

AFAR

HOTEL NEWS + OPENINGS — *by* KATHRYN ROMEYN

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This UNESCO-Designated City in Southeast Asia Just Welcomed a New Heritage Hotel

With the opening of Soori Penang, architect-hotelier Soo K. Chan revisits the city that shaped him, sharing how memory, design, and daily life inform his most personal hotel project.



The Soori Penang, a heritage hotel, debuted in January 2026 in George Town, Malaysia. Courtesy of Soori Penang

On January 15, Singapore-based architect-hotelier Soo K. Chan, founder of SCDA Architects, opened Soori Penang, a 15-room boutique hotel composed of a cluster of restored historic shophouses in George Town, the UNESCO-listed historic capital of Penang Island, Malaysia. The project marks a homecoming of sorts for Chan, 64, who was born on the island but has spent much of his adult life in Singapore, New York, Bali, and Paris. It's also his second Soori property, following Soori Bali in 2017.

With the Soori Penang (from \$550), Chan is breathing life back into historic structures in George Town in a way that protects their heritage status while inviting a new generation of guests to immerse themselves in the city's diverse cultures. For the site of his new hotel, he chose the Khoo Kongsi compound—a 19th-century Chinese clan house complex built to support families newly arrived from China, primarily from Fujian province—in George Town's heritage zone where development and restoration are tightly regulated. For his hotel, Chan took a personal, memory-led approach to restoring and reimagining



Yap Temple is one of the local attractions near the Soori Penang. Courtesy of Soori Penang

narrow historic shophouses in the Khoo Kongsi compound where he once lived. For example, the reflecting pools inside each suite are an ode to the water that collected in courtyards following monsoon rains that he recalls splashing in as a child. Other elements in the spacious, modern-feeling accommodations pay subtle homage to the neighborhood, like replicas of carved stone lions echoing those of a nearby temple.

“I think as a destination there’s a lot to discover in Penang, but it needs to be curated and shared the correct way,” Chan says of Penang, long celebrated for its food but less widely known for its complex architecture and cultural history.

A former British trading port established in the 18th century, Penang developed as a bustling stop along the Spice Route and evolved into a dense urban network of colonial and Victorian buildings, shophouses, Chinese clan houses, mosques, Hindu temples, and Peranakan mansions, reflecting centuries of Malay, Chinese, Indian, Thai, and Burmese influence. Chan calls it “frozen in time.”

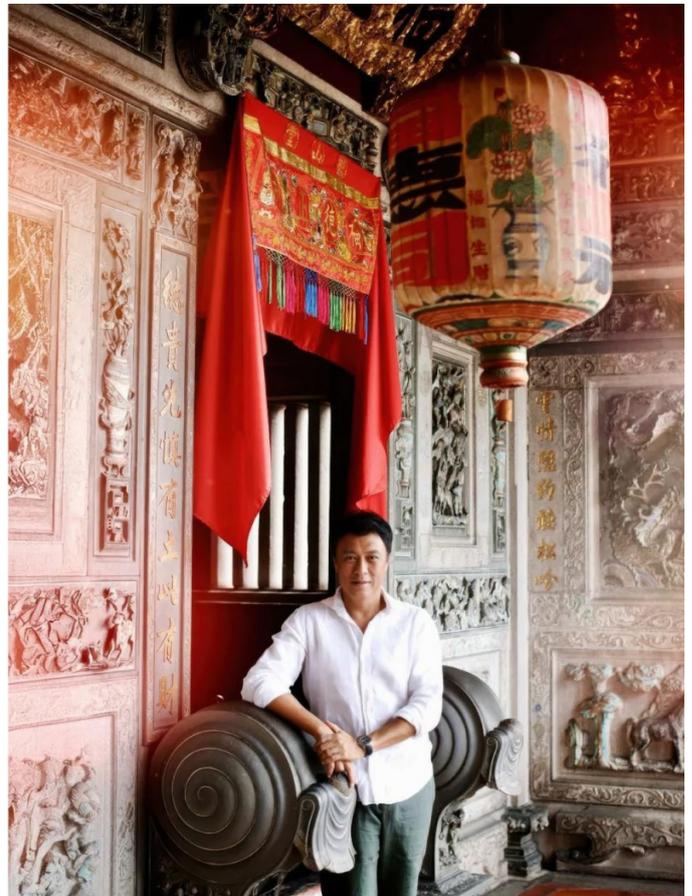
Beyond the architecture, the hotel plans to engage

directly with Penang’s living culture. Culinary partnerships with renowned street-food vendors will bring local cooking on site, while discussions are underway with chefs to open cafés and restaurants in front of the hotel.

Afar recently caught up with the architect and asked him about his latest hotel project, along with the temples, festivals, and foods that define his Penang.

After years working internationally, what did it mean to return to Penang to open your second hotel?

It’s been a long process to reconnect. I left Penang and didn’t think very much about it until maybe 10 years ago. I went back to Penang for a *Wall Street Journal* article and while there, I understood that that early environment made it very easy for me to connect to the principles of design that I later studied in university. It was like a homecoming, seeing the true beauty of it. I had already wanted to imagine a hotel there, and it was very difficult to get permission to do it—the journey took many years, about eight or nine.



Soo K. Chan spent his childhood in Penang. Courtesy of Soori Penang

How did your early experiences in the Khoo Kongsi shape the design of the hotel?

It was early years, so a lot of my memories are impressionistic. It was a very communal way of existing and living—being able to run around in a courtyard surrounded by houses of related people. If you look at any aerial shot, it's dense row houses with courtyards and a very clear delineation of public spaces where the ancestral temples sit. The unit itself was dark most of the time, with light in the middle because there was an air well. We had a sense of being connected to the weather.

I remember thunderstorms, watching rain pour into the sunken courtyard and fill up like a pool you could go and play in. Those memories impacted the way I wanted to design the hotel. I'm no longer an architect who struggles with planning; it's more about getting the feeling right. It's a tribute to memory and my impressions. And it's a cinematic approach—hearing the water, seeing the textures and sunlight, breathing the scent.

What kind of experience do you want guests to have in George Town?

I like the guest to be able to see local life, but in a very comfortable, guided way. To visit a temple but to also learn about the rituals. It'll be curated, maybe a fortune telling in the morning, a ride in a trishaw I commissioned specially, or going to the mosque, all in the vicinity of George Town. If someone in Penang wants to wish for something good to happen, it's not uncommon for them to go to the Chinese temple, then the Indian temple, then the mosque—three different places to ask for these blessings. We also have a cultural consultant, and we've connected with a fifth-generation Chinese family who does opera and puppet shows. They will be in the hotel regularly, even if the occupancy is low. We [want to] support the preservation of art by supporting the younger people learning the crafts.

The island is famous for its cuisine. What are your go-to restaurants and cafés?

Some of the ones I like have been there since I was a teenager, like Ocean Green, which I frequent. You go in through an old heritage hotel that is barely functioning and then on the water side is this very unpretentious seafood restaurant.



Khoo Kongsi Temple in George Town, Malaysia. Courtesy of Soori Penang

For local Nyonya (Peranakan) food, we go to Baba Phang and Foong Wei Heong Restaurant, and I take people to Moh Teng Pheow Nyonya Koay to give them a different experience. Sometimes we go to an old hotel called Yeang Kong, where there are remnants of dishes from British times—pork chops or chicken pie prepared by Hainanese chefs for colonial masters. When you taste them, they're a distinctive Asian fusion.

For fine dining, Gēn restaurant inspires me because it reflects the same respect for origins that I hold in my own work. The restaurant is a showcase for the incredible Penang food culture and dining scene. I admire how chef Johnson Wong elevates Malaysian ingredients by focusing on their purity and crafting each dish around a single meaningful flavor.

Where do you go for breakfast in Penang?

I go to a wet market called Pulau Tikus where you'll find all kinds of breakfast foods. If you go early, you'll be immersed in the way of life as if you were a local.

There are plenty of new cafés, but I go to a stall on Kuching Street in the Pulau Tikus area, where an Indian couple make *apom* crepes from 7 to 10 in the morning. I buy them and eat them with local coffee.

Which cultural sites in George Town best capture Penang's history?

The Pinang Peranakan Mansion is a private collection museum dedicated to Peranakan culture—the beads, the slippers, the clothing, the way they dine. My grandmothers were both Peranakan. And when I visit the Dhammikarama Burmese Temple, I feel a profound sense of calm surrounded by centuries of Buddhist craft and symbolism.

Are there any festivals you especially enjoy?

Around August and September, if you're lucky, you'll see the Hungry Ghost Festival, or Phor Thor Festival. It's beautiful, and very authentic—you'll see offerings to the god of hell. The Chinese believe spirits come back to visit their loved ones and

roam free. It's a Taoist belief, and a lot of people don't want to start a business during that month. These things used to happen in the courtyard of the compound where I lived; there would be a show to entertain the ancestors or spirits.

As an architect, what places do you always show to visitors?

I take people to get a sense of heritage at Cheong Fatt Tze, the Blue Mansion, which a fellow architect restored and which captures the opulence and cultural fusion of the Straits Chinese that have

always fascinated me. Its interiors—a blend of Chinese, Malay, and European influences—are an intimate study of craftsmanship and ornament. Kapitan Keling Mosque embodies the grace of Indo-Islamic architecture, and each time I walk its courtyards and see its arches I am reminded of how Penang has always been a crossroads of cultures. The Khoo Kongsi is deeply personal to me. It shaped my earliest memories of family, community, and Penang's history. It is the foundation that inspires much of my architectural thinking.

From \$550.

Kathryn Romeyn

Kathryn Romeyn is a Bali-based journalist and devoted explorer of culture, nature, and design, especially throughout Asia and Africa—always with her toddler in tow.
