

Star Lifestyle

Travel

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Lesson in history

You can learn a lot about Kuala Lumpur's past – and present – by walking through Chinatown with a knowledgeable guide. 3

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Telling stories of the past

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FUNERAL processions were once a common sight along the streets of Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown. I learned this during a recent walking tour with local expert and tourist guide Jane Rai, who said that such processions were organised as a mark of respect to the deceased.

"The long line of mourners would walk the streets and pass by the shop belonging to the deceased, before heading to a nearby cemetery," Rai shared during the Chinatown Cultural Walk tour, one of the sessions offered in the "Free Walk Kuala Lumpur Unscripted" (FWKLU) tours. All the tours featured in FWKLU are curated by a group of guides who are passionate about preserving KL's cultural heritage.

Rai and the other guides work the "tip-based" tours a few days a week. What this means is that, although there is no price set for the tours, participants are expected – but not forced – to tip their guides as payment. If you are unsure of how much to tip, just ask your guide for an estimate.

The tour guides' unwavering efforts in keeping the history alive are commendable, as it breathes new life into the city, by focusing on the past.

For instance, it is said that Kwai Chai Hong in Lorong Panggung, just minutes away from the tourist-famous Jalan Petaling or Petaling Street, was once a popular alley where plenty of immoral activities took place. A few years back, a group of business partners and artists worked together to restore 10 shophouses and transform the laneway into an integrated art space.

Called Project Kwai Chai Hong, the initiative by Bai Chuan Management – which also received financial grant from urban regeneration organisation Think City – now features artworks by local artists like Alice Chang, Khok Shin Nam, Chan Kok Sing, Chok Fook Yong, Chew Weng Yeow and Wong Leck Min.

The formerly dilapidated laneway is a tourist magnet today, greeting many curious visitors daily. There is an unassuming charm about this place, with its faded walls featuring murals based on real people back in the day. The murals are said to reflect the golden era of KL.

One of the murals features a "letter writer", which, according to Rai, was a much sought-after job back then. "Since many Chinese migrants were illiterate, they depended on people who knew how to write, to pen letters for them to be sent home," she explained.

Petaling Hill, meanwhile, on the southern tip of Chinatown, was a silent witness to the evolution of the area.

The shiny Merdeka 118 tower was also visible from where we stood. Rai said this imposing modern skyscraper changed the landscape of Chinatown, alongside the many old buildings that were restored and transformed into art galleries, hip cafes and restaurants.

The beginning

Like many, I have always been curious about how Chinatown came to be, so the walking tour provided some really good insights. For example, in the 1900s, the society in the area was very diverse, with people from all walks of life either living or plying their trade there.

Rai said that many Chinese migrants arrived at this part of town in the 1860s for the tin mining industry, where they work as miners or became traders. Needless to say, the place was buzzing with activity until the mining industry slowed down.

Many migrants ventured into other trades and industries too, like coal mining, carpentry and construction. Some opened beauty parlours and barbershops. There were even jobs where people sharpened knives!

The arts scene was also thriving, with some folks working as stage actors and singers, as well as storytellers. If you have watched any Chinese period dramas or films, you are probably familiar with the fact that travelling storytellers were common back in the day. "Joss sticks were used as a timer in storytelling," Rai shared.

When Chinatown was developing and expanding, it also became an entertainment hub in the 1940s. Rai said that actresses from Hong Kong and China would even travel all the way to KL to perform in the theatres in Chinatown.

The informative guide then took our group of local and international tourists to an old tea shop, which is now manned by the founder's grandson. He shared with us wonderful stories of how tea was roasted at the shop.

"Tea was an important drink. It helped the workers withstand the harsh working environment in the mines," Rai said. Many of the traditional businesses in Chinatown have been passed down from generation to generation. Some of the businesses that still exist today include tailoring stores, coffeeshops and shops that sell traditional medicinal herbs and supplements.



Some of the murals on the walls of the heritage buildings in Chinatown. — Photos: GISELE SOO/The Star



Rai (second from right) is a local expert and guide who tells fascinating stories of Chinatown and KL.



Part of the Sri Mahamariamman Temple peeking out in the corner.

In the old days, this vibrant pocket of town was under the "care" of Chinese kapitans before the British took over. Two of the five major kapitans who looked after the area left behind great legacies – Yap Ah Loy and Yap Kwan Seng, who are well-known figures in Malaysian history books.

Yap Ah Loy, for example, dabbled in many businesses that led to the economic growth of KL. When the tin industry suffered, he then went into the business of growing tapioca.

Meanwhile, Yap Kwan Seng contributed to the country's educational development, funding the building of schools and other learning institutions.

Many of the buildings in Chinatown, though mostly restored, still have some elements of their original architecture intact. They also vary in size. According to Rai, the size of the

(usually) two-storey buildings would depend on the period they were built and how wealthy the family or building owner was.

"A shophouse essentially means a residence and a commercial space," Rai explained.

Apart from that, there were many educational institutions around too, which then led to the opening of bookshops and school supply shops. These, unfortunately, have now become businesses that are struggling to find a place in today's world.

We stopped by an old-fashioned bakery occupying a restored townhouse selling various traditional Chinese pastries. I had my eye on the freshly-baked egg tarts on the counter, which seemed to be their best-selling item.

Historical significance

Rai reminded us that the population in Chinatown is not just

made up of Chinese folks as there are other communities too, including the Sikhs and Tamils who contributed to the development of the city.

The Sikhs, for instance, played a role in safeguarding the area by joining the police force. We came across the historical Sikh temple, the 125-year-old Gurdwara Sahib Polis, which seemed to be a testament to this.

Rai also talked about the Tamilians, who she said were mostly "... employed as workers in railways and plantations". They built the oldest Hindu temple in KL – the beautiful Sri Mahamariamman Temple.

Of course, the different migrants also brought with them their culinary heritage, which then helped form Malaysia's unique multi-cultural cuisines.

The tour takes about two hours to complete, but the time seemed to pass by quickly while you're walking past so much history. The walk was not all just about listening to our guide's stories, because we got to interact with the local traders too, making it a more enriching experience.

One of the participants, Fathimath Wijha from the Maldives, said that the walk was an eye-opener for her. "I learned so much about Chinatown, and the walk made me feel as if I was being transported to the past," she said. Fathimath, 27, is looking forward to joining another walking tour soon.

Nomzamo Dikana, 24, who hails from South Africa, said that the most memorable part about the tour for her was her interaction with the community.

"It's very different from other typical walking tours. This walk has a more personal touch to it which allows me to really immerse myself in the place.

"And since it's an unscripted walk, you'll never know where you will be going, or what you will hear," Nomzamo said.

Rai shared that most of the tourists who join her walks are enthusiastic about wanting to learn more about the city, although there have been a handful that leave before it ends.

Rai said that she will continue doing these cultural tours for as long as she is able to, in hopes of keeping the history and traditions alive.

To learn more about the tours, check out its website <https://free-walkkualalumpurunscripted.com>.