



Glimpses of old Singapore



There is more to Singapore's Merlion than just a water spout, writes **PEGGY LOH** who spent a nostalgic time at two museums in the republic

MARINA is deeply passionate about all things Peranakan. "I must have been a Peranakan in a past life," she muses. She works in Penang, so it's no surprise that she's familiar with the Straits-born heritage.

After a trip to the Museum Shop, her shopping bag is filled with lovely items including a mouse-pad shaped like a nonya ceramic urn with typical turquoise colours.

Marina had flown in to Singapore earlier on Firefly which has convenient connections from Penang to Subang and Singapore.

When we check into the Grand Mercure Roxy Hotel, we are amused to discover that the hotel is in Marine Parade and that our first stop is the Merlion Park in Marina Bay – her namesake!

Merlion Musings

With cameras clicking, the crowd on the sunny

viewing deck of Merlion Park is focused on the iconic Merlion spouting water from its mouth into the Singapore River.

The Merlion is the sculpture of an imaginary creature that's half lion and half fish. The fish body comes from Temasek, the ancient name for Singapore when it was just a fishing village. The lion head represents Singapore's original name, Singapura, meaning "lion city" or "kota singa" in Sanskrit and Malay.

This is the original Merlion that used to stand at the mouth of the Singapore River. When the Esplanade Bridge was completed in 1997, it blocked views of the Merlion from the Marina

Bay waterfront. So, in 2002, the Merlion was relocated to this auspicious position in front of the Fullerton Hotel.

There's also a mini-Merlion or Mer-cub in the park and I am tickled to see visitors pose with mouths wide open and bodies aligned to the Merlion's to create the illusion that they are spouting water from their mouths!

In nearby Sentosa Island, we see the mother of all Merlions that stand 37m tall. This huge Merlion has a lift that takes visitors to its mouth on Level 9 and an open-air gallery on its crown that allows a 360° panoramic view. Cooled by the evening breeze, we take our time to sight

attractions like the harbour, the Singapore Flyer, the impressive city skyline and the construction on the Integrated Resort in progress.

Museum Marvels

At the National Museum of Singapore's historical Rotunda, we are greeted by a pagoda towering almost eight metres high. It resembles a candi or ancient Hindu/Buddhist temple. This art installation by Indonesian artist S. Teddy D, entitled Love Tank (The Temple), is adorned with pretty pink lotuses and heart-shaped cannons that transform a weapon of violence and destruction into an object of beauty, purity and peace.

Such site-specific, provocative and original art installations keep us enthralled, in particular Suzann Victor's Contours Of A Rich Manoeuvre, featuring eight chandeliers that swing in sequence and staggered patterns above the link bridge.



The moment I step into the Food Gallery with its nostalgic street food stalls and food-related artefacts, I am enveloped by the sound of street hawkers and the fragrant aroma of food. The latter, I find out later, comes from a backroom where there is an enticing array of spices used in our favourite local dishes.

In each of the four Living Galleries — Food, Fashion, Film & Wayang and Photography — I find a backroom filled with precious relics presented in state-of-the-art and interactive modes.

In the Film & Wayang Gallery, I am impressed by three big screens that show excerpts from early iconic films by the legendary P. Ramlee and in the rear, I see a spectacular Fujian glove puppet theatre stage with a collection of carved ceramic-faced puppets in different costumes.

When I recognise the wailing tunes of Teochew opera, I track it to two actors dressed in intricately sequined costumes on a Chinese wayang stage, reminiscent of how Ah Kong (my grandpa) used to enjoy such opera in the old days.

On Sentosa Island, Marina and I make a beeline for the award-winning Images Of Singapore Museum to journey back in time and see how the founding fathers of Singapore's four main ethnic groups forged a nation through the process of trade.

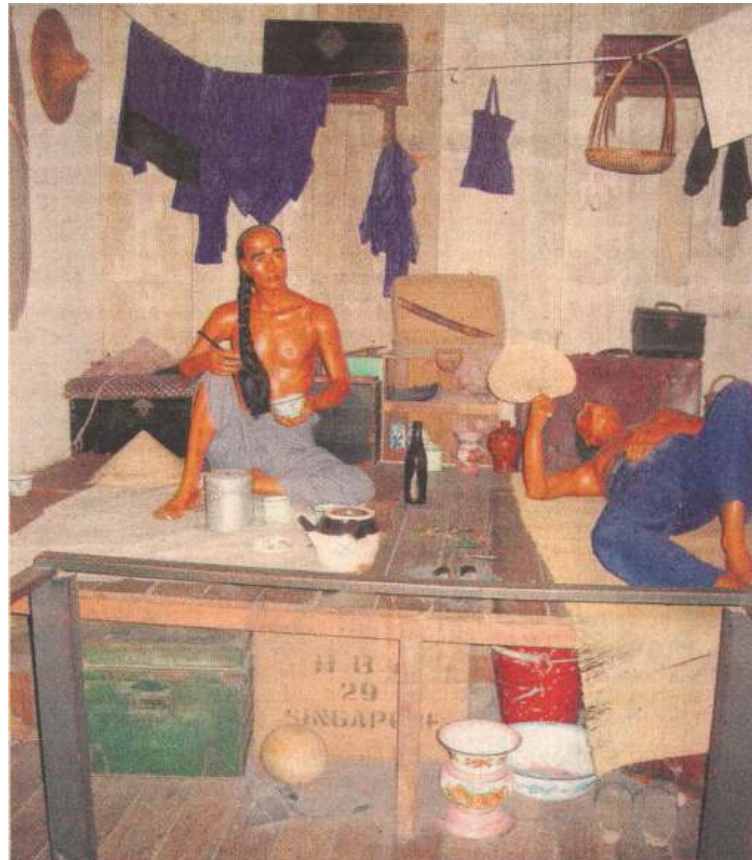
Themed, Many Faces, One Story, the display uses elaborate tableaus of wax figures dressed in authentic costumes to depict historical events, traditional lifestyles and cultural festivals. This comfortable walk-through exhibition traces Singapore's history from its fishing village days to its birth as a vibrant island nation.

From women wrapping rice dumplings and hawkers selling their wares to scenes of celebrations like weddings, Hari Raya and Lunar New Year, the wax figures look amazingly life-like.

Stepping across the threshold of a Peranakan home, we are startled when a nonya wax figure suddenly moves her arms and a recorded message welcomes us in that typically Peranakan sing-song tone. Totally charmed, Marina cries out dramatically, "My family!" and send us into gales of giggles.



Under the Esplanade Bridge in Merlion Park



Life-like scenes of coolies resting in their quarters — picture courtesy of Images of Singapore





Firefly to Singapore

Firefly, Malaysia's first community airline, made its entrance into Singapore skies from July, departing from SkyPark Subang Terminal, Ipoh and Kuala Terengganu (from July 1, 12 and 14 respectively), and from Kuantan (from July 22) and Malacca (from Sept 1).

With four daily direct flights between Subang and Singapore, and three to four times weekly from the other destinations, Firefly provides travellers with one of the best options to travel between Malaysia and Singapore. It offers low fares that include 20kg check-in baggage allowance, assigned seating and in-flight refreshment aboard its brand-new ATR72-500 aircrafts.

It is now offering an incredibly low, all-inclusive fare of RM88 one-way for booking for the travel period from now until Oct 24.

Travellers landing at the Subang SkyPark will soon be able to enjoy shuttle bus services to KL Sentral and KLIA in Sepang.

For more info and bookings, visit website: www.fireflyz.com.my

FAST FACTS

Grand Mercure Roxy Hotel
The Grand Mercure Roxy Hotel is in 50 East Coast Road, Singapore 428769, adjacent to Roxy Square and opposite Parkway Parade Shopping Centre. It has easy access to the city centre and guests enjoy free shuttle service to Changi Airport, just 15 minutes away. Tel: 65-6344 8000, Fax: 65-6344 8010. Visit website: www.grandmercureroxy.com.sg

National Museum of Singapore
Built in 1887, the National Museum of Singapore is a historical monument in 93 Stamford Road, Singapore 178897. It is open daily and admission tickets apply for permanent exhibitions. For more info and schedule for free guided tours in English, Japanese and Mandarin, call 65-6332 3659 or visit website: www.nationalmuseum.sg

Sentosa Island Museum
The Images Of Singapore Museum on Sentosa Island is open daily from 9am to 7pm. Admission tickets are S\$10 for adult and S\$7 for child (aged three to 12). For more info on Sentosa Island attractions, visit website: www.sentosa.com.sg



Stage actors performing Teochew opera at the Film & Wayang Gallery