



The vanishing traditional artisans of Georgetown, Penang

October 4, 2012 - Travel Wire Asia

No Comments » Like 0 Tweet 5 reddit +1 0

By Barbara Weibel

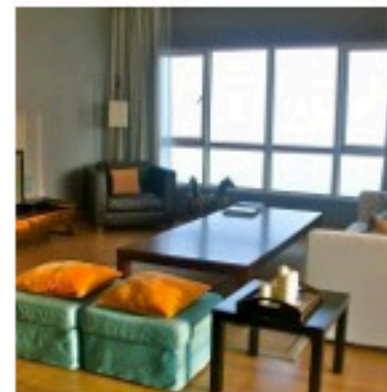
WITHIN the Kwan Yin Chinese Buddhist Temple, rivulets of smoke caressed vermilion globular lanterns strung from the ceiling before drifting through an opening in the roof. Worshipers streamed in and out, pouring oil into lanterns, lighting candles, and placing burning joss (incense) sticks into giant sand pots. Fascinated, I asked a temple worker about the significance of the incense. "It's a kind of email to God," he explained. "Only instead of a computer, the prayers are carried on smoke." He suggested I visit Lee Beng Chuan, the only remaining traditional joss stick maker in Georgetown.



Find a place to stay

Satrisna Home

Tanjung Bungah, Penang, Malaysia



Penang holiday beach apartment

VIEW

5

Tweet

0

Like

Submit

in

in Share

0

+1



[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)

Lee Beng Chuan makes 18-inch joss sticks that burn for three hours. Pic: Barbara Weibel.

I found Lee, 84, squatting on a low stool in front of his tiny shop. He grabbed a handful of amber colored mixture from a plastic bucket and spread it expertly down a thin bamboo stick as he chatted in broken English.

"This 18-inch joss stick, burn three hours."

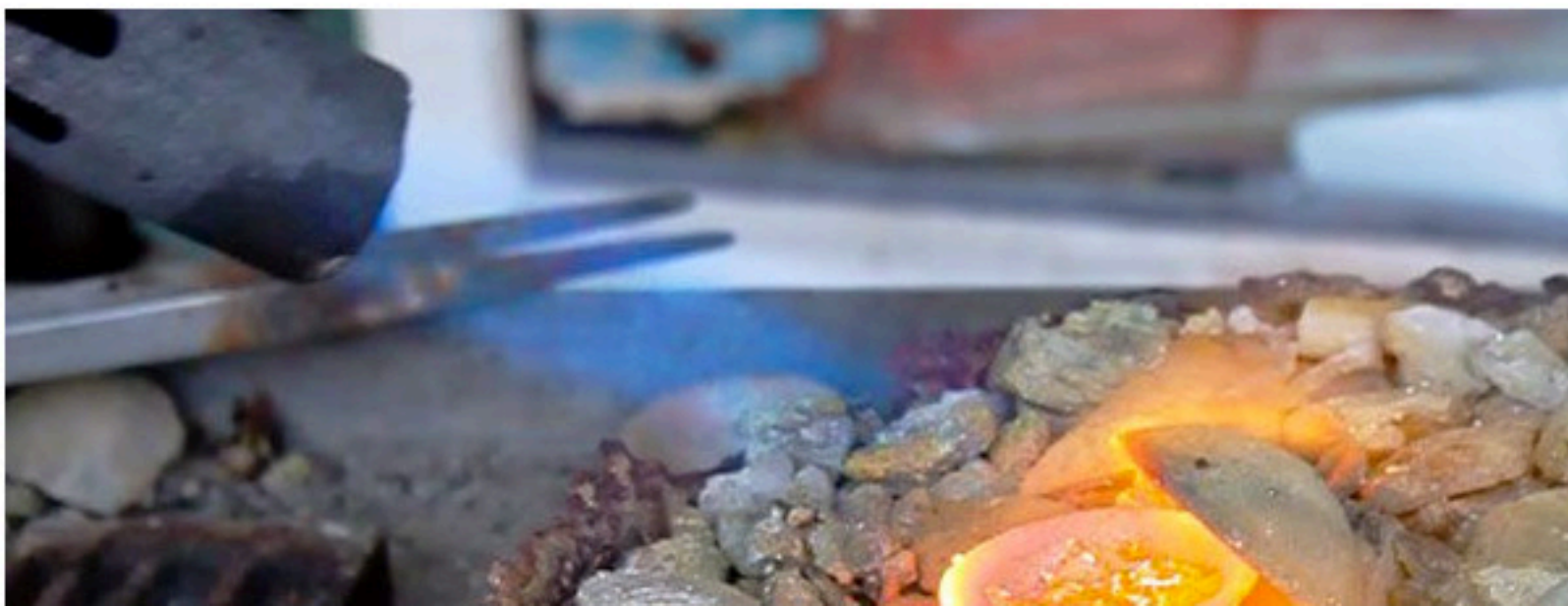
While he told me about the decline in his business he mixed another batch of Australian sandalwood powder with a sticky powder from the Teja tree, adding water and kneading until the "dough" was shiny and thick.

Lee can't compete with mass-production factories that roll out incense sticks made of low quality sawdust, but specializes in joss sticks for special religious festivals, like the three-foot high variety that burn for four days and those decorated with specially carved dragons designed to send more powerful prayers.

Lee disappeared momentarily as I browsed through boxes of incense cones and joss sticks painted with Chinese characters for happiness, fortune and health, returning with a bright orange flier, which he shoved into my hand.

"Many other traditional artist in Georgetown. You visit all," he insisted.

I was only too happy to oblige.



Old Penang Guesthouse

Penang, Georgetown, Malaysia



Period charms at
affordable rates

Bedroom, sleeps 2
1 Bathroom

[VIEW](#)

Hotel Penaga

Georgetown, , Malaysia



Character, Heritage &
Style

Bedroom, sleeps 4
1 Bathroom

[VIEW](#)

Find a place to stay

Country

City/Area

Check In

Check out

Sleeps

☐ Leave dates
blank

Clear Dates

[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)

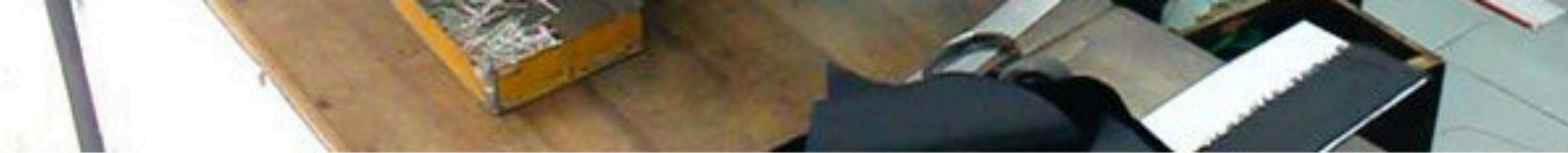
Melting gold into ingots in preparation for necklaces at Thana's Goldsmith. Pic: Barbara Weibel.

My next stop was at Thana's Goldsmith, where every piece of hand made jewelry is custom designed. One goldsmith was crafting a gold necklace and the proprietor, Mr. Raju, demonstrated the process, from melting the gold, to pouring an ingot, and feeding it through a rolling mill until it was fine enough to be worked into an intricate chain.

One block over I found Haja Mohideen OSM Mohd Shariff, Penang's sole maker of Songkoks, the traditional round hats for Malaysian men.

Haja Mohideen, 67, graciously demonstrated how Songkoks are produced. Working an ancient black sewing machine, he pumped the foot pedal to sew a silky purple lining onto newsprint. After trimming one edge into a domed shape, he attached an oval top and sewed black velvet to the outside, finishing off the edges with tiny, precise stitches.

[Find](#)[Trending](#)[Correspondents](#)

[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)

Haja Mohideen OSM Mohd Shariff finishes off a Songkok hat. Pic: Barbara Weibel.

Like the joss stick maker, Haja Mohideen's business is declining. Though his songkoks sell for just RM 9-37 (US \$3-12), a similar, lesser quality hat manufactured in a factory can be purchased for RM 8 (US \$2.50). When he retires there is no one to take his place.

My last stop was Nyonya Beaded Shoes. Nyonya refers to descendants of late 15th and 16th-century ethnic Chinese who settled here. They brought with them superb embroidery and beadwork skills still used today to create purses, belts, phone pouches and the popular beaded slippers – the glass beads are sewn on individually.



A shoemaker attaches a beaded face to a slipper at Nyonya Beaded Shoes. Pic: Barbara Weibel.

Once complete, the finished shoe tops are attached to custom-built soles. These are made to order by Nyonya women in their homes, but the shops keep some on hand for walk-in customers. These cost RM 62 (US\$20); the soles are RM 93-124 (US \$30-40).



[Diving with sharks at Aquaria ...](#)

By Virginia Tam IF there is one unforgettable experience in life, it must...



[Shopping in the magnificent Su ...](#)

By Nel de Leon KUALA LUMPUR heightened my fondness for travel when I...



[The vanishing traditional arti ...](#)

By Barbara Weibel WITHIN the Kwan Yin Chinese Buddhist Temple, rivulets of smoke...



[Traditional homecooked Nyonya ...](#)

By Virginia Tam TODAY, to many people, eating is not only to fill...



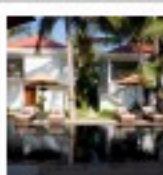
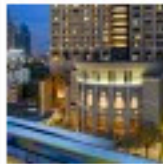
[The first meal in town: Heavy ...](#)

By Nel de Leon THE search for authentic Malaysian food began early in...



[Malaysia: Best eats in the Cam ...](#)

By Liz Ledden THE cuisines

[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)

Unlike the other shops, demand for these shoes is increasing and schools have popped up around the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, and Singapore) to teach the craft.

I had not visited all the traditional artisans of Georgetown but on my next visit I will seek out the tombstone carver; the wooden and bamboo blind maker; and a variety of cooks and bakers. I only hope I won't be too late.

Visit the above artisans here:

Mr. Lee Beng Chuan, Joss Stick Maker, No. 1 Lorong Muda (Off Steward Lane)
8-10am Mon-Fri

Mr. Raju, Thana's Goldsmith, 38 Lebuah Queen, 10am-5pm

Haja Mohideen OSM Mohd Shariff (Songkok Maker), 157 Lebuah King, 10am-5pm

Rattan Weaver, Lebuah Chulia

Signboard Maker, 41 Lebuah Queen, 11am-5pm

Mr. Oo & Mr. Ng, Nyonya Beaded Shoes, 4 Lebuah Armenian

Wooden and Bamboo Blind Maker, 231 Lebuah Chulia

Tombstone Engraver, 77 Lebuah Aceh, 10am-12pm

"Poh Piah" Spring Roll Wraps, 5 Jalan Chowrasta, 8-11am

Roti Bengali Traditional Bread, 114 Jalan Transfer, 8am-6pm

"Yu Char Kuih" Crispy Dough Fritters, 76 Lebuah Cintra; 2C, People's Court; or 17, Jalan Hutton

If you enjoyed this article and would like to find out more about travelling to Malaysia, please visit the [Tourism Malaysia website](#)

Author Bio

Barbara Weibel (Perpetual World Traveler)

After years of working 70-80 hours per week at jobs that paid the bills but brought no joy, a serious illness made Barbara Weibel realize she felt like the proverbial "hole in the donut" – solid on the outside but empty on the inside. After recovering her health, she walked away from her successful but unfulfilling career, sold or gave away most of her material possessions, strapped on a backpack and began traveling around the world in pursuit of her true passions: travel, photography and writing. Stories about her adventures are published on her blog, [Hole In The Donut Cultural Travel](#).



By Liz Edden THE cuisines on offer in Malaysia's beautiful tea country, the...



Digg ↑



Submit



submit



Tweet 5



+1 0

[DISQUS](#)[Add New Comment](#)[Login](#)

Type your comment here.

Real-time updating is **paused**. ([Resume](#))

Showing 0 comments

Sort by popular now

[Subscribe by email](#)

[RSS](#)

Recommended for you

Exploring Georgetown, Penang



August 18, 2012 - Place in Malaysia, Places - 0 Comments
- [Travel Wire Asia](#)

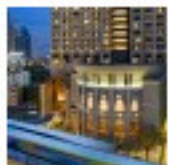
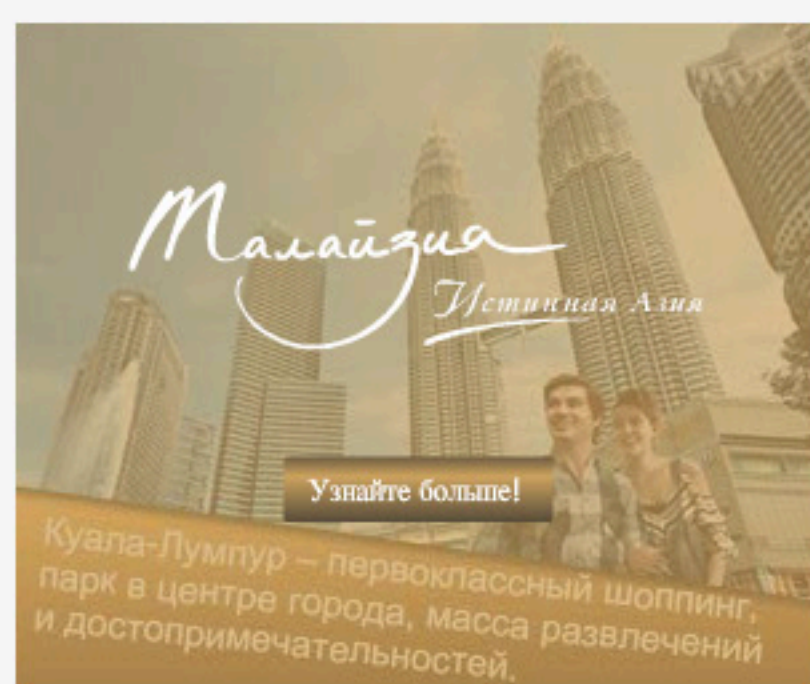
By Mike Aquino Georgetown in Penang, Malaysia is a hotspot for history buffs; its origins as a British colonial trade depot serving as the foundation for the district's dining, shopping and cultural attractions. Nicknamed the "Pearl of the Orient", Georgetown's status as Penang's foremost historical attraction was cemented in 2008 by UNESCO recognition as a... [»»](#)

Penang: Discovering Georgetown's local markets

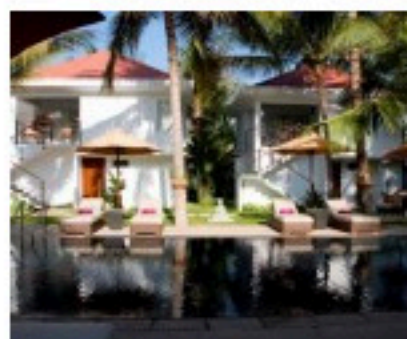


October 2, 2012 - Email Newsletter, Place in Malaysia, Places - 0 Comments - [Travel Wire Asia](#)

By Chris Wotton THERE is no better way to discover a destination than to rub shoulders with the locals and get some retail therapy under your belt in the same way that they do – at their local markets. Like many places in southeast Asia, Malaysia boasts markets aplenty, selling everything from fresh fruits, vegetables,... [»»](#)

[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)

Top Offers



Villa Kiara Boutique Hotel

Urban Boutique Hotel
Siem Reap, , Cambodia

Deal USD \$ 125 per
night



Barefoot Sakau Lodge

River Guesthouse
Sandakan, Sabah, Malaysia

Deal USD \$ 75 per
night



The Peninsula

Urban, Luxury
Bangkok, , Thailand

Deal USD \$ 185 per
night



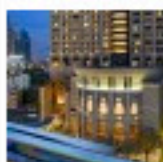
Sheraton Grande Sukhumvit

Urban Luxury Hotel
Bangkok, , Thailand

Deal USD \$ 125 per
night



Recent Posts

[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)[view](#)

Diving with sharks at Aquaria KLCC

By Virginia Tam IF there is one unforgettable experience in life, it must be swimming...



Shopping in the magnificent Suria KLCC

By Nel de Leon KUALA LUMPUR heightened my fondness for travel when I went there...



The vanishing traditional artisans of Georgetown, Penang

By Barbara Weibel WITHIN the Kwan Yin Chinese Buddhist Temple, rivulets of smoke caressed vermillion...



Traditional homecooked Nyonya dishes at Old China Cafe, KL

By Virginia Tam TODAY, to many people, eating is not only to fill the stomach,...



The first meal in town: Heavy breakfast at Bukit Bintang Food Market

By Nel de Leon THE search for authentic Malaysian food began early in the morning...



Malaysia: Best eats in the Cameron Highlands

By Liz Ledden THE cuisines on offer in Malaysia's beautiful tea country, the Cameron Highlands,...



Connect with:

[Connect w/ Facebook](#)[Connect w/ Twitter](#)

Subscribe with:



Categories

[Adventure](#)[Drink](#)[Eat](#)[Eco](#)[Events](#)[Places](#)[Stay](#)[Tips](#)[Wellness](#)[русский](#)[عربي](#)[日本語](#)[简体中文](#)[繁体中文](#)[한국어](#)

Popular Tags

China Travel, Couples, Graham Land, Alun Hill, Vietnam, India, Australia Travel, Korea, Seoul, Hotel, Thailand Travel, Places In Australia, Thailand, Travel, South Korea, China, India Travel, Malaysia, Mike Aquino, Destination, Natasha Von Geldern, Luxury, Chris Wotton, Joanne Lane, Asia Travel

[RSS Feed](#)[Facebook](#)[Twitter](#)[About Us](#)[Contact](#)[Privacy Policy](#)[Terms](#)