

The Back-Alley Barber

By Heather Clark

If you're under 10, getting a haircut in Singapore typically involves heading to a mall and watching cartoons in a chair shaped like a train. But the last time my son, Theo, needed a clip, we headed to Chinatown for something a little different: Uncle Goh's back-alley barbershop in Mohamed Ali Lane.

Uncle Goh's has been a neighbourhood institution for decades. And while they were a common sight in the 1960s, today there is only a handful of streetside barbers in Singapore. They're one of the country's many disappearing traditional trades, along with fortune-tellers, cobblers and joss-stick makers.



Uncle Goh casts a keen eye on Theo's hair

When we arrived at the stall, a couple of men were already queuing up for a shave and a haircut. As Goh tended to another customer, one of them smilingly pulled out a bright plastic stool for us to sit on until it was our turn. Meanwhile my daughter Margo had found a fantastic electric-yellow live caterpillar which, as we watched it climb over her ponytail, provided great entertainment while we waited.



A ring-seller displays his wares

At last it was his turn and Theo climbed onto an ancient barber's chair with a wooden box for a booster seat. "Short back and sides please," I said, as Uncle Goh tied on an apron. Clearly a consummate professional, he brushed some powder on Theo's neck and quickly set to work with scissors and

shears. At the end of 15 minutes the boy was looking quite spruce, in a dapper 1930s sort of way. It was such fun getting his hair cut in the open air that he hardly squirmed at all. Did I mention it cost \$4?

But the fun isn't over when Uncle Goh brushes the last stray hairs from your shoulders. Instead of Topshop or Louis Vuitton, the retail therapy across the lane is a back-alley flea market, where a dozen or so vendors lackadaisically hawk everything from old Hong Kong DVDs to huge rings set with semi-precious stones.



The live electric-yellow caterpillar



The hand-sewn cheongsam

As we made our way past the curbside displays, Margo found a fetching Malaysian doll perched in a boat full of fruit, and I was delighted to find a 1950s cheongsam with hand-sewn sequined butterflies. (I have absolutely no chance of ever fitting into this garment, but it's a lovely artefact just the same.) I also found an old photo album, filled with fascinating glimpses of a mid-20th century Singaporean dandy.

As I contemplate the sorry state of my own hair, I find myself wishing Uncle Goh would expand his services, perhaps offering highlights, say, or maybe the occasional manicure? Until then, for the men and boys of Singapore, a quick trim at a back-alley barber can be a refreshing change from the corporate slickness of modern life.

Heather Clark works with the PASSAGE team. She first saw the barber of Mohamed Ali Lane during an excellent Field Studies Singapore tour.

All photos by the author