

Penang, Malaysia — 90-Day Survival Guide

0. City Overview & Quick Facts

Penang is Malaysia's most distinctive island state. Its capital, George Town, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site packed with colonial shophouses, street art, clan jetties, and what many Malaysians consider the best street food in the country. For nomads, Penang offers English-speaking infrastructure, excellent private healthcare, a compact walkable core, lower rents than Kuala Lumpur, and a food scene that makes it easy to eat well on a tight budget.

Fact	Detail
Population	~1.74 million (Penang state); ~250,000+ in George Town
Area	1,048 km ² (Penang Island + mainland Seberang Perai)
Elevation	Sea level to 833 m at Penang Hill
Language	Malay (official); English widely spoken; Hokkien, Mandarin, Tamil common
Currency	Malaysian ringgit (MYR / RM)
Timezone	MST (UTC+8)
Climate	Tropical; hot and humid year-round, 24–32°C
Religion	Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Taoism, Confucianism
Power	240V, Type G plugs (UK-style 3-pin)
Water	Tap water treated but most residents drink filtered/boiled/bottled
Internet	50–100 Mbps fibre common; 4G/5G available

Why nomads stay: food culture, English, heritage charm, lower cost than KL, strong private hospitals, compact size.

Why nomads leave: heat/humidity, limited nightlife, weaker public transport than KL, smaller dating/social scene, seasonal haze.

1. Landing — First 72 Hours

Arrival at Penang International Airport (PEN)

PEN is at Bayan Lepas, about 20 km south of George Town.

Airport to George Town

Option	Cost	Time	Best For
Grab / taxi	RM 45–60	25–35 min	Door-to-door, night arrivals, heavy bags
Rapid Penang Bus 102	RM 2–4	40–60 min	Daytime, small pack, budget
Airport transfer	RM 60–90	25–35 min	Pre-arranged comfort

Pre-install Grab before arrival. Drivers are plentiful at PEN.

First 24-hour checklist

1. **Cash.** Withdraw RM 1,000 (~\$230) at the airport. Hawker stalls, buses, small shops, and wet markets are largely cash-only.
2. **SIM.** Buy at arrivals: CelcomDigi, Maxis (Hotlink), or U Mobile. A 30-day tourist SIM with 20–50 GB costs RM 30–60. Passport required. CelcomDigi generally has strong Penang coverage.
3. **Transit card.** Buy a Touch 'n Go card at 7-Eleven (RM 10 deposit + load RM 20) or use the eWallet app. It works on Rapid Penang buses and is useful elsewhere in Malaysia.
4. **Base.** George Town core for culture and food; Pulau Tikus/Gurney for cafés and condos; Batu Ferringhi for beach but more touristy; Bayan Lepas for cheapest rents near airport.

Move-in tests for any rental

- AC in bedroom and main area.
- Wi-Fi speed test — aim 50+ Mbps for video calls.
- Hot water in shower.
- Kitchen minimum: fridge, induction plate, kettle.
- Security: guard booth, key-card access.
- In-unit washer or building laundry.
- Pool/gym — standard in RM 2,000+ condos.
- Noise check at 9 PM.
- Written lease + deposit terms (typically 2 months deposit + 1 month advance + utility deposit).

2. Visa & Immigration

Malaysia's national rules apply. Penang is generally easy for short to medium stays.

Option	Detail	Notes
Visa-free entry	90-day stamp-on-arrival for many passports (US, UK, EU, AU, CA, etc.)	Confirm on imi.gov.my before travel
Overstay	RM 30/day fine; potential blacklist	Avoid; exit before day 90
Special Pass	Short extension possible at Immigration	Not guaranteed; fee applies
DE Rantau digital nomad pass	Remote-work pass for eligible applicants	Income requirement ~MYR 10,000/month; foreign clients only
MM2H	Long-stay pass with fixed-deposit / income requirements	Via agent

Practical advice * The 90-day stamp is a hard limit. Many nomads rotate to Singapore, Thailand, or Indonesia and return. * Keep 6+ months passport validity; immigration checks this. * Carry an onward ticket and a bank statement in case asked.

3. Money & Banking

Penang is card-friendly in malls, supermarkets, hotels, and Grab, but cash dominates at hawker stalls, wet markets, small shops, and buses.

ATMs * Maybank, CIMB, Public Bank are reliable and widespread. * Withdraw RM 1,000 chunks to reduce flat foreign-ATM fees.

Cards and apps * Visa/Mastercard accepted at mid-range restaurants, malls, supermarkets. * Grab app accepts card and cash. * Touch 'n Go card/eWallet for buses and some retail. * Wise/Revolut useful for mid-market rates.

Local bank account * Difficult on a 90-day tourist stamp. Maybank is the most flexible but usually requires proof of Malaysian address and a longer-stay pass.

Tipping * Not customary. Hawkers price all-in. Some restaurants add 10% service charge.

4. Neighborhoods & Housing

George Town core (UNESCO zone)

Historic, dense, walkable, heritage shophouses, street food on every corner. 1BR rent RM 1,200–2,000 (\$275–455). Best for culture-first nomads and food lovers. Some buildings are older and may have noise or narrow stairs.

Gurney / Pulau Tikus

Coastal, upscale, mall-heavy, café density, expat-heavy. 1BR rent RM 2,500–4,000 (\$570–910). Best for café nomads, beach access, and modern amenities.

Tanjung Tokong / Seri Tanjung Pinang

Newer waterfront, spacious modern condos. 1BR rent RM 2,000–3,500 (\$455–795). Best for families or those wanting a resort-style building.

Tanjung Bungah

Quiet, beachy, suburban. 1BR rent RM 1,500–2,500 (\$340–570). Best for slower pace; fewer food options than George Town.

Batu Ferringhi

Resort strip, touristy, night market, beach. 1BR rent RM 1,200–2,000 (\$275–455). Best for beach lovers; furthest from George Town food scene.

Bayan Lepas

Industrial zone near airport, cheapest rents, least character. 1BR rent RM 1,000–1,800 (\$230–410). Best for tight budgets or tech-zone workers.

Renting tips

- Use iProperty, PropertyGuru, Airbnb (extended stay), Facebook groups, or Spotahome.
- Standard lease: 2 months deposit + 1 month advance + utility deposit.
- Electricity often separate: RM 150–300+/month if AC runs heavily.
- Internet usually tenant-contracted: RM 120–180/month for 50–100 Mbps fibre.
- Many condos include pool and gym.

5. Transport

Penang has no metro, so transport is Grab, bus, scooter, bicycle, or walking in the heritage core.

Grab

- Default transport for nomads. Cheap and reliable in George Town.
- Short trips RM 8–15; across town RM 20–35; airport RM 45–60.
- Cash or card via app.

Rapid Penang bus

- Government-subsidized network covering the island.
- Fare: RM 1.40–5.00 cash (exact change) or Touch 'n Go.
- Hours: most routes ~6 AM – 11 PM.
- Moovit is often better than Google Maps for bus tracking.

Useful routes * 101: George Town → Batu Ferringhi → Teluk Bahang (beaches, ESCAPE park). * 102: George Town → Airport → Bayan Lepas. * 103: Komtar → Pulau Tikus (Gurney Drive hawkers). * 104: George Town → Air Itam (Kek Lok Si, Penang Hill lower station). * 202: George Town → Pulau Tikus → Tanjung Bungah → Batu Ferringhi (north-coast beach hop). * 401: George Town → Balik Pulau (rural Penang, durian farms). * 502: George Town → Penang National Park (Monkey Beach, Muka Head).

Key hubs: Komtar (central), Weld Quay (ferry to Butterworth), Gurney Drive, Air Itam.

Cycling

- LinkBike rental stations in George Town for short rides.
- Low-density traffic outside rush hour makes cycling viable in parts.

Ferry

- Penang Island–Butterworth ferry connects to the mainland ETS train station.
- Useful for train trips to KL, Ipoh, or Thailand.

Scooters

- Less common than in Bali or Vietnam but available. Helmet and IDP recommended.

6. Food & Dining

Penang's hawker culture is the main attraction. Hawker stalls are permanent, licensed, family-run infrastructure — not food trucks. Prices are fixed and portions are generous.

Must-try dishes

- **Char kway teow** — wok-charred flat rice noodles with prawns, cockles, Chinese sausage.
- **Asam laksa** — sour tamarind fish-based noodle soup with pineapple, mint, cucumber.
- **Nasi kandar** — rice with curried meat/fish drenched in multiple sauces.

- **Curry mee** — spicy coconut curry broth, yellow noodles, cockles, tofu puffs.
- **Hokkien mee / prawn mee** — rich prawn-pork broth with egg noodles and pork slices.
- **Oyster omelette** — crispy egg with fresh oysters and chilli sauce.
- **Rojak** — shrimp paste fruit-and-vegetable salad with crushed peanuts.
- **Chendol** — shaved ice with pandan jelly, red beans, coconut milk, palm sugar.
- **Satay** — charcoal-grilled skewers with peanut sauce.
- **Popiah** — fresh vegetable spring roll with jicama.
- **Apom balik** — folded sweet pancake with corn and coconut.

Iconic hawker centres and streets

- **Gurney Drive Hawker Centre** — touristy but authentic; char kway teow, oyster omelette, laksa, rojak.
- **New Lane Hawker Centre** — claypot rice, duck porridge, curry mee, satay.
- **Chulia Street Night Market** — wonton mee, popiah, satay, lor bak.
- **Kimberley Street** — duck porridge, chendol, late-night supper.
- **Lorong Selamat Char Koay Teow** — legendary but long lines.
- **Siam Road Char Koay Teow** — Michelin Bib Gourmand pushcart; sells out by mid-afternoon.
- **Air Itam Sister Curry Mee** — 70+ year-old stall, Michelin-selected.

Typical prices

- Hawker meal: RM 6–15 (\$1.40–3.45).
- Hawker-only 3-meal day: RM 24–36 (\$5.50–8.30).
- Monthly hawker budget: ~\$165–250.
- Mid-range dinner for two: RM 60–120 (\$14–28).
- Beer at licensed bar: RM 12–25.

Daily food budgets

- Hawker-first: ~\$5.50–8.30/day.
- Mix of hawker + cafés: ~\$10–15/day.
- Restaurant-heavy: ~\$20–30/day.

7. Remote Work & Coworking

Penang is not as coworking-dense as KL or Bangkok, but remote work is comfortable if you pick the right base.

Internet

- Standard apartment fibre: 50–100 Mbps for RM 120–180/month.
- Café Wi-Fi is slower than KL or Chiang Mai but usable for writing and light tasks.
- Do video calls from your apartment or a coworking space.

Coworking spaces

- **Settlements (George Town):** day pass ~RM 25, monthly ~RM 400.
- **Common Ground (Pulau Tikus):** day pass ~RM 50, monthly ~RM 499.
- **Infinity8 Reserve George Town:** from ~RM 18/hr.
- **Regus, Flyspaces, Office-Hub:** various locations and prices.

Monthly hot desks generally range RM 400–900; dedicated desks and private offices higher.

Time zone

- UTC+8. Good for Europe/Middle East/Australia; rough for US time zones.

8. Healthcare

Penang has excellent private hospitals and is a medical-tourism destination.

Facility	Location / Phone	Notes
Gleneagles Penang	1 Jalan Pangkor, George Town; +60 4-222 9111	Private, international standard
Island Hospital	308 Jalan Macalister, George Town; +60 4-238 3333 (WhatsApp) / +60 4-228 8222	Private, expat-popular, 600 beds
Pantai Hospital Penang	82 Jalan Tengah, Bayan Baru; +60 4-643 3888	Private, near airport, 190 beds
Penang General Hospital	Jalan Residensi, George Town; +60 4-222 5333	Public, 1,200 beds, cheapest but crowded

Travel insurance * Get outpatient coverage, not just hospitalization. * Save the 24-hour emergency line before you need it. * US Consulate Penang: +60 4-226 1188 (for insurance disputes or emergencies).

Emergency numbers * General emergency: **999** * Mobile emergency: **112** *
Tourist Police: +60 3-2149 6590

9. Dental

Penang has good private dental clinics, many inside or affiliated with hospitals.

Procedure	Typical price (USD)
Cleaning + checkup	\$25–50
Filling	\$30–80
Crown	\$250–600
Single implant	\$1,000–1,800

Travel insurance usually excludes dental; budget separately.

10. Safety & Emergency

Penang is one of the safest cities in Southeast Asia. Violent crime against foreigners is rare.

Common risks

- **Petty theft / pickpocketing** in crowded markets and on buses. Keep bags closed and on the curb side of the street (not road side) to avoid snatch theft from motorbikes.
- **Taxi drivers without meters** — use Grab or insist on the meter.
- **ATM / card skimming** — use ATMs inside bank branches when possible.

Natural hazards

- **Monsoon flooding** can affect low-lying George Town streets during heavy rain. If renting long-term, prefer higher floors.
- **Tsunami risk** is low; Penang's geography shelters it, though the 2004 tsunami did affect the island.
- **Dengue fever** is present year-round; use insect repellent and remove standing water.

Legal warnings

- Malaysian drug laws are severe, including for cannabis.
- Strict laws against insulting religion; be respectful online and offline.
- Alcohol is legal in non-Muslim venues but heavily taxed.
- Helmet mandatory on motorbikes; IDP recommended.

Beach safety

- Lifeguards are minimal at non-resort beaches.
- Jellyfish season varies; ask locals before swimming.

11. Weather by Month

Penang is hot and humid year-round, with temperatures barely moving. The main variable is rainfall and haze.

Season	Months	Conditions
Relatively drier	January–March	Best weather for cycling, beaches, and exploring
Hot, building humidity	April–May	Hotter, some afternoon storms
Southwest monsoon	June–August	Afternoon downpours, lush greenery
Inter-monsoon / heaviest rain	September–October	Most rainfall, possible haze from Sumatra forest fires
Wettest	November–December	Heaviest rain; plan indoor days and covered hawker centres

Best arrival windows: January–March. **Avoid if possible:** September–October (haze risk), November (heaviest rain).

Pack lightweight quick-dry clothing, an umbrella, sunglasses, and SPF 50+ sunscreen year-round.

12. Shopping & Daily Life

Supermarkets

- **Tesco / Lotus's, Giant, AEON** — full supermarkets across the island.
- **7-Eleven, myNEWS** — convenience stores on every corner.
- **Village Grocer / Jaya Grocer** — premium imports in Gurney/Pulau Tikus.

Electronics and repairs

- **Queensbay Mall (Bayan Lepas)** — largest electronics selection and authorized service centres.
- **Plaza Gurney** — tech + lifestyle.

Pharmacies

- **Guardian and Watsons** are nationwide chains; found in every mall.
- Common medications are often available without prescription; bring documentation for controlled substances.

Laundry

- Self-service laundromats everywhere in George Town: RM 5–10/load wash + dry.
- Most condos include a washer; many residents line-dry.

Shipping

- **Pos Malaysia** is reliable but slow.
- **DHL/FedEx** are fast and expensive.
- Bring critical laptop parts or medication from home.

13. Groceries, Markets & Meat

Cooking at home saves money, but hawker food is so cheap that many nomads eat out for most meals.

Fresh produce

- Wet markets (Chowrasta Market, Air Itam Market, Bayan Baru Market) have the cheapest fruit, vegetables, tofu, eggs, and seafood.
- Tropical fruit: bananas, papaya, pineapple, rambutan, mangosteen, durian (seasonal).

Meat and fish

- Halal chicken and beef widely available.
- Pork sold in Chinese markets and supermarkets, not in halal sections.
- Fresh seafood is excellent and cheap at wet markets.

Imported goods

- Village Grocer, Jaya Grocer, and AEON stock imported cheese, oats, pasta, sauces, wine, and beer.
- Western brands cost a premium.

Water

- Tap water is treated but most people drink filtered, boiled, or bottled water.

14. Language & Local Etiquette

English is widely spoken in George Town and service roles. Malay, Hokkien, Mandarin, and Tamil are also common.

Useful phrases

- **Terima kasih** — thank you
- **Tidak** — no
- **Permisi** — excuse me
- **Maaf** — sorry
- **Berapa harganya?** — how much?
- **Saya tidak faham** — I don't understand
- **Enak** — delicious
- **Pedas** — spicy

Etiquette

- Malaysia is multi-religious; respect all faiths.
- Remove shoes before entering homes and religious spaces.
- Use your right hand for giving and receiving.
- Dress modestly at mosques and temples; cover shoulders and knees.
- During Ramadan, avoid eating or drinking in front of Muslims in daytime; restaurants remain open for non-Muslims.
- Bargain gently at markets; fixed prices in shops and restaurants.

15. History & Culture Snapshot

Penang was founded as a British trading post in 1786, making George Town one of the oldest colonial settlements in Southeast Asia. It grew as a trading and immigration hub, attracting Malays, Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Armenians, and Europeans.

UNESCO World Heritage

George Town was listed in 2008 for its unique urban landscape: colonial administrative buildings, Chinese clan houses, Indian temples, Malay mosques, and traditional shophouses side by side.

Peranakan (Straits Chinese) culture

- The Baba-Nyonya community created a distinctive blend of Chinese and Malay culture.
- Visible in cuisine (nyonya laksa, kuih), architecture, and museums like Pinang Peranakan Mansion.

Street art and festivals

- Ernest Zacharevic's 2012 street-art project turned George Town's walls into a tourist attraction.
- Major festivals: Chinese New Year, Thaipusam, Hari Raya, George Town Festival, Hungry Ghost Festival, Nine Emperor Gods Festival.

Modern Penang

- The economy mixes tourism, manufacturing, medical tourism, and tech.
- Development pressure is changing the skyline, but the heritage core remains protected.

16. Tourism & Day Trips

Within George Town

Site	What it is	Entry
Pinang Peranakan Mansion	Restored Baba-Nyonya house	Small fee
Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (Blue Mansion)	Iconic blue courtyard house	Small fee / guided tours
Khoo Kongsi	Ornate Chinese clan house	Small fee
Street art (Armenian Street, etc.)	Murals and wrought-iron caricatures	Free
Clan Jetties	Stilted fishing villages	Free / donations
Fort Cornwallis	British colonial fort	Small fee
St. George's Church	Oldest Anglican church in Southeast Asia	Free
Kapitan Keling Mosque	Historic mosque	Free (dress modestly)

Around the island

Site	What it is	Entry
Penang Hill	Hill station with views; funicular railway	Funicular ~RM 8–16 return
Kek Lok Si Temple	One of Southeast Asia's largest Buddhist temples	Free; small fees for sections
Batu Ferringhi Beach	Beach and night market	Free

Site	What it is	Entry
Penang National Park	Coastal forest, Monkey Beach, Muka Head Lighthouse	Free; boat fees for some access
Tropical Spice Garden	Botanical garden	Small fee
ESCAPE Theme Park	Adventure park in Teluk Bahang	Ticketed
Balik Pulau	Rural Penang, durian farms, paddy fields	Free / tour costs

Day trips

- **Ipoh** — cave temples, old town, food; ~2 hours by train or bus.
- **Kuala Lumpur** — capital city; ~4–5 hours by bus or 3–4 hours by ETS train, or 1 hour flight.
- **Langkawi** — duty-free island; ferry or flight.
- **** Cameron Highlands**** — tea plantations, cooler climate; ~3–4 hours.

17. Master Links

Resource	URL / Contact	Use For
Immigration Malaysia	imi.gov.my	Visa rules
DE Rantau	mdec.my/derantau	Digital nomad pass
Tourism Malaysia Penang	visitpenang.gov.my	Events, festivals, official info
Rapid Penang	rapidpg.com.my / myrapid.com.my	Bus routes, fares
Gleneagles Penang	gleneagles.com.my/penang	Hospital
Island Hospital	islandhospital.com	Hospital
Penang Hill	penanghill.gov.my	Funicular tickets
iProperty	iproperty.com.my	Apartment listings
PropertyGuru	propertyguru.com.my	Apartment listings
Touch 'n Go	tngdigital.com.my	Card reload

18. Final Budget Table

Monthly cost-of-stay estimates for Penang, in USD. FX rate used: **4.40 MYR = 1 USD**.

Category	Lean Nomad	Comfortable Nomad	Premium Nomad
Room	\$350 (Bayan Lepas / older George Town studio or shared apartment)	\$650 (George Town core or Pulau Tikus 1BR)	\$1,200 (Gurney / waterfront 2BR or high-end condo)
Food	\$200 (hawker food, simple self-catering)	\$350 (hawker + cafés + occasional restaurant)	\$650 (daily restaurants + imported groceries + alcohol)
Transport	\$40 (buses + occasional Grab)	\$100 (Grab-heavy + weekly bus trips)	\$180 (private car / daily Grab)
Coworking	\$0 (cafés / apartment)	\$120 (monthly hot desk)	\$250 (dedicated desk / private office)
Insurance	\$70 (travel insurance)	\$130 (travel + outpatient)	\$220 (comprehensive nomad insurance)
Visa	\$0 (visa-free entry)	\$0 (visa-free entry)	\$0 (visa-free entry)
Entertainment	\$50 (local attractions, hawker centres, free heritage walks)	\$200 (weekend trips, Penang Hill, museums, events)	\$450 (fine dining, frequent travel, festivals, clubs)
Buffer	\$20	\$40	\$70
TOTAL / month	\$730	\$1,590	\$3,020
90-DAY TOTAL	\$2,190	\$4,770	\$9,060

Assumptions by Tier

Lean Nomad (~\$730/mo) Older studio or shared apartment in Bayan Lepas or budget George Town, hawker food three times daily, bus + occasional Grab, home/café workspace, basic travel insurance, free heritage walks and beaches.

Comfortable Nomad (~\$1,590/mo) George Town core or Pulau Tikus 1BR, hawker food plus cafés and occasional restaurants, regular Grab plus buses, monthly hot-desk coworking, outpatient insurance, weekend trips around Penang and Ipoh.

Premium Nomad (~\$3,020/mo) Gurney or waterfront 2BR, daily restaurant dining and imported groceries, private car or daily Grab, dedicated desk or

private office, comprehensive nomad insurance, fine dining, frequent travel to KL/Langkawi/Cameron Highlands.

19. Glossary of Local Terms

- **Char kway teow** — wok-charred flat rice noodles
- **Asam laksa** — sour tamarind fish-based noodle soup
- **Nasi kandar** — rice with curried meat/fish and multiple sauces
- **Curry mee** — spicy coconut curry noodle soup
- **Hokkien mee / prawn mee** — prawn-pork broth noodles
- **Rojak** — shrimp paste fruit-and-veg salad
- **Chendol** — shaved ice dessert with pandan jelly and coconut milk
- **Satay** — grilled skewers with peanut sauce
- **Popiah** — fresh vegetable spring roll
- **Apom balik** — folded sweet pancake
- **Mamak** — Indian-Muslim eatery
- **Hawker centre** — food court with multiple stalls
- **Wet market** — fresh produce/meat/fish market
- **Kopitiam** — traditional coffee shop
- **Clan jetty** — stilted waterfront village belonging to a Chinese clan
- **Baba-Nyonya / Peranakan** — Straits Chinese-Malay culture
- **Terima kasih** — thank you
- **Tidak** — no
- **Permisi** — excuse me

20. Sources & Credits

- Wikipedia — Penang, George Town, Malaysia
- Wikivoyage — Penang
- Immigration Department of Malaysia (imi.gov.my)
- Tourism Malaysia / visitpenang.gov.my
- Gleneagles Penang, Island Hospital, Pantai Hospital Penang
- Rapid Penang / myrapid.com.my
- Penang Hill official site
- Hawker and market pricing from 2026 sources

Compiled: 2026-07-16. Confirm visa, medical, and transport details directly with official sources before travel.