych of eminently explorable sites — the glorious greenery of the Cameron Highlands, the Lost World of Tambun theme park and the grand, never-completed colonial folly Kellie’s Castle — there are plenty of compelling reasons to travel to this unsung destination. Ipoh serves up its old-world gentility with a generous side of modern comfort, all laced together in complementary pastel hues like a city-sized box of sugary macarons.

Emerging from obscure small-town beginnings, Ipoh really began to flourish in the 1890s, when miners flocked from China to the fledgling industrial base to exploit the Kinta Valley’s abundant deposits of tin. With the productivity of the valley’s mines, Malaya soon became the world’s biggest producer of the metal. The mining boom survived major knock-backs such as the Great War, free-falling tin prices and the Japanese Occupation, but by the 1970s the glory days were over and the town — later a city — entered a period of decline. While heritage preservation efforts are still ongoing, local government and tourist authorities deserve serious



**1** Pastel-colored rows of shophouses are characteristic of the old town  
**2** Delightful treats along Concubine Lane **3** Local cuisine is rich with Chinese influences **4** A resident along Umbrella Lane **5** The Ipoh Railway Station, an imposing colonial-style building



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kudos for preserving the low-rise architecture that dominates the old town, with its giant wedding cake of a Neoclassical railway station (1917), and colonial throwbacks best exemplified by the HSBC Bank (1931) and, just around the corner from the bank, the Birch Memorial Clock Tower (1909).

But it's a not-for-profit group, IpohWorld — under its apposite slogan “Saving Yesterday for Tomorrow” — that's largely responsible for kick-starting the city's heritage revival through a series of exhibitions, a vast online database of period photographs and, most notably, its one-year restoration of Han Chin Pet Soo, a beautiful villa in the old town that brings to life the tin miners' harsh, dissolute experiences in the early 20th century. Spearheaded by curator and IpohWorld managing director Ian Anderson, a Scotsman who's lived in Malaysia for three decades, the engrossing project has deservedly become Ipoh's number one attraction since its unveiling in 2015, as well as a favorite subject of artists, along with the vivid royal-blue façade of the neighboring tea museum, Ho Yan Hor. A continual work in progress, the fourth floor has recently been revamped to incorporate an archetypal 1920s bedroom and vintage automobile ephemera from the 1960s.

Leong Meng Fai, an engaging Cantonese native of Ipoh, now manages the museum but confesses he once failed his history exam and found the subject “very dull”. He recounts his first meeting with Ian, an encounter that gave him a new perspective. “When I came in and learned from Ian, that's when things changed for me. He made me look at things differently. When you come to the museum you don't read from books but listen to the stories. Likewise, I see many comments from people who

- 6** Saturday along Concubine Lane
- 7** Leong Meng Fai of Han Chin Pet Soo museum **8** The museum's façade
- 9** Ipoh white coffee, a local icon
- 10** Handmade souvenirs from the Kong Heng Artisan Market
- 11** The restored SPH de Silva Building





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## **STRONG MURAL VALUES**

# **The whimsical world of street artist Ernest Zacharevic**



While it's local entrepreneurship that has come to the fore in Ipoh in recent years, the images of the city most indelibly burned into the public consciousness — through the ripple effect of social media — are the work of a thirtysomething Lithuanian. In a manner similar to enigmatic London artist Banksy, Ernest "Zach" Zacharevic's murals revel in the synergy between art and its immediate environment, creating site-specific work that's at once culturally resonant for locals and appealing to visitors. His images are so lifelike that they seem to grow out of the buildings on which they're etched (shown here is one along Umbrella Lane).

Hot off the success of his eight-part street-art project in Penang, which garnered great acclaim as part of the George Town Festival in 2012, Zacharevic's name became a byword for creative hipster cachet: a mischievous talent finding resourceful ways to connect with everyday audiences. His Ipoh collaboration with OldTown White Coffee took six weeks to complete and has remained immensely popular since its 2014 unveiling: if you stroll down almost any street in the main tourist area, you'll find people of all ages posing for selfies by any of Zacharevic's seven murals, collectively known as #TheArtofOldTown.

Half an hour is all you'll need to complete the circuit, which takes you on an alternative tour of the old town's key streets.  
[ernestzacharevic.com](http://ernestzacharevic.com)



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## Ipoh serves up its old-world gentility with a generous side of modern comfort, all laced together in complementary pastel hues like a city-sized box of macarons

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say they're not interested in history or mining, but after the tour they've changed their minds. This kind of thing keeps us going."

Part of what makes Han Chin Pet Soo so compelling — aside from its period detail like rosewood chairs, original mirrors, crockery and pantry cabinets standing in water-filled bowls to deter ants — is the immediacy of its subject matter. The building was a clan house where Hakka miners entertained prostitutes and smoked opium, and to this day remains the only place in Ipoh where gambling is legal. "These colorful stories are ones we need to keep telling, because in those days people's lifestyles were so different compared to now," says Meng Fai. "The building and the story blend together, even from the first step you take. Everywhere you look, it's all history — a complete package." Somewhat euphemistically, he adds: "This is where all the activities and lifestyles started, with Concubine Lane."

The once-sinful thoroughfare he refers to lies just meters from the villa and — perhaps by virtue of its notoriety — has blossomed in recent years into a fully fledged, Instagram-fêted celebration of the past. Flanked on both sides by a colorful parade of nostalgic outlets — old-school cafés, *ais kepal* (iceball) vendors, a toy-car museum — and festooned

with red lanterns, Concubine Lane is one of two Ipoh epicenters for a young brigade of Panama-hat-toting, espadrille-shod hipsters who've become ardent, camera-wielding devotees of the old town.

Lying just a block away, on the intersection of Jalan Sultan Yusof and Jalan Panglima, is the other hipster haven called Kong Heng Square Artisan Market, a loose conglomeration of trendy retailers linked by narrow, mural-bedecked alleyways amid a metal-and-concrete carapace with fashionably chipped paintwork. Its semi-alfresco centerpiece is a courtyard populated by craftwork stalls, a septuagenarian barber called Uncle Thiru operating from a glass box and boutique owners hawking old clothes and even older vinyls (including an original 1987 12-inch single of "Nothing's Gonna Change My Love for You" by Glenn Medeiros).

In the corner, there's the capacious Plan B, one of Ipoh's pioneering destination cafés, which was refurbished from an old furniture warehouse in 2013. Sober, streamlined design, smiley service and a soft urban-beats soundtrack set the tone, while an eclectic menu includes the *nasi lemak ayam berempah*, an unmissable cornucopia of fried chicken, sambal, anchovies and eggplant in soy dressing.

Burps & Giggles, the much-loved comfort food "art café" that kick-started Ipoh's nostalgia trip back in 2012, fronts this block alongside the imposing, leafy frontage of the Container Hotel, with its "industrial retro" capsule rooms. But what's notable is the line of cafés that has followed in Burps & Giggles' wake,

**12** Working a modern trishaw along Umbrella Lane

**13** Vintage goodies in Legenda, a boutique in Kong Heng Artisan Market **14** Kenneth Lee and baker Nicole Gan of Patisserie Boutique, a hip café in an old corner building **15** The café's modern interior



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each with its own distinct character. On the corner of Jalan Panglima, the four-year-old Patisserie Boutique holds court in a former mirror shop that's now decked out in moody monochrome, murals and vintage clocks and fans. Aside from the Anglo-Asian fusion fare — think Shibuya toast, or jacket potatoes with chicken and kimchi — it has other surprising facets. For instance, one of its four owners, 31-year-old Kenneth Lee, has an unmistakable English accent.

Kenneth spent 12 years studying in the UK before returning to his native city to find a new appetite for global tastes in comfortable surrounds. “We chose it for the heritage, mostly,” he says of the location. “Ipoh is famous for its coffee — the white coffee — but we wanted to provide a space that was more Westernized.” At this point his business partner and baker, Nicole Gan, waltzes in with a beaming smile, no doubt reflecting her surprise at the large number of customers filling the café on a typically uneventful Monday morning downtown.

The look and feel that have made Patisserie Boutique a success is a tricky one to pull off; I find that wherever else locals have adopted pure European aesthetics in other city outlets, the result usually falls flat. While it's justifiably famous for its beansprout-chicken-selling legend Lou Wong — and other specialties like *hor fun* noodles best enjoyed in a noisy hawker or kopitiam — modern restaurants are not Ipoh's forte. On a Saturday night, for instance, we found an upscale French brasserie completely empty, while business suburb Greentown holds a string of solid but unremarkable international eateries. Elsewhere in the “new town”, on Jalan Lau Ek Ching, a row of smart contemporary bars — Bricks & Barrels, Mansion Bistro & Bar — has revived a row of disused houses with a modicum of pizzazz.

It's only back in the old town that you'll discover gems like the Happy Eight, an intricate design project occupying the entire length of a narrow shophouse on Market Lane. Exceptionally cool in every sense, the layout serves to funnel natural ventilation from under the floor and



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**16** At the wildly popular old-school restaurant Won Koh Kee, on one end of Concubine Lane **17** The bar at Plan B **18** A must-order at Plan B: a large, heaping plate of nasi lemak

## OUT OF IPOH

### DAY TRIPS OUT OF THE CITY

#### KELLIE'S CASTLE

In Batu Gajah, 40 minutes' drive from central Ipoh, you'll find a real curio among the annals of the colonial era. The brainchild of a nomadic Scotsman who rose to become a tin and rubber magnate, the building was intended to celebrate the 1915 birth of his son, who would in time inherit his business empire. But William Kellie Smith's grand vision of a dramatic mansion interspersed with Hindu architectural features was fraught with pitfalls from the get-go: many of his workers from Chennai contracted the deadly Spanish flu, World War I slowed progress and Smith himself died suddenly of pneumonia after visiting Lisbon in 1926, leaving the project incomplete. While its backstory is enthralling in its own right, the castle's Moorish grandeur set amid the Perak countryside remains a breathtaking sight a century after it was (not quite) built.

#### THE LOST WORLD OF TAMBUN

Lying somewhat closer to Ipoh, a 20-minute drive brings you to one of Malaysia's most acclaimed theme parks. Combining a natural spring with a zoo, crystalline tropical pool (Sandy Bay), adventure park and even a re-creation of Ipoh's old town, the family destination is a crowd-pleasing escape that draws guests from all over the country. [sunwaylostworldoftambun.com](http://sunwaylostworldoftambun.com)

#### CAMERON HIGHLANDS

A heady 90km uphill drive through limestone, fern and pine, this was where British settlers made their homes in cooler temperatures and converted the lush mountainscapes into fertile tea plantations. Tanah Rata is the Highlands' colonial heartland, a scenic retreat marked by cozy cottages, a vibrant market and a clutch of fine hotels. Make time to navigate the narrow roads and visit the BOH Sungai Palas Tea Estate and the prehistoric-looking Mossy Forest, more than 2km above sea level.

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## LOCAL INSIGHT

## Hotelier Lloyd Gan



Perak's state capital now teems with trend-conscious modern accommodations, but only a few years ago such lodgings were rare in Ipoh. General manager Lloyd Gan was operating in a nascent niche market when M Boutique Hotel opened in 2013, but felt instinctively that the time was right for a fresh approach. "We didn't want to be like every company," he reflects. "I wanted to prove that smaller, boutique-type hotels can make it. Owners of shophouses had converted them into small homestays, or homestays that were a bit more upmarket, but not many people took much notice. Then people like us came along, and new developers copied us and capitalized. What we did was offer more than a homestay."

The direction was clear from the start. "We thought that something very traditional, like the Raffles in Singapore — luxurious, colonial, standing outside with the safari hats — wasn't the kind of image we wanted to project," Lloyd continues. "We wanted to rekindle the sights and sounds of the past and its shophouses, but we also wanted something more homey, down to earth and friendly. Yes, millennials are a target, because as in every cycle of life, if you don't look at the younger generation you have no continuity in business."

Judging from the stream of guests of all ages, it seems M's blend of old and new has indeed struck a chord with a broad range of age groups. [ipoh.mboutiquehotels.com](http://ipoh.mboutiquehotels.com)



doors at the side, which open out into a tiny garden with tables repurposed from sewing machines. A fish-feeding area perched on open-mesh steel flooring allows visitors to discreetly indulge the koi swimming below, while wood salvaged from trees felled for road-building is sculpted by artisans into all kinds of forms: bottle holders, birdcages, a horse sculpture and a vast nest. Jungle murals complete the nature theme in the rear-side café, and the front-of-house boutique leads up to an equally enchanting hostel.

Only a few years ago, whimsically designed spaces serving fine coffee blends would have been unthinkable in this stolid city of unflinchingly traditional tastes. But now even Ipoh's indigenous kopitiam brand, OldTown

White Coffee, has gone upmarket in a smart restaurant that forms part of M Boutique Hotel, one of the pioneering upscale stayovers from 2013. While the menu tempts with tried-and-tested heart-stoppers like condensed-milk Hainan toast; cheesy minced chicken with macaroni; and *gula melaka* with ice *kacang* (palm sugar with shaved ice and red beans), the hotel proper exudes a strong sense of the past through stylized re-creations of colonial-era iconography.

Threaded throughout the building's four storeys are Malayan-era letter art, urban vintage furnishing — painted shutters, old trunks, metal chairs and jerry cans — and Malaysian safari photography, while room details hark back to Straits Settlements



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**19** The Birch Memorial Clock Tower, one of the Old Town’s top attractions **20** Painted wall murals are everywhere in the city **21** The very hip lobby of M Boutique Hotel

shophouses. But far from resembling a musty museum, the hotel matches its predilection for period trappings with winning contemporary detail. Each level has its own stylistic theme (the first floor has tiger-print lightshades and pillows); chic industrial light fittings with tungsten bulbs hanging from the ceiling; and there’s a homey environment epitomized by the staff adopting names of characters from videogames, manga franchises and action movies (Doraemon, Pikachu, John Wick, Clark Kent).

So much of Ipoh centers on, to use M Boutique Hotel’s slogan, “the lifestyle of yesteryear”, that it felt fitting to end my tour at one more new space where the past has returned with a touch of quirkiness to reinvigorate the streetscapes of today. Last November saw the opening of Miniature Wonders Art Gallery, a labor-of-love exhibition space that’s the first of its kind in Malaysia, where curator Phoon Lek Kuin has installed intricate dioramas, made almost entirely from dough, which he painstakingly fashioned with his father-in-law Xu Shiyong over the course of five years. Each installation represents a scene from Chinese folklore or history, including a recreation of Xi’an’s terracotta warriors.

From a city that once resisted change to one that’s embracing it with open arms, Ipoh’s recent trajectory points towards a sustainable future for the city — and crucially, not at the expense of older businesses. Young travelers uninspired by their history classes should find, like Leong Meng Fai, that the past is no mere backdrop to the city’s modern-day reincarnation but is enmeshed into its contemporary industries with color and ingenuity. **S**



Cebu Pacific flies from Manila to Kuala Lumpur. Ipoh is 2.5 hours by rail or by car from the Malaysian capital.  
[Cebupacificair.com](http://Cebupacificair.com)