

The City of the Sea
Singapore old and new

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Singapur and I

Sometimes a photograph tells a story. And sometimes a story begins with a photograph.

Like the photograph of me at the Singapore River, taken in November 2011.

We didn't have a good start together, Singapore and I, when we met back then.

Although I travelled there with a vague idea of the city in my mind, the reality overwhelmed me: Singapore was too loud, too large, too stylish, too artificial, too flashy and too glaring.

Simply too much, too much of everything; I was intimidated by Singapore, and although I had already spent four weeks in the tropics, I suffered from the humid heat.



Marina Bay Sands

My first evening in Singapore ended with me sitting on the hotel bed crying, frustrated and angry because I was stuck there for two more days until the flight back home to Germany.

As usual in these kinds of situations, by next morning my world appeared much brighter, and I enjoyed the hours I spent at the Singapore River. On the riverbanks, the colorful godowns and the skyscrapers in view, all was quiet, almost idyllic, and I also enjoyed the boat trip on the river.

That is when this photograph was taken, capturing a moment when I had no idea that less than two hours later, in the Asian Civilisations Museum, I would get hold of some sort of inspirational seed corn. The very first seed corn of quite a few - out of which some time later *Time of the Wild Orchids* would grow.

This photograph shows a moment in the no man's land of creativity, between never and *maybe*.

Over the following two days, I discovered corners of the city I immediately fell in love with: St. Andrew's. Chinatown. Little India. The Peranakan Museum. The Cathedral of the Good Shepherd.

But again and again, the city overwhelmed me, overexcited and exhausted me.



Cathedral of the Good Shepherd: oldest Roman Catholic church in Singapore, consecrated in 1847

I was glad when I was finally able to leave the city for Germany.

Nevertheless, thoughts of Singapore kept haunting me. I started researching the city and its past with increasing fascination, finally ended up with the idea for *Time of the Wild Orchids*, and while working on the novel, I reconciled with Singapore.

When I returned there in 2013, we started courting each other, Singapore and I. Shy and cautiously from my part, stormily – with lots of thunder and lightning and torrents of rain – from the part of Singapore.

And in all of my days there, while I followed the footsteps of Georgina and Raharjo throughout the city, Singapore finally managed to conquer my wayward heart.



Patterns of Trade

Patterns of Trade was the title of a special exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum during my first visit to Singapore, relating to the tight web of textile trade in Southeast Asia that had Singapore at its core in early modern times.

But *Patterns of Trade* is also an appropriate term for the mechanisms and factors that have shaped Singapore up to the present day.

Contrary to other British colonies that had been conquered and occupied, having a military and strategic, a powerful political importance, Singapore was always about trade.

That Singapore grew from a commercial hub into a real town, finally into a crown colony was never planned; it just happened over the course of time and by the individual endeavors of all the traders in Singapore.



Trade was the only reason for founding the city; trade - and its bases, necessities and consequences – has shaped Singapore and its people. A development I have tried to depict in my novel.

Singapore old and new



There is not much left of old Singapore, because since its founding, it constantly has been built anew and built differently, resulting in an ever-changing face. Mainly though because, due to the Japanese invasion in 1942, Singapore became a theater in World War II. A dark and bloody chapter in Singapore's history, marked by extreme brutality, that has left deep traces in the cityscape and in the memory of its people.

But a few of the old corners have survived – and there are a lot of old images transmitting a feel of

what it was like, to live in Singapore in those days, long before the war ...

In the old days, a block of sandstone stood in the mouth of the Singapore River, bearing an inscription. In 1843, this sandstone was demolished in order to give way to larger vessels. A few pieces were preserved, and one of them is on exhibit in the National Museum of Singapore – one of altogether eleven National Treasures of Singapore.

The inscription dates probably from the tenth or eleventh century, at latest from the thirteenth century, maybe in Old Javanese or Sanskrit.



Singapore Stone, National Museum of Singapore

Maybe – we don't know for sure, as this inscription has still to be deciphered.

A historic mystery and - together with its individual history - a powerful symbol for Singapore.

New Singapore – by this, we understand the city that has risen from the ruins of World War II after 1945, ambitious to be larger, higher, more beautiful, more exclusive, more stylish, more modern, more exceptional. A city of superlatives, unique and sometimes almost futuristic.

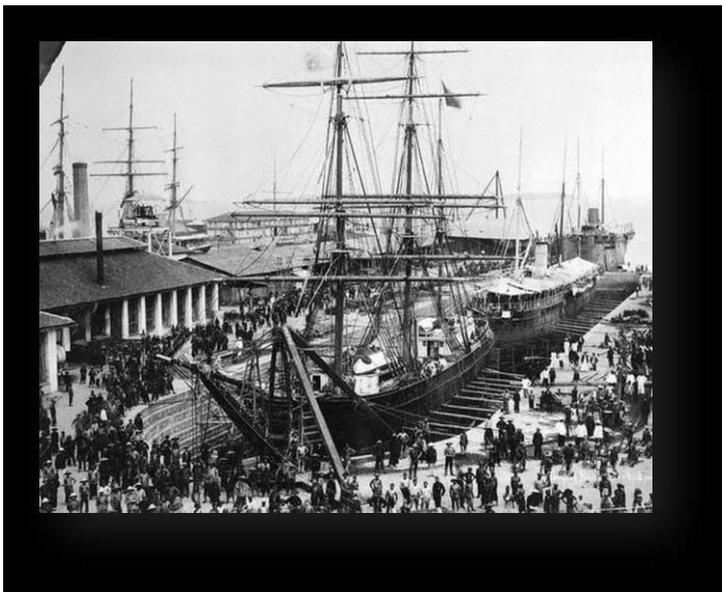


The ArtScience Museum, shaped like a lotus flower

It is this side of Singapore that gave me trouble at our first encounter. I needed some more time and above all, some patience with myself until I learned first to appreciate, then love this modern side of Singapore.



The sea, the sea



Victoria Dock, ca. 1890

The sea has shaped Singapore. This tiny island, the Malay Peninsula at its rear, facing bravely the wind and the vast blueness in front.

The history of Singapore is tightly interwoven with seafaring peoples and pirates, with merchant ships and the vast archipelago of Nusantara. The sea has made Singapore into what it has become.



Maybe because I had these thoughts in mind, everywhere in Singapore I felt the sea. Even in those corners where Singapore is a chic and modern metropolis. In spite of the stifling heat, there was always a breath of the sea in the air, a certain lightness, a sensation of openness and freedom that has influenced the novel.



Collyer Quay

The Singapore River

The Singapore River is the heart of the city. Here trade goods were loaded and temporarily stored, here bargains were struck and deals were made.

And here the city split into halves, in their respective mixture still visible today: on the southern bank of the river Chinatown, the godowns at Commercial Square (later Raffles Place) and the houses of Indian businessmen and moneylenders, while on the northern banks the residential areas of the Europeans were located, Little India and Kampong Glam. Then a bustling place, on both sides, the river today appears much quieter and almost idyllic.



Hongkong and Shanghai Bank



Raffles Place, the former Commercial Square



Chong Fah Cheong, First Generation(2000): One of several bronze statues along the Singapore River depicting scenes from the past of river and city



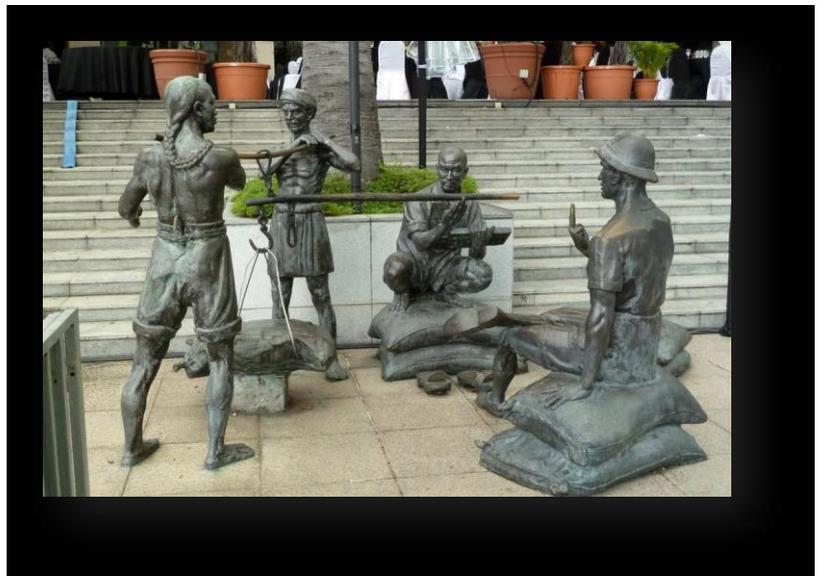
Boat Quay



Tongkang, Asian Civilisations Museum



Sir Stamford Raffles



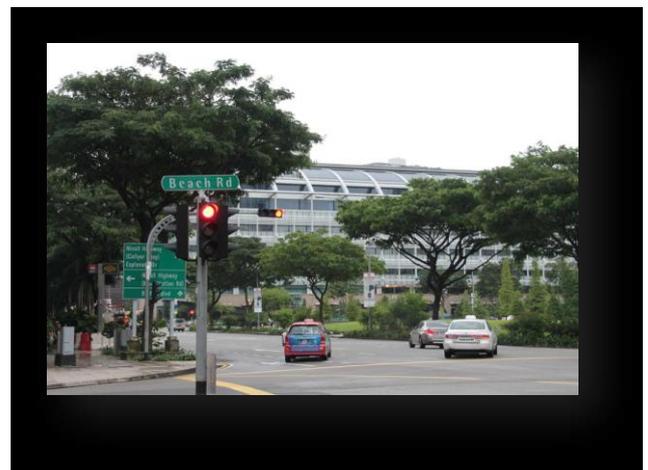
Malcolm Koh, A Great Emporium (2002)

Beach Road

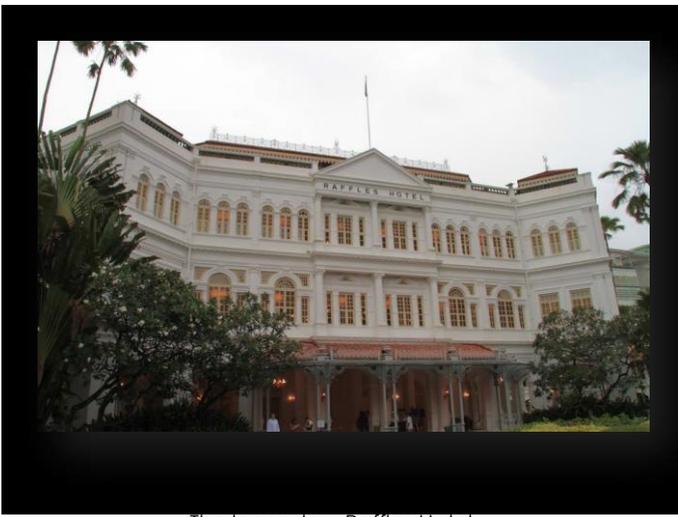
One of the first streets of the newly founded city, Beach Road once bore its name with good reason: it stretched along the coast, and during the winter monsoon, the residences' gardens were flooded by seawater.

And the famous Raffles Hotel, where one can still experience the atmosphere of the colonial era, situated between Beach Road and Bras Basah Road, used to have direct view on the sea.

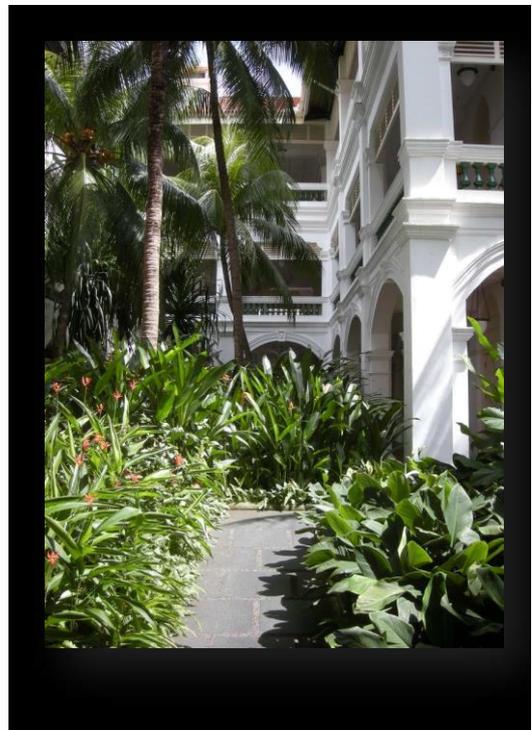
By land reclamation though, the Beach Road has shifted towards the interior. Today, roughly half a kilometer of Singapore streets separates Beach Road from the sea.



Beach Road, approximately on the site where L'Espoir is located in the novel, looking towards the direction of the coast



The legendary Raffles Hotel...



... where the very first Singapore Sling was mixed ...



... and allegedly the last tiger of Singapore was shot.



The very first map of the city of Singapore, drawn by Lt. Philip Jackson in 1828. Malay Heritage Centre.

Government Hill

During my second stay in Singapore, I was lucky not only to have St. Andrew's right across from the hotel, but also Fort Canning Hill, formerly known as Government Hill, in front of the window.

Bukit Larangan, Forbidden Hill, it was called by the Malays, since here the royal palace once stood and the kings of Ancient Singapore were buried.



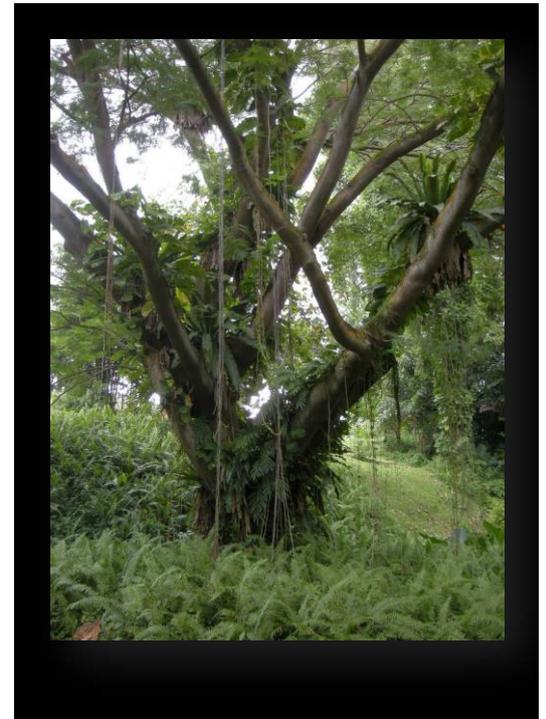
Fort Canning Hill and Armenian Church



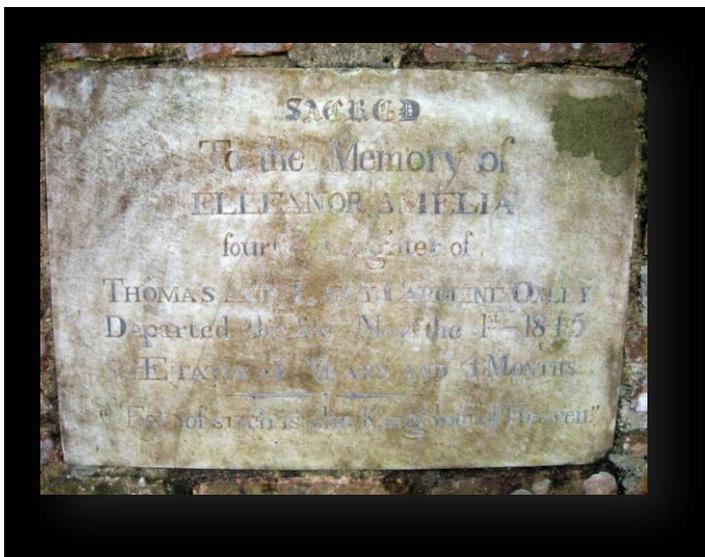
Raffles House, Fort Canning Hill

Because of this historical importance, Sir Stamford Raffles built his bungalow there – but also because of the strategic situation of the hill, from which one had a view far over the sea.

Today, the hill belongs to Fort Canning Park, an imitation of the city's first Botanical Garden, and every few steps, one comes across the past. Especially in form of old gravestones, after the dissolution of the old graveyard embedded in brick stones, allowing touching insights into life and death during the first decades of the city.

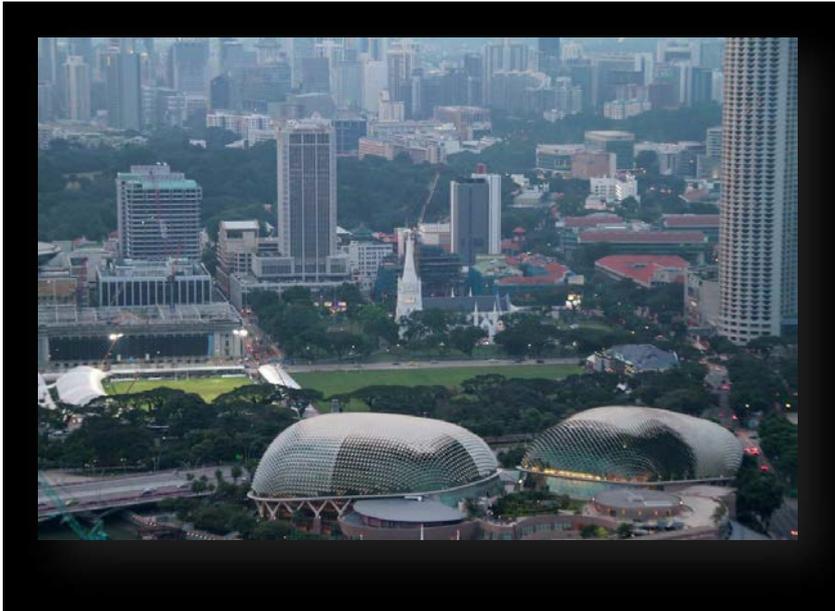


Fort Canning Park



St. Andrew's

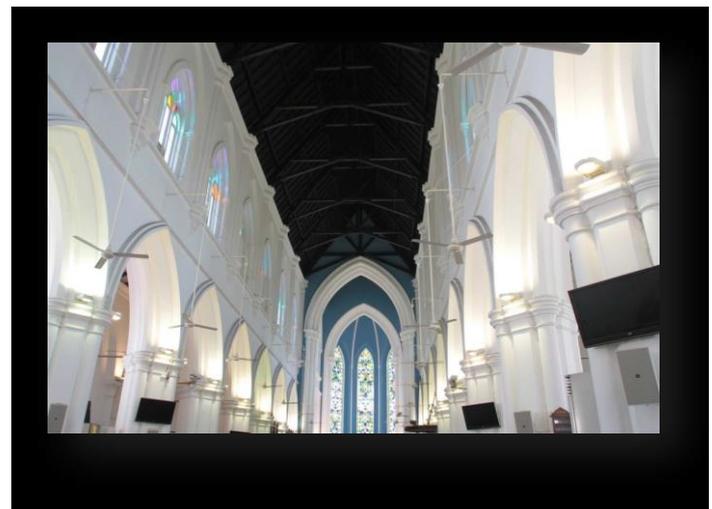
The cathedral of St. Andrew's is my personal landmark of Singapore. My reference mark, as well in the modern city as on old images and historical maps. I automatically refer to all places in and to all routes through Singapore in relation to St. Andrew's.



Sometimes I am inclined to believe it is because of Georgina's story.

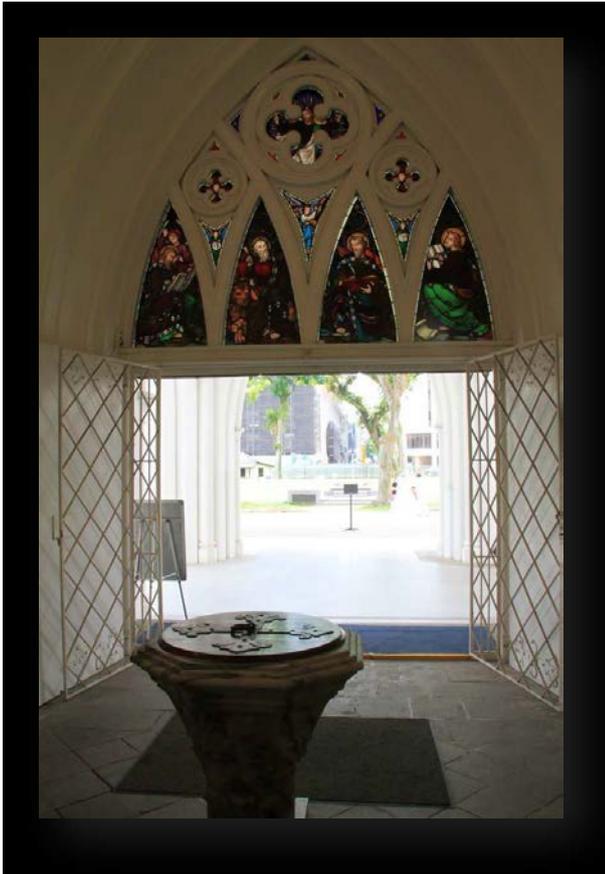
For St. Andrew's is an unmissable symbol of Singapore's Scottish heritage, a piece of old home at the other end of the world.

Just like the remains of St. Andrew had been carried from Patras to the end of the then-known world in 345 into safety, as - according to the legend - Abbot Regulus had been commanded in a dream. After being shipwrecked, his journey ended at the Scottish coast, and from the monastery founded in honor of the saint later the city of St. Andrew's arose.



Maybe it is also because St. Andrew, fisherman himself and therefore patron of fishermen and sailors, reflects in the design of the cathedral, just as the proximity to the sea does.

St. Andrew's is a motif running like a golden thread through the novel; a symbol for Georgina and her story – and of course the last scene of the novel had to take place here.

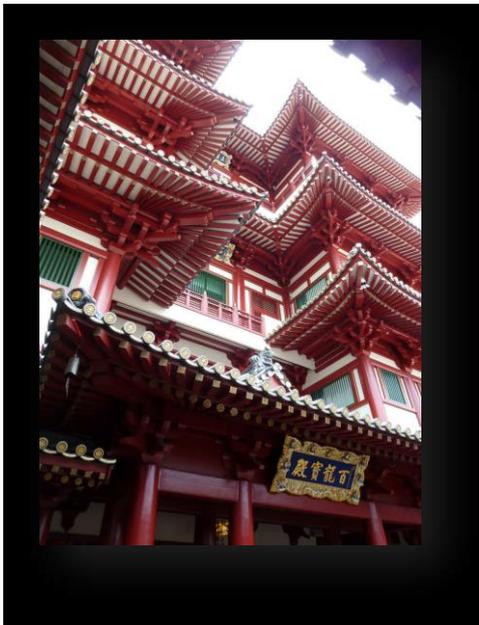


Chinatown

The quarter of Telok Ayer (translated as *water of the bay*) is a part of today's Chinatown. From a historical point of view, it is even the original Chinatown: here the first Chinese settled when Singapore was founded, here they made their first business deals.

This settlement grew rapidly, and Telok Ayer remained the bustling commercial hub of Chinese trade in Singapore, a center also for the coolie trade.





Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, Chinatown



Just like Beach Road, Telok Ayer, having originally bordered immediately to the sea, has meanwhile shifted to the interior by land reclamation.

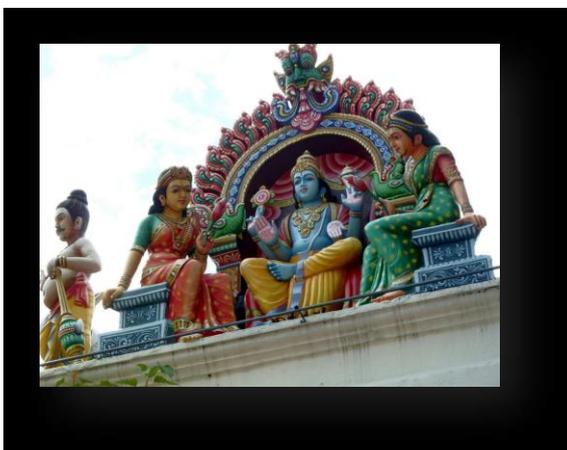
And the vast market hall erected, torn down and built anew during the nineteenth century, has since given way to a huge food court. Today, bulks of employees from the surrounding businesses and offices flock there at lunchtime.

The division of Singapore in ethnic quarters or streets is mere theory, more a simplified approach to actual conditions than a fact.

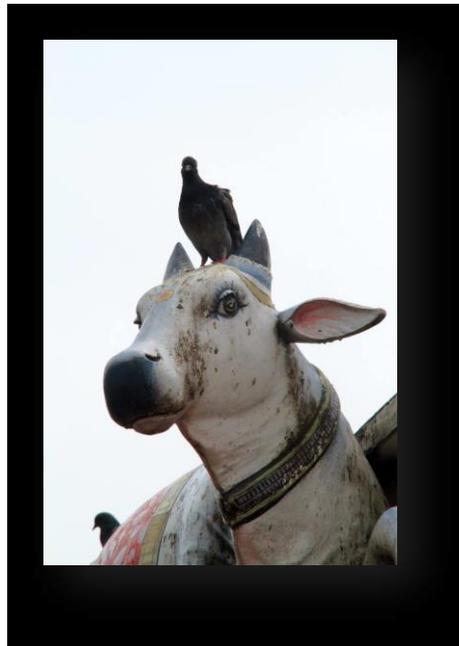
Shortly after Raffles and Farquhar had planned the city on their drawing board, the intended borderlines between the ethnic groups of the city had already started to blur. A development that continued steadily afterwards and is still visible today.



Sri Mariamman Temple



Therefore, it is not surprising that there are not only Chinese temples in Chinatown, but also some mosques and a Hindu temple. The Sri Mariamman Temple is indeed the oldest Hindu temple in Singapore, founded in 1827. The oldest preserved walls of the present-day temple date back to 1843, but the *gopuram*, the impressive tower at the entrance with its numerous sculptures of Hindu deities, other figures and ornamental decorations this temple is famous for, was erected at the beginning of the twentieth century.

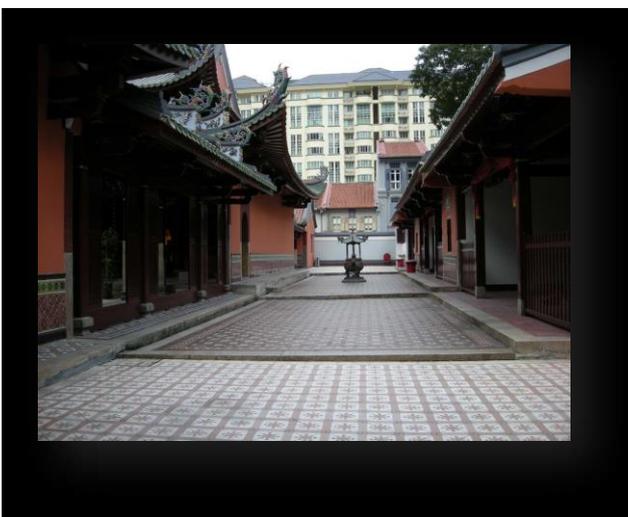


Thian Hock Keng Temple, founded in 1839, is the oldest and most important temple of the Chinese population from Fujian (formerly known as Fukien).

The main temple is dedicated to Mazu, goddess of the sea and protectress of sailors; in a second temple at the rear Kuan-Yin, goddess of compassion, is revered.

Against the backdrop of modern high-rise buildings, this sumptuous temple makes the contradictions of modern-day Singapore visible.

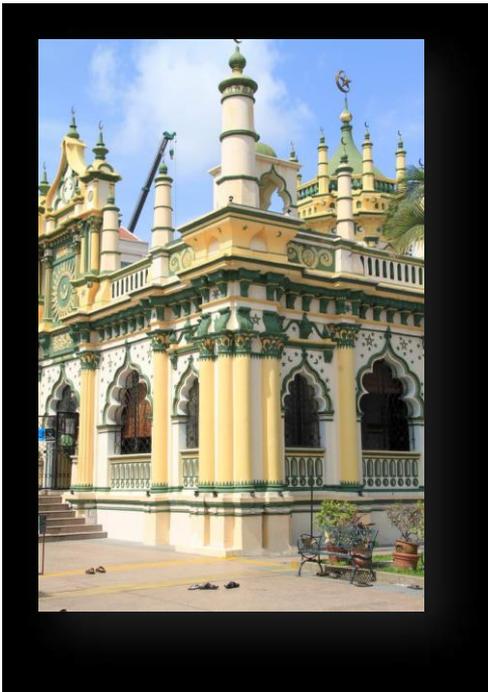
And when one approaches this temple today, in midst of Telok Ayer, it is difficult to imagine that when it was built, its location used to be immediately at the waterfront.



Little India

The Serangoon Road, where in the novel *Raharjo* builds his mansion of Kulit Kerang, was the nucleus of the quarter today known as Little India.

Little India developed from the nineteenth century onwards, when from the so far rural area bit by bit a new quarter of the city arose, mostly populated by Indian businessmen, but also by Chinese and Malays – a blend that is still visible today.



Abdul Gaffoor Mosque

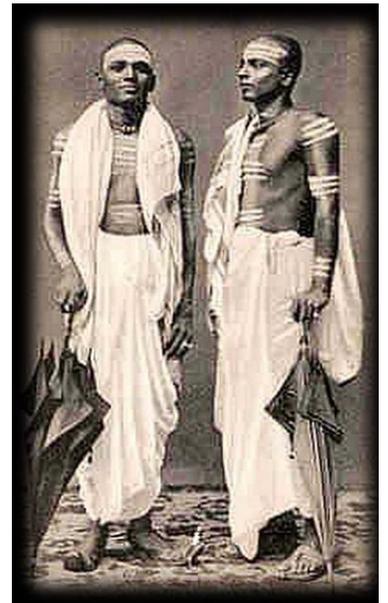
Singapore is famed for being the cleanest city of the world – which indeed is, even when one comes from an orderly and clean small town in Germany.

Little India is the exception of the rule.

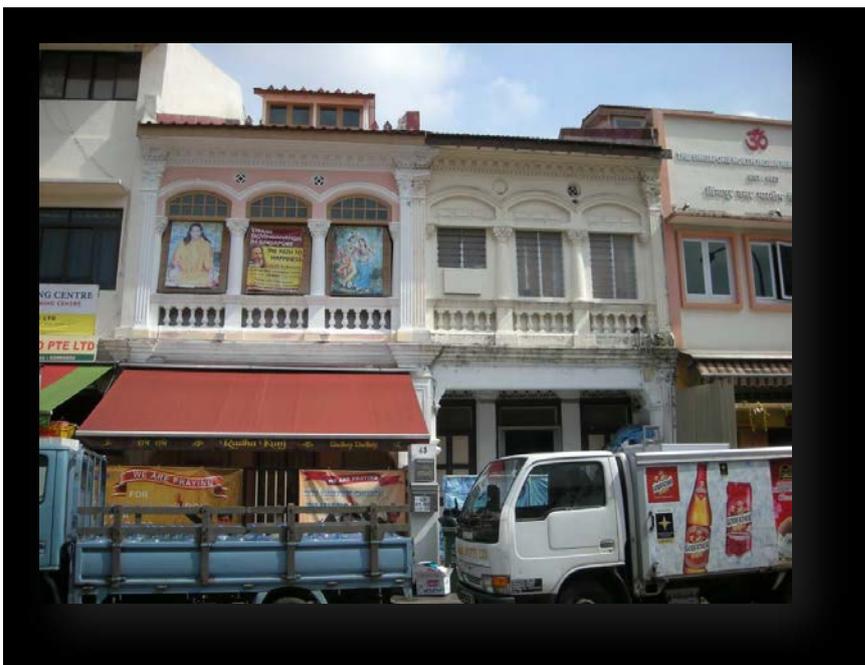
Little India is chaotic and even louder than the rest of the city, but also less hectic, more of an easy-going vividness – and even more colorful than Chinatown.

Little India is a world of its own, completely different from the – nevertheless multifaceted and diverse – rest of the city.

The reason why I love this quarter of Singapore so much.



Chettiar



Orchard Road

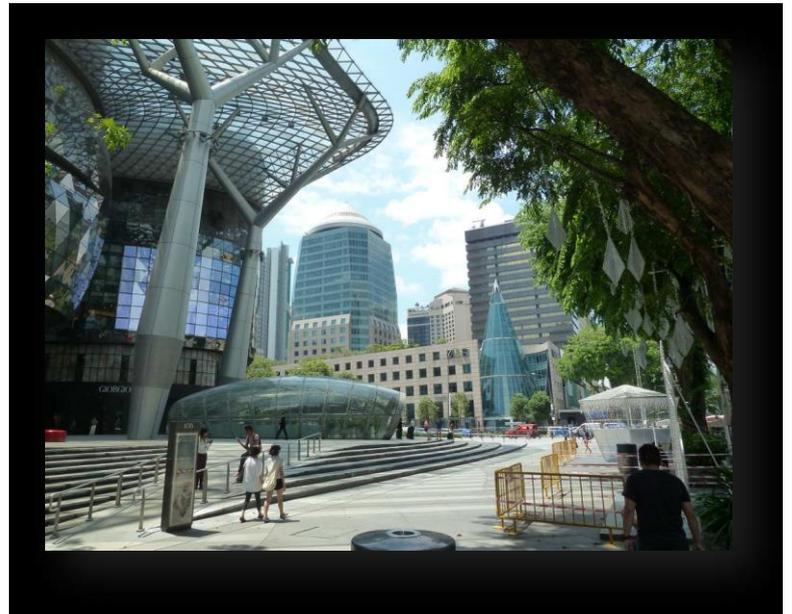
After airport and hotel, Orchard Road was one of the first places I experienced in Singapore, on my very first evening there.

A glaringly lighted shopping area, decorated with tons of gigantic Christmas ornaments. A street with heavy traffic, the noise of people, cars and motorcycles amplified by the coarse screeches of mynah birds. So many noises, so many lights, so much to see – a complete overload.



Hard to believe that in the nineteenth century the street was indeed one large orchard, interspersed by nutmeg trees. Rural, quiet, dreamy, and later on a serene residential area for Europeans.

Nothing reflects more how much Singapore has changed over time than a comparison of Orchard Road then and now.



Kampong Glam

To put it simply, Kampong Glam is the original Malay quarter of Singapore as devised by Raffles in his days. In fact, Kampong Glam never was solely Malay, but always Chinese, Indian, Arabian, Balinese, Javanese as well. A patchwork from all the ethnicities having come from Southeast Asia in order to make their fortune in Singapore.

This colorful blend is still visible today: in architecture, street names and shop signs.



Today, this quarter around the Istana, the former palace of the Sultan of Johor (now housing the Malay Heritage Centre), is mostly renovated and restored to former glory, with hip and trendy shops, cafés and restaurants.



Malay Heritage Center / Istana



Masjid Sultan, Sultan's Mosque



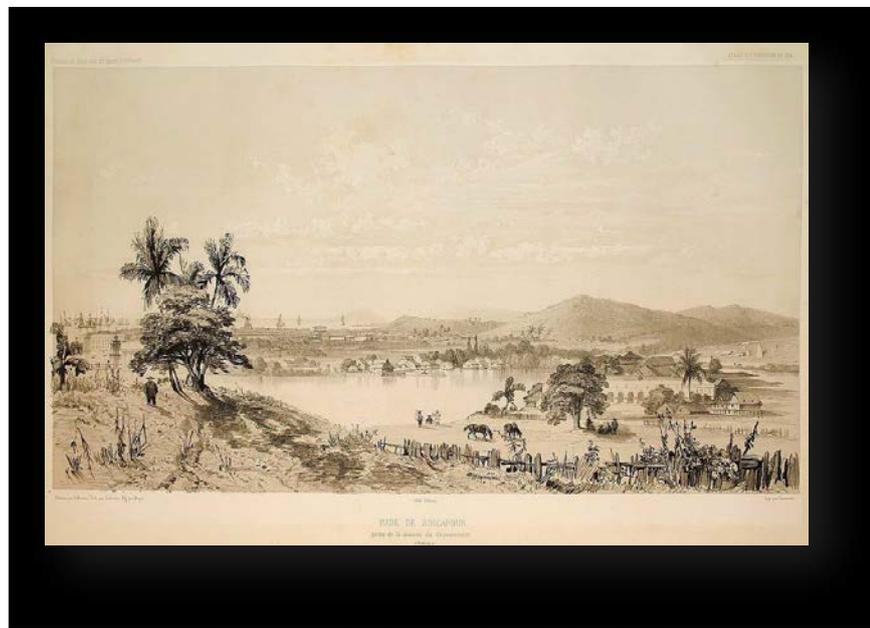
Malay Rajahs



Malay Ladies

Some kind of paradise

When looking at old drawings, water-colors and paintings from the founding years of Singapore, when reading travel accounts from that period, one believes oneself in paradise: jungles untouched by man, with lush and exotic vegetation, picturesque bays and a variety of animals.



Singapore - Adolphe Jean-Baptiste Bayot, 1846

A paradise that disappeared while the city grew in population, extension and economic power; a development also depicted in the novel.

Meanwhile, this development has been reversed in parts: nature has again some space on the island, within the hypermodern city and around. Today, Singapore is the greenest metropolis in the world.



Wild orchids

I came across areas where this lost kind of paradise has been reconstructed, conveying vividly the idea how paradise-like Singapore must have been in its beginnings.



Asian otter

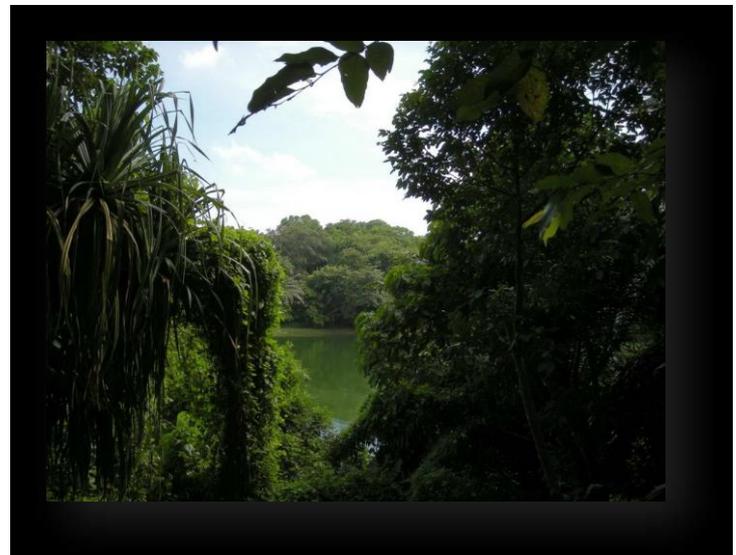


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