

# The forgotten Penang hill station

Strategically placed between Asia and Europe, Penang Island was once dubbed the 'Pearl of the Orient'. Four years ago UNESCO granted the World Heritage Status to the historical heart of its capital, Georgetown – giving a boost to efforts to preserve the area's rich diversity. Beautiful colonial buildings such as the City Hall, High Court and the Eastern & Oriental Hotel have been restored, their white facades once again gleaming in the tropical heat. For the past thirty years, however, the bungalows and grounds of the famous Craig Hotel on Penang Hill (also known as the Crag Hotel), have all been allowed to go to ruin. What exactly has been happening up at this old British hill station?

Louis Zweers



1. The Craig Hotel in 2010; photo by author.

2. View from the first floor, overlooking one of the bungalows; photo by author.

3. Ground floor of the left wing, showing the 1929 inscription; photo by author.

4. The right wing of the Craig Hotel in 2010; photo by author.

5. View from the first floor, right wing, looking out onto Georgetown, the sea and mainland Malaysia; photo by author.



IT IS THE HEIGHT OF SUMMER 2010, and at first the driver of the jeep I am seated in will only agree to drive me up to the top of Penang Hill, where a well-known tourist lookout point can be found. But this is not what I came for. Somewhere below, among the thick jungle foliage, supposedly lies an old British hill station. After much coercing, and a substantial financial sum, I finally manage to convince the driver to take me along the narrow dirt road with dangerously sheer drops, until we eventually find the hidden cluster of buildings we were looking for. (We would later find that there was nowhere to turn the car, and we were forced to carefully reverse all the way along the winding and twisting path, back to where we had started.)

When arriving at the destination I am met by a rickety suspended rope bridge, and a forlorn overgrown property. Immediately visible are a number of dilapidated structures, windows and doors wide open, and a gate supported and kept upright by a few thin iron rods. This was the original entrance to the hill station. All around I see bungalows in ruin; here and there a forgotten rattan chair. Then I notice the building at the top of the hill, standing on an outcrop and accessible from only one side. It is the famous Craig Hotel, at the time a sister establishment of the Oriental Hotel in Georgetown. It still has its curved stone stairway leading up to the entrance; even the old balustrade has remained intact. Sheer drops are found on the other three sides of the building; a veranda stretches across its front. Inside I find the old ballroom with its endless bar; the room is dotted with remnants such as a metal coat-and-hat stand, original electrical outlets, doorknobs, rusty window and light fixtures. It could not be more dejected. It is rather spooky. "No one ever comes here", whispers the driver who is now standing behind me, looking around in amazement.

The once popular, and oldest (established in 1869), British hill station with its stately hotel and homely chalets has been completely engulfed by the jungle and the elements.

The once so elegant Craig Hotel, its outbuildings and detached bungalows with wide verandas, have gone to ruin. Behind the hotel you can still see the protruding slab of rock upon which guests could relax and enjoy the views, shaded from the sun by a large white parasol. From this elevation, at about 800 metres high, the views of Georgetown and its harbour, the tropical island of Penang, the sea and mainland Malaysia in the background, are still spectacular.

Penang was, only second to Singapore, the most important constituent of the British Straights Settlements. The island is approximately 25 kilometres long, 17 kilometres wide, and lies just off the west coast of the Malaysian peninsula. In 1901 the total population comprised 128,830 people – mainly Chinese, Malays and Tamil Indians. Just 2%, or to be precise, 2692 inhabitants were white colonials, originating from Europe and America. Georgetown was built on a hillside that slopes out to sea. It boasted numerable government structures and mansions built in British colonial style, as well as the legendary Oriental Hotel, the European Club, a race-course, botanical gardens and a golf course. Behind the town, the Penang Hills rise to an elevation of about 820 metres.

The original Craig Hotel was built towards the top of the hill in the 1870s. It was established and maintained by the joint Dutch tobacco ventures found in Deli, on the east coast of Sumatra. The managers of the hotel were the Armenian Sarkies brothers, who also had in their possession the famous Strand Hotel in Rangoon, the Raffles Hotel in Singapore and the Eastern & Oriental Hotel in Georgetown, among others. The high-lying hotel, where there was always a cool breeze, offered a sanctuary to the Dutch colonials from Deli; they often suffered from malaria, and would travel to Penang frequently for rest and recuperation. At that time, the trip by sailboat between Sumatra and Penang took about a week; later, a steamship covered the distance in a day.



The photographs taken by the British photographer W. Jones, who had a studio in Georgetown, show the nineteenth century hill station on Penang Hill. His extensive album "Penang, Singapore and Sumatra", compiled in 1888, gives a remarkable impression of the trip up the hill, and of the time spent by colonials at the mountain hotel and its hillside bungalows. One image shows a colonial being carried up the hill in a palanquin by Klingalese coolies from British India; at certain places the path was too steep even for horse and carriage. Another photograph depicts a colonial man, dressed in white flannel trousers, dark coat and tropical helmet, peering through a telescope perched on a tripod. In the background you can see a few chalets, and a sign announcing "Queen Victoria Bungalow". To the left, among the trees, you can spot a Bengali servant carrying a large tray with beverages.

Dutch author Carry van Bruggen who was living in Medan, travelled to Penang in 1905. In her story "Een badreisje in de tropen" (At the Seaside in the Tropics) she describes the trip across the Malacca Straits made by the young white lady Gerda, with her baby and *baboe*. She too was carried up the hill in a palanquin, but found it a harrowing experience and lamented about the fact that "five people, just for her, painstakingly laboured, like wretched servants, contorted slaves..."<sup>1</sup> When the new hill station Brastagi was established in East Sumatra, increasingly fewer visitors from Deli made the trip to Penang for health and recreational reasons, and by 1910 the Dutch colonials preferred to find respite in the cool hills of the Sumatran hinterland.

The Craig Hotel was completely renovated in 1929. The imprint of the year of the overhaul is still visible, and can be found on the ground-level wall of the left wing. A number

of new chalets were also built for the guests. The Craig Hotel maintained its popularity and flourished up until the start of the Second World War. After the War, the property fell into the hands of a group of Malaysian plantation owners, and later an international (boarding) school was temporarily established on the site.

The property has now stood empty for the past 3 decades. In 1992, the French actress Catherine Deneuve momentarily drifted across the terrace of the desolate Craig Hotel in the award-winning movie "Indochine", which was partly filmed at the hill station and in Georgetown. My driver told me that the hotel now has a new owner; there are plans to build a prestigious hotel complex on the popular elevated location. The question remains, though, whether the Craig Hotel will be restored to its original state, as was done with the Oriental Hotel, or if a more terminal future awaits it.<sup>2</sup>

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**Notes**

- 1 Carry van Bruggen. 1988. *Een badreisje in de tropen* [At the Seaside in the Tropics] Schoorl: Conserve. Original version was published by Becht in Amsterdam, the Netherlands in 1909.
- 2 The original bids for development in 2010 were rejected as they did not meet the requirements set by the council. In April 2011 a subsequent bid was accepted and the Malaysian businessman, Sri Nisuh Sdn Bhd, was awarded the rights to develop the site. The new hotel will be managed by Aramresorts International, and be named Aramcrag Resort.



Photo taken by British photographer W. Jones in 1888. Here you see a guest of the Queen Victoria Bungalow enjoying the views through a telescope. Courtesy of VIDOC, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, the Netherlands – image 1165/31, neg. 1132/3a .



Photo at the Penang Hill station in 1888, taken by British photographer W. Jones. In the foreground you see a colonial guest shooting at a target. Courtesy of VIDOC, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, the Netherlands – image 1165/5, neg. 1132/2a .



Photo taken by British photographer W. Jones in 1888. Here you see the Clara Bungalow, and a guest being carried up Penang Hill by palanquin. Courtesy of VIDOC, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, the Netherlands – image 1165/1, neg. 1132/1a.