

Lead and learn

The number of volunteer guides at museums, parks and wildlife reserves here is rising

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Story-tellers: Mr Poh Lip Hang (above), 28, a guide at the National Museum, draws reserved students out by asking questions. -- ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM



By Kezia Toh

If spending your weekends attending lectures, reading and conducting mock exhibition tours sounds like fun rather than work, you may want to sign up as a docent at museums, parks and wildlife sites here.

Docent means "to teach" in Latin. If you love animals, nature, art or history and want to spread that love to others, you can join training programmes to lead guided tours once or twice a month around museums and the zoo.

More and more people are volunteering to be docents, says Friends of the Museums president Elaine Cheong, 60, who oversees more than 500 docents, 20 per cent up in numbers from three years ago.

The non-profit group of mostly women run a \$500 six-month training programme where one must attend lectures and tours and write research papers before he can be certified as a docent at five museums and heritage institutions run by the National Heritage Board.

These are the Singapore Art Museum, Asian Civilisations Museum, Peranakan Museum, National Museum of Singapore and the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall.

The training fee is borne by the docent.

The docents also serve the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, which does not come under the board, and they will start guiding at the Malay Heritage Centre in May.

They may do "soapbox guiding" when the museums offer free admission to Singaporeans and permanent residents from May 18, helping to ease traffic from a potential spike in visitor numbers.

"Rather than taking hordes of visitors along and crowding the gallery, we could station docents in various parts of the gallery and visitors go to them instead," she says. She adds that the group is prepared to put up more tours if there is a massive influx of visitors.

Hers is the largest group serving museums run by the board. The other two groups are the Museum Volunteers - a newer and smaller group with mostly Singaporean guides - and one with the Preservation of Monuments Board, which promotes an appreciation of national monuments. Overall, volunteer numbers of the three groups have risen from 530 in 2011 to more than 900 as of January, said a spokesman for the National Heritage Board.

Volunteer numbers at the National Parks Board have grown too by a third from 2011. More than 800 people help out for free at public parks and gardens with activities such as guided tours and conservation programmes, says director of conservation Wong Tuan Wah, 56.

Those with a passion for animals can volunteer at the Singapore Zoo, Night Safari and Jurong Bird Park. They have a total of 154 docents, up from just 30 in 1997 when the docent programme started, says Ms May Lok, 51, director of education at Wildlife Reserves Singapore.

It is looking to introduce tours in Mandarin and get more retirees to become docents.

Heritage sites such as the Sultan Mosque in Arab Street and Baba House along Neil Road are also docent hot spots.

The programme at the Sultan Mosque was started in 2002 to counter the problem of visitors attending tours handled by tour agencies which sometimes gave "inaccurate information" such as bowing in the wrong direction during prayer, says the mosque's executive officer Asmawi Said, 59.

Today, 10 docents conduct tours at the mosque, up from just two in 2002 when the programme started, he says. Most are female retirees aged 60 and above.

A half-day training gives guides information on the mosque's history and, most importantly, do's and don'ts - such as wearing proper attire and not shouting. "After all, this is a place of worship and we have to protect its sanctity," says Mr Asmawi.

The five-year-old docent programme at the Baba House - a heritage house showcasing Straits Chinese culture managed by the National University of Singapore Museum - is one of the newest here with 19 guides.

The ArtScience Museum at Marina Bay Sands, which opened in 2011, employs 14 full-time, paid docents. It is the only organisation here to pay its docents. It declined to reveal how much they are paid.

It offers a career to docents as they are in the frontline, delivering the best museum experience, says associate director Ross Leo, 36.

He adds: "It is important that our docents have a passion for the creativity at the heart of art and science - and for sharing it with others."

keziatoh@sph.com.sg

SPEAKING ON BEHALF OF ANIMALS

Spreading the message of conservation often hits a snag when visitors ask zoo docent Rachael Lim if a specimen is for sale.

Sometimes, they also ask if a specimen, such as the horns of an antelope, should be better used as medicine instead.

"It is difficult to persuade them otherwise," says the 24-year-old docent with a sigh. She frowns on poaching as animals are killed to harness their medicinal benefits. Antelope horns, for example, are used in Chinese herbal medicine to disperse heat.

Getting through to young children is the best way, says Miss Lim, who is single.

For example, she fishes out specimens, such as lion and cheetah skulls and leopard skin, for children to touch and feel, while more mischievous youngsters put their heads in the big cats' jaws.

"When they touch and interact with these specimens, they feel closer to the animals and view them as creatures to be protected," she says.

The laboratory officer at the Health Sciences Authority has spent the past three years volunteering at the zoo, going back to her undergraduate days reading chemistry at the National University of Singapore.

She volunteers at the big cats and reptile stations every Sunday and leads tour groups of up to 20 visitors.

Another perk of her weekend job: She shadows a keeper at the reptile station, checking on lizards and snakes to ensure they are well-fed.

She says: "Reptiles are amazing. They gradually get used to people and, as long as I stay calm, they feel it and will fall asleep in my arms."

While these slithery creatures may strike fear in those who do not know them well, they awaken in her an instinct that is almost maternal.

She explains: "They cannot speak and need someone else to express on their behalf that they are creatures surviving alongside humans."

DOCENT PROGRAMMES

Wildlife Reserves Singapore

What: Docents are based at the Jurong Bird Park, Night Safari and Singapore Zoo.

Training: A \$150 eight-week programme to equip docents with knowledge on animals and wildlife conservation and public presentation skills. They must also complete a group project.

Commitment: Once a month for a year. Go to education.zoo.com.sg/docent.html

Preservation of Monuments Board

What: Guides conduct special tours of national monuments such as the Sri Perumal Temple and the former Cathay Building (now The Cathay).

Training: A \$200 three-month programme to equip guides with knowledge about Singapore's built heritage and issues surrounding preservation, as well as guiding skills.

Commitment: One year. Go to www.pmb.sg.

Friends of the Museums

What: The 35-year-old non-profit group serves National Heritage Board museums such as the Asian Civilisations Museum, National Museum of Singapore and the Peranakan Museum.

Training: A \$500 six-month programme of lectures, research papers and following tours of qualified docents.

Commitment: A year's guiding at the museum where the docent is trained. E-mail office@fom.sg.

Museum Volunteers

What: A non-profit group that gives visitors guided tours at National Heritage Board museums.

Training: A four-month programme on guiding skills and etiquette, history of building, lectures and gallery walk-throughs by curators. The training fee for the Peranakan Museum and Singapore Art Museum is \$200; training is free for other museums.

Commitment: Once a month for a year. Go to sites.google.com/site/museumvolunteers

ArtScience Museum

What: Full-time paid position to guide visitors around travelling exhibitions at the museum.

Training: Three months, including full museum orientation, written assessments and shadowing senior docents. Free.

Baba House

What: Docents take visitors around this heritage house, containing National University of Singapore Museum's Straits Chinese collection.

Training: A four-month programme including lectures, walking tours and workshops. Trainees do research on Peranakan culture, Baba House and its Neil Road neighbourhood and write papers. **Commitment:** One year. E-mail babahouse@nus.edu.sg for price and details.

National Parks Board

What: Volunteer guides take visitors around parks such as Fort Canning Park, Singapore Botanic Gardens and the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, sharing information about their flora and fauna.

Training: Varies, depending on location. Free.

Commitment: At least four times a year. Go to www.nparks.gov.sg/volunteer.

Sultan Mosque

What: Multilingual docents guide visitors in English, Malay, Japanese and Chinese around the mosque, which dates back to 1824.

Training: A half-day free training programme detailing the history of the mosque, do's and don'ts at a place of worship and public speaking tips.

Commitment: At least twice a month.

Call 6293-4405 for details.

HELPING THE DEAF ENJOY ARTSCIENCE EXHIBITS

A hearing-impaired group touring the ArtScience Museum's Titanic exhibition a year ago received a pleasant surprise when senior docent Gina Soh signed to them in response to their questions.

Although a sign-language interpreter was present, the 35-year-old former social worker - who attended a year-long sign-language course at the Singapore Association for the Deaf - could answer questions directly.

"It really helps to build rapport with the visitors: I can relate more to them and they learn more," says Ms Soh.

She leads the Marina Bay Sands museum's only tours in sign language, conducted on request from visitors.

She started working with the docent programme - a full-time paid position - two years ago, a change from her previous work helping the disabled find jobs. Ms Soh, who is single, leads about seven tours a day.

"It is an opportunity for me to meet people from all over the world and share experience that goes beyond reading the label next to the artefact," she says.

For example, New York-based artist Nathan Sawaya, whose Lego sculptures are showcased in the museum's ongoing The Art Of The Brick exhibition, visited last year. He related to Ms Soh the personal anecdotes behind each piece, which she now passes on to her tour groups.

These include the story behind the artist's 6m-long T-Rex skeleton sculpture and which part of the dinosaur he found the most challenging to construct from Lego bricks - its rib cage.

She says: "It is through passing on these little stories that I feel like an ambassador of sorts, which is very fulfilling."

SELLING HISTORY TO SCHOOL KIDS

Mr Poh Lip Hang, 28, relishes being a museum guide so much that he sometimes takes leave from his civil service job to conduct tours.

The assistant director at the Competition Commission of Singapore uses his days off accumulated from overseas work trips and about a third of his annual leave to be a guide at the National Museum of Singapore.

He volunteers with non-profit organisation Friends of the Museums, where taking charge of school groups is his favourite part of the job, particularly as expatriates, many of whom volunteer as docents, are often not keen on leading local students.

"Local kids are more reserved, so sometimes expat guides are a little worried because it is hard to draw them out," he says.

To engage them, Mr Poh designed a guiding method: throw leading questions to elicit responses that lead students to their own conclusions.

He pauses at a portrait of Sir Stamford Raffles, for example, and asks: "Is he an important man?" "Look at what he is wearing - is he local or from the Western world?" From there, students are led to probe deeper into history, such as the role of Raffles.

"There are many ways you can sell a story," explains Mr Poh, who is single, and started guiding two years ago during his undergraduate days reading economics and business at Singapore Management University.

However, guiding youngsters through the highs and lows of the nation's history comes with its challenges, says the docent, citing how he led a group of lower primary pupils this month through the museum's prized funeral hearse exhibit belonging to the late philanthropist Tan Jiak Kim, when a boy turned pale and burst into tears.

"After this, I learnt that with young kids, we have to be very sensitive with artefacts that feature death," he says.

Now, he guides once a month at the National Museum and heads its student programmes.

The interactions on the job - with both young and old - keep him going. He says: "Older Singaporeans share interesting anecdotes growing up here during the 1950s and 1960s. I learn about their perspectives of Singapore and through them, see how Singapore came to be."

SPREADING HIS LOVE FOR MARINE LIFE

He may be only 16, but Choo Yi Feng can steer visitors expertly through mangroves that dot the Chek Jawa wetlands, pointing out mudskippers, sea snails and worms.

Four years ago, when Yi Feng - then a Primary 6 pupil at Yu Neng Primary - led his first tour through Chek Jawa on Pulau Ubin, his father had to be a chaperone.

Today, the Dunman High School student is no longer the "nervous and trembling" guide of before, he declares.

The National Parks Board volunteer guide now leads tours once a month, although the school holidays in June and December see him on the island - a one-hour bus and bumboat ride from his home - as often as five times a month.

He conducts tours for groups of about 15 people and, two years ago, even guided President Tony Tan.

Yi Feng's love for sea animals was sparked by a visit to Underwater World as a child and, after that, the aspiring marine biologist eagerly read up on sea animals.

"I enjoy understanding the relationship between marine plants and their surroundings, like how a sea hibiscus releases sweet water on the underside of its leaves to attract ants to protect it," he says.

Unlike artefacts in a museum, the changing face of nature makes each tour different, he adds.

"Once, I got really excited when someone on my tour spotted a small mud-coloured octopus, which is a rare find," he says.

His young age, he is quick to add, is no barrier to being a guide. "I just try to sound professional," he says.

But he is sometimes stumped by the barrage of questions visitors fling his way, such as one who quizzed him on the relationship between a clownfish and sea anemone.

His strategy is to explain as much as he knows. As for the rest, he says: "It is up to me to hit the books and read up on what I don't know."