

# *Penang, visa runs and Malaysia*

*By Leanne Gardner*

I am pleased to say that the visa run to Malaysia is easier and a lot more enjoyable than you would expect. I expected to be 'stuck' in Penang with nothing to do for days, with a long bus journey there and probably an even longer bus journey back. However I had a great time, the visa process was easy and whilst I was happy to return to Thailand (as always) I will have fond memories, a happy stomach and a nice tan from Malaysia.

## **Before you leave**

First thing first is to make sure you have all the **documents** you need. Wen (from Super English) carries most of this burden so you don't need to worry about much. Just remember your passport, collect the papers from Wen (which is documents from Super and copies of your degree certificate etc) and have 2 passport photographs. Even if you forget the passport photographs you can easily get them done there. So really just remember your passport!

Check to see if there are any **Thai holidays** coming up which will cause the Embassy to shut. Depending on your agenda this may deter you from going at this time or inspire you to spend more time exploring Malaysia. Just remember how many classes will need covering. If there is a Thai holiday there is unlikely to be classes so should equal the same amount of time off work.

Next thing is to **buy a ticket** to Penang. This will take you 5 minutes! Seriously that easy. Go to the bus station area near Ciao Italia (everyone knows where Ciao Italia is and you will too within a few days of being here). There are lots of bus companies there so ask around and buy a ticket. They can all get you there just pick the cheapest option. I paid 550 baht for mine so you don't want to pay more than that. Pick a morning bus. The earliest as you can get yourself out of bed, the earlier you get to Penang the easier it is to get food, accommodation and how you are going to the embassy the following day. I left at 5am and managed to get to Penang around 3pm. It doesn't feel too long at that time as you are half asleep. Plus my bus had a Dvd player so we got to watch a movie, albeit in Thai.



## **The Journey there**

The journey itself is fine. Yes it is long but the buses aren't uncomfortable and time does seem to fly. Bring a nice book, look out the window, sleep or be like me and day dream the entire journey. After approximately 2 hours you stop for a 10 minute toilet break and then you stop for longer in Hat Yai. This is the last stop in Thailand before the border. You will need to give the agency your passport details including your departure form (this would have been inserted into your passport when you arrived). You will have to wait in Hat Yai for your next minivan. This will be between 20 minutes to an hour. If you haven't eaten yet eat here it will be your last chance to eat properly (as in not petrol station food) until you get to Penang. Plus it will help

pass the time. The two times I have stopped there it has been at the same place. If you take a left out of the office and left at the next road you will find a great coffee shop which also serves food from English breakfast to traditional Thai. Ask the ladies at reception.

Next stop is the border. Again very easy. Everyone on the bus is doing the same thing so you just follow them. You get out of the van, line up in immigration, give them your passport, take your finger prints and walk back on the bus. The bus will stop again 5 minutes down the road where you do this again (minus the finger prints). Now you're in Malaysia. If you are just on a border run (need to leave the country and return) you will now head back to Thailand stopping again at Hat Yai and will be back before bed time (depending what time you woke up). Budget 12 hours for the round trip. It will most likely be less but don't make plans for the evening as things can be delayed.



If you are off to Penang you have another 4ish hours ahead of you. You will have another toilet stop where you can also buy food. However this will most likely be at a gas station and remember your Thai money is of no use now. Bring Malaysian Ringgit if you want to eat or buy water. I forgot and there wasn't an ATM either where we stopped so I had to go without.

### **Arriving in Penang**

I arrived in Penang around 3ish, which made the total journey time 10 hours (it felt like a lot less). The bus will stop in George Town, which is where you want to stay. Stay on a road called Love Lane. This is where I stayed and most people I know have done too. Despite the fact it has a nice name it is also cheap and close to everything you need. Once you get off the bus walk about 50 meters on the same side of the road towards the 7/11 then take a left; that is Love Lane.



Love Lane is only 100 meters long and there are a few places to stay. I stayed at a hostel half way down called Civilians' Inn (number 52 Love Lane). This seemed by far the cheapest place to stay at 16 Ringgit per night for a dorm. It is pretty basic but it is clean, the staff are friendly, there is free wifi, free coffee or tea in the morning and warm water for a shower. The toilets are small and not as clean but you have to compromise somewhere. The man that works there is called Kim, very nice, he helped me get a ticket back to Thailand and gave me advice on where to eat and how to get to the embassy.

Brittany, a fellow Super English teacher, stayed at Red Inn (55 Love Lane). This costs around 24 Ringgit for a dorm. Her review was that it is clean, has a good vibe, has free breakfast, a dvd lounge and she got to meet nice people. The downside is you pay for extra blankets and the single rooms are expensive.



If you are going for cheap go for Civilians' Inn. If you want to meet lots of people go for Red Inn or Reggae bar next door to it. I didn't meet many people at my hostel but got to meet people easily around town so it didn't bother me that there was no real area conducive to meeting people at Civilians'.

## Visa

Now you have your place to stay next agenda is the visa. It is too late to go the day you arrive so you have time to figure it all out before the morning. The office hours are 9am-12pm and 2pm-4pm. The general rules are you apply for the visa in the morning and you pick it up in the afternoon slot the following day. You will be at the embassy for a total of 2 minutes! Sign in, give in papers/pick up passport, and leave x 2.



If you are lucky you can do this in the same day and/or you may be able to pick it up the following morning and catch the 12pm bus home. Ask when you get there when is the earliest you can pick up your passport and visa.

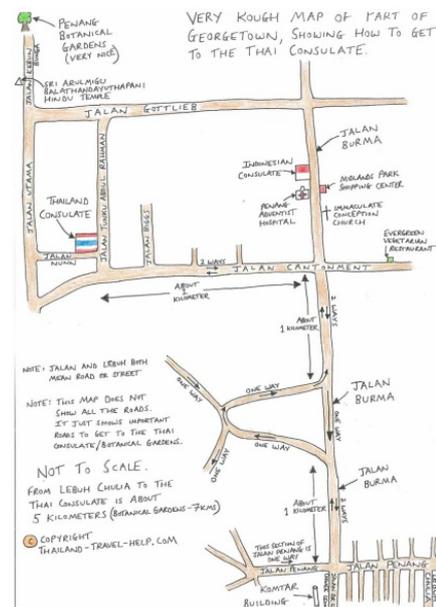
## Getting to immigration

There are several options to getting your visa:

**Option 1: Get your hostel to do it all for you.** They will take your papers and pick them up for you all for about 40 Ringgit. This is a good way to do it if you want to disappear for a long weekend outside Penang and if you want to be lazy. But really there is no need as it is a really easy trip even if you go away and are lazy (like me).

**Option 2: Catch a taxi.** I didn't do this so not sure how much but would predict it to cost about 30 Ringgit in total for the 2 trips there and back. There are always people going to the embassy so you could get a group together and split the costs. This may be more hassle and you might as well have caught the bus by the time you have fuffed around with taxis and sharing transport.

**Option 3: Catch the bus.** This would be my recommended option and what I did when I picked up my passport. It is very cheap and easier than it sounds. Catch the 101 bus opposite 7/11 (the corner of Love Lane). They come every 10-15 minutes. Costs 1.40 Ringgit. Ask the driver to drop you off near the embassy. They will drop you off outside the AM Bank. As you get off the bus walk left towards the traffic lights. Take a right down that road called Jalan Cantonment. Walk down that road for about 10-15 minutes. Take a right on the penultimate road. It is called Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman. Then take first left and the embassy is seconds away on your right. Honestly this is easier than it sounds!!!!!!



There is another option which I managed to utilize.....

**Lucky Option number 4: Make friends with Happy.** I met a Malaysian man called Happy who gave me a lift to the Embassy and back to drop off my papers and passport. He also took me around Penang, found me a cheap place to stay and managed to get me a cheaper ticket to the islands (where I escaped to for a few days). He would have got me a cheaper bus ticket back to Thailand and dropped me off to pick up my passport but unfortunately I couldn't find him that day. I gave him 20 Ringgit for his troubles and he more or less paid for himself with the cheap ticket and day out around Penang.

Happy is not hard to find. He works outside Reggae bar renting out motorbikes on Love lane. Say you are a friend of mine (Leanne – Blonde English teacher that lives in Surat Thani) and I say hi and he may help you out too.

## What to do in Penang

So that just leaves what

food is what everyone talks about with Penang (even the Malaysians) and to be honest it had a lot to live up to from the way people went on about it before I got there. I must say they aren't wrong the **food is amazing** and worth sticking around Penang just for that. Honestly it beats Thai food – and I never thought I would say that!



there is to do in Penang. The

## Food

The best place to eat by far is **Red Garden**. If you take a left down the road next to Civillian's Inn, get to the end and it is on your right. It is a big food market with tables in the centre and food stalls all around the side. It is cheap, delicious and has a huge variety. You can eat anything there from Western food to Thai, to Chinese to Malay, to Phillipino to waffles and ice cream. You name it they have it!! Anywhere else I ate just seemed so insignificant in comparison. It is only open in the evenings so you will have to find other options during the day. On a side note, Peter said to avoid the curries out there or at least be close to a toilet if you do. Taking my bosses advice I avoided them so I cannot confirm or deny whether the rumors are true. (Peter's note: I have been to Penang twice and both times I really enjoyed the Indian curries. You can find Indian food in Thailand but it's pretty expensive. Penang offers lots of delicious, glorious, cheap Indian food, which is awesome. But, and this is what I warned Leanne about, as delicious as it is on one end it is equally painful on the other. Enjoy, but be ready. I will say no more. )

At the end of Love Lane by 7/11 there is a small food stall. I ate my breakfast here, pretty cheap and cheerful. For lunch time I failed to find an establishment worth writing about.



## Drink

Drinking (alcohol) can be relatively expensive in Malaysia however there are ways around it. Most bars do happy hours and there is also a bar, Reggae bar (not Reggae Inn) near the 7/11 (opposite Banana Agency) that does Ladies night which is 'free drinks' for ladies (vodka and coke) – best deal I saw by far!! Sorry boys your best options are the 2 for 1 deals. There is a club called Slippery Senioritas which opens till at least 4am. I didn't go but I met some RAF pilots who went there a lot and loved it! This is about a 5 minute walk from Love Lane. I believe there is a cover charge to get in.



## Sightseeing

There are several sites to see in Penang itself so there is no need to just sit and wait for your visa getting fat from all the amazing food. Also a lot of them are cheap if not free. Penang is an island so it is pretty easy to rent motorbikes and drive around and see everything. If you don't feel comfortable on a motorbike then buses are regular and fairly easy to negotiate, your hostel reception should be able to help, if not find Happy!

One of the best drives is along **Gurney Drive** also known as Persiaran Gurney. This is a part of Penang that runs along the coast. It is about a 3 mile stretch. There are huge hotels and penthouse apartments worth millions on one side and on the other you can see islands off in the distance. Happy drove me along here. It was a very nice drive seeing how the rich in Malaysia live. There are some places you can stop of and eat which are relatively cheap too.



There are also the **Botanic Gardens** which are about a 10 minute drive from Love Lane. It is free to go there. Here you can walk around beautiful green gardens, visit the waterfall and see monkeys. You can get ice cream here, have a picnic and make a day of it. There is even a little tourist tram that can take you round the gardens. Again Happy took me here but we could spend only 20 minutes or so. You could easily spend a whole day here walking around.



There are several **Temples** you can go visit. The most popular are the 'Sleeping Buddha' and 'Kek Lok Si temple'. Kek Lok Si Temple is the biggest temple in South East Asia. I didn't get a chance to visit here but I did see the sleeping Buddha. It is a huge golden Buddha and around

the outside there are statues of your Chinese Zodiac Sign. There is also a temple opposite which has various statues outside and is a peaceful place to sit on a nice sunny day.



If you are looking for beaches then **Ferringhi beach** is the nearest/quickest option. It is not the nicest of beaches and will surely be a massive disappointment after to Thailand. However it is easily accessible by bus and taxi, being only an hour away. If it is sunny you can catch a nice tan but the water looks dirty so swimming is not appealing.



**Penang Hill** is a mountain about 5km from George Town. It is approximately 750 metres high and can be a good day out/hike given good weather. That is what I hear. Having just climbed to base camp Everest hiking mountains of any sort other than the himilayas just did not seem worth it instead I chose to make a weekend away relaxing.



### **Making a Weekend of it**

There are several options to disappear to make a longer weekend and see more of Malaysia. I advise you to check the weather before you make the trip, it will make or break your adventure. These can all be booked at Banana agency (next to 7/11) and/or booked with your Hostel (or if you find Happy he may be able to get you a deal). The most popular getaways seem to be:

### **Beaches:**

**Lankawee** is the nearest 'nicer' beach closest to Penang on the North Western side of Malaysia. A ticket will cost you approximately 60 Ringgit each way and will take just under 3 hours to get there. Michael, another fellow Super, spent four days there. He said that it had nothing on Thai beaches but was still a beautiful beach. There is also a cable cart which you can get that gets you beautiful views of Lankawee and waterfalls. The food and drink is good and cheaper than George Town but the rooms slightly more expensive.



The **Perhentian Islands** are on the Eastern side of the Malaysia; this is where I went. I spent 3 nights here, taking advantage of the Thai holiday, and loved every minute of it! It was beautiful and it did manage to give Thailand a run for its money on idyllic beaches. The water was by far the clearest water I have ever seen in my life and the snorkeling is incredible. When I went snorkeling our group saw several black tip sharks, one being 2 metres long. Scuba diving is also an option here and is meant to be one of the best places in the world to scuba dive (as a scuba diver I am highly skeptical of that statement). However the actual beach, in my view, is not as nice as Thai beaches. There is less of the palm tree views as all the accommodation and bars are together in one long row along the beach.

There are 2 islands, big island and small island. The larger island is more popular with families and children, whereas the smaller island is designed more for backpackers. The accommodation is cheaper and you can find bars, smoke shisha and there are a couple of fire shows. It is nothing like the ones you see in Phi Phi or Koh Phangan. There are only 2 places you can really drink along the beach but the music will still go on late and people will 'party' until 2am. Long beach is where the bars are and the sandy beach. Coral bay on the other side is a shell beach with less to do but it is quieter and more peaceful than Long beach.

This is more of an expensive option and involves more travel than Lankawee. You need to spend at least 2 nights here as the journey takes around 7 hours each way. The trip there costs around 140 Ringgit (includes 2 ferry trips), bus trip return cost 70 Ringgit, accommodation was 30 Ringgit, snorkeling (half day) 30 Ringgit. Also the food is also slightly more expensive and not as nice as Penang.



**Jungles/Mountains**

**Taman Negara** is a national park in the center of Malaysia. It is reputed to be The Oldest Jungle, The Best Kept Tropical Rainforest & The Great Natural Wonders of the world. I met several people on my travels who had been here. One even described it as the best trip they had ever done. They spent the night sleeping in a cave in the rainforest. Just be careful of leaches and research malaria risks before you go. Again this will be at least a 2 night trip and the cost was 140 Ringgit one way, same as Perhentian Islands.



The **Cameron Islands** are another popular destination for travelers. I met several people on their way to and from there whilst in Malaysia. It is located in the central part of Malaysian so again will involve at least 2 nights stay and 140 Ringgit for a ticket. It is famous for its beautiful vast green hills and tea plantations. The temperatures I hear are much lower than the rest of Malaysia and it can be quite wet. This is a benefit though as waterfalls are better seen and you don't get so hot walking through the highlands.



### **Background advice on Malaysia (from my experience)**

Similar to Thailand Malaysia is very westernized for an Asian country. The standard of living is about the same. The biggest difference I found was the people. The people are just as nice as Thais but remember it is a Muslim country so there are some cultural differences which you will feel. Even though George Town and the destinations mentioned here are extremely used to tourists walking around in shorts and teachers (so don't feel you can't; I did) however I found I got a lot more unwanted male attention for it and a few more uncomfortable stares. These were more alien like stares compared to the exotic creature like stares from Thai people along with their shouts of 'Ferang'. If you do go to the beach do not sunbath topless.

There was also a less of the 'mai bpen rai' attitude and happy smiles which Thailand is known for. I felt reasonably safe here but not as safe as Thailand. I wouldn't advise walking home at night on your own



and keep your bag close to you at all times. I did walk home on my own and got followed twice. After saying I was married and I was meeting my husband on the corner they did leave me alone but it took some convincing. They say walk with your bag on the side of the street not the road. I don't want to give you the wrong impression; I did experience a lot of surprising generosity too from the Malaysian people. I met Happy who drove me around and got me discounted tickets. I also didn't have enough money for my dinner one evening as I left my wallet back at the hostel by accident and the next table overheard and paid the difference.

Also because it is a Muslim country it is not acceptable for the Malays to drink. There are a lot of drinking venues so feel free to get drunk and merry. Many people did when I was there! But it is only for foreigners and you may see signs saying they alcohol can only be bought by foreigners. This is probably why the alcohol is more expensive there.

Other than alcohol most things are relatively cheap there. Not as cheap as Surat Thani but then few places are. Expect to pay anything from 16-30 Ringgit for shared accommodation, which is approximately 160 - 300 baht. Meals will cost anything between 6 Ringgit (the cheapest I found) to 20 Ringgit, which is 60 baht to 200 baht.

The weather is pretty similar to Thailand. It is hot, humid and can have sudden down pours of rain. So bring your sun cream and rain mac. Also another worth while item which you might not have thought of is a torch. You will be traveling in the dark - no torch = no reading.

So that was my border run.

**As a summary:**

- Get all your information for visa
- Take the earliest bus you can
- Stay on Love Lane
- Go to the embassy next morning from 9am -12pm
- Pick up visa following day (or later if staying longer) in the afternoon 2pm-4pm
- Keep safe and Enjoy the rest of your time there!!

**Chok dee na Ka!! Good Luck!!**