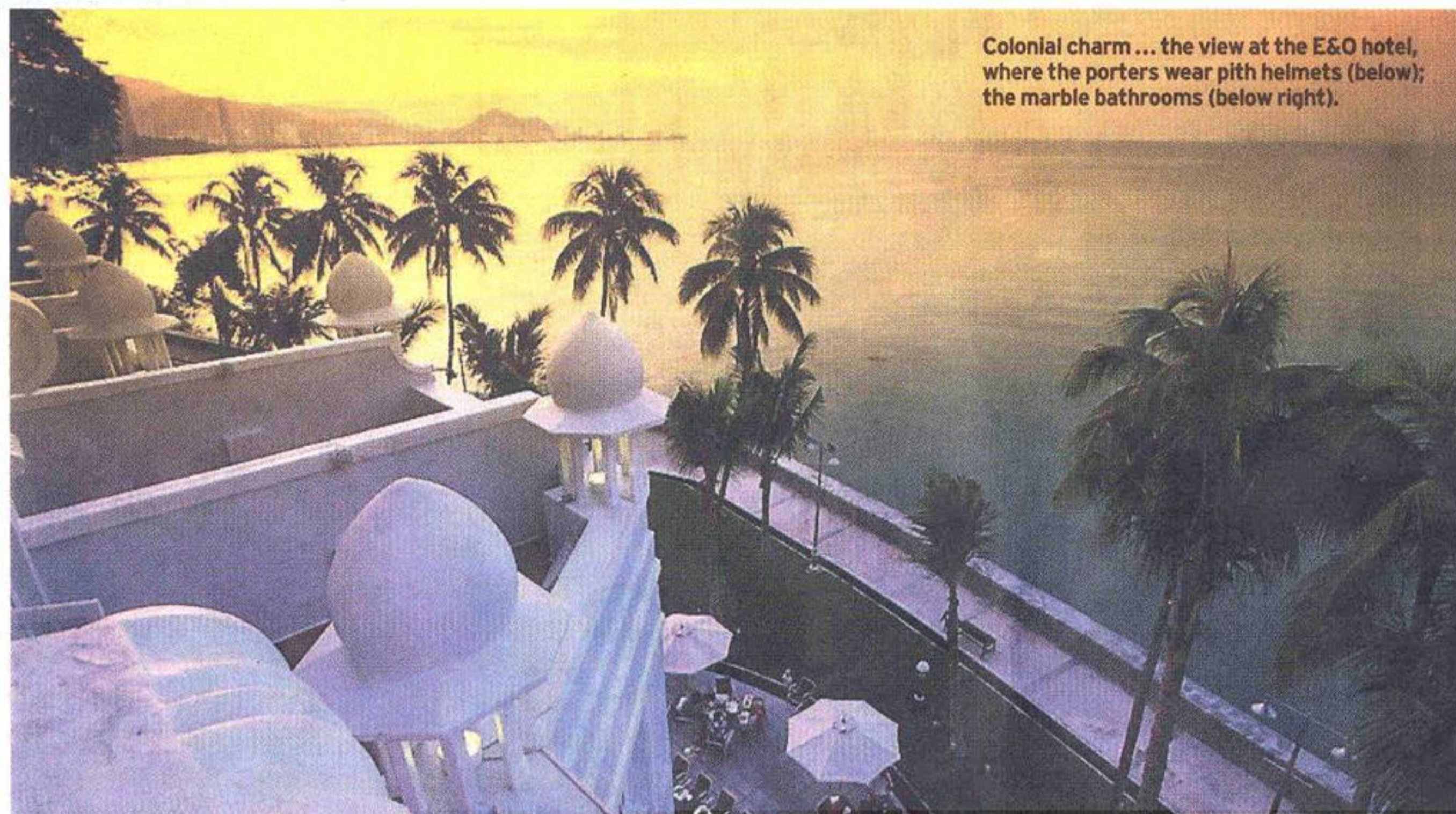


PEPPERS

Every one's unique

Colonial charm ... the view at the E&O hotel, where the porters wear pith helmets (below); the marble bathrooms (below right).

FAST FACTS

Getting there

Malaysia Airlines flies twice daily from Sydney and Melbourne to Penang with a change in Kuala Lumpur; Singapore Airlines requires a change in Singapore. Fares from \$880. The airport is 20km from the E&O Hotel in George Town.

Staying there

From \$320 a night for a deluxe suite. Phone +60 4 222 2000 or see www.e-o-hotel.com.



What the butler saw

It's a steep learning curve but **Stella Martin** quickly adapts to royal treatment.



'Most people don't know how to use butlers now," says Elizabeth Dass, communications manager at Penang's Eastern and Oriental Hotel, in a slightly peevish tone. "For example, if you are busy you can ask your butler to pack your bags for you."

I don't really want a stranger poking around the dirty laundry at the bottom of my bag, but perhaps with a bit of practice I could get used to it.

It is 25 years since my husband and I met, as young teachers working in Malaysia. Now with the nest empty, we have returned for our anniversary and checked into the E&O, which prides itself on its 24-hour butler service. It would be hard to find a better place to celebrate.

We stagger in from the oppressive afternoon heat and frantic streets of George Town and are quickly guided to enormous armchairs, presented with cold face towels and glasses of pink fruit cocktail. I like this place already.

A porter in pith helmet, white shirt, shorts, gloves and long socks takes charge of our bags as our butler guides us across the domed entrance hall. At the end of a cool, high corridor lined with old photos of the hotel in its colonial heyday is

our suite. "There are no rooms, only suites" is the catchcry of the E&O. A sumptuously furnished living room overlooks the swimming pool and, beyond the sea wall, the bay. Our emperor-sized bed is flanked by butler-summoning buttons, and beyond stained-glass doors is a black-and-white marble bathroom. You could get lost in here.

One of the delights of Penang is its colonial architecture. Many of the great buildings constructed during the days of the British Empire are in a state of advanced decay, but the E&O is in beautiful condition. Built in 1884 by the Armenian Sarkies brothers, the Eastern Hotel was such a success that within a year they had added another, the Oriental, next door. Eventually the two merged; our butler points out the slightly sloping wooden floor that marks the join. A third brother added an extravagant ballroom in 1903.

The hotel was renovated recently. The main staircase had to be completely rebuilt but is identical to the one ascended by Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling, Hermann Hesse and Noel Coward. The neoclassical facades, domes and minarets have been repainted a crisp wedding-cake white.

The hotel was built to last. Its solid walls have caused headaches for technicians installing modern communication facilities but its sea wall stood up to the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004.

Our butler takes us on a tour of the other suites. The four writers' suites, named after famous scribes who frequented the hotel, each have a dining room, a guest toilet and a writing bureau, of course. And then we step into the Pinang suite. Beloved of princes, presidents and prime ministers (former Malaysian PM Dr Mahathir Mohamad favours it), it is a sumptuous apartment furnished with Malaysian Chinese antiques and screens. An enormous four-poster bed has footstools for entry and exit and there is a fully equipped kitchen for the attending butler to whip up meals as required.

What tasks does a butler here usually perform? Booking onward flights, hiring cars and travel arrangements, our butler replies. But he has also had to find helicopters, private jets and yachts for guests at short notice. One guest decided, at 2am, she wanted firecrackers, so our butler had to find them and a place for her to let them off without disturbing other guests.

I have an inkling of how royalty lives. I almost expect a butler to materialise in the bathroom and squeeze the toothpaste onto my brush.

There is only one disadvantage to staying at the E&O: Penang is a fascinating island but the hotel is so seductively comfortable it is hard to leave. It would be a perfect place for a honeymoon.

Perhaps our son, born 23 years ago in Malaysia and now engaged, should revisit his origins and book the hotel for his.