



Doyenne of local tour-guiding for more than 50 years, GERALDENE LOWE is semi-retired in Perth, Western Australia, but still comes back to lead occasional tour groups in Singapore. Verne Maree joined a fascinating bus tour of multicultural Katong on the East Coast, home to a plethora of eateries, historic temples and other architectural gems.

On the bus from Dempsey coach park to Katong, Geraldene takes the many opportunities to point out places of interest. The building site opposite Tanglin Mall, for example, is the soon-to-open **Interpol Global Complex for Innovation**. Trips off the tongue, doesn't it? Luckily, they already have an acronym for it – the IGCI.

In old colonial days, she explains, all the British liked to live in **Tanglin** because it was so leafy and green. As we'll see later, rich Chinese and other Asian communities far preferred to live near the sea. Like many places in Singapore, Tanglin is named after a tree: the tanglin tree. Some say it's a derivation of the Hokkien *tang leng*, meaning "eastern hills"; but as Geraldene points out, this prestigious area is not the east and it's not that hilly.

Orchard Road used to wind through a series of nutmeg, pepper and fruit orchards. Scotts Road was named for the port harbourmaster who owned property here, and the presidential Istana, or palace, was a German plantation owned by the Prinseps – hence Prinsep Street.

We pass **Tekka Market**, previously called KK Market, where buffalos used to be penned; hence Buffalo Road and Kerbau Road. The market was built after cattle were banned from the city. In the old days, says Geraldene, you had to be careful to specify which KK you meant, or the taxi driver might take you to the nearby KK Women's and Children's Hospital instead of to the market. The new name, Tekka, comes from the Hokkien *tek kha*, meaning "at the foot of the bamboo".

Next up is the Thieves' Market, and then on the left is the city's main Muslim

area, **Kampong Glam**, dominated by the dome and minarets of Sultan Mosque. We pass the back entrance to trendy Haji Lane, and then Arab Street.

Having turned right into Nicoll Highway, into Beach Road and along the Golden Mile, we cross the Geylang and Kallang rivers, both now canalised. The name **Bugis**, we're told, comes from Kampong Bugis, previously home to a tribe of tall, handsome sailors from Sulawesi Island.

"They used to come up the rivers to sell their exotic birds and spices," says Geraldene. She remembers that the sailors would turn their boats onto their sides on the beach and smoke the insides to kill the borer; then they'd collect the bark of the paperbark or glam tree to stop up any holes; it also served for awnings, sails and firewood. That, of course, is how Kampong Glam got its name.

Kallang is where, in the 1930s, the first proper airport was built. "This was originally a very swampy area," says Geraldene, "and there was a village here called Kampong Arang, *arang* meaning charcoal." After the war, in 1955, the airport was moved to Paya Lebar.

Mountbatten breezes

According to Geraldene, wealthy locals always aspired to owning a house at Katong or Pasir Panjang, somewhere to catch the cool sea breezes – they couldn't understand the British desire to live in the interior.

Along Mountbatten Road, she points out a few of the palatial homes that still remain. All these houses would have been right on the beach, before the huge land reclamation that took place in the 1970s.

This road lost more than its sea views. Sadly, it often happened that when grandma died, the younger generation heirs capitalised on their inheritances by knocking them down for redevelopment. Some of these old houses are still glorious, though, especially those that have had government preservation orders imposed on them. Others have been extended to the rear, and many serve as kindergartens – that's the big business nowadays, as Geraldene sagely notes.

Number 754 and its neighbour, 759, are two rather famous houses, featuring exquisite tiling and lovely balconies. Geraldene says they were owned by the same man, who accommodated his two wives in them. The one at 759 is now a hotel, but its original grass lawn is rather bleakly covered with tarmac.

She points out a house that sports her favourite **"pepper-pot" turrets**, a popular architectural feature of the time. "Asian people don't swim much," she adds, "but they love the sea breeze, and the pepper-pots were the perfect spot to catch it from. Look at the traditional front steps, too – the curved balustrades stretch out to welcome visitors to the house."

These properties don't come cheap. Number 789 belonged to an old Arab family, says Geraldene, and was reported to have sold for many, many millions a number of years ago.

From Mountbatten, it's a left into Tanjong Katong Road, left again into Bournemouth, then into Wilkinson and our first destination.







**#1
STOP**

**Gurdwara Katong
Sikh Temple**
17 Wilkinson Road

Built in 1969 on the sites of two old bungalows bought for the purpose – at 11 and 17 Wilkinson Road – this Sikh temple was designed by a Muslim architect and surveyor called A. H. Saddique, who contributed his skills pro bono. Cameras are allowed in, but shoes are left at the door.

Reflecting traditional Sikh architecture, it's a two-storey building with a wide dome and a flat roof. One of many colourful murals on the lower level is a huge depiction of the **Golden Temple**

of Amritsar, Amritsar being the capital of the Sikh world.

Another highlight for me is the **kitchen**. Its practical stoves are only knee-high, making it easier to lift off heavy pots of all-vegetarian dishes that are served up on high days and holidays, explains Geraldene, together with piping-hot chapatis. Today, sadly, the pots are cold and empty; but when one of the *Expat Living* team recently got married at the Central Sikh Temple in the Serangoon area, the vegetarian feast was delicious.

Upstairs is the **prayer hall**, where (being women) we're required to cover our heads; there's a pile of scarves available for anyone who didn't bring

one. It's rather nice, really – our group looks wonderfully exotic. During services, women sit on the left side and the men on the right. One day a week is ladies' day, we're told. It's a most pragmatic practice, according to Geraldene, because that's when the women do the dusting and clean up after the mess the men have made during the rest of the week.

A marble *paalka* holds the **Sikh Holy Book**, and nearby is a harmonium that's played with just one hand. Apparently, a group of singers leads the weekend services; they have beautiful voices, and anyone is welcome to attend.

"Who didn't have breakfast?" asks Geraldene, and we line up for a delicious scoop of some sort of sweetmeat – a mixture of nuts, semolina and sugar, still warm from the pot and doled out by a smiling temple attendant.

Before this visit, the little I knew about Sikhism had been gleaned from local author Shamini Flint's delightful detective series: *Inspector Singh Investigates*. For something more substantial, you'll find plenty on Wikipedia.

THE SIKH FAITH

Sikhism is a relatively new religion, having been founded by Guru Nanak around 1500 in the Punjab area of what are now Pakistan and India. Nine gurus developed the faith – which is completely distinct from both Hinduism and Islam – over the ensuing years. After the execution of the ninth guru by the Islamic Moghul Emperor Aurangzeb in 1675, the tenth and final human guru, Gobind Singh, re-established the Sikhs as a military group so that they could henceforth defend their faith. After Gobind's death, the Sikh Holy Book has been regarded as the guru of the faith.



Eurasian Association
139 Ceylon Road
6447 1578 | eurasians.org.sg

You don't have to be a member to visit the Eurasian Association, have a look at its museum or eat at Quentin's restaurant, but it's best to check opening times in advance. As a Eurasian herself, Geraldene is a member, serving on its Heritage Committee.

"My father's side is Russian," she informs us. "His grandfather married a Chinese lady in Shanghai and brought her to Singapore. My mother's family was called Luth and came from Schleswig-Holstein, then part of Denmark. During Bismarck's unification of Germany, they headed to Asia and Australia and married people from various nationalities." The **museum** downstairs is small but interesting. I like the Singer sewing machine, just like the one my late granny used to make dresses for me as a child and a teenager. Upstairs

is another area that deals with the experiences of Eurasians during the Japanese Occupation. "Our passports called us 'Others'," she remembers. "But now we have the choice of putting the word 'Eurasian' there, our official numbers have swelled."

As usual, Geraldene is full of snippets of information. One of Singapore's more illustrious Eurasians, she says, was the country's second president, the gynaecologist **Dr Benjamin Sheares** (yes, the bridge is named for him). When he was living at the Istana, he would nip out of the back entrance to deliver babies at the aforementioned KK Women's and Children's Hospital on Bukit Timah Road.

Decorative Portuguese blue-and-white tiles reflect the fact that many of the Eurasians here are of **Portuguese origin**; their names feature strongly on the gilded lists of Association office-bearers. Portuguese spice-traders first sailed to Malacca in 1509, having

already established settlements in Goa and other parts of India.

In past times, many Eurasians lived in the Katong area, as did the younger Geraldene herself. Others favoured the Waterloo Street area, because they went to the Catholic schools that used to be there.

Interracial marriage was very common in colonial days, says Geraldene. Even men who had European wives often had "a bit of curry-puff on the side" (in her words). European women transplanted to Southeast Asia tended to die young; and men of retirement age, instead of going back to cold Europe, would settle in Australia with their Asian women, she says. Apart from being warmer, Down Under was perhaps a tad less judgemental, too.

"In fact," she adds, "many Singaporean Eurasians have migrated to Australia. At one time, if you could prove that you were Christian, or half-European, that was all it took. Often, a European-sounding name was enough."





**#3
STOP**

Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple 27 Ceylon Road

Stepping over the doorsill from glaring sunshine into cool shade, we try not to crush the flowers underfoot. In a cupboard to the left is what's claimed to be the world's biggest collection of **Ganesh figurines** – in gold, crystal and many other humbler materials. Anyone is welcome to add to it.

Originally a shrine built by poor labourers from Sri Lanka on the spot where, in the 1850s, a little statue of the Hindu god Ganesh was found among the roots of a chempaka (ylang-ylang) tree – an auspicious and holy omen – it has been rebuilt a number of times over the years. A series of murals shows its development from tiny shrine to bigger shrine to increasingly impressive temples.

Now we're in a newer part of the complex that's been built especially for **weddings**. "If you come on a Sunday when there's a wedding on,

you'll probably be invited to eat," says Geraldene. Though it's an ordinary weekday, temple business is nevertheless brisk. Apparently, you pay about 50 cents for an ordinary prayer; you can either say your own prayer, or ask the priest to make it for you.

The temple **priests** – generally tall, strong men – all train in Sri Lanka for a number of years. Each morning, we're told, they have to wake up very early to clean the temple and physically wash all the gods. That's a big job in itself.

Indicating a statue of Ganesh wearing a crown, our guide tells us that all figures with crowns are saints. Ganesh's ears, she explains, are a message to listen to the guru, and to listen more than we speak. One of his four hands holds a stick, symbolising the stick used by a mahout, and another holds a lasso; both are meant to remind us to stay on the straight and narrow path, and to seek the middle way. His third hand holds a ball of rice, and the last holds the broken-off tip of his tusk, which he used to write the Hindu holy books.



**#4
STOP**

**Kim Choo's Kitchen,
a Peranakan heritage
home**

109/111 East Coast Road
(opposite 112 Katong Mall)

Rumah Kim Choo is one of a few houses along this stretch of road that are dedicated to the **Peranakan** or Straits-born Chinese community, whose forefathers were the first to settle in Southeast Asia, perhaps most famously in Malacca.

Intermarriage with local women gave rise to a uniquely fascinating culture with its own **cuisine**, plus a legacy of distinctive marriage and social **customs**, architectural features, enamelware, intricate beadwork and embroidery.

High shelves bear jars of whole spices and other Peranakan ingredients, love letters, pineapple tarts and much more, together with diverse kitchen implements and exquisite porcelain and enamelware.

In another area is a stunning collection of **nonya garments**: hand-beaded shoes, hand-embroidered *kebayas* and sarongs, made on the premises and all for sale. It would be tempting to pair an exquisite *kebaya* with jeans, but my credit card is safely at home.



This business was started by his paternal grandmother shortly after the Second World War, says the young Raymond Wong. Taught to make the various *nonya kueh* (cakes) by her grandmother, she started making the traditional **rice dumplings** in the late fifties. We're treated to a demonstration: glutinous rice that's been soaked overnight is stuffed with savoury pork,

firmly wrapped in fibrous green leaves, tied with string and steamed till tender. They're delicious washed down with a cup or two of tea after Raymond's comprehensive guided tour. 🍵

Geraldene is currently doing a few months of travelling, but we hope to see her back in Singapore before too long – and leading a few more of her famous tours.