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Penang Revisited

Hitting the streets of Penang after 15 years brings back a deluge of memories...

Not having had the opportunity to put in a decent run in my hometown since I moved south to Kuala Lumpur some 13 years ago, I saw an opportunity to rekindle the feel of the Penang roads again during this year's Chinese New Year trip back home. For this trip, I packed my running shoes and attire, and adequate supplies of protein and carbo powders, so it had better be worthwhile.

Whilst I have every intention to ride on the training momentum I had over the past weeks by putting together a couple of good runs in Penang, I know that the likelihood of me doing so will be slim. My son is now at a precocious age and can be very difficult to handle when he gets into the terrorizing mood. Secondly, we may be bogged down by the endless itinerary of visiting relatives and friends. Thirdly but no less a major factor would be if I survive the earlier two factors, I'm not sure if I still have energy left to run in the mornings (running in the evenings are not an option).

When we arrived in Penang, our expectations of the famed islandic Chinese New Year heat melted away literally. This year, the mercury is much higher probably hitting 35C or even higher. It was already hot at 8:30am. And in my mind I was already kissing my chances of running goodbye. Furthermore my son has not reacted well (who would have?) to the heat and he has been targeted by mosquitos mercilessly.

In any case, the chance came a-knocking when my wife decided to spend the night with my kid over at her Mom's, therefore making my next morning's run a possibility. I didn't waste it. By 6:30am I was out of the door.

I opted for the coastal road route, starting from the Court House, along Farquhar Street, pass the majestic E&O Hotel, pass the notorious (for the number of accidents occurring there) Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah, pass Citibank, hitting the Gurney Drive and U-turning at the new Gurney Plaza for the return trip.

Part of this route is quite nostalgic as during my school days, I used to run (or perform an act resembling it) these roads with my good friend, Boo Teong. When we started running those days, we were so bad and unfit that we couldn't run 1.5K if our lives depended on it. Our reasons of taking up the sport were different but I'll leave that for another time.

I started steadily and the breathing rhythm took me comfortably to Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah. It was here that I realized that not only is this stretch of road unsafe for motorists but the uneven brick pavements pose a considerable amount of danger for pedestrians and runners too. A slip in concentration is all it takes to introduce your face to the road. So I made sure that I lifted my legs just a little bit over the cracks and unevenness. I passed by the curve of the road where we witnessed a fatal accident just 2 days ago. The streets were still dark in some areas due to the tree foliage blocking out the street lights.

Hitting the junction to Gurney Drive, 2 dogs suddenly appeared from behind one of the construction hoardings with threatening growls and I loudly shushed them off and at the same time slowed to a walk so as not to "excite" them more. Thankfully they backed off and I continued on my way.

Boo Teong and I would wake up at 5 in the morning on Saturdays to participate in our ritual. The ritual would involve me walking to his home half a mile away and from there make our way to this spot along Gurney Drive where we would limber up before attempting to conquer the 1.5K distance (1 way only!) of Gurney Drive but usually we would last just the distance of 2 lamp posts. We were that bad when we took up running then. Passing through this area



brought back the memory of 1 particular experience when while limbering up, we spotted this fit looking man running past us. Boo Teong and I quickly stopped our stretching and took off after him, intending to run him down. Unfortunately our VO2 Max and endurance were crappy and yes, we got as far as 2 lamp posts and as if telepathically connected veered off the main road into one of the turn offs. That saved us the embarrassment of being overtaken by that chap. Of course we had a good laugh about our inadequacies!

Eighteen years on, this morning, I am faring much better. Turning back at the Gurney Plaza area, I checked my watch and it showed 25 minutes sharp. Not bad. The early morning folks are already up doing their walks and runs. Some eateries were either closing for the day or just opening for business. That's Penang for the uninitiated - there's a fine line (a very fine one at that) between when a restaurant closes or opens for business. It's easy to get some bite at any time of the day.

Before long I passed the E&O Hotel again and noted the impressive festive decor and with 1K to go, I thought what the heck and dispensed with the time keeping (it's the holidays!) and gradually slowed to a walk. Which was a good thing because I bumped into 2 young women backpackers heading my direction. They wanted to know how to get to the Swettenham Pier where they're supposed to catch the boat to Indonesia!



OK, it's not running related, but it's still a damn nice picture! Taken during one of the 2004 Chinese New Year evenings in Penang

I fell into a conversation with them and though I didn't get their names, I found out that Irish Girl (IG) and American Girl (AG) were going to Sumatra to visit a friend who has just given birth. They found it remarkable that I still "workout" during the festive season and I replied that this is my form of stress relieve, to which the pretty ladies mentioned that I should try lugging their packs to add impact to my routine - in jest of course.

Reaching my destination, I pointed to them the direction they should be heading and reluctantly said goodbye. The thought of exchanging email addresses did cross my mind except that, oh well...

The stopwatch read 52-odd minutes. It would have been a negative split had I run the return leg. All in all, a very good outing for me. It brought back the good memories, met some new people and had a good run.

Hopefully I will be able to do it again before I leave for Kuala Lumpur again in 2 days' time.

The journey continues...
Jamie Pang
Jan 26th, 2004