

SHHH! HIDDEN BARS

Part of the fun is in the chase; the hunt to find these hidden bars and then to enjoy some beautifully crafted drinks as your reward

WORDS **CHRIS PARRY**

SECRET BARS, HIDDEN BARS AND SPEAKEASIES became popular in the United States during prohibition in the 1920s and '30s. It's thought that the term 'speakeasy' means how patrons would have to talk in a whisper or low voice to gain entry to avoid alerting the police and prohibition spies. They've become popular in recent years around the world as many city precincts seek to open up older areas, basements, attics and laneways.

Allow me to let you into a little secret; secret bars aren't really a secret. They might be well hidden, they might require you to know a password to get in or know what the venue looks like from the outside because there's no signage, but they can be found easily by doing a bit of google work to where you're travelling to or asking a good hotel concierge (top tip; ask the concierge of a good hotel, even if you're not staying as a guest).

THIS IMAGE: WWW.SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



LOCATED NOT FAR FROM THE LIGHTS, SOUND AND ACTION OF CHINATOWN ON PETALING STREET, PS150 IS VARIOUSLY DESCRIBED AS A SNEAKY BAR



I started looking for something different in bars a few years ago when I realised that being surrounded by as many televisions as people wasn't what I was looking for. I started looking around for what I'd probably best describe as hotel bars – those little bars in hotels that don't have a lot of people because most guests in hotels want to get out.

So on a recent trip to Malaysia, I was sitting in the Pavilion's Lounge of the Sheraton Imperial Kuala Lumpur, listening to a piano crooner hit all the right nostalgia notes, and was inspired to see if I could find some other bars in Kuala Lumpur where I could hear myself think, avoid twenty different leagues of European soccer and, of course, get some really cool drinks.

So, let's have a look at two, maybe even three, secret and hidden bars in Malaysia that were fun to find and even more fun to be within.

The first bar I'd like to take you to is Suzie Wongs Speakeasy Bar; a retro-feel, atmosphere-filled bar full of cosy, lamp-lit corners that contrast with the glittering stage for the live performances throughout the evening.

I've been to Suzie Wongs a few times and been lucky enough to take travelling companions and colleagues there as well. As we walk past an old bicycle and a rusty street hawker stand and through the inauspicious door, I'm certain they all have the same thought as they follow me in, "Do I trust this guy?"

You know how a great restaurant hits you with aromatics the second you walk in the door? A good bar should always hit you with a feeling of immediate comfort and imminent surprise. Ha! I feel like I've just described meeting the girl of your dreams! The feeling that this is the one and every moment from now on will be exciting.

You walk in to see low-lit lamps, sumptuous velvet lounges surrounded by suits of armour, rich and royal tones of gold, maroon and blue. As a heavy velvet curtain to another area of the bar is swept aside, a stage is revealed where a mix of burlesque and cabaret performances create a vibe of 1920s Paris. The vibe of the place is a little bit naughty and a lot of fun while you sip on cocktails that are decorated and infused with aromatic spices.

For something a bit more reminiscent of a secret club than a secret bar, try PS150. Located not far from the lights, sound and action of Chinatown on Petaling Street, PS150 is variously described as a speakeasy, hidden bar, Chinatown bar and sneaky bar. The only thing missing in the atmosphere as you explore the doors looking for the entrance is a ship's fog horn. The pre-war buildings and the street are dark, the Grab cab has quickly driven away, and there is the shadowy outline of a person on the other side of the road. Having opened some doors where I've heard activity and quickly closed those doors again, I hear a slow grinding noise on the road and turn to see the shadowy figure I spotted earlier crushing a completed cigarette with the sole of his shoe.

The figure walks towards me and asks if I have a booking. I take a chance that this person doesn't mean a booking for what is behind the other doors and say that I am alone, thirsty and would like to see the drinks menu at PS150. A slow grin is matched by the slow opening of a door that is set into what resembles a small toy shop.



**IT'S ABOUT THE HUNT,
THE PURSUIT AND THE
CHALLENGE OF FINDING
SOMETHING DIFFERENT
THAT IS OFF THE BEATEN
TRACK BUT NOT PUTTING
YOURSELF IN DANGER IN
THAT PROCESS**

I walk down a very narrow corridor which then opens to a room bursting with red lanterns and a bar with its inbuilt ladder to reach the top shelf choices. PS150 drinks are created from reimagined eras, and my post-war era Rumble in the Jungle is served in a simple mug and reminds you of the charisma of that friend in your group that is a bit quiet but then suddenly bursts with wonderful stories the more the night unfolds. The close, intimate seating of this bar means that if you're drinking alone, you're not really alone.

Finally, I'd like you to walk with me as I discover The Old Merchant in Melaka. Just saying 'Melaka' is cool. Located on the western coast of Malaysia, adjacent to its namesake – the Straits of Melaka; it is famed for being part of the old spice routes, a pirate's nest, its inner-city riverbank and the striking UNESCO heritage-listed architecture inspired by a history of colonial occupation by the Portuguese, British and Dutch.

One late evening recently, I found myself crossing the Melaka River over the Chan Koon Cheng Bridge. I felt adventurous, but I also felt safe. The streets were dark, and the only noise came from some locals playing cards down a back alley, and one of them, in particular, didn't seem to enjoy losing. I knew from my studies of the area that this was a place that were shuttered and locked, I tried to orient myself the way no noise, and nobody around, I tried my usual method of opening doors. On my first try, I got it! A door that looked like part of the wall and it opened into a small foyer where I was greeted with big smiles by the staff (I think they'd enjoyed watching me on the CCTV trying to work out how to get in).

The Old Merchant has a beautiful range of drinks with high-end gins, a particular speciality. My concoction includes spiced rum, a sprig of thyme and a smouldering cinnamon stick that looks like a cigar belonging to that old gangster Al Capone.

I wonder if you have thought to yourself how these bars can be secret and hidden when the use of smartphones can guide us to any square inch on the planet? Well, that's the real trick to being a secret and hidden bar. It's about the hunt, the

pursuit and the challenge of finding something different that is off the beaten track but not putting yourself in danger in that process. Suzy Wongs Speakeasy actually describes their venue as a beautiful woman. They challenge you to find her, and she will reveal herself to you. Now that's even more smouldering than my cinnamon stick at The Old Merchant!

For each of these bars, I've chosen to describe the first time I visited them, not the times thereafter, when I took my friends and colleagues. On those occasions, I knew where I was going, but they didn't. I knew what was inside, but they didn't. For some reason, they trusted me, and we all shared the adventure of these special bars that a smartphone can find but where's the fun in that?

ESCAPE PLAN

Covid-19: Malaysia is one of South East Asia's best-performed countries in terms of the Covid-19 response. At various times Malaysia has enforced Movement Control Orders that continue to reduce the number of new Covid-19 cases per day.

GETTING TO MALAYSIA

Many airlines continue to fly into Malaysia, particularly to Kuala Lumpur International Airport where you can expect to be reminded to wear a face mask and be thermal image body scanned for flu-like symptoms. Malaysian Airlines has been particularly pro times Malaysia has enforced Movement Control Orders that-active in introducing safe travel practices and improving onboard hygiene.

STAYING IN MALAYSIA

Accommodation in Malaysia is easy to find for every budget and comfort preference. If you wish to be close to Suzy Wongs Speakeasy Bar or PS150 or the other local places that are all the rage, try the Sheraton Imperial KL which of course has a great piano bar to kick off your evening. For accommodation in Melaka try the Hatten Hotel which has a sky lounge offering stunning views of this historic town.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE

To mix some exercise with some site seeing, Mike Bikes offers great cycling tours through Kuala Lumpur. **U**

More information:

www.malaysiaairlines.com/hk/en/advisory/important-notice.html

www.eoresidences.com

www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/kulsi-sheraton-imperial-kuala-lumpur-hotel

www.hattenhotel.com

www.mikebikes.my

