

# Ipoh: A Haven, A Home

It's possibly Malaysia's most underrated city. But since being recognised last year by Lonely Planet as a top place to visit in Asia, Ipoh might be ready to step out of the shadows. **Alexander Lim** made the easy drive from KL to experience the food, enjoy the famous white coffee, see the sights, and relax at one of the most comfortable and beautiful places to stay in Ipoh.



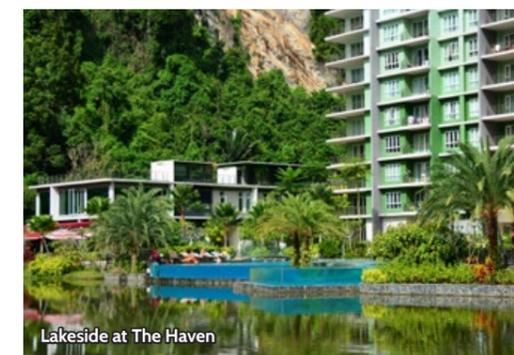
Ipoh is home to dramatic topography

Heading north along the highway, about half an hour before reaching Ipoh, the topography had already grabbed my attention. Rolling, forested hills in the distance had become increasingly punctuated by captivating limestone cliffs and outcroppings. And about 25km before Ipoh, there was a monolithic formation just next to the highway which is so dramatic, that in another country it could easily be the centrepiece of a major park – think El Capitan in California's Yosemite National Park. Though this limestone formation is not quite as high as Yosemite's famous granite cliff, it's still nearly as impressive.

Upon exiting the highway – and having a breathtaking RM25 extracted from my Touch 'n' Go card – it was a short drive to my destination, The Haven, a lovely condo resort sited adjacent to a stunning limestone formation of its own. The scenery en route to the resort was simply

beautiful – all the cliffs and outcroppings covered in dense forest, the soaring trees clinging to any surface they could find. And just past the Lost Word of Tambun and The Banjaran lay The Haven, three condo towers built in a semi-circle around a small natural lake with a massive limestone outcropping estimated to be 280 million years old. It's a delightfully unusual place to stay: the condo units have been sold, and then leased back to management who run them as a wonderful hotel resort. So you genuinely have all the comforts of home, with the conveniences of a fine hotel. Suites range from one-bedroom to three-bedroom units, and they're all spacious, fully furnished, and very comfortable. My 18th-floor condo overlooked the lake and the forested cliffs beyond. The Haven also has a large, stunning pool (shaped like a seahorse), so be sure to bring your swimsuit along. Incorporating a large warm-water Jacuzzi,

a lap pool, an infinity-edge pool looking out over the lake, a children's pool, and even a curved slide, this might just be the best swimming pool anywhere in Ipoh. Gorgeously landscaped, and complemented by a fountain and an adjacent gym and restaurant (with a spa coming soon), it's easy to feel like you've truly escaped when relaxing in or by The Haven's beautiful pool.



Lakeside at The Haven



Old Town coffee shops

### FOOD AND COFFEE TRAILS

Though you may not want to leave this idyllic enclave once you've gotten settled in, you'll be well-rewarded if you do. I made a number of trips out from the resort, two into Ipoh's historic Old Town district, which is just brimming with delights both visual and edible. The heritage and history is evident at every turn, and once I felt the need to nip into one of the many shops to escape the afternoon heat, I was spoiled for choice. Though perhaps not as famous as Penang is which it comes to food, Ipoh certainly measures up – and those in the know come here for some of the city's most famous eats and treats. Bean sprout chicken rice (*nga choy kai*), *kai see hor fun*, *yong tau foo*, *hakka mee*, caramel custard,

egg tarts, and of course that famous Ipoh white coffee... these are just some of the specialties you can indulge in while visiting. And if KL's rising prices have gotten you down, you'll be pleasantly surprised at your total bill in almost any *kopitiam* or food stall you visit in Ipoh. I met up with some local friends and hit the food trail – with some places in and around Old Town, and others a bit further out (but all in the city and nearby). Try the *Fook Kee* fried noodles with fat prawns at a stall in Restoran Yu Yee – it's an unremarkable and humble little corner lot in Kampung Simpee, but plenty of locals will have heard of it if asked about the best fried noodles in Ipoh. During peak times, you'll need to be patient: waits of over 30 minutes are not uncommon, so popular is this stall. We also enjoyed a generous (and inexpensive) platter of delicious crispy fried wontons and hot *shui xian* tea at Hoong Tho café in Old Town.

Ipoh abounds with places to enjoy its famous white coffee. The well-known Nam Heong white coffee shop is steps away from Hoong Tho, but was still closed for the long Chinese New Year break. No matter, I've had their coffee several times before and can easily recommend it! (And the egg tarts here are quite good, too.) My local friends, however, steered us to a nearby shop



Hoong Tho café



Afternoon tea

called Kedai Kopi Ah Chow for what they claimed is some of the strongest white coffee in town. It was pretty intense, admittedly, and for just a little more, you can get a 'special' version which is laced with a bit of alcohol. I sampled it, and though it was pretty good, the curious flavour kept me happy to stick with the pure coffee version, in a glass with plenty of ice. All the shops here are happy to bag up your coffee for takeaway, too – and there is no shortage of shops in the Old Town area, either. Just look for '*kedai kopi*' on the signboard and get your coffee fix on the cheap: most places will charge around RM2 for a glass (or bag) of delicious white coffee. And every shop's a little different, so it's a fun quest to see which you prefer. I personally like Nam Heong's brew, but also thoroughly enjoyed the white coffee at Sun Yuan Foong, too, just across the street. And just next to Sun Yuan Foong, you'll find Sin Yoon Loong, said to be the oldest coffee shop in Old Town, and they also serve up a particularly delicious cuppa.

There's a Teochew noodle soup in Ipoh called *hor hee*, as distinct from the more popular *hor fun*. This soup is served with bits of green, sliced fish cakes, fish balls, and – though we had to pay a bit extra for this – big, tender dumplings. This was a fantastic dish, and we were lucky to get one of the last orders before the stall



The Haven's amphitheatre on the lake

closed up at 10pm one night. Sadly (for me), the signage at this stall was all in Chinese, so no luck in reading it, but I was told that Loke Woi Kee on Jalan Mustapha Al-Bakri is also a great place to try this soup, though they close around 4pm most days.

### SEEING THE SIGHTS... AND MORE FOOD

Apart from Ipoh's mouth-watering food, there are also endless temples. Some are in the city, some are near parks, and plenty are tucked into hillsides and cliffs in the area. I stopped at one Buddhist temple on the outskirts of the city that caught my eye with its bright colours and beautiful gilded Siamese architecture. Sure enough, the ornate signage said Wat Siribunyamagaram and I hadn't been tentatively loitering around the gate for more than two minutes when people already inside beckoned at me to enter. Though I'm not Buddhist, I was still warmly invited into the temple grounds to look around and explore to my heart's content, and it was a pleasant way to spend a little time, enjoying both the peacefulness and opulence of the temple, and the hospitality of the people who were tending to it.

Though the food on offer in Ipoh is incredible, I actually didn't even need to leave the resort one night to have a terrific meal. The onsite restaurant at The Haven, called Cuisines, serves some truly delicious local fare, along with a range of more Westernized dishes, too. We thoroughly enjoyed the local *kai see hor fun*, a marvellously nuanced soup made with thin, flat wok-fried rice noodles, evoking the charred flavour of the famed *char kuey teow* dish, only in a soup dish, joined by bits of chives, slivered chicken, prawns, and bean sprouts. It was

absolutely delicious, and the piquant Singapore *laksa* we savoured after that might have been even better. Creamy and spicy in equal measure, featuring pillowy bits of fried tofu, this *laksa* was somehow bold and subtle at the same time, and was one of the best renditions of this particular variant of *laksa* – truly one of my favourite local dishes – that I've ever had. The Haven also put on one of the better breakfast buffets I've had in Malaysia, and I was told that when there weren't enough guests to justify a full buffet spread, they served breakfast from their à la carte menu, a nice touch that avoids wastefulness.

In fact, The Haven is quite eco-conscious all-around, and has really made an effort to be in harmony with the environment. This was particularly evident when strolling around the lake on the lovely



Unwinding at the pool

jogging/walking track. The natural foliage is complemented by thoughtful landscaping and plenty of little signs to identify the various trees and plants. There's a meditation deck by the lake, as well as a beautiful amphitheatre. We enjoyed several laps around the lake, with the view on the far side just as incredible as the one from the condos!

Ipoh is definitely one of Malaysia's most underrated gems, and with a place like The Haven offering such home-like accommodations, you can take the whole family and enjoy and explore during an easy weekend getaway. If you haven't been lately (or at all), take the short drive and discover both the culinary, historical, and geological wonders of this charming city. There's much more to report on Ipoh, of course – we squeezed a lot into the weekend – but that will have to wait for another story! ■

*For more information on The Haven, visit [thehavenresorts.com](http://thehavenresorts.com). Plenty of blogs and websites on Ipoh's food exist, but a good one to start with is [vkeong.com/food-guide/must-eat-places-in-ipoh-food](http://vkeong.com/food-guide/must-eat-places-in-ipoh-food).*



Cliffside temple in Tambun area