

# ISLAND HISTORY

The names of neighbourhoods each carry a slice of local history. *INDepth* lists some whose backstories may surprise and delight you.

## 1 Sembawang Colonial legacy

When the British built Sembawang Naval Base in the 1920s and 1930s, it was a main British installation in the region. Many of the roads there were named after what are now former British colonies. For instance, Pakistan Road, Lagos Circle, Malta Crescent, Canada Road, and Kenya Crescent.

## 2 Bukit Batok Who put the "batok" in Bukit Batok?

There are at least three common stories behind the name.

First, Bukit Batok means "Coughing Hill" in Malay. Did the people there all get some kind of sickness? Not really, but as the area was much cooler, it led to people getting coughs and colds.

Second is that "batok" means "coconuts" in Javanese, and the area used to be dotted with coconut trees.

Last, the name could refer to the blasting of the granite quarries in Bukit Batok that made the hills sound like they were "coughing".

You decide which one is true.

## 3 Jurong A big experiment

Perhaps someone mistook crocodiles for sharks (called "jerong" in Malay) in the swamps that Jurong used to be full of. But most of these reptiles had to take a hike in 1961, when a 69 sq km plot in Jurong was chosen for Singapore's first

industrialisation experiment. The hills were levelled and the swampland filled in to build factories, homes and recreational facilities – Jurong Industrial Estate.

## 4 Queenstown Royal roots

The estate is Singapore's oldest satellite town, meaning it was self-contained with amenities for residents so they did not need to venture far to work or buy things. It was named after Britain's Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 – the same year of her coronation. Queenstown began as a project by the Singapore Improvement Trust, the predecessor of the Housing Board (HDB).

It has a "VIP block" – Block 81 Commonwealth Close is dubbed as such because foreign dignitaries visited it in the 1960s and 1970s.

## 5 Telok Blangah It's a big bowl

The area derives its name from the nearby Keppel Bay, which is said to be in the shape of a cooking pot. "Telok" means "bay" in Malay while there are some varying perceptions on the roots of "blangah" – it could refer to "blanga", a clay cooking pot used by South Indians, or "belangah" which means "bowl" or "stopping place" in Malay.

Did you know that Telok Blangah once had reservoirs? One was discovered in 2014 by National Heritage Board researchers following clues from old maps. It turned out that three small reservoirs used to serve the area.



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Sources

Infopedia, The Straits Times, Roots.sg, Singapore Street Names: A Study of Toponymics

# PROTECTING SINGAPORE'S INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Hawker dish kway chap, the Jewish festival Passover, and Malay dance form zapin are among the nine latest additions in 2021 to the intangible cultural heritage inventory created by the National Heritage Board (NHB).

The list now comprises 97 – from an original 50 - practices and cultural artefacts.

The inventory is meant to raise awareness of the diverse rituals and preserve them for future generations.

It also includes the country's hawker heritage which was recently added by Unesco to its intangible global heritage list.

The other additions made in November 2020 are: the making and repairing of Malay drums; the making of Chinese signboards; the making of flower garlands; the making of tempeh and tapai; the Nineteen Day Feasts and Baha'i community life; and yusheng and lohei.

With the newest entries, a wide diversity of practices by various religious, ethnic and artisanal groups here are now enshrined on the list.

**CLEMENT YONG reports on the latest additions to Singapore's own intangible cultural heritage list.**

These range from niche practices like the making of joss sticks to the widely enjoyed fish head curry. Religious festivities such as the celebration of Christmas and even forms of medicine like Ayurveda, which has roots in ancient Sanskrit sources, have been included.

Among the newest entries, the Baha'i faith, which is predicated on the oneness of religion and man, is practised by only 2,000 people here.

Passover, commemorated by the Jewish community, is also limited to about 2,500 people, most of them expatriates.

The continued efforts to leave no stone unturned in compiling the list shows the NHB's continued commitment to "document Singapore's intangible cultural heritage elements and safeguard them for future generations", said Mr Alvin Tan, NHB's deputy chief executive of policy and community.

He added: "The inventory is also a key pillar of NHB's efforts to profile and recognise intangible cultural heritage practitioners."

Living heritage includes social practices, rituals and festive events, performing arts, and craftsmanship that change over time as people adapt to new environments.

It has been said, for example, that the quiet tossing of yusheng this year due to Covid-19 regulations presents an important change in lohei's practice.

Addition to the list means the practice is given an entry on NHB's website, Roots, covering its origins and expression.

The entry is topped off with bibliography and references to aid students or those who are interested in reading up on the topics.

More crucially, the heritage inventory focuses the efforts made by the NHB and its stakeholders to help some of these practices live on, at a time when many of these are not being picked up by younger practitioners.

It also makes each of them a potential candidate for a future nomination to the Unesco Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Mr Yaziz Hassan, 46, the co-founder of Nadi Singapura, a Malay drum and percussion group, said there are enough players of Malay drums but not enough practitioners who make them.

He started playing drums at the age of 10. He had to learn how to make them when he was 17, as he could not afford to buy one.

Each drum takes about one to three months to make.

"The craft is appreciated among practitioners but not by the public because it's not a normal career," he said.

Madam Som Said, 70, one of Singapore's well-known dance choreographers, said Singapore's zapin is unique, despite the dance's popularity in the Malay world.

She said that with more young people taking up zapin, the dance form will naturally evolve.

"While we preserve and promote it, a tradition is not static. Zapin is now so popular that all children, youth and adults are able to dance zapin in schools, community centres and cultural organisations."

Singapore's zapin is unique, despite the dance's popularity in the Malay world.



# Steady journey towards the stars

**NUR SYAHIIDAH ZAINAL** looks at several key moments in the history of space exploration.

Humans have always looked up into the night sky and dreamt about what was out there.

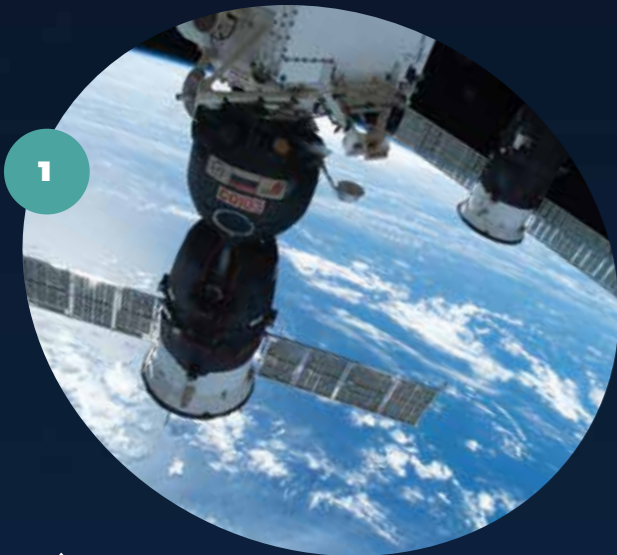
However, space exploration did not properly begin until the 1950s, when the development of ballistic missiles, first used in World War II, paved the way for the rockets that could send man into orbit.

## SOVIET UNION STRUTS ITS STUFF

In October 1957, the Soviet Union kicked off the global space race when it launched humankind's first artificial satellite.

The Sputnik I transmitted signals to Earth for 22 days and stayed in orbit until it burned up in January 1958.

Sputnik's launch was a blow to American pride. The United States, fearing a technology gap between itself and the Soviet Union, began revamping the nation's science and engineering education. A year later, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Nasa) was created.



A view of the Earth taken during the International Space Station expedition 57 in October 2018.

2



Apollo 12 mission Commander Charles P. "Pete" Conrad is shown on the moon's surface in this Nov. 1969 file photo. After decades of watching astronauts circle Earth, space visionaries finally have reason for optimism: Nasa and other agencies are working with the White House on a bold, new course of exploration.

But the Americans were playing catch-up. Already, the Soviet space programme had sent the first living creature to space: a stray dog named Laika. She orbited the Earth in 103 minutes aboard Sputnik 2 in November 1957, but died after the fourth orbit due to overheating.

In April 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to fly into space and return to Earth safely. He circled the planet in 108 minutes aboard the Vostok 1 spacecraft at an altitude of 327km.

Just two years later, in June 1963, Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova made history when she became the first woman to go to space aboard the Vostok 6.

In 1965, Russian cosmonaut Alexei Leonov was the first person to walk in space when he left the Voskhod spacecraft for about 10 minutes.

The Soviet space programme scored a major coup in 1966 when it managed to land two unmanned spacecrafts in two separate places.

The spacecraft Luna landed on the moon in February and sent transmissions to Earth, while the Venera 3 landed on Venus in March. However, its communications systems failed before any data could be retrieved.

In September 1968, the Soviet spacecraft Zond 5 became the first spacecraft to orbit the moon and return to Earth. The spacecraft carried several living things, such as turtles, mealworms, seeds and bacteria, which were all safely recovered after it landed in the Indian Ocean. This flight was seen as a precursor to manned moon missions.

## BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

The United States, which until then had been far behind the Soviet space programme, finally proved its prowess towards the end of the decade.

It launched Apollo 8, one of its most famous space missions, in December 1968.

Apollo 8 was the first manned spacecraft to leave Earth's gravity and reach the moon.

Its crew photographed Earth, as well as both the far side and nearside of the lunar surface, in addition to conducting several tests that were crucial to a major moment in history – the moon landing the following year.

Nasa astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first humans to set foot on an astronomical body other than Earth in July 1969, in a triumphant moment witnessed by hundreds of millions of people on television around the world.

The two men spent 2½ hours on the moon surface carrying out various tasks including collecting rocks and soil samples, and measuring by laser the exact distance between the moon and Earth.

### Photo credits

1 Earth Science and Remote Sensing Unit, NASA Johnson Space Center, Wikimedia Commons

2 Nasa, Wikimedia commons

### Sources

Nasa, National Geographic, Space.com, BBC, History.com, Forbes, Popular Science, NYTimes, MIT Technology Review, Vox, New Scientist, The Verge, The Aerospace Corporation, US National Archives, AFP, Reuters, The Guardian, The Atlantic