

Penang Hosts GPS-EDWIN for PITE 2018

Destination Reporter's Naina Nath gets to know Penang up close and personal leaving no aspect of the dazzling city's culture and heritage unexplored



Penang International Travel Exchange (PITE), the homegrown B2B travel expo that aims to position Penang as the leading business events and leisure destination in Asia Pacific, this year hosted delegates including myself as part of Global Panorama Showcase (GPS) Educational Destination Workshop International (EDWIN) programme. Each year, PITE sees select buyers from around the world brought to enjoy the Malaysian State's many experiences unfiltered. Inclusive of B2B sessions, site inspections, education workshops and networking events, PITE is the premier travel show in Penang held by Penang Convention and Exhibition Bureau (PCEB) in association with Apollo Conferences.

The Malaysian State of Penang is a tropical paradise that boasts beautiful beaches, lush rainforests and the UNESCO® World Heritage Site of George Town. Centuries of heritage, gorgeous colonial and pre-war architecture, an active arts and festivals scene, world famous gastronomic culture and best of shopping options, are all juxtaposed against the backdrop of an international city.

GPS-EDWIN comprising 120 Indian business event and travel buyers were welcomed by YB Yeoh Soon Hin, Penang State Executive Councillor for Tourism Development, Heritage, Culture and Arts at a glittering inaugural ceremony at Khoo Kongsi, a large Chinese clanhouse with highly ornamented architecture, a mark of the dominant presence of the Chinese in Penang. "Penang, consistently being ranked as one of the top 10 budget travel destinations globally, is the most liveable city in Asia. Malaysia is truly Asia and Penang

is truly Malaysia," said YB Yeoh Soon Hin in his opening remarks. "India is a large and growing outbound market. We want to target it in a big way. Malaysia-India relations have been strong for many years now and there is a large Indian population in Penang. Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, China, Japan and Hong Kong are our major source markets. We look forward to India becoming one soon."

With global connectivity to more than 100 international and local destinations, Penang is easily accessible – 98 weekly direct flights from Singapore, 225 flights out of Kuala Lumpur and 24 weekly flights out of Bangkok. Penang can be packaged as a dual destination because one can combine leisure with MICE or cruise. From January to May 2018, Penang International Airport (PIA) welcomed 30,75,643 visitors which is more than 5 per cent growth over last year. Since 2008 when UNESCO® conferred the World Heritage Site tag for George Town, tourism has boomed and now contributes 50 per cent to the State GDP.

The day long B2B meetings saw 50 sellers from Penang and Malaysia spanning top hotels, DMCs, PCOs, tourist attractions, sites, venues and suppliers showcasing products and services and interacting on a 'speed date' format with the visiting delegation culminating in over 5000 B2B meetings at the Setia SPICE Convention Centre, the world's first hybrid solar-powered facility of its kind.

Quah Eugene, Director of Business Development, Shangri-la's Rasa Sayang Resort & Spa and Golden Sands Resort, Penang felt, "PITE 2018 offered good exposure for Penang among key business providers from

India, a large market we wish to tap." Andrew Ong, In-bound Manager, YY Tour & Travel said, "We want to see more Indian friends visit Malaysia, especially Penang. I hope some day in the near future, we will have a direct flight from India to Penang." Cawen Leong, Senior Sales Manager, Hard Rock Hotel Penang commented, "This is a great opportunity to gather database and leads from Indian travel trade business providers."

Says Ashwin Gunasekaran, CEO, PCEB, "For MICE we are focusing on Europe – UK is very strong, US is beginning to show interest; contribution from the SEA region and national market is also growing. Qatar recently started direct flights into Penang. We participated in the eight-city GPS roadshow in India which helped us to promote MICE into Penang in a big way."

Penang has been hosting the V-Conference by QNET for the last six years which sees 20,000 delegates of which 80 per cent are from India. MICE infrastructure development is an ongoing activity. Setia SPICE was recently refurbished. Penang Waterfront Convention Centre is due for completion in 2021. In 2019, nine new hotels, all with meeting facilities, will open adding 3000 plus rooms. In the three and four-star category, there are easily 15,000 plus rooms available. Penang has many city, beach and boutique hotels to choose from.

Harmandeep Singh Anand, MD of GPS, says, "GPS-EDWIN has offered Indian agents a rare first-hand opportunity to explore Penang. Traditionally Malaysia has promoted Kuala Lumpur, Genting and Langkawi. Penang is the new focus. With EDWIN, our agents can now package and sell Penang as a 4D/3N destination for leisure and MICE/cruise."

PIA is already exceeding its handling capacity of 6.5 million arrivals a year. The government is focusing on an airport upgradation programme. "Minor works are already underway," said Chow Kon Yeow, Chief Minister of Penang, in an exclusive chat with *Destination Reporter*. "Major expansion of the airport will be completed in the next three years. We are planning an LCC terminal too and Air Asia has committed many regional flights then, connecting India as well."

In September, Penang Port signed a joint venture agreement with Royal Caribbean Cruises to redevelop its cruise terminal to accommodate larger ships. At Swettenham Pier Cruise Terminal (SPCT), the existing 400 m berth will be extended by 220 m with an additional 118 m-long dolphin, allowing it to handle two mega-sized cruise ships simultaneously on the outer berths along with one small and one medium-sized ship on the inner berths by 2019 end. The expansion will enable Oasis-class ships, the largest in the world, to berth at the terminal.

As an island city with over 25,000 rooms, world class MICE infrastructure and tourist attractions like beaches, hills, UNESCO® World Heritage Site, culture, shopping, food and nightlife, Penang is ideal for business and leisure. "Penang hosted 2511 business events in 2017 registering an economic impact of \$1 billion. PCEB is working to get direct flights from India. This will make Penang the most favourite SEA destination for MICE and leisure among Indian travellers," says Preshant Chandra, Group CEO, Apollo Conferences, the only homegrown PCO in Penang.

The EDWIN delegates were delighted with the exposure. "I would rate Penang high as a MICE destination," said Manvinder Singh, Vice President, Operations & Contracting, Holidays By Sahibji. "However, for FITs, hotels need to be more equipped with Indian food especially vegetarian." Dipen Mistry of International Travel Agency opined, "A trip like EDWIN to PITE 2018 helps us create interesting travel itineraries."

The visiting GPS-EDWIN delegation also found time to check out some of the attractions in Penang. Our first stop was the Tropical Spice Garden, a bio-diverse Living Museum of more than 500 living specimens of exotic flora and fauna, herbs and spices from around the world. Here we saw a baby crocodile, viper snake and different sorts of spices local to the region. Guided day tours with 15-20 pax per guide at MYR 40.50 per adult and night walks of maximum 12 pax per tour at MYR 72 per adult are available. This is a unique setting for meetings, seminars and team building exercises, and packages can be tailor made for corporate clients.



(Anti-clockwise): Harmandeep Singh Anand hits the gong during the inauguration ceremony of the B2B meet; B2B meetings in full swing at Setia SPICE Convention Centre



EDWINS at Penang Amazing Race



EDWINS cycling through the local villages at Balik Pulau



The rooftop of Setia SPICE Convention Centre



EDWINS enjoying authentic south Indian dosas



Tanushka Kaur Anand, Executive Director of GPS, with her sister at Khoo Kongsi during the inauguration ceremony



Ashwin Gunasekaran during the lunch ceremony with Raj Kumar, GM of the Light Hotel, Penang



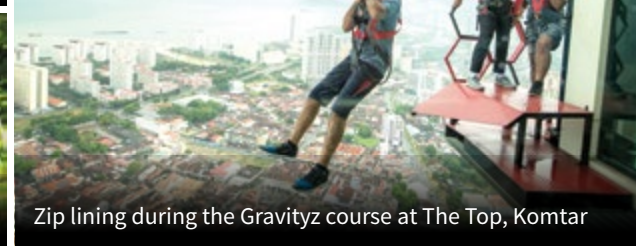
Chow Kon Yeow, Chief Minister of Penang and Harmandeep Singh Anand unveil the September 2018 issue of Destination Reporter magazine



EDWINS celebrate the success and completion of the Penang Amazing Race



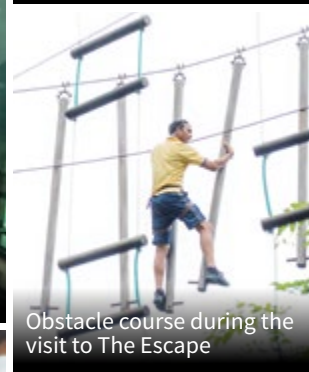
EDWINS enjoying the skyline view of the city from Penang Hill Sky Walk



Zip lining during the Gravityz course at The Top, Komtar



Naina cycling through the hills and villages of Balik Pulau



Obstacle course during the visit to The Escape



Farewell for EDWINS from Penang at Gudang



At the Batik factory, learning how to create wax imprints for the fabric



EDWINS being guided through the Tropical Spice Garden in Penang



EDWINS after a full day of B2B meetings

tropicalspicegarden.com

I got to try the butterfly pea tea but it wasn't to my taste though many other EDWINS (that's what we are called) loved it. Our 76-year old guide Danny Beh was walking faster than any of us could keep up. He is a very learned man who made this experience truly enjoyable with his humour.

At the agricultural town of Balik Pulau with its local cottage industries and villages surrounded by mountains, we took to the cycling pathway. We hopped onto our bikes and followed the guides. This is an experience I will never forget. I rode for 7 km non-stop. Overtaking and getting overtaken by fellow EDWINS, we had a blast. Most of us sat on a bicycle after 20-30 years yet were able to complete the ride at our own pace. Though we complained about our legs hurting for the next five days, if I had a chance, I would do it all again. The sun had disappeared and the weather was very pleasant for an enjoyable bike ride. It costs MYR 309 per adult and there is no time restriction.

Penang Hill, hardly 15 minutes from downtown, is the first colonial hill station developed in Peninsular Malaysia comprising of Western Hill, Bukit Laksamana, Tiger Hill, Flagstaff Hill and Government Hill, the tallest standing 833 meters above sea level. We took a ride on the Funicular Railway from the lower station at Air Itam to the upper station at Penang Hill. This is the longest track in Asia and the steepest tunnel track in the world! The train ride costs MYR 30 and access to The Habitat Penang Hill another MYR 50. The Habitat provides the most authentic and educational Malaysian rainforest experience. We climbed up to The Sky Walk and Viewing Decks offering a spectacular 180-degree view of George Town. Senior citizen and physically-impaired friendly features ensure accessibility for all. Sunrise and sunsets are truly mesmerising from here.

I met the GM of Penang Hill Corporation, Cheok Lay Leng and he told me that they are introducing more nature walks and heritage trails this year. penanghill.gov.my

EDWINS also got the opportunity to partake in Goche Corporation's Penang Amazing Race where we can EAT, EXPLORE, PLAY, LEARN & SPEAK like a true Penangite. Wonderfood Museum Penang was the first stop-over where we got to whet our appetite with models of over 100 different types of popular



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street food, pose for hilarious selfies with outsized snacks and learn how locals eat at miniature hawker stalls. Many of us tried the Durian fruit but found its smell intolerable and threw up. I was told that, owing to its lingering bad odour, the fruit is not allowed in elevators or flights! penangamazingrace.com.my

Other challenges included playing the drums and making condensed milk tea by the street side. The last leg of the Penang Amazing Race challenge took us to Peranakan Mansion, a museum dedicated to Penang's Peranakan heritage and served as a residence and office to the 19th century Chinese tycoon, Chung Keng Quee.

Here we had a treasure hunt to find hidden objects in the mansion. Entry to Peranakan Mansion featured in the reality TV shows *The Amazing Race* and the *Amazing Race Asia*, is

MYR 20. pinangeranakanmansion.com.my

A must-visit destination in Penang is TOP at Komtar Tower, Penang's tallest skyscraper. Dato Richard Koh (founder and Group MD of TOP) is so friendly and down-to-earth that spending time with him and Dato Jean Koh (Group CEO) was a treat. He took a few of us for a private tour of the Jurassic Research Centre (Adult: MYR 58) where they have brought 200 dinosaurs back to life through animatronics. The place combines entertainment with education in informative exhibits that are perfect for children and adults.

thetop.com.my

After this we were moved to the 65th floor where we geared up with harnesses and helmets to undertake the world's highest ropes course challenge involving six gravity-defying, gut-wrenching obstacles at The Gravityz (MYR 239). This is not for the weak-hearted and anyone who's afraid of heights. We walked on grills, sat on a reclining chair (which was leaning towards the outside of the building) and even did a short zip-line ride. I was not scared at all and hence completed the task so fast that it lasted barely 3-4 minutes to my utter disappointment. thegravityz.com

On the 68th floor is Rainbow Skywalk, the highest outdoor glass skywalk in Malaysia offering stunning views of George Town and beyond.

A visit to Craft Batik factory showed us the process of making the famed Penang Batik. Many of us coloured the wax batik pattern and saw it being stamped on to the fabric. penang-batik.com.my

Our farewell dinner, a memorable night indeed, was at Gudang@Lebuh Cecil, Penang's first warehouse-inspired event space located in George Town incorporating a magnificent 30 ft. high ceiling and multi-functional space. Gudang@Lebuh Cecil is fit to host any event whether social, corporate or cultural. The open concept of 40,000 sq. ft. allows clients to customise the space, giving each event its own personal touch.

There are many places we could not make time for like shopping at Gurney Plaza and Queensbay Mall, hiking at Penang National Park which has a meromictic lake (the layers of water do not intermix in this lake), Entopia, the largest butterfly garden in the world and the Kek Lok Si Temple with its 10,000 Buddha pagoda. But that's for another trip soon.