

New light



through

Through a community of heritage homeowners and restorers in long-established cities across Asia, you too can call time-honoured residences your home for a day

Words **Jonathan Evans**

old windows

In Penang’s multi-faceted Unesco World Heritage capital, the many buildings that make up 23 LoveLane Hotel were constructed at various points from the 1800s, representing five architectural periods.

The 10-room hotel on Muntri Street in the heart of George Town was originally a mansion with servants’ quarters and stables owned by a European family. Once the present owner acquired the property in the noughties, everything changed at an address that had fallen into disrepair. Carefully revitalising the disparate buildings as a boutique hotel – a process involving “cocooning” (spraying with protective coating), lime plastering, repurposing bricks and extensively using recycled timber – a team of architects and consultants busily applied themselves to the restoration.

A key turning point in 23 LoveLane’s transformation took place when noted heritage conservationist and George Town specialist Dr Gwynn Jenkins from the UK – who was instrumental in the city’s successful Unesco World Heritage bid – joined the team. “The project was conservation-led rather than architecture-led from start to finish,” says Doris Chin, general manager of 23 LoveLane’s hotel division. “The entire restoration process proceeded seamlessly from initiation to completion.”

The team brought the buildings back to authentic 19th-century life over a three-year timespan complete with antiques, sculptures and paintings. According to Doris, the restoration was an “open lab” for conservationists, students, heritage bodies and authorities to collaborate. In December 2011, 23 LoveLane

Hotel re-opened for business, winning a PAM (Malaysian Institute of Architects) Gold Award for Conservation two years later. It’s one of several gems on Heritage Homes (ourheritagehomes.com), an online community dedicated to fine examples of adaptive reuse and other storied buildings like 23 LoveLane.

A DECADE AGO, EMILIE RÖELL FIRST arrived in Yangon and, together with locals, set about transforming the city’s neglected historic homes, alleyways and parks – everyday community spaces that suffered from neglect. The city’s jumble of colonial-era buildings, deficient urban planning and inconsistent public-area maintenance presented an appealing challenge to the Dutch expat, and she founded her placemaking company Doh Eain, Burmese for “our home”, in 2015.

The idea for the firm originated when Emilie helped modernise a cash-strapped family’s old building – money they could pay back when a tenant was installed in their upgraded home. It’s that same enthusiasm for renovating vintage properties that propels Heritage Homes, an online sister company encouraging people to stay in historical homes, which operates primarily in Myanmar, the Philippines, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Its distinctive residences – “heritage” is any home older than 50 years – are repaired and fitted with stylish period furniture with the goal of conserving cultural heritage. “Heritage Homes is a digital community for homeowners [to] access information and advice – as well as opportunities to list their properties for stays, rent or sale,” says Emilie.

Heritage Homes aims to incentivise historical-home travel, on the basis that staying in heritage accommodation provides richer experiences making a positive impact on immediate communities. The company believes that a weekend in, say, an 1850s ancestral house facilitates cultural learning and exchange, creates a sense of local pride and identity, and stimulates local economies.

The global heritage-tourism market was valued at US\$557bn even in 2021, during the pandemic, driven by government efforts to promote tangible and intangible culture

PHOTOS: JILSON TIU (LA CASITA MERCEDES), SHUTTERSTOCK (GEORGE TOWN)



Previous page photo:
Vintage Penang at 23 LoveLane

This page from top:
The courtyard scene at 23 LoveLane; La Casita Mercedes in Manila; details at 47th Street Apartments in Yangon

Opposite page:
Charming heritage buildings at Penang’s George Town





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in the tourist industry. Travellers were also encouraged to seek out destinations’ natural aspects. The global market percentage share of heritage tourism is predicted by Grand View Research – a market research company based across India and in San Francisco – to follow a steady year-on-year uptick of 3.5% until 2030.

Covid-19 of course negatively impacted tourism overall, but one highly positive consequence that’s emerged is a fresh emphasis on responsible, mindful tourism such as hyper-local heritage home stays. According to the UN World Tourism Organization, a remarkable 40% of all travel now involves cultural and historical journeys.

PENANG ASIDE, HERITAGE HOMES’ online community of vintage-property buffs is also present in urban centres across the Philippines – in the capital city as well as conurbations like Baguio, Vigan, Taal and Iloilo. Despite the widespread destruction Manila endured during World War II, it still retains a few Spanish-era residences. Perhaps the finest example is La Casita Mercedes in Poblacion, a 1939 colonial home belonging to restoration enthusiast Juan “Jon” Ramos, who also owns the art-deco gem The Clipper Hotel down the road.

Juan’s two-year project, culminating in 2015, is the stuff of interior designers’ fantasies – an immaculate montage of period tiles, antique furnishings and Filipino artworks, filling La Casita with sophisticated detail. Juan sourced additional items from old houses, antiques stores and auctions. The sage-green exterior is bedecked with architectural finery: circular windows, tidy balconies fronting capiz-adorned windows and curlicued front gates, surrounded by lush greenery. It’s difficult to imagine a more authentic pre-war accommodation experience. La Casita has eight bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms perfect for family stays, and has even hosted weddings.

“It’s vernacular with influences of American and Spanish design,” says Juan. “I’m trying to make people remember what Manila was like. This is my contribution in showcasing our past, our heritage.” Juan named it “Mercedes” because it supposedly represents the 1930s-era Filipina – most famously embodied by Mercedes Matias Santiago, an operatic soprano and music educator who once performed in front of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

West of the Philippines, all the way to the far west of Southeast Asia, 47th Street Apartments in Yangon comprises three flats (two down, one upstairs) renovated from 2017 to 2018 on a tree-lined street in downtown Yangon. The owner refused to have the century-old Chinese merchant’s home demolished by developers like so many aged residences in the city, instead having it modernised without sacrificing its period aura. “I hope this house will be inherited [from] generation to generation,” says U Thein Aung, who has lived here from birth.

The brick-and-wood house’s restoration was financed and executed mainly by Doh Eain, led by its then-chief architect Mark Horton and construction manager Albert Company Olmo. They exposed the brick walls and retained the teak flooring – the elements that make it distinctive – while updating the electrics and lighting. “We tried to keep most things [Thein Aung’s family] had, such as the wooden furniture, and used them to re-decorate,” says Albert.

Across the Bay of Bengal, in the Sri Lankan highlands of Kandy, a scenic destination two-and-a-half hours’ train ride from Colombo, The Coffee Bungalow remains one of Heritage Homes’ more dazzling offerings. Built in 1860, the neo-colonial residence once belonging to a British coffee planter now serves as a singularly picturesque period hotel, retaining original features including veranda pillars, tiles and coffee grinders alongside newer design additions like cast-iron bathtubs by renowned heritage architect Channa Daswatte. The hotel’s in-house restaurant, Gilbert’s, serves Sri Lankan/British fusion dishes to guests.

Clockwise from top left: The inside story at 23 Lovelane; tropical botanicals theme at La Casita Mercedes; dusk at 23 Lovelane; a sitting room at 47th Street Apartments



Below: A swish bedroom at neo-colonial plantation-style home The Coffee Bungalow in Kandy; the hotel's pool with a view



The Coffee Bungalow was inherited by the owner's son Thusitha Paranagama, who oversaw its restoration over a 30-month period before opening to guests in 2018. A 14m infinity pool sits regally in the garden, affording views of *two* Unesco Heritage Sites: the 16th-century Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic and the Knuckles Mountains' Conservation Forest.

BACK AT 23 LOVELANE, HERITAGE Homes has since added the stunning, pre-war Muntri Suites, a three-room, pre-war shophouse just minutes' walk from the main building; and Stewart Suite, another heritage duplex which even includes a jacuzzi. The beautiful guestrooms reflect George Town's remarkably rich colonial history over the last two centuries. The Anglo-Indian Bungalow is a light-filled colour tapestry; the four-bedroom Straits Eclectic Building, built for physically challenged guests, contrasts with the Tudor façade and Chinese-Indian terrace of the 1920s Jack Roof Annex, which juxtaposes monochrome with vivid colour.

Emilie's long-term goals for her company are to expand in Asia – particularly in countries like Malaysia – and to help boost this worldwide movement towards both safeguarding and financially supporting our historical homes, either those in the process of restoration or those already on the rental market. The company has recently introduced crowd-funding functionality, to help mobilise extra support for heritage-hotel owners in times of adversity.

"Our vision is to tap into eco-conscious travel and living trends, and build a stronger international market for heritage stays and rentals," summarises Emilie. "[We wish] to nurture that enthusiasm among heritage homeowners in the hope that fewer will neglect, sell or demolish them."



Step by step

Know more about your destination through the eyes of residents with these walking tours

George Town. Numerous operators conduct themed tours through Penang state's eminently walkable capital – the most enlightening of which are WithLocals' treks exploring street food, architecture and street art. withlocals.com

Manila. Old Manila Walks' two-hour tour of the old walled city of Intramuros – where you'll find the Unesco-fêted San Agustin Church, originally built in 1607 – takes you through 450 years of history, from the time of the rajahs to conquistadors. oldmanilawalks.com

Kandy. Wander through this gorgeous hill city on Apple Vacations' day tour, stopping at the Peradeniya Royal Botanical Gardens, the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, the high-up but rewarding Kandy View Point, the city's tea estates and rainforests, and Geragama Tea Factory. applevacations.com.co

Yangon. Sampan Travel's three-hour tour of Myanmar's former capital flits through the history-laden city's cultural hotspots, including the Victorian-era Secretariat building, beautiful Bogalay Zay Street, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Sarkies Bar at The Strand Hotel, and highlights of the Indian Quarter and Chinatown. sampanttravel.com



Malaysia Airlines flies from KL to Penang 42x weekly, to Yangon 7x weekly, to Manila 10x weekly and to Colombo 7x weekly.