

A Far East Odyssey



*Memories of three teenage years
in the Far East in the 1960s
Penny Buckley (née Adwick)*

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For *Damían*
with whom I have shared so
many lovely and
exciting adventures

Route of our Far East Odyssey
March - April 2011



April 1964 Journey to Singapore - 26 hours / two stops
March 2011 Journey - 12 hours non-stop

Part 1

Singapore



Day 1
Bournemouth → Heathrow

Monday, 14 March

After much planning and anticipation and to celebrate 40 years of marriage, Damian and I are embarked on the eponymous 'Holiday of a Lifetime', revisiting the three years I spent in the Far East with my parents between 1964 and 1967. These years are now described as the last gasp of the Raj. Colonial life was still privileged and comfortable; servants were the norm and european memsahibs¹ would not expect to exert themselves with domestic tedium - glory days indeed. I was a teenager and serendipitously found myself accompanying my parents. This had not been part of the 'master plan' but my small boarding school in Sussex, which should have seen out my education, closed down and there was not considered enough time to find a new, suitable establishment. Little did I know then but that this period would prove to be such a defining time for me? These were the Swinging 60s; the Beatles were in their prime, old ways were being swept away and new freedoms appearing on all fronts.

On 4 April 1964 my parents and I set off on this great adventure. The flight took 26 hours with two stops at Istanbul and Bombay. Today it takes 12 hours non-stop. What will I find? I know Singapore has changed beyond all recognition; that much was clear when Damian visited on business in 1984. I am full of excitement and anticipation. We have chosen Audley Travel² of Oxford to make the arrangements, which they appear to have done with great care and attention to the many requests and changes I have made. For me, this is to be two weeks of unbridled nostalgia in Malaysia, followed by a week of new experiences in Thailand.

¹ Form of address used by servants for the lady of the house

² www.audleytravel.com

Day 2 Singapore

Tuesday, 15 March

To my astonishment and delight I sleep for eight hours on the plane! My first impression, as I walk down the steps, much as it was in Bombay 47 years ago, is that I am stepping into a warm, moist oven. In 1964 we landed at Paya Lebar. In 1975, Changi became the international airport for Singapore and by 2012, the new Terminal 4 will be opened to cope with additional traffic; all terminals will be connected by a futuristic Skytrain.

We are met by Raymond in the air conditioned luxury of a Mercedes. In 1964 air-conditioning in buildings was new technology and confined mostly to hotels. Air conditioned cars would have been considered a flight of fancy. Changi is at the extreme east of the island and connected to the centre by the East Coast Parkway, a road built on reclaimed land. Raymond proudly tells us that, should the need arise, this road will double as a runway by the simple expedient of removing the potted plants from the centre. This is Singapore ingenuity and foresight at its best.

Comparing my map of 1965, I can see that the island has grown enormously; the Marina Bay area spreads far into the sea. Collyer Quay, which used to be on the sea front, is now well inland. New buildings and facilities include the Skypark, the floating stadium, high-rise buildings of the central business district, the theatre, science museum, new courts of justice and the 72 storey Marina Bay Sands hotel. The landmarks I recognise are St Andrews Cathedral, the old Law Courts, the old Post Office, now the 5* Fullerton Hotel, and the Anderson Bridge, infamous during the Japanese occupation for the severed heads which were impaled there 'pour encourager les autres'.

For the first of many occasions, I explain how and why we are here in Singapore. Raymond warms to the challenge and offers to take us on a whistle stop tour of downtown Singapore. In fact, it feels nothing so much like Pratt Street, Baltimore; it's a rather schizophrenic experience. He is proud of his country and tells us that by 2013, Singapore will be self-sufficient in water, no longer relying on importing dirty water from Malaysia and purifying it. He also shows us a wonderfully clean Singapore river, so different from the cesspit of 45

years ago when it might be used as a latrine, for washing bodies and/or clothes and very possibly contain the odd dead dog.



*Circa 1966.
The Post
Office and
Anderson
Bridge*

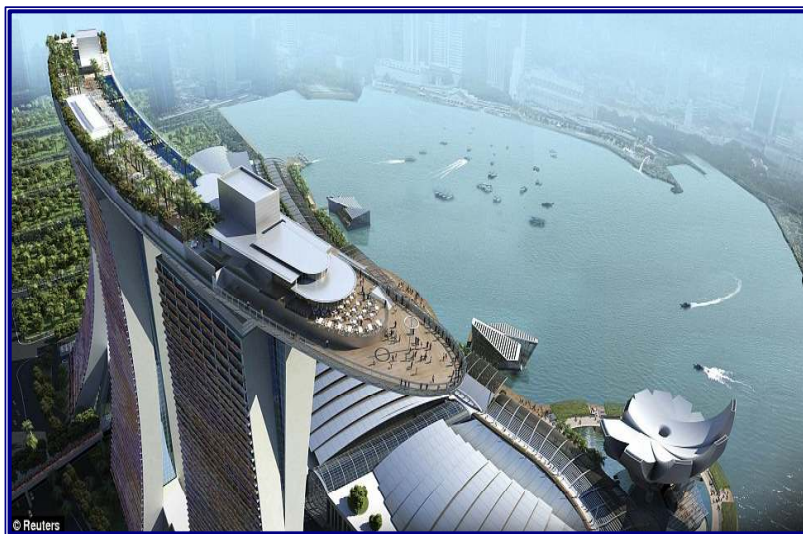


*2011 What a difference 47 years make! The Post Office, reinvented
as the Fullerton Hotel, with Anderson Bridge
to the left of picture*



Newest hotel in Singapore - The Marina Bay Sands built on reclaimed land in the Skypark

In 1966 there were a handful of international hotels, now there are scores, the newest and most futuristic being the Marina Bay Sands, a triumph of modern engineering at which to marvel. For us, the Peninsular Hotel, just off North Bridge Road, will be our base for three days. The hotel was not here in the 60s.



Arial view of the Marina Bay Sands showing roof-top infinity pool and Science Centre below right.

Day 3 Singapore

Wednesday, 16 March

Time is too precious to waste lying abed and we are hitting the trail at 9.00 am. The dazzlingly white gothic spire of St Andrew's Cathedral visible from the hotel is the first port of call. It contains brass plaques to the memory of intrepid colonial folk who perished in the cause of bringing European ways to this distant marshy land. These are now joined by similar plaques to noteworthy Indians and Chinese, who have contributed to Singapore's prosperity in recent decades.



***2011. St Andrews
Cathedral looks
reassuringly
familiar***

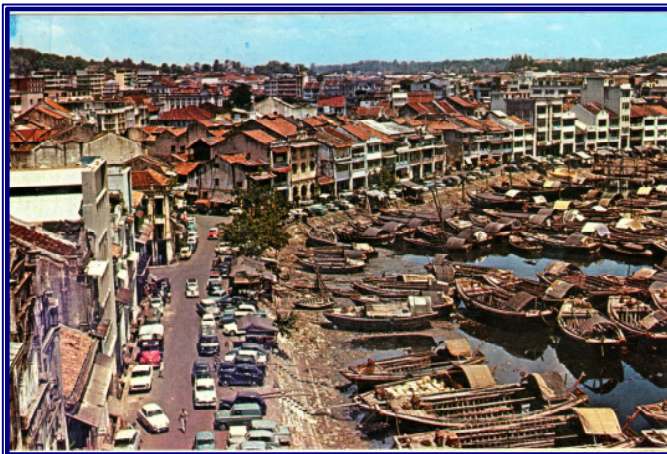
***This angle
reveals new
skyscrapers***



We have planned a walking tour of the Chinatown area; Pagoda, Sago and Temple Streets. In 1966, to boarders of St John's School, these areas were strictly out of bounds being the home of opium dens, death houses, brothels and other insalubrious joints quite unsuitable for

British school children. Now the area is sanitized and preserved. To a sentimentalist, it seems sad that so much of the old has been swept away in the name of progress but that would be to deny the Singaporeans the opportunity to modernise, something they have achieved most successfully. There is an excellent museum of Chinese life covering the arrival of the first settlers in the late 1800s to the present day. There is much here that takes me straight back 45 years.

***Post card
circa 1966.
A typical street
such as were,
strictly out of
bounds to
boarders***



***Post card circa
1966.
The Singapore
River***

After lunch we head up to Orchard Road, the shopping district. Now, this is familiar stamping ground; 45 years ago, as a boarder, I would spend Saturday afternoons here alternating between Cold Storage - (that was the name of the shop and presumably an allusion to its

origins), Fitzpatrick's, Tang's (a handsome, chinese owned departmental store) and the ice-cream parlour. Later, when I became a day-girl at St John's, the Tanglin Club would be my second home.

Today, Orchard Road is like any other international shopping destination. The architecture is imaginative and daring, it is a world of bright lights, marble, steel and skyscrapers. Tang's has been hugely expanded and 'morphed' into a shopping plaza, it has preserved, after a fashion, the iconic pagoda style roof but is, otherwise, unrecognisable. All the usual suspects are here, Mulberry, Calvin Klein, Zara, M&S, Ferragamo, etc etc. I could be in Bond Street, Times Square, Fifth Avenue or Boulevard Haussmann. I am speechless! Goodbye modest shopping centre, hello glitzy, progressive metropolis where people are young and busy about their day's work. I have seen one beggar today. Everyone has an air of purpose.



***Circa 1966.
Tangs
department store***

***2011. The new
Tang Plaza***



I remember the Goodwood Hotel is close by and once the scene of a frantic teenage chase with my friend, Rosie Massingham (née Bushell). Our quarry that day was David Macallum and Robert Vaughan aka the Man from U.N.C.L.E. The Goodwood is, indeed, to the right, up Scotts Road but forty four years have played tricks with the memory and it is closer than I remember. Now completely dwarfed by high-rise blocks it is, however, still a handsome building. In that summer of '66 we never did meet the object of the chase but were given a signed a photo as a consolation prize!

I remember the Tanglin Club, focus of 'ex-pat' life, is not far from here. I used to spend many a day at the swimming pool and return for dances or film evenings during the holidays. It was where all the British teenagers would meet in the holidays. It too has grown enormously, with a new building joined to the old part by a footbridge over the road. I try my luck at reception with my story of having lived here 45 years previously, to my amazement the young receptionist - certainly not born in 1966 - is happy for us to walk round freely and unaccompanied. This seems extraordinary, even foolhardy on her part, but then I remember crime in Singapore is not a commonplace. In the 70s, it became a by-word for draconian punishment and, refreshingly, people expect others to behave properly - not quite London or Boscombe!



***Foot-bridge
connecting two
parts of the
Tanglin Club***

We walk and take photos and I introduce myself to a fine elderly lady, who, by quick calculation, I reckon could have lived here in the 60s. I'm right. Nanette Sanford has lived in Singapore for 60 years, knew the 'old' Tanglin Club and, we learn, tried, with a group of other like-

mindful Europeans, to turn St John's into an international school when British military forces began withdrawing from south east Asia. In fact, she said, HM Government gave it to the group but then took it back! It subsequently became, and remains, the United World College of South East Asia, a successful school for the growing international community of Singapore.

We spend a happy afternoon in Nanette's company reliving old times. She gives us a conducted tour of the superb facilities. She is on the management Committee of the Club and is rather put out that the Tanglin is to be remodelled again, ripping out the beautiful mahogany panelled entrance hall and reinventing it in shiny white marble and steel. This she considers a foolish, retrograde step. I promise to write to the President to point out the collective error of the Committee's ways. How much are they going to like that?!



Oil painting hanging in the main entrance of the Tanglin Club, showing the Club as I knew it in 1966

... and as it is now



We take our leave of this feisty relic from the Raj and continue in search of the Singapura Hotel, the only skyscraper hotel in 60s Singapore, eventually ending up at the Hilton which could well be on the foot-print of the Singapura. However, the staff has no knowledge of any other establishment. How could they, most of them weren't born!

After fresh lime to die for, which I find the most evocative of taste sensations, we head for the Newton Circus Hawker Centre for supper, somewhat disappointing especially after our excellent lunch in the Maxwell Road Hawker Centre

Day 4 Singapore

Thursday, 17 March

Today is to be a full-on Nostalgia Fest with visits to St John's (now United World College-UWC) and to try to find 32 Rochester Park. What will I find?

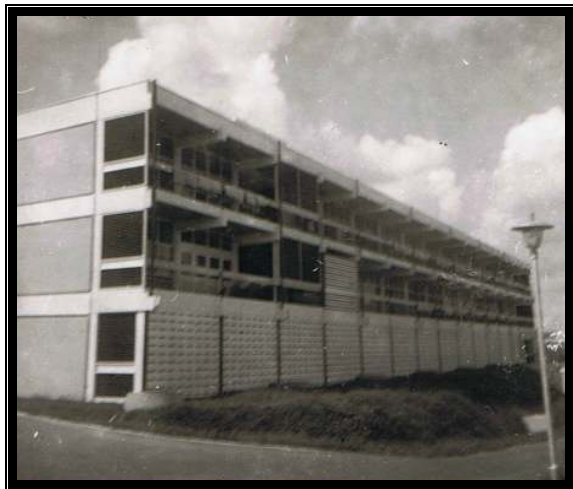
We are advised to take the MRT³ to Buona Vista, the main road off which Rochester Park used to lead, followed by a bus to Dover Road and UWC. We are to meet Brenda Whatley and her assistant Prapti Patel. Brenda's job is Archivist and Developer of Alumni Relations - nice work if you can get it!

I recognise nothing of the journey, all is high-rise buildings where once was open space; the MRT is super efficient. As we leave Dover Road, I note that the Anglo Chinese School is on the site of what used to be boys' boarding houses, Dover and Richborough. It is an irony that the english model of education is copied the world over yet we, in England, manage to tinker with it endlessly, seemingly, to the detriment of our own children. There is still a building on the site of headmaster's house on the right hand side, though it now appears to be a nursery school. There is some history here. Soon after St John's was fully functioning, ie., became a boarding **and** day school, the headmaster, Mr Wheeler died from an infected mosquito bite. This was considered unfortunate and although his successor came and went without incident, another subsequent headmaster died unexpectedly; later there were stories of hauntings. It was said that the house had been built on the site of a former chinese cemetery, a real no-no for the chinese and, on reflection, could, probably have easily been avoided; there was plenty of land, in those days, around the house.

We collect identity tags, meet Prapti and are joined by a former pupil of UWC who left in '78. We exchange histories and become friends, united by the bond of 'old school'. It is, apparently, not unusual for former pupils of both schools to turn up at the door wanting to relive their pasts. Prapti takes us all on a tour of the school. Like the boys', the girls' boarding houses have been swept away, along with the domestic science, woodworking and art rooms, these are replaced by a lovely pavilion-style canteen. The Small Hall where we had Saturday

³ Mass Rapid Transport

evening films is still there. I remember the excitement we all felt when we learnt boys and girls would be allowed to sit together for films! A sea-change from the Bourne School, Kuala Lumpur régime where we were strictly segregated, presumably to avoid 'hanky panky'.



***1965 - Deal House
my dormitory
showing one section
of bars post The
Intruder Incident!***

***New canteen on the site
of the girls' boarding
houses, woodwork,
domestic science
and art rooms***



The class room blocks are scarcely changed, science block to one side, arts to the other. The fountains, installed to generate the air-conditioning, are gone but the iconic pointed roof of the main hall is still there, though 45 years of vegetation have rendered it much less prominent. The swimming pool has doubled in size and behind the

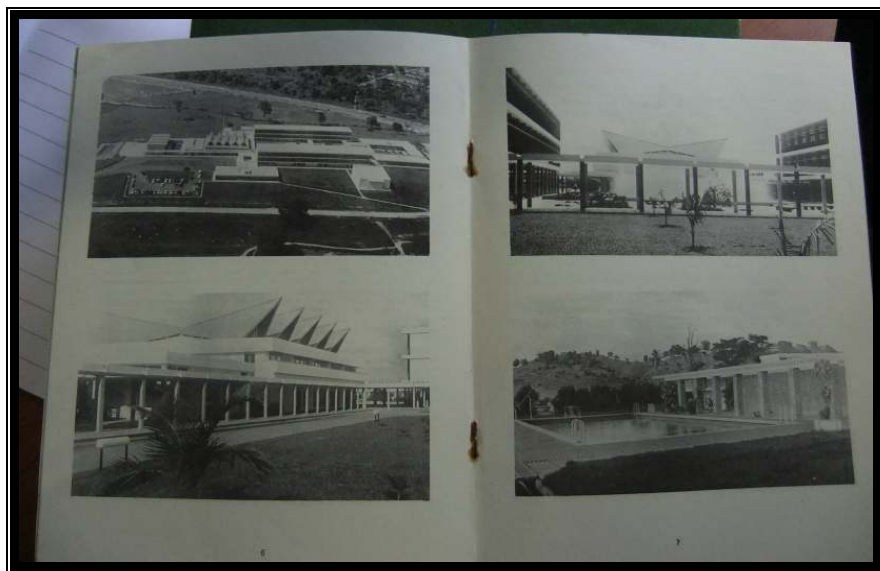
science block is a new block. There are games pitches and playground for younger children. UWC has 2,900 on the roll, aged 5-18, with pupils studying for the International Baccalaureate. It has all the attributes of a fine, successful school and the children look happy.

*The main hall
and
iconic roof of St
John's*



45 years later the roof is still there, just a little less prominent

Prapti gives us a lot of her time before we rejoin Brenda and another former pupil anxious to relive the past. We look at the archive, which, for the St John's era, is rather sparse but then it was St John's for only about six years. I bring out my old album and we all agree that the visit has been an extremely happy, if rather emotional, experience.



Pages from the prospectus for St John's circa 1965

Our next stop on my trip down Memory Lane is Rochester Park. The taxi driver looks a little blank at first but my 45 year old map helps and he soon finds it, albeit approaching from a direction I don't recognise.

From internet research, I have learnt that Rochester Park 'is a heritage site where the former colonial black and white bungalows have been transformed into up-market eateries' - interesting! In the intervening 45 years the tree cover has grown enormously and houses which were once clearly visible but, nevertheless, well spaced, now seem almost hidden in the trees of the hillside.

The first few houses on the road are occupied, further on they appear empty and behind security fencing. I am sure I have found ours, not from any number, just my memory of its position on the road. It also is behind fencing and, who knows, but guards and/or guard dogs may be roaming free.



Rear view of 32 Rochester Park - 1967

Feeling **very** nervous and to my utter amazement, I am able to slip the bolt and walk down the drive to the back of the house facing the garden and no dogs with bared fangs have leapt to tear me apart! The house is in a very bad way with windows broken and doors off their hinges, bird droppings litter the floor and there is damp creeping up the walls; it is completely recognisable as my home.

We venture into the sitting room, dining room and then up the stairs. There were my 'pre' and 'post' burglary bedrooms at both ends of the balcony. I remember my father sleeping with his sword under the bed in case the burglar thought to return!

I have my hand on the same banister I used 45 years ago; it is a most surreal experience. The whole house has a desperately sad air and reeks of decay.



My 'post-burglary' bedroom



The verandah 2011

Once these were the homes of senior British Army officers, if walls could talk, what tales they would tell. One day, I am sure, this house will also be restored to its former glory but I am not sure if I will ever see it.

We have spent nearly an hour walking round my old home of so many memories and then walk back down to Seb's Bistro to collect my thoughts. I find I have the most excellent recall of these years in the Far East. They were so happy; I had such fun that I look back with the greatest affection and realise what a privileged life I enjoyed, though as a bolshie 16 year old, I didn't know it at the time and it would have been deeply 'un-cool' to admit it. Those days are gone forever and to talk about them puts me in the 'fossilised' category, causing youngsters to roll their eyes heavenward.



The back similarly overwhelmed.

NB the windows round the upstairs balcony were not there in 1966.

These were presumably added to maximise the effect of the air conditioning



*The front of
32 Rochester Park
- a sorry sight,
being rapidly
overwhelmed
by vegetation!*

As we walk back, we notice another house being renovated; the effect is somewhat spoilt by the two 50 storey blocks being built within yards of the back windows!



***A house in the course of renovation. I imagine this is the plan for
32 Rochester Park in due course***

In the afternoon we visit the Skypark / central business district all built on reclaimed land. I could be in Boston, Baltimore, London or New York. This is brave new Singapore and a world away from the calm leafiness of Rochester Park. We take the lift to the top of the Marina Bay Sands Hotel with its infinity pool. Sadly, the sky is overcast so the photos do not have that typical bright tropical light. There are no memories here; after all, I am standing in what would have been the sea 45 years ago. I just marvel at the massive achievements of this little nation state, which steadfastly refuses to be restricted by any emotional baggage.

