

A different Singapore: Art, history, and everyday life

The city is synonymous with glitz and luxury, often drawing the uber-rich. But beyond the glam, lie tiny enclaves, spinning yarns of friendship, collaboration, and coexistence with warmth and vibrant colours. They are as appealing as the greenery is soothing.

I was not visiting Singapore for celebrated landmarks. My interest lay elsewhere.

Over the years, I have become more of a relaxed flaneur than a landmark-hopper, wandering, eager to stumble upon the unexpected, sample local cuisine and talk with the locals, and explore fascinating neighbourhoods steeped in culture and history.

The identities of all these places collectively bubble up to create a complete kaleidoscope for a proud nation. The predictable homogeneity is a suffocating turn-off for me. The element of surprise

fragrance shops. The pastel signature not only added colours to the delightful two-story Peranakan shophouses that stood in refreshing contrast to the ubiquitous gleaming tall buildings, but also to the variegated soul of Singapore. Peranakan refers to a mixed-heritage community, dating back to when the Chinese immigrants married local Malay women.

The pastel colours reminded me of Cinque Terre, Italy. If those were the flowers on the lap of the lush green mountains, these were the flowers of green Singapore.

From the streets below, the open windows looked like inviting portals to the glorious past. I craved a Harry Potter broomstick to instantly fly me up

through an open window upstairs. That aeroplane instantly made me wonder if he was sending us a plane-load of messages to share his anecdotes.

Standing next to it was a depiction of a publishing house, "Pustaka", once run by one Haji Muhammad Said, then a prominent figure in the Malay printing Industry. Did those books hint at these murals featuring their lives

one day?

Right below was the picture of two tombstone makers practising their craft. Then, to the right of it was a metal fabrication shop and Jamal the jeweller, hard at work. The illustrations in these murals of ordinary lives were so vivid, and the portrayal of common people so natural, that everything felt very real and palpable, and I instantly imagined myself in that world with them, trying to understand their struggles and aspirations, and their way of life that slowly shaped this area.

Today's ambitions of the new are certainly mirrored in these murals that lay out the aspirations of the old, binding all with a common thread. The spirit of the old not only lives on among the new, but the character of the old also propels the new forward.

All these murals come together in



a smaller Kampong Gelam mural that embroiders the individual pieces into one elegant tale, one of cooperation. Another important mural was an interesting juxtaposition of two time periods of Kampong Gelam, between the 1920s-30s, and 2023, showing the evolution of the area. A small river of the 1920s-30s has disappeared on one side, and a new bridge



keeps the traveller in me engaged and excited.

This disposition led me to two radiant microcosms hidden beneath Singapore's usual gleaming self. If I were an artist, they could easily be my muses.

Arab Street packs an array of businesses and eateries that exude an aroma evocative of the Muslim culture. Today, there is more influence from the Malay Archipelago than from the Arab countries. A thriving commercial hub where merchants of all kinds have set up their shops.

It owes its name to the settlement of Arab traders in the 19th century. Sir Stamford Raffles designated this area for the community. It quickly evolved into a thriving commercial hotspot, shared by other ethnicities. Located in Kampong Glam or Kampong Gelam, as it is also called, it's just a stone's throw from the nearby Bugis metro station.

My first stop was a small shop, owned by an affable Indonesian woman. Her warm greetings, laced with an ear-to-ear grin, were inviting and welcoming, eager to tell a story as it related to her. A hot Nasi Goreng and a brief teaser later, I began a jaunt down the street, excited and curious.

The first eyecatchers were the colourful facades of the shophouses. Many of them were silk, carpet, lamp, spice, and

and back through time. But my acrophobia quickly intervened and restricted me to a stroll.

The real charm lay about halfway down the street. The tall granite arch with Omani carvings stood as the gateway to an Arab Street offshoot: Muscat Street, named after the capital of Oman, a shining symbol of cooperation and friendship between Singapore and Oman through maritime trade. One of them at each end proudly stands as a testament to this rapprochement.

Perhaps, this is the essence of it all — the camaraderie and the spirit. The first soundbite, an introductory orchestra, along with the stunning visuals, was the soothing call to prayer wafting through the air, an apt reminder of the Muslim culture and tradition dominating this part of the city, and the acceptance of it.

Redeveloped by a joint venture, the street boasts large murals on the side of the buildings. Colours splash the large mural-like raconteurs that tell fascinating stories in pictures, tying the city's rich past to the proud present.

The first giant mural delineated the typical daily life of a Muslim merchant family, selling merchandise, apparently from their shophouse, while their young son playfully hurled a paper aeroplane

and tall buildings have taken their places on the other.

The salient feature of the area, Sultan Mosque, or Masjid Sultan, was a small house then with a sloped clay tiled roof, a clear contrast to the huge ornate two-story white grand mosque with impressive golden domes and minarets attracting thousands of worshippers today. Non-praying visitors are allowed in up to a certain point. The welcome mat extended to non-Muslims is another gesture of harmony. Inside the prayer hall, huge chandeliers and fans dotting the ceiling appeared to illuminate and disseminate the message of peaceful coexistence.

This is not the only confluence of cultures in Singapore. On the East Coast, there's a charming Katong District that prides itself on street art. It is home to pastel-coloured terraced houses patterned after the Peranakan heritage. The main level of terraced houses is elevated to protect against the water because of proximity to the sea.

The back alleys wear lovely street art makeovers. The rows of two-story charming houses with intricate carvings on doors and windows, bathed in pastel hues, are a treat to the eye. I chanced upon some lovely murals while checking out a famous local confectionery, Chin Mee Chin. The kopitiam boasts its signature Kaya Toast, served in the rich backdrop of Peranakan floral motifs and street art.

Artists poured their hearts out in buckets in sprightly colours here to project their sense of pride. East Coast Road, with adorable street-side pots of shrubs and quaint shops, makes a walk soothing. The murals, approved by the authorities, are a tribute to the proud coastal identity. Life here takes a stroll, and pauses frequently to savour it all over a Kaya Toast and coffee.

I wanted a tête-à-tête with a local on Muscat Street to put a face to it all. Teh Tarik, a special pulled tea in hand, I struck up a candid conversation with Nikki, a friendly young woman, in front of the famous Tarik café, a popular haunt for the locals and tourists alike. Seated next to her mother-in-law, Hariya, she was a Singaporean native, married to a Yemeni man. Her son Ibrahim flashed me a toothless smile as a friendly gesture. Her husband, a glowing embodiment of the spirit around, worked nearby. She spoke highly of quality halal food, hip restaurants, and the trendy shops set up by the Malays and the Chinese.

My Padi Quencher was a refreshing green drink with coconut flesh and wheatgrass. This was a fusion of disparate elements, just as the city is of different cultures, all contributing to its richness. With every sip, I felt I was now taking in the whole essence of a multi-faceted stage, adorned with fascinating bonds expressed in street art, and enriched by the spirited protagonists. The murals and floral motifs are emphatic artistic expressions that nicely complement garden-wrapped Singapore. Her walls are leaves of an open book where artists spontaneously narrate stories and project identity.

By Arif Shahjahan

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