

A Seaside Walk to Remember

By Terrence Hong

At the start of the 20th century, the east coast of Singapore, an idyllic area where small villages lined the seafont, became a place where wealthy families flocked to build magnificent seaside villas. The area soon became known as the 'Brighton' of Singapore, attracting the interest of hoteliers such as the Sarkies brothers, owners of Raffles Hotel, to establish seaside retreats.

Despite the profound changes of the last three decades, the East Coast has retained much rich history and old-world charm. The neighbourhood is a veritable social container of memories for many Singaporeans; a mention of Katong or the East Coast is bound to unloose a deluge of anecdotes about food stalls, shops and the illustrious families who owned the great seafont mansions, some of which still stand today.

One need not be a local historian to experience the unique history and heritage of the area. A walk down Marine Parade Road will show that much of the East Coast's charm and splendour remains undiscovered. I have designed this trail to allow anyone to explore this fascinating area unaccompanied. Put on your walking shoes and arm yourself with a camera as you become a local tourist for the day.

The Elias brothers, Joseph, Ezra and Isaac, were prominent landowners around the turn of the century. **Amber Road** was named for the matriarch of the family, Amber Elias.

Unfortunately, the family's seaside bungalow is the only part of the original estate that still remains. For years, it served as a storehouse for Cold Storage but has now been restored as a clubhouse for the Sea View Condominium. The new condominium complex replaced the Sea View Hotel, which was built in 1969 on the site of the original family mansion. When it opened, the 18-storey hotel was the tallest structure in the suburbs. The perimeter wall of the condominium roughly follows the perimeter wall of the grounds that surrounded the old family home.

Mandalay Villa, a grand house built in 1902, once stood where the main entrance of the Sea View condominium is now located. This was where the illustrious socialite Mrs Lee Choong Guan held lavish parties for the elite of Singapore. The parties given by the Diamond Queen (as Mrs Lee was more commonly known, thanks to her penchant for a 'girl's best friend') were rare platforms where the British and Chinese communities could mingle in days when such social mingling was unusual. Mrs Lee was presented at the Court of St James in London; she was honoured as a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in recognition of her charitable work for the British Red Cross. She allowed the villagers of Kampong Amber to live rent-free on her land, for which they thanked her by holding an annual parade in her honour.

A seaside bungalow unchanged since it was built in 1926





A traditional Peranakan wooden house located at 25 Chapel Road.



The original property wall of the estate that once belonged to Tan Eng Chee still stands.



Sea Breeze, a landmark of Marine Parade

Mrs Lee died in 1978 at the age of 101. Mandalay Villa was sold and demolished in 1983. Fortunately, select pieces of furniture and the original stained glass window panels can be found in the Garden View Hotel in Balmoral Road. The Indian High Commission in Grange Road, built by Lermitt and Westerhout, the architectural firm that designed Mandalay Villa, still conveys some sense of the grandeur that was Mandalay Villa.

23 Amber Road was built by A.W. Cashin in 1916 as a gift to his brother-in-law, Mr D Kitovitz. Designed by Regent Bidwell, architect of the Goodwood Park and Raffles hotels, 23 Amber Road was built in a crescent shape, enabling all rooms to receive maximum sunlight and ventilation. The house was designated a heritage property in 2008; it is the only house in Singapore built in a crescent shape.

A landmark of Marine Parade is **Sea Breeze at 38 Marine Parade Road**. Built by Mr Eric Choa, partner of the law firm Oehlers and Chua, this is the only plantation-style bungalow still remaining on the former seashore. The house has a deep verandah from which the family enjoyed the sea view in shaded comfort. Also in the same grounds is an apartment block designed in the modern style that was the pinnacle of contemporary living when the block was built in the mid 20th century.

Just off Marine Parade, in Joo Chiat Road facing Katong Mall, stands the largest house in the area (**517 Joo Chiat Road**). Members of the family that built the house still reside in it today. The nearby Cheow Keng Road was named after the home's illustrious owner, Wee Cheow Keng, a prominent leader of the Hainanese community in colonial times.

The cul-de-sac of **150 East Coast Road** conceals a lovely row of pastel-coloured single-storey houses with Victorian bay windows. Resembling seaside homes in Brighton, these conserved terrace houses are some of the few old houses in Singapore with basements.

Another gem can be found at **25 Chapel Road**. Two pairs of imposing gate-posts guard this traditional Peranakan wooden house that rests on concrete plinths. This is the only house on the street that still has a traditional driveway with both entrance and exit gates.

Within the grounds of the former **St Andrews Community Hospital** opposite Laguna Park estate on Marine Parade Road, hidden from the public eye by trees and bushes, is a single storey seaside bungalow with an enclosed verandah. Go have a look – you will be surprised to see that this house has remained unchanged since it was built in 1926. The entire plot of land is now abandoned.

The Grand Hotel (25 Still Road and 26 Still Road South) stands at the junction of Still Road and Marine Parade Road. Originally named *Karikal Mahal* when it was built in 1917 by wealthy cattle trader Moona Kader Sultan, the house

became a hotel after WWII. Because of its direct access to the seashore, it soon became a favourite venue for weekend tea parties. The grounds of the Grand Hotel were eventually divided when Still Road was extended to meet Marine Parade Road. When walking along Marine Parade Road, just after the Marine Parade National Library, if you look closely you can still find the original steps that would have led hotel guests down onto the sandy beach. Today, the street is known as 'Karikal Lane', thus immortalising the name of the original building.

The best-preserved stretch of the old **Katong sea wall** can be found at the junction of Marine Parade Road and Telok Kurau Road. The land behind this sea wall is now an empty field but a huge mansion resembling *Panglima Prang* once stood there. *Panglima Prang*, which means War Admiral in Malay, was built near River Valley Road before 1860 by Tan Jiak Kim, grandson of Singapore pioneer Tan Kim Seng. At the time of its demolition in 1982, *Panglima Prang* was the oldest house still standing in Singapore. Its look-alike on Marine Parade and Telok Kurau, constructed in 1914, was demolished in the early 2000s.

Where **Marine Parade Road meets Nallur Road**, one finds the property wall of the estate that once belonged to Tan Eng Chee, son of the millionaire and philanthropist, Tan Lark Sye. Tan's property was redeveloped in the 1970s, but the original property wall remains and serves to fence the houses facing Marine Parade Road.

As you stroll along the former seaside, it's not always easy to imagine the stately settlement that was Singapore's East Coast during the first part of the 20th century. But, despite modernisation, vestiges of the old neighbourhood remain. With some background information, a peek at the historic buildings that still dot the area, plus sufficient imagination to conjure up those that no longer stand, even the casual explorer can glimpse the rich heritage of this unique area.

More information on heritage areas can be found at www.infopedia.nl.sg/Architecture_and_Landscape.html
Photos of the East Coast can be found at www.picas.nhb.gov.sg/picas/public/internetSearch/ (key in aerial view Katong).

Terrence Hong has been a volunteer at the Asian Civilisations Museum since it opened its doors in 2003. He has conducted walking tours on colonial architecture in the vicinity of Empress Place, Chinatown and Sembawang. In his free time, he enjoys photography and has built up extensive photo records of Singapore's colonial houses.

All photos by Terrence Hong