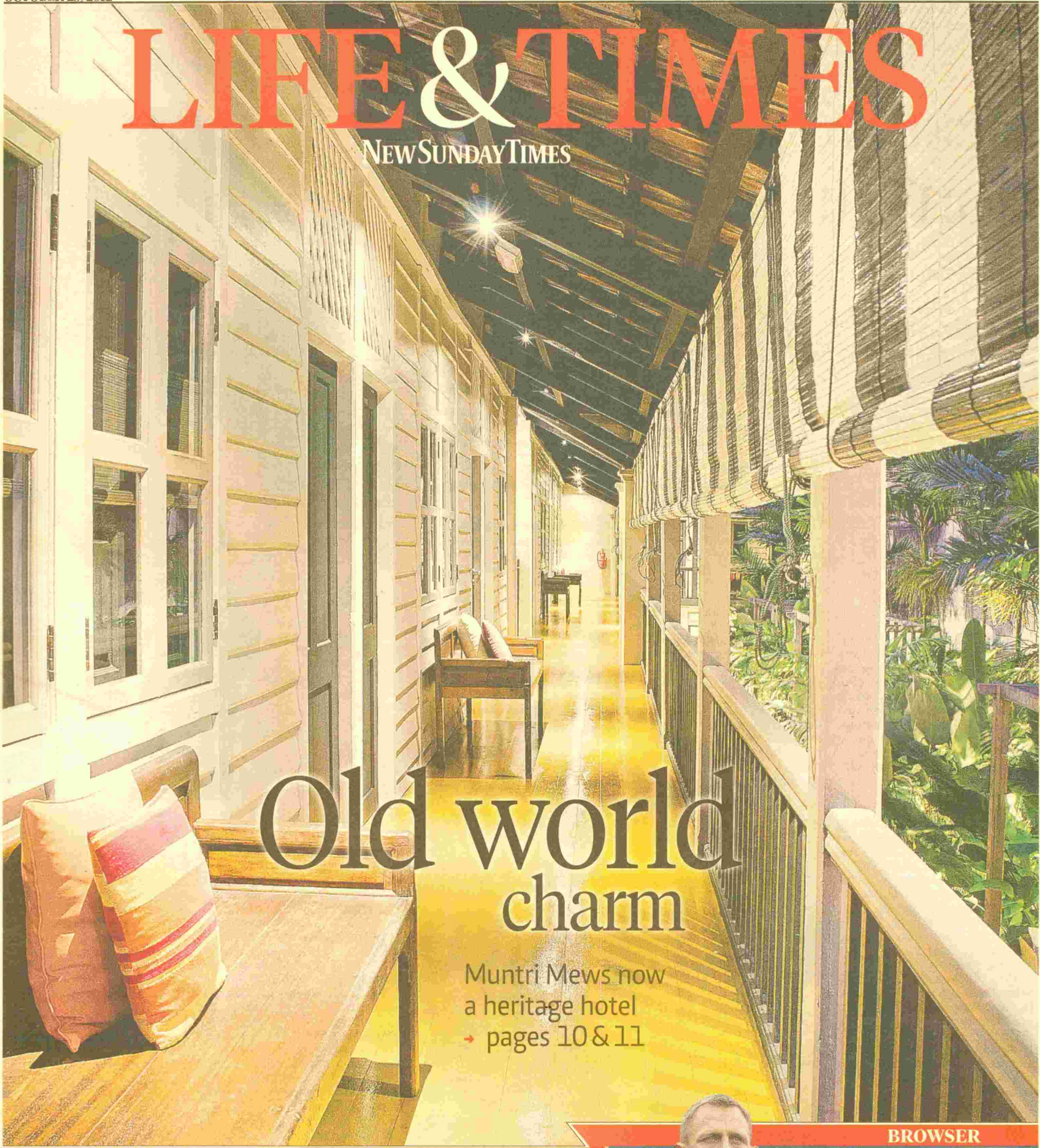


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# LIFE & TIMES

NEW SUNDAY TIMES



## Old world charm

Muntri Mews now  
a heritage hotel  
→ pages 10 & 11

### BROWSER

## KEEP IT PRIVATE

→ FAMILY PAGES 2&3

## PET THERAPY

→ FAMILY PAGES 6&7



James Bond's back and NST readers get to see **Skyfall** first — for FREE! Details in **Life & Times** on Monday

# Walking on gold

Stepping into Muntri Mews gives **Aneeta Sundararaj** that delicious feeling of having stumbled into Old Malaya

**S**TEP into Muntri Mews, a boutique hotel in the Unesco World Heritage Site in George Town, Penang, and one of the first things that may strike you is how compact everything is.

But by no means does this suggest congestion. In fact, the place is bright, breezy and leaves you pondering on the effort that has gone into its refurbishment.

By his own admission, Chris Ong, 50, co-owner of Muntri Mews is a contrarian. He invested in Muntri Mews at a time when popular opinion was to do so elsewhere. "I wanted to show people that they can live in the city. Many people don't want to live in the inner city and are scrambling to move out. Yet, the inner city has the lowest density in terms of the population."

Such an opinion comes as no surprise. After all, Ong grew up in Muntri Street. With a wave of his hand, he adds: "When I was growing up,



"I wanted to show people that they can live in the city."

Chris Ong  
Co-owner of Muntri Mews

there was an ice-cream seller here. There was also a man on a pushcart who sold soya bean milk and *ais kacang*. When I left for my studies, I told my parents I was never coming back. And, here I am, back in the street where I grew up."

Continuing, he says: "When I was growing up, Muntri Street used to be called Serani Lane. We had a Cathay cinema, a shrine and even a fortune-teller. This was the place to go to for

many of the traders. They would start in Victoria Street and when they made some money, they would move to the first middle class housing to live upstairs and downstairs. All these buildings on this street have very tall, high ceilings. They are statuesque."

Today, the rows of shop houses in Muntri Street, apparently named after the Menteri of Larut, have some of the best examples of well-preserved 19th Century Straits Chinese architecture in the country. Muntri Mews is a Grade 2 listed building situated at the end of a row of shops. Chris explains that the building was formerly the stables and carriage works where carriages were kept below, while staff was housed in the quarters upstairs. At the beginning of the 20th Century, these stables were turned into a garage for some of the grandest cars in Penang.

The previous owner of the building was Khoo Sian Ewe, a municipal councillor who died in 1959. He bequeathed the building to his children with a condition: They could not sell it for 50 years. Ong bought the property in 2009 and began restoration works immediately.

Ong is no stranger to the hotel business. His foray into this industry began in Galle, Sri Lanka. "Galle is similar to Penang in many ways. It had Dutch influence and there is a fort too. I arrived after the war. It was a time of growth and regeneration. In the beginning, when people told me to go and bid for a house that was being demolished, I thought they were mad. Why should I pay for a



Muntri Mews offers visitors the old world experience.

house that was going to be destroyed? But that was how I learnt about recycling and salvaging stuff. I saved windows and even bricks. I even bought jackwood (wood from the jackfruit tree) and it's very strong."

With refreshing honesty, he says: "To do up this place, of course I needed capital. Without that, you can't even begin restoration works. I used the beautiful old mansions as a guide to know what these buildings could have looked like. I looked at buildings like the Blue Mansion, Pinang Per-

anakan Mansion and Suffolk House. Then, I salvaged doors and windows from old houses. That's why you see that the windows in the room are not equal size. I had to cut the bottom bit to make them fit."

With capital and experience, was no surprise that Muntri Mews boutique hotel opened for business within a year. The decor is a mixture of Malay, Chinese and European influences that have made Penang famous.

"See all those plants there?" sa



If not for the cars in this recent photo of Muntri Street, one can imagine how the street used to look like when it was known as Serani Lane in the late 1700s.



Mews Cafe serves amazing **laksa** and **latte**.

caps on the columns. "We retained the structure, of course. The doors, we got from an old house. All the window frames are from another house. Some of the pillars and wooden beams are made from recycled wood. I replaced the roof tiles with Italian tiles from the 1930s. I found them at a demolished bungalow. These tiles are from Verona where they have an almost 2,000-year-old history of making tiles."

Then, Ong leans forward and points to the floor. "See these slabs of granite? Do you know you're walking on gold? When the Chinese travelled here to trade, they used these granite slabs as ballast in their ships. When they reached Penang, they unloaded it and traded it for spices and other things available here. So you can't find these anymore."

With pride, he adds: "I found these slabs and was here when every slab was laid down."

"The marble table was from a coffee shop that closed." The bases for these tables are different from a cheaper version where marble slabs merely rested on square metal frames. "Mine are of better quality. These allow you to push the chair in and you don't have to lean forward when you eat."

This blend of the old and modern in the ideas, concepts and structure is something that permeates all facets of Muntri Mews, down to its tagline: Boutique Accommodation For Today's Flashpacker. A flashpacker is neither a backpacker nor a high-end traveller, but someone in between. Certainly, the guests of Muntri Mews reflect this: "There is a US Marine living full-time in Penang. He is probably in his 70s now. He pays RM30 per night where he stays. But he uses a MacBook Pro and visits us every day for coffee. So, he spends about the same amount on his rent as he does for his coffee each day," says Ong.

Then, there's the resident artist, Foo May Lin, who can be seen enjoy-

ing her coffee while working in the relaxed ambience of the cafe which is part of Muntri Mews.

"I want my visitors and guests to enjoy a Sydney-style cafe experience," says Ong.

Picking up the antique cup and saucer which he painstakingly sourced from local dealers, he says: "I want them to feel as though they've entered a film set. It's as though they're experiencing the old world. Old Malaya."

Then, with a wide grin he adds: "But with amazing latte and laksa of course."

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Town, Penang  
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Website: [www.muntrimews.com](http://www.muntrimews.com)

### Chris Ong's seven must-visit places in and around Muntri Mews

1. Soul Kitchen: An eating establishment run by a German couple. (102 Lebu Muntri)
2. Mews Cafe: Part of Muntri Mews, it serves excellent coffee.
3. Moonie 47: This 'art and cafe' is a hostel-cum-gallery-cum-cafe. (47 Lebu Muntri)
4. Behind 50: An establishment started by three friends with a passion for food, art and 'making friends'. (50 Love Lane)
5. Nostalgie: A family-run cafe-cum-hotel managed by siblings Jean and Jason Lee. (34 Lorong Stewart)
6. Cafe&Restaurant: Serves Mediterranean dishes and aromatic coffee. (55 Lorong Stewart)
7. Nazlina's Spice Station Cooking School: Self-taught cook Nazlina Hussin offers cooking classes in traditional Malay cuisine.

PICTURES BY ANEETA SUNDARARAJ

Ong, pointing to a luscious little garden just outside the hotel. "That's where the communal bathrooms used to be."

Don't be alarmed. You don't have to use a communal bathroom now. All suites come with en suite bathrooms and are equipped with many mod cons like LCD televisions and WiFi service.

"Look at this," says Ong, standing outside one of the suites in Muntri Mews. "Almost everything is recycled." He looks up and points to the



Tea is served in tea sets at Muntri Mews.