

A Voyage of Discovery

Navigating The Maritime Experiential Museum with Children

by Anne H Perng

Almost by definition as Friends of the Museums members, we seek museum exhibitions that interest us whether in Singapore or abroad. As a parent, I want to instil the same sense of wonder and inquisitiveness in my own children. Museum-going should not be a chore, but an enriching experience that increases their understanding of a particular topic. It should also be entertaining because, well, they're just children. With this in mind Zara (eight), Ivor (four) and I set off for The Maritime Experiential Museum (MEM) in Sentosa after school one day.

We first encountered one of Asia's most famous mariners – 15th century Chinese Admiral Zheng He. An introductory film was projected onto a giant screen located on the full-sized replica of the bow of his massive *bao chuan*, or treasure ship. Next we visited the places Zheng He had sailed to on his seven voyages. As travellers, Zara and Ivor received their own passports, which required embossed stamps at each of the eight trading ports, starting in China (Quanzhou) and ending in Kenya (Malindi). The experiential part of MEM's name was certainly appropriate as these destinations were laid out like different *souks* (Arabian marketplaces) and offered many interactive activities on the 'touch-learn-play information panels'. The children could not resist beating out rhythms on drums in Malindi or making their own *wayang kulit* puppets in Palembang.



Ivor on the Javanese jong



Admiring the Indonesian Borobudur ship

Then it was off to the Historic Ship Harbour where we boarded full-sized replicas of the various ships that had plied the maritime silk route, including a Javanese *jong* and an Indonesian *Borobudur* ship. The *jong* was handmade and had sailed from Indonesia to its new home in Sentosa. Before heading to the Typhoon Theatre, we looked around the Marine Archaeology Gallery, showcasing early 15th century artefacts from the Bakau shipwreck, which lies near Bakau Island in Karimata Strait, Indonesia. The ceramics cargo and

carbon-dating indicated a wreck of the early 15th century, which makes it one of the earliest examples of Chinese shipping in Southeast Asian waters. These Southeast Asian shipwrecks were interesting because they proved that clandestine trade had occurred during the Ming dynasty, which had first promoted trade and exploration of the outside world and later became more isolationist. Zara was excited to see NUS professor and archaeologist, Dr John Miksic, on the explanatory video because she had met him last year during the Bujang Valley Study Tour.

At the Typhoon Theatre's waiting area Ivor discovered his favourite item: a particularly scary 'surprise' when you opened a wooden crate's doors. Inside the theatre, the 360-degree screen and multi-sensory special effects of howling winds, splashy waves and loud thunder, helped us experience the shipwreck of a Chinese trading vessel bound for Arabia. This was Zara's particular favourite despite it being "too sad". An Omani *dhow* is also displayed here. A gift from the government of Oman, the *Jewel of Muscat* was built using traditional materials and construction techniques and had sailed here from Oman in 2010.



Zara and Ivor beating drums in Malindi

An activities space with arts and crafts tables, reading corners, and cultural demonstrations managed to divert the children from the souvenir store (all those stuffed toys...). After a quick stop at the snack counter, we went home with fully stamped passports, having learned so much about Asia's maritime history.



Finding the shipwrecks in the region

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Did they want to go back again – their response? A resounding yes!

Anne H Perng is Vice President on the FOM Council and also serves as a docent at the Asian Civilisations Museum and the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall. Her children's favourite Singapore museum is the Singapore Philatelic Museum.

All photos by the author

Please note: FOM members will receive a discount on ticket prices.