

Bukit Bendera

Also known as Bukit Bendera, Penang Hill is the highest peak on Pulau Pinang. At 830m above sea level, it is one of the best places to catch a bird's eye view of the island's expanse, including the panorama of George Town, the Penang Bridge and the Straits of Melaka.

One of the peaks on Penang Hill called Flagstaff Hill, is accessible via a healthy hike up via several hiking trails, including one from the Penang Botanical Gardens. Alternatively, visitors may also opt for a more leisurely trip up via the Penang Hill Railway which stretches just over 2km long and departs from the station at Air Itam, a mere 10 minutes' walk from the Kek Lok Si Temple. The 30-minute ride on the funicular railway takes place every 30 minutes and makes its way up a thrilling, at times near-45 degrees angle, with spectacular vistas along the way before reaching the top hill station at 701m above sea level.

Along the way, visitors will see a few stately mansions said to date back to colonial times, and at times, troops of monkeys scouring along the route of the train, hoping for visitors to throw out treats to them. Once at the top of the hill, arguably the most popular attraction is the Bellevue Hotel which boasts some of the best views from Penang Hill, a charming garden and aviary. The surrounding parks and gardens here are perfect for photography. You can also arrange for a leisurely tour of Penang Hill at Bellevue hotel. Another notable landmark that might interest visitors is the former Crag Hotel, built in 1890 by the famous Sarkies brothers who also built the Eastern & Oriental Hotel in George Town. Today, the Crag Hotel building serves as the office of the Public Works Department.

History

Just like Frasers Hill, Bukit Larut and other hill stations in Malaysia, Penang Hill was a favoured destination by the British in the late 1800's, who seek reprieve from the humid tropical climes. One of the earliest hill stations in the country, it is believed that Francis Light himself first trekked up Penang Hill from the grounds of the current Penang Botanical Gardens way back in 1788. Later, some of the British colonials of the time made their way up, using single-passenger sedans carried by at least six coolies. In the mid 19th century, a few bungalows were built by the British for private use. These include the Bel Retiro, Convalescent, Grace Dieu and Fairmont.

The Penang Hill funicular railway (railway operated by cables which counterbalances the ascending and descending train coaches) was completed and began its operations in the mid 1920's. The simple carriages originally used by the railway were replaced with four modern coaches in 1979. One of the old carriages can still be seen today at the Penang Museum, used as the Penang Heritage Trust souvenir kiosk.

Food

You will not have any problems finding a place to eat on your visit to Penang Hill. From the Lower Hill Station at the bottom to the top of Penang Hill, you can always find a snack vendor, food stall or restaurant at stations where the

train stops along the way. There are also plenty of places to eat once you're on top of Penang Hill.

Travel Advice

If you're planning to hike up Penang Hill, remember to wear comfortable shoes and light clothing like t-shirts and tracksuits. Make sure you drink lots of water and bring a water bottle with you for the hike. Start your hike early in the morning when it is not too hot. And most importantly, before you go, be sure to inform someone that you are off on the hike and let them know when to expect you back. Tracks that are available for your hike includes the stepped walk and jeep track near the Botanical Gardens (takes about 1 hour to get to the top), through the Hye Keat Estate in Air Itam, via Tiger Hill Trail (an 8km trail that starts near Kek Lok Si temple) and the Moon Gate which starts about 5 minutes away from the Botanical Gardens.

Getting There

By Bus

From Georgetown, take a Transit Link bus No 1, or No 101, or Lim Seng bus No 91, or minibus No 21 from Lebuah Chulia to the Air Itam Terminal.

Express buses ply the route from Penang to / from Kuala Lumpur and major cities in the country. Please visit (<http://www.plusliner.com/>) for more info. The main bus terminal in Penang is located next to the Ferry Terminal.

By Taxi

To get to Penang Island, long distance taxi service can be hired at Weld Quay, Penang. Tel: +604-2625721

By Plane

Daily flights via Malaysia Airlines (www.malaysiaairlines.com, tel:1 300 88 3000) and AirAsia (www.airasia.com, tel: 1-300-88 9933) to / from Penang to major cities in Malaysia. Penang's Bayan lepas International Airport is roughly 20km (45-minute drive) from the Georgetown city centre.

By Rail

Train service start at about 6.30am during school holidays and about 7.00 am on normal days, every half hour, until about 9.15pm. On Saturdays, the trains depart at 6.30am every half hour, until about 11.30pm. Tickets are RM4 for adults, RM2 for children under 12. For more information, please call the Penang Hill Railway Station at +604-828 3263 (Lower Station) or +604-829 9412 (Upper Station).

You can take the train from Kuala Lumpur to Penang, where it stops at the Penang Railway Station, close to the ferry terminal. For more information, visit www.ktmb.com.my or call their call centre at +603-22671200.

By Boat

Ferries can be boarded at Butterworth, in the mainland portion of Penang. Among Ferry Services available are:

Langkawi Ferry Services (Tel: +604-2643088)

Ekspress Bahagia (Tel: +604-2636255)

From the Ferry Terminal you can easily get a taxi ride to the bottom station of Penang Hill, in Ayer Itam.

A trishaw ride is also an ideal way to negotiate Georgetown's backstreets, and it costs around RM1.50 per kilometre.

To drive to Penang, from Kuala Lumpur, get onto the North-South Expressway heading north. Get onto the Penang Bridge (Tol is RM7 for cars), then head for Ayer Itam.