widely known as the Pearl of the Orient, Penang is one of Asia’s most famous islands. Its natural beauty and exotic heritage have been attracting curious visitors for centuries. Where else can you find a century-old church, a Chinese temple, an Indian temple, and a Muslim mosque all within a five-minute walk from one another? Likewise, tall urban structures stand beside the red-tiled roofs of Chinatown and “Little India” is just across the road, while the Malay kampungs lie on the outskirts.

For me the charm of Penang or Pulau Pinang, lies in its diversity and the influences of its many cultures. Although I was born in Ipoh, Perak, indeed, I am proud to be associated with Penang as I completed two years of primary education and seven years of secondary education in this magnificent state of heritage.

One of the interesting sites in Penang that deserve to be well promoted among the tourist is the Clan Jetties in Penang’s Weld Quay or Pengkalan Weld at the Southern stretch next to the Penang Jetty. Weld Quay is sprinkled with water villages, home to the early Straits Chinese. These water villages are actually clan villages built out on the sea. Like gnarled fingers that claw the sea, the Clan Jetties line the waterfront of Georgetown. Here, we can find communities that have existed for over a hundred years, suspended in time above the tide lines. Nowadays,
however, encroaching development has posed a new threat to the very existence of this unique community.

For the unfamiliar, the Clan Jetties consist of seven sets of wooden piers. They are home to seven clans who migrated from China - the Lim, the Chew, the Tan, the Lee, the Yeoh, the Koay and the mixed clan. The Clan Jetties, so named as residents of each jetty share the same surname; have been in existence since the 19th century.

**CHEW JETTY**

Of this, the Chew Jetty is the largest and liveliest of the seven clan jetties situated at the end of Gat Lebuh Armenian. The visit to Chew Jetty located just beside the Penang Jetty is filled with interesting history. “Chew” is one famous last name and it means the entire long stretch of jetty is residence with “Chew” as their last name.
I had an opportunity to visit this awesome jetty on a familiarisation trip together with six other writers and representatives of reputable travel publications and local press which was organised by Sheraton Hotel Penang.

According to our guide, Chew Jetty is the home of some of the earliest Chinese settlers in Penang. The jetties were established at a time when Penang’s maritime trade was booming. The people here stay in distinctive wooden houses built on stilts that reach out to the sea. The timber houses are joined by plank walkways. The jetty-dwellers worked as stevedores and cross-channel ferry boatmen in the bustling port of Penang.

Slowly take a walk to the end of the jetty and observe the laid-back, rustic lifestyle of the Chew. You will be able to see Penang Bridge at the horizon. This jetty was built specifically for people to live on, and it was excellent seeing all of the little homes and businesses built on this small jetty.

At Chew Jetty, home to more than 60 families, we saw a handful of tourists but mainly residents going about their daily activities. The people here were really friendly and did not mind us having a look around their backyard. But beware of motorcyclists who ride on planks of the narrow pathway.

It is interesting to note that the plank walkways double as the children’s playground. Walking along the wooden plank ways, pass houses, some with tiny potted gardens; we are able to get a glimpse of the way of life that has withstood the pressures of modernisation and urbanisation. A cool breeze and the gentle lapping of the waves belie the proximity of the jetties to the commercial heart of Georgetown, a stone’s throw away. Here, all’s quiet and idyllic.

THE TURN OF MODERNITY

The homes on the Clan Jetties have all the trappings of modern life; running water, electricity, air-conditioning, satellite television and even Internet Cafe. Only the sanitary services hark back to the 19th century, the sea it is!

As we made our way out of Chew Jetty, we stopped at a shrine at the entrance to the jetty. A simple structure adorned with red and gold lettering, the shrine had an altar, pictures of Chinese gods and large urns filled with joss sticks. The air was lightly scented with the smell of burning incense. A giant ancient banyan tree beside the shrine offers shade. Skirting the entrance of Chew jetty are hawkers selling noodles and dumplings.

The loss of Penang’s free port status in 1969 translated to the loss of jobs for many maritime residents including the Chews. However their bond with the sea remains strong as some of the residents chose fishing as a livelihood while offering the occasional water taxi rides to visitors.

Indeed, the Clan Jetties are a living tradition, a unique community that has managed to stave off the tide of urbanisation for now. Rows of wooden stilts and planks are laid out at the jetties, waiting to rejuvenate a stretch ravaged by time and the elements. The Clan Jetties could potentially be a very attractive tourist attraction, once they come to terms with the need to introduce urban waste management.

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