

Part 2

Seremban
Kuala Lumpur



A Far East Odyssey © Penny Buckley 2013

Day 5

Friday, 18 March

Singapore → Seremban, Malaysia

Today it's goodbye Singapore, hello Seremban. To achieve this we book a 6.00 am wake up call! I have no recollection of my 1964 journey between Singapore and Seremban. In those days, Singapore was part of a federated Malaya. In 1965, Singapore split, rather acrimoniously, from the Federation to become an autonomous city-state. Over the subsequent years, the track and station at Tanjong Pagar, all owned by Malaysian Railways, has become rather run down but always eyed covetously by the Singapore government. Incongruously, passengers must complete Malaysian immigration formalities on a small part of the platform, a sort of Malaysian 'sovereign territory'. It reminds me of one of our American trip when we landed at Shannon, Eire and completed immigration for America in part of the terminal set out just as it is at BWI⁴. There any comparisons are swiftly ended! Where America is formal, brusque, even aggressive and one is left feeling like a unwelcome alien, here it is haphazard, chaotic and mostly, friendly.



***The Railway station
at Tanjong Pagar.***

We eventually complete immigration and board the train, moving off only about ten minutes late, this is, Malaysia where time is elastic. We are joined by a party of 20 Chinese, armed with cameras, making the journey for posterity. After co-existing, more or less peacefully since independence, the Singapore government has decided it needs this

⁴ Baltimore Washington International

land on which Malaysia is running its railway. The service will cease on 30 June 2011. In future, passengers will board trains much closer to the Johore Strait, to the north of the Island, at Woodlands. For us today, we will also stop at Woodlands leaving the train in order to complete our formal exit from Singapore territory. It all seems rather back-to-front and very 'unsingaporean'! Once back on the train, we can settle down to the four hour journey to Seremban.



Malaysian immigration procedures. These are best described as informal!

We are speeding 'up-country', through lush greenery, frequently rubber and oil palm plantations. In the 60s rubber was the main product of Malaya. This changed in the 80s when oil palm became the 'must-have' crop. The lead-time for an oil palm to come into production is rather less than a rubber tree, so optimising revenue. However, this may change again as rubber prices are increasing. Also dotted along the route are the ramshackle, corrugated tin-roofed kampongs complete with obligatory mangy ⁵kampong dogs. This is the Malaya I remember, lines of washing which can be no cleaner than when they entered the cleaning process, motley collections of tin baths, pots, pans and buckets, old bicycles and prams all stacked on the roofs. Occasionally, the greyness is relieved by a luminous flash of cerise or orange bougainvillea but, overall, the effect is grey. I am particularly aware that nobody walks with any urgency, so different from the concentrated purposefulness of Singapore but this is Malaysia - life has already changed down a gear or two.

⁵ village mongrel

As we pull into Seremban our fellow passengers, kind and helpful to a fault, are anxious that we get off safely. Train travel is for the masses it's unusual to see Europeans.

Despite a plaque proclaiming a facelift in 1994, the station looks tired but it is bustling in the way indian stations are shown in films. The platform is packed with families carrying assorted bags and/or livestock in cages, hawkers are selling their wares. Our driver is there to meet us with another air-conditioned car.

The journey from station to our hotel passes through some ordinary parts but most railway stations tend to be situated in the less agreeable parts of towns and cities. The hotel, The Royal Bintang, was not here in 1964. On that April day, when I arrived with my parents, our first couple of nights were spent in the rest-house, quaintly named Purity Lodge. For some reason, lost in the mystery of time, our quarter⁶ was not yet available.

The Royal Bintang is of international standard, modern, luxurious and very comfortable. It is obvious that I must try to meet people of my age or older if I am to find any of my past in Seremban; Susannah Sunderaj the switchboard manager, is going to be perfect. We chat, I show my photos, she, however, mindful that her switchboard is seriously under managed, invites us to join her at the Golden Circle Fellowship prayer meeting at St Mark's Anglican church the following evening. I am delighted to accept, this is perfect! Self-evidently the Golden Circle Fellowship members are hardly going to be the 'young bloods' of Seremban; they are the very people who will remember when British Forces were stationed at Rasah Camp. It's a date then.

We still have to eat and the hotel manager, a graduate of Leeds University, recommends a malay fish speciality restaurant. We expect something a little sophisticated; it turns out to be the malay equivalent of spit 'n sawdust. The *spécialité du région* is brought to us, a fearsome looking butterfly-filletted fish with nameless chewy bits, which, we suspect, once performed some bodily function. We decide discretion is the better part of valour and put these bits to one side. So ends another day in this amazing journey down Memory Lane. Tomorrow we are to meet Nellie Tan, daughter of friends of my parents.

⁶ Military speak for house

Day 6
Seremban

Saturday, 19 March

We are scheduled to meet Nellie at midday; our morning is free. We start off with a sumptuous breakfast buffet with, amongst other things, steamed lotus buns and chicken sausages. As I have noted in other journals, Damian is strictly a porridge-at-breakfast man, these were taste sensations with which to conjure!

I am slightly apprehensive. Will I recognise Nellie? I need not be, she is the image of her mother and although I don't think I met her parents, I have seen photos. Mr and Mrs Tan were the 'movers and shakers' of 60s Seremban and my parents met them when the British community would meet the local community. Nellie's mother was particularly involved with the Girl Guides. On her own admission, public service runs in her blood and Nellie has taken on the mantle whole-heartedly and, apart from being a chartered accountant, she is involved in many charitable organisations, most notably as President of the NSCMH⁷. She is obviously influential and is, consequently, recognised frequently. Nellie, her husband, Wong and daughter, Josephine take us out to lunch and I show her the albums including pictures of my parents and her parents - surely a surreal moment for her.

After lunch they take us to find my old house, 22 Jalan Dato Klana; 22 JDK as it was always known. Unfortunately, my letters to the occupant have not brought forth response but Wong has no trouble finding the house. Although much extended, it is very recognisable. Sadly, it is securely enclosed behind a fence and electronic gates; no-one is at home.

1964.
22 Jalan Dato Klana



⁷ Negri Sembilan
Chinese Maternity
Hospital



**22 JDK as it
now is - much
extended**

I am disappointed not to be able to meet the owner but it can't be helped and our next stop is The Club. Its full name is the Sungei Ujong Club, to us it was just The Club, in the intervening years it has been granted 'royal' status. This is where I spent my holidays; it was not even my second home but rather my first. I cycled here after breakfast, it was not far, and only went home for meals and to sleep. Once there, I would meet all my friends from school in Malaya and from boarding schools 'at home' and we would sit around the swimming pool signing for drinks and ice-creams on our fathers' accounts! Looking back, this was indeed a charmed existence; only once did my father lose his composure when a particularly large sheaf of 'chits' was attached to his monthly account!

Nellie and Wong give us a conducted tour of The Club of which she was President for three years. It has changed and expanded, of course, in 45 years but is very recognisable and brings back the happiest of memories.

***Nellie, Wong, Damian
and I at the
Royal Sungei Ujong Club.
NB the hunting print on
the wall. Was it designed
to remind home-sick
ex-pats of home?***





1965.
PJB enjoying ice-cream at The Club



***Atap shelter
design seems
timeless***

Unfortunately, 5 Jalan Ridgeway, my second home in Seremban has obviously been swept away in the name of progress and we cannot spend too long trying to find it as we have our appointment with the Golden Circle Fellowship. Nellie and Wong have kindly invited us to dinner this evening at the Klana Resort.

But back to the Golden Circle Fellowship! Susannah is President of this august body and has spread the word amongst the members, that we will be there. As I thought, most remember the days of the British Army at Rasah Camp and are interested in my photos. We are publicly welcomed from the pulpit and the evening closes with hymn singing in St Mark's Anglican church, Seremban.

We have time to change quickly for dinner before Nellie is back to collect us. The Klana estate restaurant is chinese muslim (!) and serves no alcohol! Despite this, we spend a delightful evening returning to the hotel past Doshi, the tailor's shop and more memories. On arrival in Malaya 47 years ago, the first imperative - as far as my parents were concerned - was to have school uniforms made for me. I as I would be sent off to Bourne School, KL⁸ as a boarder within the week. Doshi ran these up, as well as tropical uniforms for my father, with lightning speed. Later, my mother and I would visit him regularly for dresses which seemed to appear within a couple of days. Indeed, if necessary, Doshi could make a new dress for a party within 24 hours - heady experiences for a teenager in the 60s.

⁸ Kuala Lumpur

Day 7

Sunday, 20 March

Seremban → Kuala Lumpur

Today, Nellie and Wong are taking us to lunch at The Club at Port Dickson 'PD' in ex-pat speak. In the 60s there were not many British Forces in PD but I did have a friend whose father was seconded to the Malay Army. The Club is still right on the beach and I do remember visiting it with my friend. It is a beautiful day and we walk along the beach where the waves lap gently and the sea has the temperature of a warm bath. A couple are hand trawling for fish and shellfish swimming in the shallows, which they will then sell to a restaurant. It seems a precarious, backbreaking way to earn a living and reminds me of the coquinas fishermen in Ayamonte, Spain.

On the walls of the entrance of the Club are the those boards, so beloved of members' club the world over, listing previous presidents. I recognise 'J G Crabbe' '57-'59. Jimmy Crabbe was a rubber planter on the nearby, Tanah Merah estate. He and his wife, friends of my parents, lived in a beautiful colonial house with pool and while I thought my life was privileged, their daughter enjoyed even greater luxuries. I wonder what happened to them. It was said that the plantations suffered badly when Malays took over the management in the 70s.

It is almost time to bid farewell to Nellie, her husband and daughter. who have been unstintingly kind and generous during our whistle stop tour. Before we leave for KL, we set out to find the old Rasah Camp with the parade ground where I remember children were assembled prior to being bussed up to KL at the start of each term. The camp is there, now owned by the Malaysian Army but we cannot enter and photography is not permitted. The soldier on guard duty is about 22 and will not be persuaded by any stories of the 60s, the Stone Age as far as he is concerned! It's a disappointment but I have been so lucky so far.

The journey to KL is about 40 miles. Our route takes us past Putrajaya, a planned, new city to which the whole government machine moved in 1999 and then we see Petronas Towers, until 2004 the highest building in the world. There are 'brave new world' sky scrapers on every hand alongside 'old' KL.



***Brave new KL rises
behind old 'shop-
houses'***

Officially, Malaysia is a muslim country but many religions co-exist more or less peacefully. Interestingly, the women we see, those not indian or chinese, all wear the hijab. The colour and variety of scarves is astonishing, and the girls look charming, one nevertheless feels it is a form of tyranny and must be extremely hot and uncomfortable in the sticky tropical heat. I do not remember so many 'scarfed' women 46 years ago.

***Hijab
Central***



Day 8

Kuala Lumpur

Monday, 21 March

For the next three days our base is the Renaissance Hotel on Jalan Ampang. Forty six years ago, I spent 18 months in KL, at Bourne School, the British Forces school serving all garrisons on the malay peninsula; revisiting my old school is for tomorrow. Today we are on our own finding our way with map and memory.

KL now has a light rail and monorail but a step from the hotel. It's easy to use, following the London Underground model, and we head for the Padang and the Selangor Club. This club has also gone up-market and now enjoys 'royal' status. It is where my parents would bring me for lunch on visiting days. In those days, a most wonderful smörgasbrod would be available, an exotic array of delicious foods to gladden the heart of a girl on boarding school fare.



The monorail

Even after our return to UK in 1967, the ex-pat grapevine was active. Through it we learnt that the Selangor Club suffered a disastrous fire in 1970, but like the proverbial phoenix a 'new' club has risen from the ashes rebuilt just as before - all black, white and mock tudor to remind ex-pats of home.

We are signed in as temporary members on the strength of my parents' membership 46 years ago and it seems very little has changed; once again I bring out my photos and retell my story.



***Damian on the Padang.
Government buildings
dwarfed by high rise
blocks***

***Postcard 1964.
Government
Buildings - not a
high rise in sight***



***I am standing in
front of the Royal
Selangor Club. No
change here despite
being burnt down in
1970***

We have a delicious lunch and walk round taking many pictures - so many happy memories!

Day 9 Kuala Lumpur

Tuesday, 22 March

Today's schedule is a 'heritage' walk; in the morning; after lunch we will meet Lt Colonel Surjeet Singh, Malaysian Army Education Corps. I have invested time and happy anticipation in this meeting; I hope to find whatever may be left of Bourne School. I very much hope I shall not be too disappointed.

Our guide for the morning is Zeb, a charming and knowledgeable malay muslim, fiercely proud of his country and culture. Unfortunately, it's raining, NOT part of Plan A. To give the walk some sort of context, Zeb takes us out to the outskirts of KL on the LRT⁹ to show us new housing developments. We ride back to Little India for breakfast and 'pulled' tea, a confection of cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, ginger and milk, where 'pulling' involves pouring from one Pyrex cup to another to create a frothy 'head' - it's tea, Jim, but not as we know it.

***Culture shock for a
porridge-at-
breakfast type!***



From Little India to the Jamek Mosque where I must cover myself decorously with robe and headscarf, then on to temples chinese and Hindu. By now, and after a four hour bombardment with facts, I am punch drunk and feel I cannot absorb another fact. We take a taxi back to the hotel which is a bad move. Traffic in KL is worse than London. Zeb tells us the government offers zero deposits and a bounty of

⁹ Light Rail Transit

RM¹⁰100 for people to buy a car. Better by far to offer a free bicycle but I guess this is not quite in keeping with the image of a modern westernised, country, which Malaysia likes to project!



The Jamek Mosque



The ablutions pool at the Jamek Mosque

What the well-dressed tourist wears



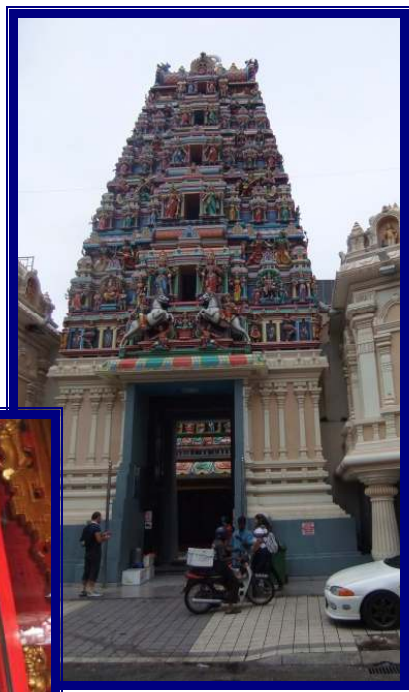
¹⁰ Malay Ringits

During this morning's relatively short walk, we have been exposed to three monotheistic religions: Islam, Hinduism and Christianity; the reassuringly Anglican Cathedral of St Mary the Virgin is right opposite the Selangor Club. Also to Taoism, the worship of many gods. I have learnt a lot!



***St Mary the Virgin
anglican cathedral***

***Srimariamman
hindu temple***



***Sin Sze Si Ya
taoist temple***

Unfortunately, due to our traffic delay, Surjeet is already in the foyer; but the very sight of his officer's uniform has charmed the hotel staff, and he observes RHIP - Rank Has Its Place - a lovely expression one would not dare utter in über-egalitarian Britain. Surjeet, a sikh from the Punjab is charming and proudly tells us he is third generation Education Corps with a doctorate in english. We set off for the Malaysian Armed Forces College and Staff College in Jalan Tekpi. I knew it as Jalan Gurney after Sir Henry Gurney but in the spirit of post-colonial times references to europeans have been swept away.

Surjeet drives up what I knew as Arakan Hill past what were the Needlework rooms and on to the boarding houses. The Needlework rooms are now the Guard room, whilst the boarding houses is a vast building site for the new Armed Forces Officers' Mess. This is a boldly confident nation which builds such huge facilities for its forces where we in the UK are closing and amalgamating at every turn. We walk around and I try to get my bearings; we are introduced to Satwant and Toh.

Unfortunately, the Chief of the Australian Defence Staff is meeting his Malaysian opposite number and not even the arrival, 47 years on, of a former pupil can hurry this meeting. We must 'kill' time with these three lovely gentlemen, but this is no hardship whatsoever as I bring out the photos, which they all love, and we all share our military heritage. The Malaysian Army has copied the british model and is steeped in the same ethos and its many similar customs.



***High rise
officers'
accommodation
being built on the
site of former
single storey
dormitories***

***Arakan Hill, up and down which I walked daily
between boarding house and classrooms.***

Arrows point left down to class rooms, right to boarders' accommodation

Finally, the Australian 'big cheese' is on his way and we can go down to the Staff College section, what I knew as classrooms. There to meet us is Colonel Ranjit Singh who opens my car-door! This is 'red carpet' treatment indeed. Nothing, but nothing has changed though it does all look rather smarter.

To my huge delight, I discover that Ranjit's office is my old classroom, here, poor Mr Eckersley, maths master, tried to instruct me in the gentle art of quadratic equations, the mysteries of logarithm tables and sad to say, failed consummately. It was about this time that serious maths forever became a closed book to me and French, under the surprisingly relaxed eye of Madame Cross became a favourite subject; she would allow us to read back copies of Paris Match - a great way to learn a language. Forty-seven years melt away and I am a fourteen year old school girl again.



***Once classroom
for 3A now office
of Colonel Ranjit
Singh, Malaysian
Army Education
Corps***

There is so much here which is, astonishingly, just the same, the covered walk ways between blocks - monsoon rains are sudden and torrential, so cover is essential. The glass louvres at the top of the walls, in 1964 these were permanently open, as were the doors - there was no air conditioning at Bourne; even the round Bakelite light switches are still in place. The art room is now a conference room, the headmaster's study the Guard room of the Staff College.

We sit in Ranjit's office and look through the photos, amongst which are seemingly endless military parades, and several invitations to my parents from local Negri Sembilan¹¹ royalty. It is not an exaggeration to say the colonels love them.



***Penny and 'her'
Colonels, Ranjit,
Surjeet and Satwant
outside classroom 3A***



Penny, Damian and the Colonels

¹¹ One of the 13 federated malay states

This most happy of returns must come to an end and Surjeet suggests we visit his punjabi club for a drink before returning us to the hotel. He has a sister in London and hopes to come to the UK for the Olympics. We invite him to Dorset so, who knows, watch this space ... !

Day 10
Kuala Lumpur → Penang

Pakistan Day, Tuesday, 23 March

Today we shall bid 'adieu' to KL but not before a visit to Petronas Towers. Audley has pre-booked us tickets, a real bonus. Only a limited number of visitors are allowed each day and queuing starts early; we have been able to avoid the queue and / or disappointment.

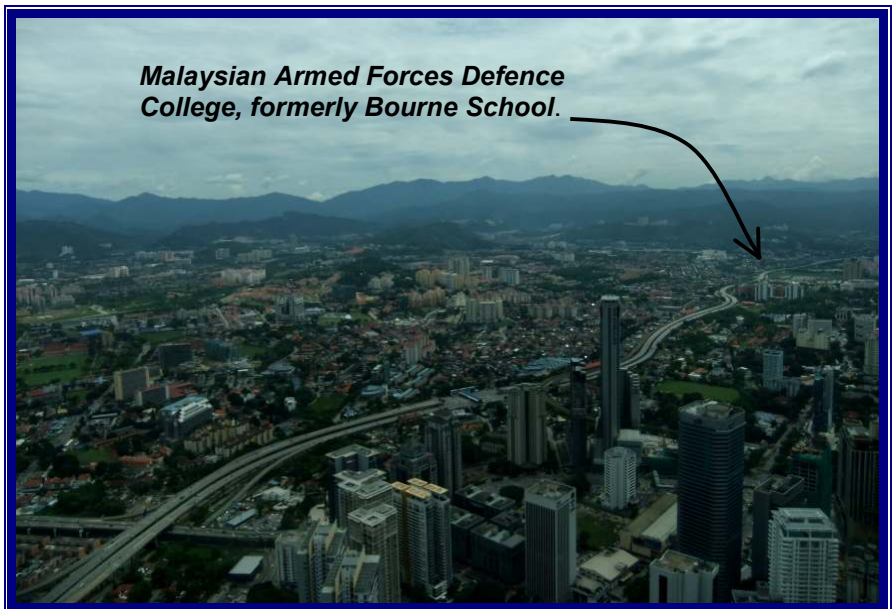
The visit to the Sky Bridge, linking the two towers and the 82nd floor is carefully managed. Malaysia is justifiably proud of this monument to engineering excellence, until 2004 the tallest in the world but now overtaken by Burj Khalifa, Dubai, with 163 floors.



To say the views are breathtaking is a masterpiece of understatement. I can see up to Defence and Staff Colleges also the new officers' mess. I can't help noting that we have closed HQ Land Forces at Wilton and the Officers' Mess where we had our wedding reception, Malaysia is building new and bigger.



*View from
the top*



*Malaysian Armed Forces Defence
College, formerly Bourne School.*

The ribbon of road is the Kuala Lumpur Elevated Highway

We leave Petronas Towers and hurry back to meet the car to take us to the airport. The Renaissance happens to be next to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan's High Commission and it also happens to be Pakistan Day. We note much frenzied activity including these chapati makers, one of whom hands me one made just moments before.



***Freshest of fresh
chapatis***

Next stop Penang, the island off the west coast of Malaysia and scene of my Christmas holiday in 1965. I was only there for about five days so not so many memories, although I am on a quest to find the Runnymede Hotel. For the next three days we are lucky enough to be staying with Damian's cousin, Catherine and Peter Cogan. Peter is serving with the British Army on the HQ staff of the Five Power Defence Arrangement, a coalition of Great Britain, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand and Australia. Sadly, for us during our stay he is in Hong Kong at the Rugby Sevens.

The Cogans live in a fabulous apartment on the 32nd floor of the Silverton Condominium on Gurney Drive. En route for their home, we call in at the Snake Temple where snakes, so woozy from the scent of joss sticks, are at large. I remember visiting the temple in 1965; I did not much care for it then, and I have not changed my opinion in the intervening 47 years!



**Snake Temple
Penang**

**Snakes are
everywhere!**



We have stayed in some fabulously comfortable hotels; it is a great pleasure now to be in a home **and** with family. We catch up and note how surreal it feels to be together in Penang when we have generally been together in Wiltshire or Somerset. Catherine suggests the local hawker restaurant, a few yards from the Silverton, for supper. 'Fine dining' it is not; it is situated directly on the street, with corrugated tin roof, metal tables and maitre D is wearing welly boots, albeit they are white, they are essential as he spends a lot of time washing down the concrete floor with a hose. We have a delicious meal of deep fried prawns, chicken satay, squid etc all for £12. Damian and I decide that we might not have been bold enough to even walk in were it not for Catherine.



*View from the Cogan's kitchen.
Wat Chaiyamangalaram Buddhist temple to the left,
built on land given on behalf of Queen Victoria*