

# Star Metro

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The "Pulau Pinang" ferry has been repainted in its characteristic yellow and is in the final stages of refurbishment at the Bagan Dalam dockyard in Butterworth. — Courtesy of Penang Ferry Museum



Filephoto of 'Pulau Pinang' at the Bagan Dalam dockyard in 2021. The refurbishment marks a remarkable transformation for the vessel.

## Keeping a legacy afloat

One of Penang's iconic double-decker ferries will live on as a museum. The attraction is due to open in the first half of next year and will be permanently berthed at Tanjung City Marina. >2&3



Julian (left) sharing details of his artworks at the Penang Ferry Stories exhibition at Penang State Art Gallery in Dewan Sri Pinang, which ends tomorrow.

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PENANG'S iconic passenger-vehicle ferries may have sailed off into the sunset but they live on in people's memories.

For over six decades, the double-deck vessels crossed the channel between the state's island and mainland.

Though replaced by modern fast boats, the old workhorses – all named after islands around Malaysia – still evoke nostalgia.

The first of these ferries, aptly named *Pulau Pinang*, came into service in 1957.

Carrying vehicles on the lower deck and passengers on the upper level, it revolutionised cross-strait transit.

From 1894 until then, people had to cross the channel on steamers, barges and even converted military landing craft.

A total of 15 bigger vessels were then built and commissioned between 1959 and 2002, the later ones capable of carrying vehicles on both decks.

They sported the famous yellow livery for most of their existence, though the eight that remained in use past the turn of the millennium got more colourful paint schemes from 2010.

Yet the allure of the 20-minute journeys remained unchanged.

There would be the captain's announcement at the start of the journey like "*Pulau Angsa akan bertolak sekarang*" (Pulau Angsa will now depart) followed by two deafening blasts of the ship's horn.

Passengers would then hear the sound of churning water as propellers stirred into action.

This would be followed by the sounds of groaning steel as the hull flexed against forces exerted by the sea plus vibrations from whirring engines.

As the ship pulled away from the berth and gained speed, salty sea air would buffet one's face.

When the destination terminal – either Raja Tun Uda in George Town or Sultan Abdul Halim in Butterworth – drew near, passengers enjoying the scenery would either scurry back to their vehicles or congregate near the exit.

Docking created a jolt, after which ramps were lowered and everyone went their separate ways.

For many workers, students and locals, this was part of their

# Nostalgia of voyages past

## Exhibition chronicles story of Penang's iconic ferries



During WWII, the Japanese took over 'Bagan'. The Allied Forces recaptured it after the war. — Photo from book "25 Tahun Suruhanjaya Pelabuhan Pulau Pinang"

daily routine.

For tourists and pleasure seekers, it was an essential experience on their itinerary.

Indeed, the Penang ferry experience was listed among the *501 Must-Take Journeys of the World* published by Bounty Books.

Cartoonist Lefty Julian remembers how relaxing the rides were.

"Once you were on board, whatever troubled you had dissipated with the wind," he said during the opening of the Penang Ferry Stories art exhibition.

Julian along with painters Khoo Cheang Jin and Koay Sheng Tat are among the participating artists of the show at the Penang State Art Gallery in Dewan Sri Pinang, which ends tomorrow.

Koay has fond memories of climbing to the upper deck and observing other passengers.

"You could easily tell who was going for classes, who was heading to work and who was cruising for leisure.

"It was a snapshot of society going about everyday life," he added.

The old ferries ceased their journeys on Dec 31, 2020.

During the final days of the service, Khoo took 10 return trips in over a week to produce a

9.9m-long scroll immortalising everything he saw.

"These ferries were an integral part of Penang's public transport system and I had to record the end of an era," he said.

According to Penang Port Commission (PPC) statistics, 232,516 four-wheeled vehicles, 418,326 motorcycles, 10,871 bicycles and 625,926 foot passengers were ferried across the channel that last year of service.

Those figures are somewhat skewed by the Covid-19 pandemic and movement restrictions, with 2019's total of 511,439 four-wheelers, 765,725 motorcycles, 11,964 bicycles and 1,536,373 foot passengers a more accurate reflection of ridership averages in recent years.

Time caught up with the ferries. Wear and tear led to frequent and costly breakdowns.

Some could not be repaired at all. This caused long wait times.

Most motorists also found either of the two Penang bridges an easier means of traversing the channel.

This led the state government to switch to serving only foot passengers and two-wheelers from 2021, using interim vessels.

Four new purpose-built and



Passengers taking the ferries during the last few days of service in December 2020. — Filepic

air-conditioned fast ferries were commissioned in August and will be the backbone of the service for the foreseeable future.

State tourism and creative economy committee chairman Wong Hon Wai, who attended the art exhibition, has a soft spot for the old ferries, having relied on them in his university days.

"The iconic double-deckers will live long in our hearts," he said.

### Enabling cross-strait mobility

PPC chairman Dr V. VijayaIndiran said the ferry service was initiated in 1894 by Straits Chinese entrepreneur Quah Beng Kee and four siblings.

Under the Beng Brothers banner, they ran foot passenger-only routes from Kedah Pier (off Fort Cornwallis) on the island to various stops on the mainland including Bagan Tuan Kechil (near the present-day North Butterworth Container Terminal), using steamers and small boats.

The service was taken over by the Penang Harbour Board in 1924, which started ferrying cars across the channel using barges in 1925 and built two facilities, Church Street Pier on the island and Mitchell Pier on the main-

land (near the current Sultan Abdul Halim Terminal).

The service proved successful so the steam-powered *Seberang* was built and put into use that year, followed by *Tanjong* and *Kulim* in 1929, and *Bagan* in 1938.

This newfound mobility aided Penang's economic growth but the Second World War put a spanner in the works.

*Seberang* had been sold by then, but *Tanjong* and *Kulim* were scuttled to prevent capture by Japanese forces.

*Bagan* was recaptured by Allied forces and returned to service after the war, alongside four converted landing craft named *Senangin*, *Lidah*, *Talang* and *Tengiri*.

They were not sufficient to cope with demand so by 1955, a new prototype ferry with double end-loading capabilities was ordered.

It was delivered in 1957 and named *Pulau Pinang*. In 1956, the board evolved into PPC and came under the purview of Transport Ministry.

With more ferries on the horizon, PPC constructed the Raja Tun Uda and Sultan Abdul Halim Terminals that were opened in 1959 by then prime minister



Visitors checking out a model of the iconic ferry and panels chronicling the service's history. — Photos: CHAN BOON KAI, ZHAFFARAN NASIB, LO TERN CHERN and JEREMY TAN/The Star and courtesy of Penang Ferry Museum and Penang Port Commission.



Khoo (in blue) showing his 9.9m-long scroll of the ferry service's final days, to Wong at the exhibition.



Artist's impression of the upcoming Penang Ferry Museum at the Tanjung City Marina in George Town, Penang. (Right) Pulau Kapas and Pulau Undan remain mothballed.



Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj.

The new vessels were of the improved Aman class. *Pulau Aman*, *Pulau Langkawi*, *Pulau Tioman* and *Pulau Pangkor* entered service in 1959, followed by *Pulau Lumut* in 1965, and *Pulau Redang* and *Pulau Labuan* both in 1971.

In naval parlance, a "class" is a group of ships built to the same general design and dimension.

They are typically named after the first vessel completed or commissioned.

Keen ship spotters can easily identify this type in old photos by the row of small windows on the upper deck, straight oval funnels, life rafts on the exterior and flush navigation bridges.

The next iteration, the Undan class, was the first capable of taking vehicles on the upper deck. The ferries called *Pulau Undan*, *Pulau Rawa* and *Pulau Talang-Talang* entered service in 1975.

They also necessitated the construction of new ramps at both terminals, enabling four ferries to dock at any one time.

The Rimau-class ships — *Pulau Rimau*, *Pulau Angsa* and *Pulau Kapas* — which followed in 1981 had a more modern design characterised by protruding navigation bridges, larger openings along both sides of the superstructure and rectangular sloped funnels.

Until the opening of Penang Bridge in 1985, the 14 ferries were the only connection between Penang island and mainland.

In 1988, the older part of the Sultan Abdul Halim Terminal collapsed due to overloading, killing 32 people and injuring 1,674. It



When the Pulau Pinang ferry is restored as a museum, visitors can explore the rooftop and navigation bridges (Right) The interior being refurbished.



was not rebuilt. The new terminals with the upper ramps for cars proved incompatible with the older Aman-class upper passenger decks, so the ferries were phased out and sold off by the 1990s.

The final two vessels — a second *Pulau Pinang* and *Pulau Payar* — were acquired in 2002. They are largely identical to the preceding Rimau class, except for the navigation bridge being set further back.

In 2017, Penang Port Sdn Bhd handed over ferry operations to Prasarana Malaysia, a government-owned entity which manages public transportation.

The service was rebranded as RapidFerry and ran for three years until the end of 2020 when it reverted to Penang Port.

**End of the journey**

After being sold, *Pulau Langkawi*, *Pulau Redang* and *Pulau Aman* were converted into floating restaurants.

*Pulau Aman* was destroyed in a

fire in Johor in 2003. The fate of the other two, as well as sister ships *Pulau Tioman* and *Pulau Labuan* is unclear but they are most likely scrapped.

The first *Pulau Pinang* and *Pulau Pangkor* enjoyed second lives under Indonesian operators. The former carried on for some years as *KMP Aeng Mas* plying the Madura Straits while the latter was rebuilt multiple times.

Now called *Bahari Nusantara*, it is still operating in the Bengkalis area of Riau. *Pulau Lumut* was last photographed in Sepanggar, Sabah, around 2018.

Among the newer ferries, *Pulau Rawa* was beached in Sungai Perak and scrapped.

*Pulau Rimau* was bought by a developer and is now parked off Persiaran Bayan Indah as a sight-seeing attraction.

*Pulau Payar*, *Pulau Kapas*, *Pulau Undan* and *Pulau Talang-Talang* remain mothballed.

Only the latter two are still functional.

Following public pleas to have

the old ferry service revived, the private sector mooted plans to turn them into tourist ferries and floating restaurants in mid-2021. But nothing has materialised so far.

**Sailing to new horizons**

There is good news as the second *Pulau Pinang* will have a new lease of life as the Penang Ferry Museum towards the end of the first quarter of 2024.

The ferry museum's chief executive officer Abdul Hadi Abu Osman said they were in the final stages of refurbishment and getting regulatory approval, after which it would be permanently berthed at Tanjung City Marina.

"There will be four levels to explore. The engine deck was previously off-limits but can now be explored.

"The main deck will be a gallery chronicling the ferry service's history, while the upper deck will have interactive exhibits.

"The rooftop is also open, so

visitors can check out the navigation bridges," he said.

It is a remarkable revival for the vessel, which was partially sunk in the Bagan Dalam slipway in June 2021.

A month later, Printhero Merchandise Sdn Bhd was awarded a 10-year lease by PPC.

Abdul Hadi described it as a project close to his heart. "She has been beautifully restored. Even though I am from Alor Setar (Kedah), my sister studied in Penang, so we would often visit her.

"I hope the museum will rekindle the magic for many," he said. The final surviving ferry, *Pulau Angsa*, was donated to the state government.

Wong said its fate was raised at the recent state assembly sitting, with the Chief Minister Incorporated's office intending to turn it into a tourist attraction.

They are considering sites like Gurney Bay to park the ferry, with a public request for proposals (RFP) to be announced soon.