

On a KL heritage walk

By [Loong Wai Ting](#) - October 4, 2018 @ 7:49pm

After a three-hour night tour in the heart of the city, Loong Wai Ting learns its history from the early 1860s to 1957

IT’S midnight but the clock, designed to echo the Big Ben in Westminster, London, atop the tower of Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad doesn’t chime as expected. Fortunately, we don’t really expect it to for our attention is not on this iconic clock.

Like a commando leading his troop to battle, KL Heritage Walk tour guide Azry gathers us and says: ‘Tonight, we will walk along the city’s quiet streets to marvel at the architecture and learn about its historical past. It’s going to be a fun-filled night.’

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Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad in the early years. NSTP/Ihsan MUZIUM NEGARA

With him is Mariana Isa, a heritage enthusiast, conservationist and independent researcher of Malaysian and Southeast Asian history who will fill us in with anecdotes seldom found in books.

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Azry diverts our attention to the Indo-Sarascenic design of Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad. Its red bricks and copper domes are probably the most photographed in the city.

The red bricks were made and fired at kilns in Brickfields (hence the name). Although the kilns no longer exist, nevertheless, they have left their mark on various buildings in Kuala Lumpur.

In British colonial days, the Mogul-inspired building was known as Government Offices where administration work took place.



Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad at night NSTP/ASWADI ALIAS.

The original administration area was on Bluff Road (now Bukit Aman), which overlooked the grassy field of Dataran Merdeka. Due to limited space, it was proposed to relocate the Government Offices to lower ground. The man in charge was British engineer Charles Edwin Spooner who oversaw many important buildings in Kuala Lumpur during its heyday. Among them is Kuala Lumpur Railway Station on Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin.

Just steps away from the intricately designed 19th century Mughal arches of Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad is the glass-and-concrete bridge that provides a 360-view of the surrounding heritage buildings. As it is midnight, we decide to skip the bridge and head over to Masjid Jamek.

MASJID JAMEK

As Azry tells us the origin of Masjid Jamek at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers next to Masjid Jamek LRT Station, one particular story catchesmy attention: at the far end ofthe mosque, which used to be the entrance, was a Malay cemetery.

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The stairs in front of Masjid Jamek used to serve as the main entrance.
NSTP/KHAIRUL AZHAR AHMAD

Arguably one of the oldest mosques in the nation, it was designed by Federated Malay States’ Public Works Department assistant architect Arthur Benison Hubback.

In early photos of the mosque, people arriving in sampans were greeted by a prominent staircase. It was around this area, surrounded by coconut trees then, that the Malay cemetery was located.

Contractors working in the vicinity of the century-old mosque for the River of Life project stumbled upon the remains of several gravestones, which are believed to be from the early 18th century.

Mariana says some of these gravestones have Acehnese influence - lotus like design on its head and Jawi script.



Masjid Jamek gets a face lift under the River of Life project NSTP/ASWADI ALIAS.

It’s no surprise as the area where the mosque sits was called Kampung Rawa, sandwiched between Jawa Street (now Jalan Tun Perak) and Malay Street. The village was home to Malay communities from Rawa, Maindailing, Javanese, Minangkabau and Bugis people who were the early settlers here.

Attracted by the prospects of tin mining, they worked under the watch of Raja Abdullah, Kapitan Yap Ah Loy and the like. Artefacts found included broken ceramic bowls, glasses and pots. We eye the ground, hoping to discover some.

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Loke Yew Building built by business magnate and philanthropist Loke Yew during the British Malaya era.

The Chinese-born played a significant role in contributing to the growth of Kuala Lumpur was also one of the founding fathers of Victoria Institution in the city.

On the ground where Pacific Express Hotel now stands was once the location of Kapitan Yap Ah Loy’s house. Known as Old Market Square, it housed facilities like banks, textile shops and traditional medicinal halls.



The clock tower at Medan Pasar NSTP/ASWADI ALIAS.

Mariana says the place used to be a thriving place where the locals shopped. “It’s like Bukit Bintang. It was one of the trendiest places in KL then. It was also a popular gambling haunt frequented by the working class. Within the shops were opium dens and brothels.

In the late 1880s, the road where the Old Market Square was located was known as Macao Street or Hokkien Street (depending on who you ask).

It is here that Kapitan Yap controlled most of the businesses in the market until the first resident general of Federated Malay States, Frank Swettenham, appalled by the conditions of unkempt stalls and wooden huts, decided to demolish the market in 1882 and relocated it to where Central Market is now.

At night, Medan Pasar is dead quiet, save for the homeless who set up their makeshift beds nearby. At the centre of Medan Pasar is a clock tower, erected in 1937 to commemorate the coronation of King George IV.

There is a traditional coffee shop on Jalan Medan Pasar, just a couple of steps away from the clock tower. The Cafe Old Market Square (formerly known as Sin Seng Nam Restaurant) was established by Hainanese immigrant Choong Yoo Ying and his two brothers in 1928.

Back in the day this was the place where people met and conducted businesses over coffee. Eighty-five years later, the restaurant closed its doors in 2013 as the family was not able to maintain the century-old building.



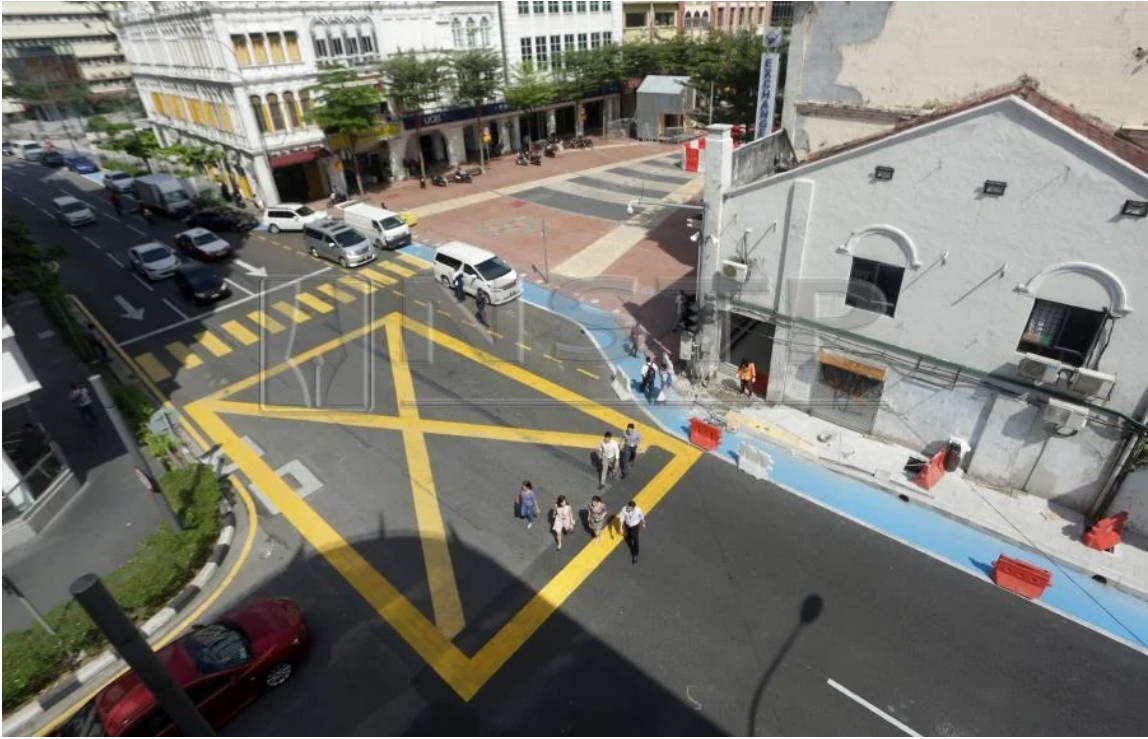
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Medan Pasar with The Cafe Old Market Square in the far left corner STR/HALIM SALLEH

Fortunately, the coffee shop caught the attention of former-lawyer-turned businessman Datuk Ghani Abdullah, who bought it and restored it to its former glory.

The cafe retain much of its original structure and was later renamed Cafe Old Market Square.

With high ceilings for better air circulation and large windows, the cafe is also adorned with many photos of yesteryears. There is a black and white portrait of Kapitan Yap Ah Loy sitting on a chair in his unmistakable Qing robe, hat and a fan in his right hand.

THREE HOURS

Just when my feet are protesting after walking for three hours, with little rest in between, Azry signals us to stop. Our last stop is at the end of Petaling Street, where it intersects with Jalan Gereja and Bukit Nanas. It is here that the original wooden St John Church once stood. Established by Reverend Father Charles Hector Letessier in 1883, the church was built with financial assistance from rich Chinese Catholic merchant Goh Ah Ngee.



Azry briefing media members during the heritage walk. NSTP/ASWADI ALIAS.

The current church, which sits on the small hill on Jalan Gereja, was built in 1954 and was elevated to the status of a cathedral not long after that. Kuala Lumpur Episcopal Tamil Church, built in 1897, was also located at

Covering history from the early 1860s to1957, the walk is an eye-opening experience, for history buffs and first-timers alike.

There’s just so much to learn about on the walk. By the end of it, I am eager to learn more about the place I call home.

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