

Singapore Precincts Evoke Historic Ties to Indonesia



Wahyuni Kamah

Around the world, the names of streets illustrate a city's history. This is particularly true in Singapore.

As I strolled through the eastern part of downtown Singapore, wandering between North Bridge Road and Victoria Street, I spotted a number of landmarks that included the name Bugis. Yes, I was in the Bugis District, one of the city state's larger center for business and trade, named after an ethnic group from South Sulawesi.

The Bugis people were once prominent maritime traders, seafarers and fishermen, using their trademark *pinisi* schooners to make their ocean voyage across the region during the 17th century. Located on the tip of the Malay Peninsula, Singapore was at the time a burgeoning trading post. Buginese traders sailed up its large canals to conduct frequent business with local merchants.

In the 1830s a group decided to make the city-state their home and settled into an area between Rochor and Kallang Rivers. A road called Kampong Bugis now runs through it.

Bugis District is located only a few kilometers from Kampong Bugis.

Standing between modern, high-rise buildings and wide boulevards, it was hard for me to imagine that from the 1950s to 1980s, Bugis Street was Singapore's notorious red light district and a popular hangout for the transgender community.

The district was transformed in the mid-'80s into a bustling tourist destination with cobblestoned streets and more than 800 shops laid in neat rows. Here, visitors have the option to rent trishaws to travel around Bugis and Little India.

Bugis Street is reminiscent of North Jakarta's Mangga Dua shopping district, a labyrinth of shops offering cheap souvenirs and knick-knacks as well as food stalls, and it is always crowded with visitors.

Vastly different from the shops on Orchard Road that offer mainly branded items and target up-market customers, the commercial and shopping areas in the Bugis District cater to a wider range of consumers. And as most shopper and diners are locals, it offers a less metropolitan atmosphere.

As I walked further along Rochor Road heading north, I passed Bencoolen Street, calling to mind the area's historic connections to Indonesia.

The name is derived from Sumatra's Bengkulu province, where British Governor General Stamford Raffles was stationed in the early 19th century.

He moved to Singapore in 1819, bringing with him a group of Sumatrans who settled in what came to be called Kampong Bencoolen.

This area now includes Waterloo Street, Prinsep Street, Albert Street and Middle Road. Waterloo Street is particularly unique as it is home to several houses of worship, including the Hindu Sri Krishnan temple, the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho temple dedicated to the Chinese goddess of mercy Kuan Yin; the Maghain Aboth Synagogue; and the Roman Catholic Church of St. Peter and Paul.

Waterloo is a wide cobblestone street lined with trees — and a haven for pedestrians.

As the sun begins to set, hawkers begin setting up their stalls offering tasty local dishes.

Chinatown, Kampong Glam and Little India are Singapore's

The ethnic quarters of Little India, Bencoolen and Bugis, offer tourists a glimpse into the Singapore's past, while honoring the various cultures that built the city state.

JG Photos/
Wahyuni Kamah

cultural precincts that are home to countless heritage buildings.

I continued to walk toward Little India, which is located about 500 meters from the intersection of Rochor Road and Bencoolen Street. Construction on the road did not hamper my short journey as pedestrians were provided a safe path.

I walked down to Serangoon Road where Little India is situated. Historically, Singapore's Indian community was scattered across the city state as immigrants arrived at different times. Those who now live in Serangoon Road are descendants of those who came over during the 19th century. The area later transformed into a residential and commercial district.

Farrer Park by Serangoon Road was once a racecourse. Built in the 1840s, it staged mostly horse races, which attracted mostly European visitors. This would explain why some of Kampong Kapor's streets bear English names.

The district is the best destination for Indian food (both from the North and South), spices, traditional Indian textiles, religious and ceremonial items and handicrafts.

A popular spot for backpackers and budget hotels, businesses there also cater to tourists. Little India Arcade is one of the larger and more popular shopping centers for foreign visitors, offering a melange of food, jewelry, textiles and knick-knacks from India.

Despite its name, the district provides places of worship for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians, highlighting Singapore's ethnic and religious diversity.

Many of these structures have been declared heritage buildings by the government, which means they cannot be torn down or altered in any way.

They include the Abdul Gafour Mosque on Dunlop Street, the Kampong Kapor Methodist Church and Sri Srinivasa Perumal temple on Serangoon Road.

Like Kampong Glam and Chinatown, Little India offers a more historical alternative to Singapore's better known urban destinations. Its traditional shophouses add to the ambiance.

Very much like the *rukans*, or *rumah kantor*, of Indonesia, these buildings house small businesses on the ground floor and a living space on the upper floors.

Like its Chinatown counterparts, the shops are typically narrow, made of stone bricks and topped with tiled roofs. Many are painted in bright, vibrant colors to aptly reflect the Indian culture.

Shophouses built between 1840 and 1900 bare a mix of Malay, Chinese and European influences in their architecture. Hostels and budget hotels built

between 1930 and 1960 have more of an art deco look to them.

The ethnic quarters of Bugis, Bencoolen and Little India reveal the rich and culturally diverse past and present of Singapore's 5.4 million residents.

Despite the city state's global reputation as a modern hub for high-end shopping, business and luxury tourism, its high rises and branded department stores will never hold a candle to these vibrant districts.

Bencoolen Street calls to mind its historic connections to Indonesia. Raffles brought people from Bengkulu with him who settled Kampong Bencoolen.



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