

Childhood memories of Singapore

By Fiona Hodgkins (nee Dougal, in case there is anyone out there who still remembers!)



Pick-up from school on Portsdown Road, pop in to Holland Village, swimming lesson at the Dutch Club. Plans for the weekend: perhaps a trip to Sentosa or the Jurong Bird Park. Does this sound familiar? Well, strangely enough, it comes from my memories of Singapore over 30 years ago and it would appear that some things haven't changed much!

I first came to live here in 1975 as a 9 year-old. My earliest memories are of staying in serviced accommodation behind the Goodwood Park Hotel. It was quite a treat to come back from school and get an ice cream float at the café in reception, overlooking the swimming pool, so that was one of the first places I went to on my recent return to Singapore. Although not the identical café, the layout of the reception was nostalgically familiar.

I spent 2 years at Raeburn Park, part of the Tanglin Trust which, shortly after I arrived, moved to its new site on Portsdown Road – yes, the location of the current Tanglin Trust School – with Raeburn Park on one side of the field (the current infant block) and Weyhill School on the other (the current secondary block). The field of course seemed enormous then, and the fact that it now looks small to me is due as much to a child's memory as to all the development. The site is vastly changed, but when I first returned to the front of the school a couple of months ago, I got goose bumps, vividly reminded of sitting in 'pens' in a verandah, where the infant offices are now, to await pick-up after school.

I have strong memories of my class teachers, especially Mrs Lyn Edmonds, a long-term New Zealand expat and my teacher for my final year of Primary school. I remember friends, all of whom I lost track of many years ago; a great school trip to Tioman; being the girl captain of Raffles house (the other houses being Keppel and Ridley) and going to collect the Winners' Cup on Sports Day.

UWC was the only secondary option in those days, but I and a handful of others went to boarding school in England, as my parents didn't know how long they would be in Singapore and didn't want to disrupt my education.



Coming home at half term was never an option in those days so the Christmas, Easter and Summer holiday trips home to Singapore were always very special. There were no direct flights to Europe and I remember one exciting trip, going back to school, when the plane broke down in Bombay and all of us boarding school UMs were put up in a hotel. It was of course long before the days of instant mobile phone contact and though we were told our parents had been informed, it turns out they had a very worried 24 hours only knowing the plane was stranded in Bombay, not what had happened to their children!

Once back at school the main communication with home was the weekly blue air letter. My parents were diligent writers from this end and my father even used to drive out to the airport (Payar Lebar) so their letters would get sent quicker, only to find out years later that letters posted at the airport were brought into town to be sorted at the central post office!

Coming home, the blast of humidity as you came out of the airport and the night sounds of the crickets are what I remember and then my first meal home out of choice was always char siew pork from the stalls. Our local stalls were the ones at Adam Road but in those days they were not well thought of. Newton Circus was our favourite place but now, for me at least, there has been a reversal in this trend - I live within walking distance of the Adam Road stalls and love them as much as I dislike the tourist glitz that now goes with Newton Circus.

Food-wise, my younger sister and I learnt to eat curry from a young age. My father was a connoisseur and took us to such salubrious places as the workers' canteen at the airport and the Islamic on North Bridge Road. We also had lovely Malay curries at the Rendezvous Restaurant - but that, although architecturally the same, is now sadly the sanitised coffee shop of a hotel.

The British Club didn't exist, and while the Tanglin Club was THE expat club to be a member of, we were members of the Dutch Club as it was just round the corner from where we lived. That looks the same, if a bit overgrown, and I was glad to see my favourite bitterballs still on the menu. We inherited corporate membership (more common then, as well as taking on the company house and furniture, etc) of the SICC and the Cricket Club too - with their membership premiums now, I feel that we took them a bit for granted then - and I have great memories of steam boat at the SICC Bukit location and kaiserschmarrn for pudding at the Cricket Club.

The Jurong Bird Park is one of my favourite childhood

memories in Singapore, and one of the places I headed to early on with my children when I returned here. I fully expected to be disappointed after all this time but it was even better than I remembered! In fact my 11 year-old son said it was worth coming to Singapore just to go to the Bird Park! The other place I particularly wanted to visit for old time's sake was the Haw Par Villa and, as a great user of Tiger balm, I still think it is culturally worth a visit.

My parents in fact stayed in Singapore until late 1983 and then moved to KL, so I lived in the region from the age of 9 until 20 - certainly the most formative years of my life. In addition, I met my future husband in KL on my first trip to my new home from boarding school, and strangely enough he had also previously been a pupil at Raeburn Park, before I was ever there, so we both share a special feeling for the region which goes back a long way.

We have since lived in Southern Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean and South America but always hankered after a return to Asia. When the opportunity arose out of the blue a few months ago, there was only one decision for us. I was so excited to be returning to what I felt was my heartland, but also nervous that it would be a big anti climax. So far not, and whenever I speak to my father or sister on the phone to tell them about all the places I am re-experiencing, they can hear the excitement in my voice and just say, 'So you are enjoying being back in Singapore then!' Yes I am!

And as life goes full circle, I now have a 15 year-old son at boarding school, but in our technological age, we have mobile and internet communication with him and he comes on a direct flight each half term and holiday. My daughter is nearly the same age I was when I first moved to Singapore and she and my middle son will be following in their parents' footsteps at the Tanglin Trust. As for me, I am teaching at my old school - you hear of alumni returning to teach at their local school in the UK, but I certainly never dreamt that I would one day return to teach at my old junior school in Singapore! I relish the opportunity and hope I can offer my pupils the breadth of education that my Year 6 teacher gave me, as well as enjoying the experience myself.

There is lots new going on in Singapore and although some of the change may seem sad in a nostalgic sense, the heart of the place is still here for me. So if you see someone reminiscing at the Japanese Garden or the Mandai Orchid Garden, rather than living it up at Clarke Quay or Vivo City, it is probably me, but given time, no doubt I will be able to balance the old with the new and equally love the new life Singapore offers me and my family.