

Would you like to *Explore Singapore!* beyond the usual tourist spots? You will be amazed at how much there is to discover on this Little Red Dot. Have a look at some of the diverse tours we have conducted in the past. From visiting little known traditional craft shops to a condominium for the dead, we take you to places beyond the glitzy and modern Singapore you frequent. We also share with you, in some depth, traditions of the different ethnic groups – from Malay sireh chewing and Indian kolam drawing to festival celebrations.

We will repeat most of these tours so keep a look out if you are interested.

### **Artisanal Chinese Tea Blending Shop and lunch**

We started at a nearly hundred year- old shop which has been blending Chinese tea by hand since 1925. We heard the stories and historical events behind the branding of each blend of tea and saw how the teas are blended using old fashioned equipment and wrapped by hand in paper specially printed for each customer.

The shop has been supplying uniquely blended tea to various “bak kut teh” restaurants and stalls from the earliest time and continues to do so to this day. Now, they also count top hotels and large corporate firms amongst their customers.

After our visit to the shop we went for lunch at a traditional “bak kut teh” restaurant. “Bak Kut Teh” literally translates to “meat bone tea”. It is a soup made with pork ribs boiled with garlic and pepper (some versions have Chinese herbs) until tender. The restaurant, with a history of over 50 years, is one of the tea shop’s earliest customers, and still serves its own special blend of tea from the tea shop.



### **Living with the Dead – The Story of Bishan**

The area of Bishan, located in the northern most part of the Central Region of Singapore, consists of Government HDB housing and private residences, retail/shopping malls and some light industries. It has a fascinating history of nearly 200 years not known to many young Singaporeans and most foreigners.



All of Bishan today sits on what was once a huge cemetery of nearly 400 acres established by the Cantonese and Hakka immigrants in the 1820s. Within the cemetery was a village with a thriving community with its own school, market and cinema. During WW2 a fierce battle between the British and Japanese was fought in the cemetery.



In the late 1970s the government acquired the land for development, the graves were exhumed, and the remains moved to a new columbarium specially built for that purpose.

We were able to visit the columbarium and its temples as well as its heritage gallery where we learnt about the history of Bishan and saw this unique “condo for the dead”.

### **Chinese New Year Walk in Chinatown**

Chinese New Year is the most widely celebrated festival in Singapore and is the most important festival for Chinese people all over the world.

Although the whole of Singapore will have prominent and plentiful signs (dominated by red colour) of the approaching festival, Chinatown is still the traditional centre for festival shopping. Immersion in Singapore’s multi-racial culture is not complete without an experience of Chinatown during this period. The area turns into a lively and colourful hub with shops and extra stalls abundantly stocked with special goods.



This exciting walking tour of the area taught us about the numerous customs associated with Chinese New Year. We also learned about the importance and symbolic meanings of the decorations, special foods and culinary delicacies, and had an opportunity to taste some of them.

### **Little India Deepavali Walk**

ES! took a walk through the streets of Little India and saw how the community prepares for the colourful Deepavali festival. FOM docent Abha Kaul shared with us the meaning of Deepavali, explaining the rich customs and traditions associated with this festival, which Hindus consider one of the most important festivals to celebrate. Why is it called





the festival of lights? What are the stories surrounding the festival? Not only is this a very colourful time but one which is associated with wonderful food, especially sweets. We then enjoyed a light lunch to conclude the programme.

### **Traditional Chinese Craft Workshops – Joss Sticks, Figurines and Funeral Paper Objects**



Chinese people pray to gods and deities with lighted joss (incense) sticks. Have you ever wondered why? And do you want to know how they are made? The same powder used for making joss sticks can also be fashioned into an array of figurines. ES! went to a fascinating craft shop to find out the answers.

A few doors away was another wonderful shop where a family makes objects for the dead to ensure they have a comfortable life in the next world. Be it big mansions with up-to-date amenities, the latest electronic gadgets – iPads, smart phones, luxury cars, or even maids to serve them, one can order anything you want for your dearly departed.



### **The hidden gem of Singapore Lim See Tai Chong Soo Kiu Liong Tong**



We were able to explore a unique Chinese ancestral hall which featured beautiful imported decorative tiles, original frosted glass windows and elegant neoclassical columns. Australia-Singaporean artist Jennifer Lim shared some insights into her great grandfather's clan house, and how her personal connection has inspired a passion project about vintage tiles. Completed in 1928 by prominent China-born building contractor Lim Loh, the clan house was frequented by the Hokkien and Peranakan communities, including Dr Lim Boon Keng. It was a fun exploration of the many secrets which are hidden inside this fascinating building on Cantonment Road.



## **Sculptures in the City**



ES! embarked on a walking tour of Singapore's impressive collection of public sculptures in the civic district. We explored a selection of striking and often whimsical works – from frolicking children to merchants and traders from the past to sculptures celebrating the progress of Singapore. Sculptures that go largely unnoticed by the general public, hiding in plain sight! We learned about the inspirations behind the sculptures and gained an understanding into their meanings and relevance to Singapore's past, present and future.

The tour featured works by prominent Singapore artists such as Han Sai Por and Chong Fah Cheong, both Cultural Medallion recipients, and world-renowned artists like Botero and Dali. These monumental sculptures are both a part of Singapore's distinctive character and a major source of civic pride.



## **Threads of Creativity – Dressing Up Malay Style**

From the humble 'kemban' breast cloth captured in nineteenth century photographs to elaborate, sumptuous ensemble recorded in classical Malay manuscripts to modern day interpretations, this ES! programme invited us to walk down the timeline of Malay women's clothing.

We discovered its forms and styles, and explored the motivations and influences behind them.

We learned the genealogy, the nomenclature and the roles clothes play as status symbol in a stratified society, and that the cloth that makes the clothes is equally fascinating. This specially curated event allowed us to experience up close the woven (tie-dyed ikats, Malay brocades) and decorated textiles (hand painted batik, gold-stamped cloth and gilded embroidery), and savour the endless creativity that went into their productions.



## **Painted Prayers of India: The Art of Kolam**



Through the ages, Indian women have been drawing kolams (geometric designs) at their doorsteps or in their courtyards as a welcome sign every morning. Traditionally they use rice powder mixed with water. Nowadays many have switched to commercially available dry coarse powder.

This form of art from South India serves three main purposes: a religious ritual, a social activity, and a channel for artistic expression for the commoner. It is an ephemeral art that is kept alive not in galleries, but in the common man's home. It is not meant to be permanent. Like life, it has to be constantly regenerated (the life of a kolam is usually just one day).

Join Explore Singapore! to learn about kolams and its variations throughout India like the Rangoli in the North and Alpana in the East. Experience the joy of learning how to create these geometric designs on paper and discover the benefits it brings, such as improved concentration and creativity amongst others.



## **Kranji Countryside – Singapore's Wild, Wild West**



Do you want to see a completely different side of Singapore? Explore Singapore went on a bus trip through the Kranji countryside. No highrise buildings to be seen - only peaceful, green farms and small holdings. The first stop was a farm growing wheatgrass, pea sprouts and various types of mushrooms. Then we saw a new way of growing vegetables in vertical farming. Our final stop included a guided walking tour through the charming Bollywood Farm. A delicious lunch of produce grown on the farm followed before we headed back to the Singapore of today.

## **Secrets of a Good Soya Sauce**

Soy sauce or soya sauce is a ubiquitous condiment used by Chinese people throughout the world. The history of soya sauce goes back more than 2,000 years when it was first created in China during the Western Han Dynasty. The sauce was introduced to Japan by Buddhist monks in the 7th CE, but Korea seems to have begun its own brewing prior to the 6th BCE.



Over the years, soya sauce became widely used as an important flavouring and is now integrated into the cuisines of many East Asian and South East Asian countries, although the sauces made in each country differ in taste.

We were curious about how this indispensable sauce is made, so we had a tour to find out. We visited a soya sauce brewery using the traditional method of making the sauce. We learned about the many steps and natural ingredients needed to make a superior sauce. After a tour of the brewery we attended a workshop to taste and discern different types of sauces and learn how to pair them with different foods.

## **A Studio Visit with Artist Kelly Reedy**

Artist Kelly Reedy has lived in Singapore for more than 18 years. Her mixed media paintings, collages, prints and hand-dyed textiles are inspired by the techniques used in traditional Asian folk arts, including early Japanese Buddhist woodblock prints, Chinese paper cuts, Indonesian batiks and Japanese shibori dyeing methods using natural indigo grown in her studio garden.

She has recently begun to make digital videos, staging her own artwork processes in order to create contemporary multi-media installations.

We joined her for a morning of looking at art and discussion about the combining of old and new technologies in the production of her artworks. Try your own hand in a short workshop using mixed media techniques with paper cut, collage and printmaking!



## **With a Quid of Sirih, I Welcome Thee! – Betel Nut Chewing Culture in a Malay Home**

"A Malay home is incomplete without a sirih set." So goes an old Malay adage. The ultimate symbol of hospitality, it precedes any form of drinks or food in traditional Malay culture, and hence plays a central role in fostering social relationships. Its presence is needed for various rites of passage: from birth to marriage to death. So it makes the ideal family heirloom. Besides, it also serves as the family First Aid box.

This Explore Singapore event went to the home of a collector of sirih sets of the Malay Archipelago. Participants learnt about the betel nut chewing culture through a delightful collection of sirih sets from different regions, reflecting different styles, materials, periods and purposes enlivened by explanations about craftsmanship, and stories about traditions and symbolism.

Through learning more about this seemingly humble practice, this programme provided participants with a deeper understanding of Malay culture.

