

Little India

with Geraldene Lowe



After years of saying, "I really should do one of Geraldene Lowe's tours sometime," I turned up one Sunday morning at the corner of Serangoon and Buffalo Roads for her walking tour of Little India. Have you met this inspirational woman yet? If you have any interest in Singapore's history and cultural heritage, you should.

*by Verne Maree
Photograph by Shamus Sillar and Verne Maree*

After rounding up her little flock – six trainee tour guides, German-Swiss Michael Ruesch and Peter Eigenmann, American Joe Green (who lived here 40 years ago and returns every year to visit friends), and me – Geraldene begins by explaining the historical background to the cultural neighbourhoods of Singapore. You probably know that Chinatown was laid out with districts for Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka immigrants, but did you know that Middle Road used to be the Jewish quarter, or that Mount Sophia was where the German community lived?

Nearby **Farrer Park** was a sports field with an oval, Singapore's first horseracing track. Hence Racecourse Road, now most famous for its string of Indian restaurants. On non-racing days, it became a golf course, but the presence of grazing buffaloes caused much annoyance. It was also where the first aeroplanes landed; but the distance being too short for them to take off again, they had to be pulled into Serangoon Road, not much more than a dirt track at the time.

The skins of the pineapple grown in this area were fed to the buffaloes, and their manure in turn fertilised the plantation. Not all such arrangements were as convenient, says Geraldene. She recalls that it was “very difficult” to eat green vegetables when she was a child, because human waste, “nightsoil”, was used as fertiliser. To make the fresh produce edible, it had to be soaked in a tub of water treated with permanganate crystals, which made it brown and wilted.

We cross to the newly refurbished **Tekka Market**, *tek-kah* being Hokkien for the bamboo that once grew on the banks of the Rochor Canal. More interesting tidbits: Buffalo Road is named after the cattle slaughterhouses that once stood here; *kandang kerbau* means cattle pens in Malay, and the next road up is named Kerbau. The whole area is still known locally as KK; hence the nearby KK Khan Women's and Children's Hospital.

Thirty years ago, vendors operated in the street from mobile barrows. For reasons of hygiene, the government banned this, licensed them and provided



Michael Ruesch and Peter Eigenmann



formalised markets such as Tekka. Until five years ago, livestock such as beef, goats and poultry – and snakes and frogs – were slaughtered in Tekka Market.

“This,” says Geraldene, “is the biggest, best and cheapest market in Singapore.” On the upper level, she points out Mr Poh’s excellent Antiques and Collectibles stall; a seamstress who will do alterations and replace zips; a vendor of ribbon, lace and other haberdashery items; and a shoe store that specialises in larger sizes.

On the day of our walk, it is the Hindu elephant god Ganesh’s birthday (the date is different each year), so Little India is even more crowded than it

is on other Sundays. It being Ramadan, too, one **provision store** has a machine set out on the walkway, grinding fresh coconut for use in cakes and sweetmeats. Speaking of which, Komala Vilas on the corner of Serangoon and Upper Dickson sells the most scrumptious sweetmeats.

Outside **Thai Tong’s pawnshop** at number 74, we hear that all the local pawnshops are owned by Hakkas. How it works is that the pawnbroker lends you a third to half of the value of the item you want to pawn, and you pay him a monthly interest of 1.5 percent. (This rate is now fixed; in the past, it was not.) After six months, if you have not reclaimed your item, he has the right to sell it.



The Chinese are interested only in pure gold, explains Geraldene, at least 20-karat, and as a buyer you will pay only for the price of the gold, not for workmanship. “They have a lot of European items, too, such as Rolexes and coins.”

At a **Ganesh shrine** that has been set up outside a store selling religious trinkets and artefacts, she describes the figure’s symbolism in interesting detail. It’s next to **Little India Arcade**, a commercial cluster of government-owned shophouses that people lived in until fifteen years or so ago. On the corner of Campbell Road, we stop for ginger *teh tarik*, literally “**pulled tea**”; the sweet, milky beverage is poured at a height from one container into another to aerate it



and give it its distinctively frothy top. It is absolutely delicious.

Back on the street, our guide points out a huge **ficus (fig) tree**. Regarded as holy by all the religious groups here, it is in no danger of being removed to make way for development, she says. “The government would have to bring in an atheistic foreign worker to cut it down!”

Veerasamy Road is named after the first Indian doctor in Singapore qualified to practise Western medicine. Geraldene points out a two-storey 1930s building that was originally accommodation for lower-grade government employees, and is now being revamped as trendy accommodation for expats, local architects and

the like. She also explains the significance of a variety of plants outside a doorway: a Chinese home or business should choose good-quality plants that between them have something sweet, something red, something fleshy and something thorny. A jasmine bush and a red-flowering cactus would do the trick.



Desker Road is named after the first English butcher in Singapore, but as anyone who has seen it after dark will know, it's now famous for a very different sort of meat market: cheap, licensed brothels. And in nearby Kelantan Lane, there's a government clinic that has, over the years, treated many an expat who would rather not take his particular itch to the company doctor.

We make our way to **Sree Veeramakaliamman**, a Hindu temple dedicated to the wife of the god Shiva. The place is heaving today, the air full of smoke from ritual fires. After removing their shoes, of course, devotees can go to the office and pay 50 cents for a priest to deliver a special



prayer directly to the inner shrine. As recently as twenty years ago, workers would visit the temple each morning for a free bath and breakfast in its courtyard, and again in the evening to wash off the grime of the day and be fed again. They would then sit and chat on the pavements outside until it was time to retire for the night to their hot, cramped, bathroom-less sleeping quarters.

Over an excellent lunch of paper *dosai* at the vegetarian Komala Vilas (\$6 including a lime juice or *lassi* drink), Geraldene tells us that she donates the price of her weekend tours to charity. The **Cuff Road project** for migrant workers in distress, also known as Transient Workers Count Too is the current recipient of her generosity. To find out more, go to www.twc2.org.sg.

ABOUT Geraldene Lowe-Ismail

Eurasian Singaporean Geraldene Lowe speaks six languages, and is a wealth of information. She should be declared a national treasure, having contributed a good fifty years and more to this country's tourism industry.

After a stint with Air India, she worked for Anglo French Travel for eight years, during which time she set up the company's air-passage department. After working in Italy, Jordan, Spain and Switzerland she returned to Singapore to run Diners' Travel, organising the first outbound tours to Cambodia and Bali.

After Singapore's independence from Malaysia in 1965, she and an old colonial, George Thompson – who also set up the Civil Service Institute – were asked by the newly formed Singapore Tourism Board to train tour guides, so they put on weekend courses for this purpose.

"Then the various embassies started setting up shop here," she recalls. "I was called upon to take care of visiting VIPs and began working as a guide during 1968. As a mother of three, it was the ideal job –

part-time and flexible. I used to do specialised tours in either Spanish or Italian, too, and because of my knowledge of Singapore, was able to help source locations and props for local and foreign film-makers and photographers.

"But I was frustrated that the average visitor only went to the 'tourist spots' and did not get to experience the real Singapore. So I started conducting walking tours of ethnic areas, covering temple festivals, World War II sites, traditional trades, antiques, and our unique architecture. These were – and still are – put on especially for the expatriate community, generally through the various clubs and associations."

That was more than forty years ago, and Geraldene is increasingly in demand for her in-depth, intimate knowledge of a country whose development she has not just studied, but lived. For tour details, or to request your own guided tour, call Geraldene at 6737 5250 or send an email to geraldenestours@hotmail.com. 📧

