



Fountain at the entrance to the town of Balik Pulau

DISCOVERING BALIK PULAU

Bruce Robinson & Mark Bishop

What sparked our interest in visiting Balik Pulau back in November 2008 was a heritage brochure we found at our hotel in George Town, Penang. Although we had frequently visited Penang and been guided by George Town's heritage walks to many wonderful places, we had never really thought much about what might lie on the other side of the Island.

As well as a fun map with clever line drawings and small photos, the brochure – called 'Discover Balik Pulau' – provides brief, informative accounts of historic buildings and monuments, restaurants, a traditional Malay healer, a silversmith, batik shops, wooden Malay houses and much more.

Because our interests revolve around traditional food we were especially keen to visit the spice and fruit farm, the herb garden, the paddy fields and the shrimp paste business – and also to sample the laksa (spicy noodle soup) and refreshing fruit drinks mentioned in the brochure.

Learning from the brochure that we could reach Balik Pulau by catching the Rapid Penang Bus from downtown George Town, we headed to the bus station straight away.

Through Suburbs and Hills

A bonus of the trip across Penang Island is the short ride through George Town's suburbs. The bus picked up shoppers heading to the massive, bland suburban shopping malls, kids going to school and local people travelling from one part of town to another. This made us feel less like tourists and more involved in the day to day activities of the community.

As we looked at the huge concrete shopping complexes with their operatic scale entrances and featureless, treeless car parks we pondered the prospect that, one day, these too could be included

in a heritage trail showcasing the unique lifestyle of early 21st century communities. We did not feel optimistic, though, that it could ever match the intensity of the colourful, bustling, historic heart of George Town – let alone its history!

The suburban sprawl and expressways gave way to smaller communities which appear to thrive on farming and local commerce. Then the two lane road wound up into lush tropical bush weaving along the hillside and offering occasional glimpses of the ocean.

They are building a new road with elegant sweeping flyovers, presumably intended to iron out the tight twists and turns of the old road. It was intriguing to see the construction of the new road frozen, often in mid air it seemed, and looking like a car chase set from a James Bond movie. We assume completion of the roadway is delayed while the worst of the rainy season weather passes.



The Balik Pulau trail map

A Swashbuckling History

In spite of being small, Balik Pulau, like Penang Island, came about as a consequence of an exciting almost swashbuckling history.

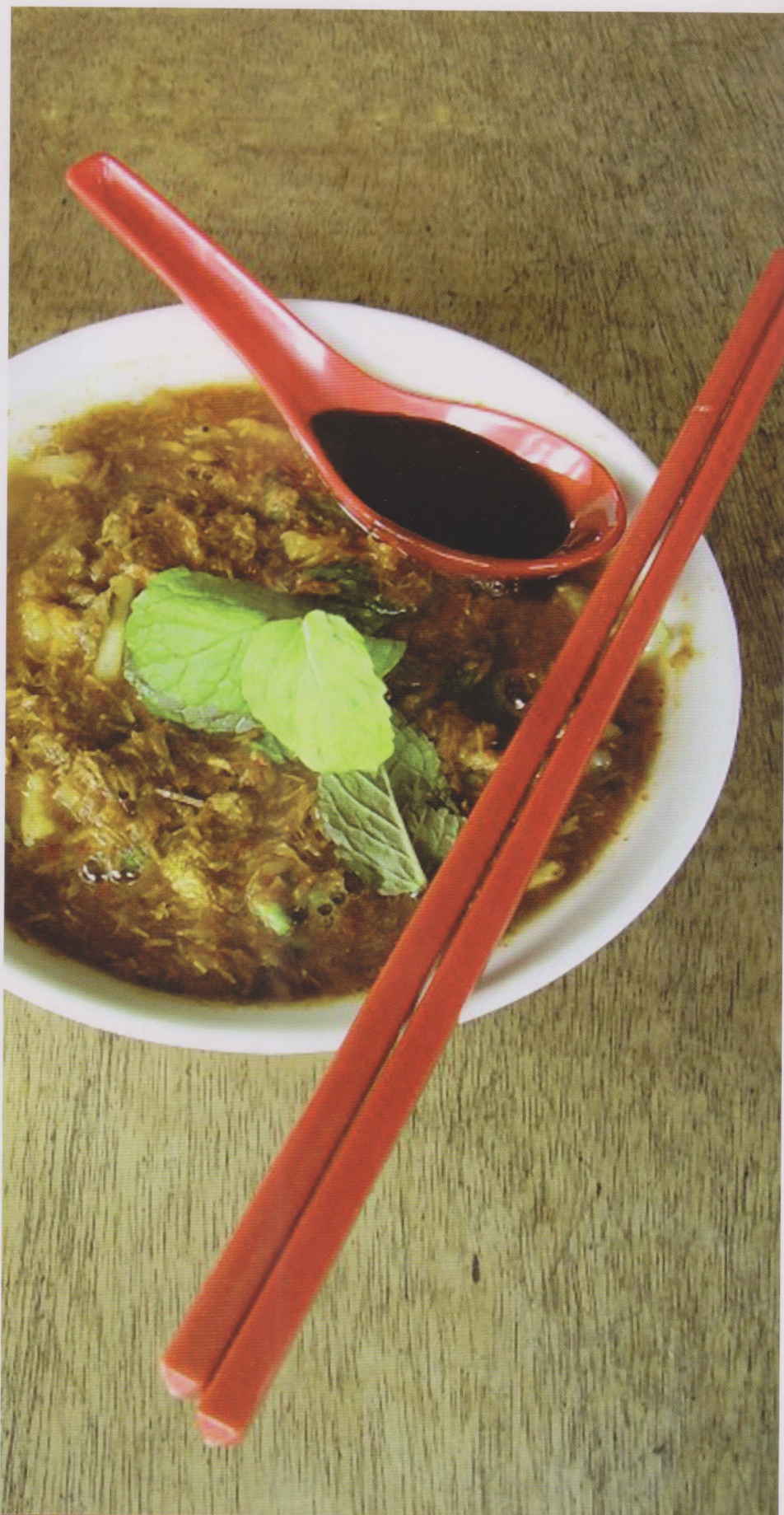
The brochure explained that in the late 1700s Penang Island was part of the Malay kingdom of Kedah which was constantly menaced by the kingdom of Siam. When Burma threatened Siam, the Sultan of Kedah took advantage of the situation and offered to support Burma with arms. In retaliation, the enraged King of Siam threatened to attack Kedah.

Fearing the perils of war, Chinese residents of Phuket and Malays living in southern Thai settlements moved to the relative safety of Penang Island. Some 70 refugees settled into the generous valley of Balik Pulau. Here, surrounded by fertile hills open at one end to the sea, they started up small farms planting paddy, coconut, fruit and coffee.

In 1786 Francis Light – the first British Governor of Penang – leased Penang Island for 10,000 Spanish Dollars from the Sultan of Kedah in return for protection from Siam. By 1794, the East India Company had developed clove and nutmeg plantations in Balik Pulau and by the 1800s Balik Pulau had become a thriving centre of agriculture exporting exotic, highly valuable spices around the world, as it still does today.

On the Spice Trail

The bus took us to the smart, new main bus station at the upper end of Balik Pulau at which point we were able to check the map references in our brochure. Having easily found our way to the Balik Pulau *laksa* restaurant, just down the road from the bus station, we knew we were onto a good thing.



An enticing bowl of *laksa*



Fresh nutmeg fruit

This small, clean, busy business has been serving Grandma Khoo's two unique variations of this famous dish since 1970: "Assam Laksa" - tamarind flavoured, and "Laksa Lemak" - a sweeter variety with a coconut milk base. Of course we tried both. They also serve an extraordinarily refreshing cold drink made from white nutmeg and sour plum.

For many people around the world, nutmeg is just the fine, bitter, deep brown powder that we sprinkle on our cappuccino or that our mother used to sprinkle on milk and rice puddings. Similarly, most of us know the humble

clove simply as the spice you cook with apples and the source of an especially pungent massage oil. But because of our interest in food we were determined to discover how nutmeg and cloves are grown.

How Cloves and Nutmeg Grow

The lush hills surrounding Balik Pulau are planted with clove, nutmeg, durian and fruit orchards. The Lim family farm, a ten minute walk from the *laksa*

restaurant, turned out to be a fascinating introduction to a Malaysian home as well as a source of the exotic spices that have for centuries influenced and enhanced global cuisine.

The Lim family has been farming nutmeg and cloves at the same place in Balik Pulau for over 100 years so we figured this was where we could learn about these mysterious spices. Waving our 'Discover Balik Pulau' map as our entry credentials, we were warmly greeted by English-speaking Mrs Lim and immediately taken on a tour of the multi-product farm.

While the well established family business may be based on nutmeg, clove and durian, Mrs Lim's personal interest is eggs which she supplies to the local market. Free range pheasants, chickens, turkeys and different varieties of ducks all scratch around behind the house under the magnificent broad-branched fruit trees. If, to this vast collection of fowl, you add fish, rabbits, turtles and snakes sleeping in trees, Balik Pulau has by default a fascinating zoo!

The nutmeg fruit looked to us like a Nashi Pear but about the size of a plum. The pale yellow flesh of the fruit can be sliced and eaten raw, crushed for its juice for drinks or cooked to make an excellent jam. The hard dense seed comes in a surprising range of colours from light to deep dark brown, and is crushed to produce nutmeg oil or ground into nutmeg powder. The seed is enclosed by a highly aromatic, delicate, red seed coat which is dried and used for colouring and flavouring and which we know as mace. This makes nutmeg the only tropical fruit that is the source of two different spices.

We were early for the clove picking season - November to January - but apparently cloves are harvested by men climbing tall bamboo ladders to hand pick the budding fresh green twigs. Later the clove twigs are sun dried on large mats in front of the house until they turn

dark brown. Mrs Lim explained that these dried cloves are separated by hand into three grades; bud only, bud and stalk and a mix of the two, each grade eventually fetching a different market price.

The heady aromatic air around the farm was hardly needed to encourage us to purchase nutmeg seeds and a small bag of cloves to take home, smell, show friends and use.

Houses, Schools and Churches

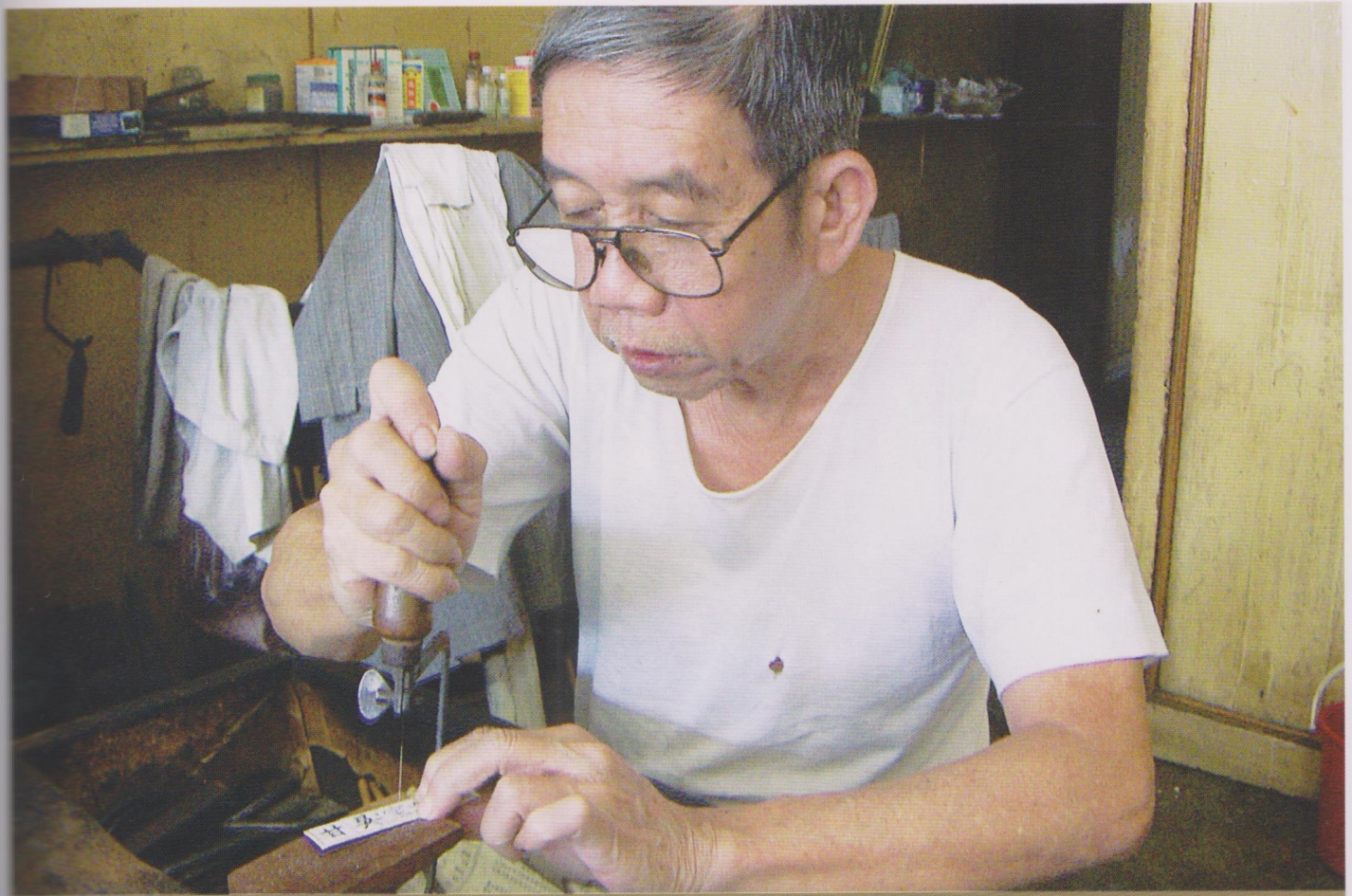
Next door to the spice and fruit farm are four small, simple, beautifully-maintained wooden houses, some painted bright fresh colours, others stained dark with oil. For anyone from Australasia, these delightful houses have a familiar feel, reminiscent of the ubiquitous "batch" or beach holiday homes dotted along New Zealand and Australian beaches. Much loved for their simplicity, they are affectionately and deeply rooted into our beachside holiday culture and folklore and we wondered if their unaffected style was originally taken from these adorable Malay homes.

Closer to the fishing village harbour-front of Balik Pulau, there are excellent examples of the more elaborate Malay *kampong* (village) house. These wooden houses are built on stilts, many of them above wet paddy fields or coastal waters. Raising the house on stilts protects it from flooding and from wild beasts, and allows cooling air movement under the floor boards. Often these houses have deep protective verandahs which are important living spaces during the rains and on very hot days.

Walking back from the spice farm we found the Sacred Heart and St George's schools opposite each other, bustling with children on lunch break. Both these large schools have noble community origins.



Sacred Heart Church



Silversmith, Mr Fong Ten Sent

The Sacred Heart was originally founded in the 1800s as an orphanage where classes were conducted by Hakka-speaking French missionary priests not just for the orphans but for the sons and daughters of Hakka farmers.

In due course the girls' section became a Mandarin language convent school for girls, while the boys' section developed into an English language school called St George's. Both are now Malaysian national curriculum schools teaching students from the surrounding district.

The quaint Roman Catholic Church next to the Sacred Heart School has an international touch to its history which says a lot about the growing prosperity of Balik Pulau. The church began as a thatched structure in 1854, and was extended later as the congregation grew, using granite from the surrounding hills.

The granite altar has both Chinese and European motifs, the beautiful stained glass window came from Belgium, and the tenor bell in the bell tower was cast in France.

Where Three Roads Meet

Three roads from different parts of Penang Island converge at a roundabout at what you might call the middle of Balik Pulau. In the 18th century this was the site of the public water pump and a water trough for elephants and horses. Elephants and horses have long since given way to cars and motorcycles, but the flow of traffic is still gentle around the white monument set in a circular garden where the roads meet.

This modest monument was built by a wealthy local farmer to commemorate the visit of the Governor of Malacca to Balik Pulau in 1882. The picture in our brochure shows the monument crowned with a fine weathervane, but the weathervane seems since to have vanished.

On the main road, just as it joins the roundabout, there is a small shop housing a silversmith. Inside we were able to talk with the silversmith while he was at his work bench. Some of his pieces are incredibly detailed and delicate and the nano-sized abacuses are a testament to his laser-sharp eyesight.

Our guide map identified many more places of interest in the busy area below the monument. The variety is so great it is hard to decide where to head first. The Muslim mosque and graveyard, the traditional Malay healer, the herb garden,



Making "bedak sejuk"

The family purchase salted shrimp pulp made from the tiny "minute shrimp". This slightly fermenting pulp is sun dried before being ground, then pressed through a grinder then dried again. The resulting brownish paste is compacted and sold in blocks.

On the Way Home...

Our return trip to George Town retraced the hillside road flanked with jungle then took us back down into the outer suburbs between the airport and George Town.

This part of the return journey followed a different suburban route from the one out to Balik Pulau. The bus wove its way through desperately narrow streets, again picking up school children on their way home and a noticeable number of elderly, well dressed Chinese ladies with tightly permed (and more often than not impossibly black) hair – perhaps on their way to or home from Mah-jong and tea.

It was fascinating to see how the close-packed suburban homes had a style not unlike those we had seen in Balik Pulau, but often with modern additions such as brick feature walls, transparent corrugated plastic-roofed carports and concrete garden ornaments. The compression of these homes was in sharp contrast to the openness and tree filled gardens of the fortunate residents of Balik Pulau but both shared the quietness of the streets and the hushed busyness of people going about their daily routines.

ha

the paddy fields – yes in the middle of town – the batik business where a young craftsman hand paints batik designs, or the business which produces "Bedak Sejuk", a cooling face powder made from quality broken rice and perfumed with the fragrance of *pandan* leaves.

Belacan – an Odorous Business

We had made that typical travellers' error of spending too much time early in our tour on things that specially interested us, forgetting how much more the place

has to offer. As time was running out we decided to focus on food and headed for the shrimp paste factory.

Less a clanking, groaning, metallic factory and more a well established cottage industry, this is where the Lo family makes a fermented shrimp paste known locally as *belacan*. After the sweet aromatic smells of the spice farm, the *belacan* process is pretty stinky. This can be forgiven when you realise how important *belacan* is as an ingredient in Malay, Chinese and Nyonya cooking – providing that slightly pungent, sweet and rich but refreshing taste at the base of so many regional dishes.



Bringing in the day's catch, Pulau Betong



Drying cloves