

How an architect rebuilt his family ‘kongsi’ into Malaysia’s most ambitious hotel

A transformed 19th-century Chinese clan compound in George Town is now Soori Penang, a stately hotel shaped as much by heritage law as by personal history

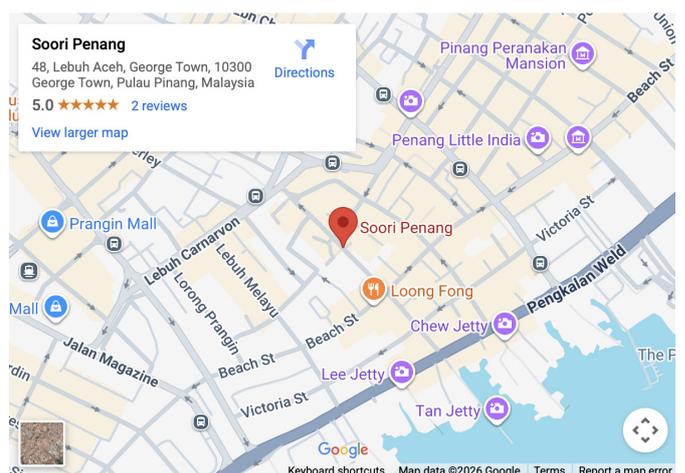


Soori Penang. All images credit: Photography by Aaron Pocock

A *kongsi*, for the uninitiated, is a fortified Chinese clan compound – a temple and ancestral hall at its heart, with residences and shophouses forming protective walls around it. Penang retains a handful of these 19th-century enclaves, and the Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsi is one of the island’s most spectacular, its ornate temple a riot of carved beams, lurid-hued statuary, and gilded deities.

That the Singapore-based architect Soo K Chan was born within one of these very residences – and has now returned to reimagine 15 of them as Soori Penang – lends this hotel opening an

WALLPAPER* CHECKS IN AT SOORI PENANG, GEORGE TOWN



unusually poignant backstory. It's a full-circle moment rendered in modern furnishings, light wood, dark fabric, and quietly cascading water. The project joins sibling properties Soori Bali and the forthcoming Soori Ubud.

What's on your doorstep?

Step outside into George Town's Unesco-listed fray: rickshaws touting for trade, crumbling shophouse façades, narrow lanes thick with tourist tat alongside *fin de siècle* Chinese temples, their air thick with incense, old-world *kopitiam*s jostling mod cafés, bookshops and restaurants, among them China House with its towering cakes, and Baba Phang and Auntie Gaik Lean with their robust Nyonya cooking: it's literally impossible to go hungry in this town.

Meanwhile, the Soori Penang's affable concierge arranges tours of Thai and Burmese Buddhist temples. Avoid the crowds and book an early morning visit to the magnificent temple in the Khoo Kongsi itself, which still functions as a prayer space and occasional Chinese opera venue. The

scale of the preservation and extant architecture is genuinely striking.

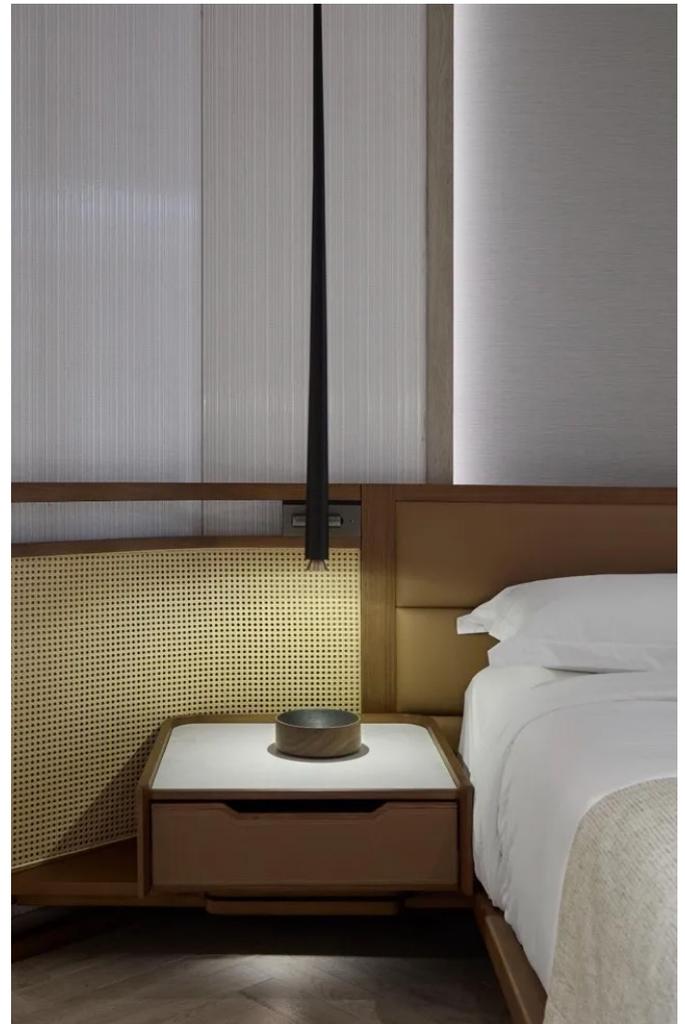
Who is behind the design?

Chan's Yale-trained architectural practice thrives, but the pull of home has been irresistible, which explains why he was willing to spend almost seven years convincing the kongsi's elderly custodians to grant him a 25-year lease on these moribund spaces. Strict conservation restrictions governed the transformation, though Chan navigated them deftly.

The suites follow the original shophouse footprint: long, narrow spines divided by original central air wells, now reconfigured as shallow ponds. Light filters through double-height wooden trellises at the entrance, establishing privacy while illuminating the high-ceilinged chambers. A round granite fountain – its shape a palimpsest of a traditional stone rice grinder – divides the sitting area from the large bathroom and bedroom beyond.







The room to book

They're all fairly identical, though that's no criticism as it neatly side-steps the dilemma of FOMO when booking rooms. A bijou daybed nestles between sleeping quarters and pond, while carved stone window replicas from the Khoo Kongsi temple (depicting longevity and prosperity) and miniature green lions echo the clan house's guardian statuary.

Light wood panelling meets dark grey upholstery, onyx bathroom sinks, and knowing homages to bentwood chairs. Yet beneath this heritage veneer lies thoroughly contemporary infrastructure: Toto toilets, millennial-friendly tech, all the expected comforts. At the moment, only the ground floors are available for booking, though upper levels will eventually accommodate guests seeking additional space for family or posse.

Staying for drinks and dinner?

Executive chef Mathijs Nanne currently serves Western fare – shakshuka, smashed avocado

on toast – in the plant-festooned courtyard, its tall brick walls slender as those in Beijing's Forbidden City courtyards. This is interim programming as the plan is to source more local flavours such as Peranakan kueh, Indian apom, and Chinese noodles from neighbourhood purveyors for the menu.

The restaurant and lounge remain in pre-opening flux, though evening turndown brings warm





lemongrass tea one evening, rosella chai on another, and coconut-pandan crêpes alongside kueh bingka – a thoughtful, not to mention delicious gesture that anchors guests in the place. Most meals, for now, happen beyond these walls, and George Town rewards that impulse with gluttonous aplomb.

The verdict

Soori Penang – which will expand with another dozen or so new rooms in the coming year, alongside curated shops, bars, and restaurants facing Cannon Square – makes Chan's homecoming a tangible experience. Check-in happens in-room; while staff trained by the Balinese team from sister property Soori Bali

deliver amiable, proactive service. Equally, the Balinese-trained masseurs staff the upstairs spa with skilled hands.

It goes without saying that the starting room rates of \$745 have startled locals accustomed to gentler pricing, but this is neither a conventional opening nor a run-of-the-mill hotel. Chan's emotional investment permeates every detail, making the hotel a remarkable tribute to place and memory, rendered in design rigour.

Soori Penang is located at 48, Lebuh Aceh, George Town, 10300 George Town, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

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