

Nostalgia - Boutique Hotels Of Old

The last time I looked at a website for Ipoh hotels I discovered that it claimed that there were 632 places to stay within easy reach of Ipoh Town and well over 120 such places within the city. Many of these were described as Boutique Hotels, defined as “a small stylish hotel, typically one situated in a fashionable urban location”. Now I have no idea how many Ipoh hotels actually match this definition today, but there is no doubt that in years gone by, you can be sure there were none in Ipoh. The nearest we had was the *Rumah Tumpangan* (Boarding House). Most of these were in one place, Hale Street. Indeed there were so many of these establishments there that the locals renamed it Hotel Street.

The boarding houses conducted their business in individual shophouses, converted into small cubicles, called private rooms, to fit in as many beds as possible. Three toilet cubicles on each floor were fitted with doors barely 30in high so that passers-by could easily view the heads and feet of participants; these shared between the clientele. In the 1950s and 60s, these places were very popular with out-station Malaysian visitors who, in the main, travelled here by train, for business or pleasure. Coolies from the tin mines could also afford to stay the night as such accommodation was very cheap.

For visitors who could afford a better place to lay their head at night, there were other hotels. Civil Servants had the Government Rest House, while for others there was always the FMS Hotel and Bar, The Majestic Hotel, The Mayfair Hotel, and The Park Hotel. Later entries to the hotel scene included the Fair Park Hotel, the Cowan, the Excelsior and more.



1988 Government licence

But back to the old *Rumah Tumpangan*. One by one they disappeared, as a different standard of cheap accommodation arrived in Ipoh. The old boarding-house style was taken over by new ideas and development. By 2003, there was only one such establishment left! Just by chance, my wife and I took

an evening stroll along Hale Street as a way to enjoy the peace of an

almost deserted Old Town. Suddenly we came across the only shophouse in the street that still had its lights on. A signboard above the door proclaimed it to be the Kam Kong Hotel.



*Abandoned and forgotten, 2013
(courtesy of 22 Hale Street)*

Peering through the steel gate we could see a dimly-lit counter. Then, a weak voice came out of the gloom demanding to know what we wanted. On replying that we were just looking around, we were invited into the mysteries of an original boarding house. Perhaps he thought we wanted the two-hour rate!

Behind the desk was an elderly, gaunt Chinese man who was in charge of the accommodation. On discovering that we wanted no more than to explore, he kindly took us on a guided tour of the facilities. The steep, rickety staircase was almost dark, dimly lit by a single, fly-spotted bulb. At the top was a landing and corridor to the rooms. A room consisted of a cubicle just big enough for a single bed and a small cabinet. It was windowless. The walls were paper-thin with 3-foot wire grilles at the top, to provide ventilation. An old fan wheezed and groaned on the ceiling in an effort to circulate the humid air. Bedding was a sheet over a plastic-covered mattress with a pillow and folded blanket. The rate he told us was RM18 a night.

Unfortunately, he would not allow us to take photographs and the only souvenir I manage to get was a quick snap of the 1988 Licence Plate. I did not dare to ask if he had renewed it since then.

Today, the very last vestige of Ipoh's *Rumah Tumpangan*, Ipoh's original boutique hotel, is the hotel signboard, still in place. It remains, despite the massive renovation that included the building into the 22 Hale Street complex. For that, we must thank Puan Sri Dato' Sandra Lee, who kept the old facade to give us a little nostalgia from those days gone by.



The name stands proud in 2019