

Something new in old Chinatown

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The aim of a staycation, as far as I'm concerned, is to stay within the confines of the hotel as much as possible. Why go out into the all-too-familiar Singapore-scape when you can do that any time? And why leave the luxury of the hotel after paying for it?

So, when I am asked to leave The Clan Hotel for a walking tour of Chinatown, it's with more than a little reluctance.

After all, the hotel's Grand Premium room is nothing short of fabulous. Perched at one corner of the 27th floor above Upper Cross Street, it offers 270-degree views of Chinatown's streets below and the business district's skyscrapers in the distance.

Reviews of this new 324-room hotel, which opened in March, have been good and I can see why. The mix of modern luxe and traditional Chinese decor gives the Far East Hospitality-run hotel a stately feel, while the service is top class. Really, why step out of the room when the "Clan Keeper" (that is, butler) will run a bath for you, any time you want?

The reluctance, however, evaporates minutes after meeting tour guide Patrick Lee.

He begins by introducing us to the "original female bada**" of Chinatown. These are the samsui women who once worked in construction sites and the majie (amahs) who served as domestic helpers.

ADVERTISING

The tour is one of many choices from the website of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), which is hoping to encourage locals to rediscover passions such as culture, heritage and art by curating itineraries to match each interest.

STB has assumed we have an interest in culture and heritage (they're half-right - my wife does), and that we would enjoy a walking tour of Chinatown (this turns out to be spot on).

The outfit behind the tour, Eighth Wave, puts an interesting spin on its "Perspectives" tours, elevating them from touristy heritage walks to eye-opening "untold" stories behind familiar Singapore districts. I am tempted to sign up for some of their other deliciously titled offerings, like *The Black & White Curse Of Malaya* and *Coolies, Towkays And The Gig Economy*.

Eighth Wave calls their tour guides "storytellers". Patrick, for instance, draws on his personal association with Chinatown - his grand-mother was a samsui woman - to give a social commentary that makes me look at the area afresh.

For the first time, I see the significance behind some of the usual sights in the area. Like why only some of the old shophouses in Bukit Pasoh sport European-style balconies that are hardly used in the tropical heat (a subtle show of wealth and suggestion that the owner was well-acquainted with foreign architecture).

Or how clan and trade association buildings are clustered along certain streets in the area (by industry type, original location in China, as well as social class).

And why having a forecourt is not as common as you think (again, another show of wealth).

Ducking into a somewhat hidden temple in Keong Saik Road that was once open only to women, we discover some secrets behind the vows of celibacy taken by samsui women and majie.

"They're supposed to be celibate, but I'm the grandson of a samsui woman," Patrick points out. "Now, how could that be?"

He leaves us thinking for a while, before revealing that this was a vow that could be reversed. Those vows, he explains, were often made to protect the women when they came from China.

There's more to discover: An innocuous-looking shophouse nearby that was still functioning as a brothel until recently. An intriguing wall mural next to the Chinese Weekly Entertainment Club that features key historical players in the Chinese community, including a Japanese general that always seems to be behind bars.

After a few hours, I am surprised to find myself a lot more interested in culture and heritage than I had thought I would ever be.

In fact, it's only our aching legs that remind us it's time for a break - and dinner.

Fortunately, The Clan Hotel has brought takeaway Punggol Nasi Lemak and Jangut Laksa up to our rooms. At \$30 a pop, sampling from well-known hawker dishes under its Master Series programme is pricey, but digging into the generous portions while taking in the sunset from level 27 makes it quite the experience. (Also, it gives us a few more precious hours in the hotel.)

By the next day, I'm actually looking forward to another walking tour, even if the topic isn't something I would have chosen: Street Art And Street Food Tour.

"Street paintings, yay!" my wife exclaims delightedly. I try my best to look a bit more enthusiastic.

Once again, however, I am surprised by how much more there is to the area, once you scratch beneath the surface.

While the street art is supposed to be the highlight of this walk, Yeo Pei Shyuan from Everyday Tours spends just as much time sharing some intriguing nuggets of information about Chinatown.

Like, why all the places of worship are clustered along Telok Ayer Street (immigrants would thank their deities the first thing upon safe arrival).

How there were more hillocks in the area (of which only two are left - Ann Siang and Pearl's). And why Pagoda Street is so named even though there is no Chinese pagoda anywhere along the street. (Clue: Check out Sri Mariamman temple.)

Pei Shyuan points out one of the oldest shophouses in Singapore, as well as an almost-hidden well that reminds us why Chinatown's early residents once called the area "bullock water-cart".

These little discoveries almost overshadow the main draw of the tour - street paintings, many by artist Yip Yew Cheong depicting life in the early days - but that's okay.

I'm almost sorry when the tours are over and our little Chinatown getaway ends, but I have to confess, I'm a new convert to culture and heritage.

I'm also a little more convinced that going on a local tour within Singapore isn't as pointless as I once thought it was - and that staycations don't always have to be spent within the confines of the hotel.

- **The writer is a former Straits Times journalist.**
- **The writer's staycation and tours were hosted by the Singapore Tourism Board, The Clan Hotel, Eighth Wave and Everyday Tours. For more stories on exploring Singapore, go to str.sg/sg-go-where**

Matching interests

Whether you are interested in culture or the outdoors, looking for an adventure, or just wanting to dine or shop, the Singapore Tourism Board is hoping to find something you can do - in Singapore.

Go to its SingapoRediscovered website (visitsingapore.com/singapore-discovers), which curates a range of itineraries and tours to match individual interests.

Pick a preferred interest and the site will list suggested destinations, tours and itineraries.

It will also list upcoming events and staycation options, along with links to websites of the providers and booking partners where you can find out more or book tickets. Deals that are eligible for the SingapoRediscovered Vouchers will also be indicated.

Where to stay

For a staycation in the heart of Chinatown, check out The Clan Hotel (theclanhotel.com.sg).

Rooms start from \$320 a night, or splash out for the Grand Premier and Premier rooms, which come with extra services to pamper guests.

"The Clan Uncovers: Craft and Cook" package, which includes a two-night stay, meals and experiential activities, costs \$1,048 for two. It is available for bookings till Dec 25.

Walking tours

Eighth Wave's Perspective tours (perspectives.com) offer a range of walking tours revolving around unusual themes with captivating storylines.

Everyday Tour Company (everydaytourcompany.com) prides itself on its personalised, "small is beautiful" approach to walking tours.

Both companies run Chinatown tours.