

TRAVEL

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The guns at Fort Siloso protected the entrance to Keppel Harbor at the time of the Japanese attack on Singapore in 1941.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SENTOSA

THE REST IS HISTORY

Singapore's World War II sites, museums and tours challenge preconceived ideas of how the conflagration unfolded in the city-state

BY TONY PHILLIPS
STAFF REPORTER

Everyone knows that World War II in the Far East began with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. Only it didn't. The Japanese invasion of British-controlled Malaya began just after midnight on Dec. 8 (local time), before the first bombs hit the US naval base on the other side of the international date line.

The fall of "Fortress Singapore," which followed a rapid Japanese advance down the Malay Peninsula, was described by Britain's wartime prime minister Winston Churchill as "the worst disaster and largest capitulation" in British history.

Although the city-state is now known for tourist attractions such as the Singapore Flyer, the world's tallest observation wheel, and the newly opened Universal Studios theme park, there is no shortage of sites that offer an insight into what happened there during and after the Japanese invasion.

The National Museum of Singapore is a good starting point to gain an overview of Singapore's history during World War II. Its Singapore History Gallery contains sections on the fall of Singapore and subsequent occupation, with an audio-visual companion providing further insights.

The companion — a multimedia handheld device comprising an LCD display, earphones and a keypad — provides audio, visual and textual content to complement the museum's artifacts.

Perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most moving, objects on view, are the belongings of the victims of a massacre that took place during the Japanese occupation. Religious trinkets, buttons, coins, spectacles and even a doctor's wallet and stethoscope bear silent witness to one of the mass executions that targeted the Chinese population and may have claimed up to 100,000 lives in total.

If you happen to be in Singapore on a Wednesday afternoon you can gain a more detailed understanding of the events of late 1941 and early 1942 by joining the weekly "End of Empire — Singapore 1942" tour run by The Original Singapore Walks.

The afternoon begins with a trip in a

private bus to the former British command post on Mount Faber, which provides a panorama of the island from Johor to the north, where the Japanese launched their attack on Singapore, to Sentosa Island to the south, home of three British gun batteries. On the trip to Mount Faber our guide, Helena, provided an overview of the Japanese campaign and the military commanders involved. These included the "Tiger of Malaya," Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita, who commanded Japanese forces, and his British counterpart, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival, who had the rather less flattering nickname of "Bunny" thanks to his prominent front teeth, a feature visible in a photograph of the rival commanders that was passed around the bus.

Next stop was the site of Labrador Battery, located in what is now a park. Not much remains of the two World War II gun emplacements, one of which has been transformed into a gazebo, but it was here that Helena exploded the myth that Singapore's heavy guns were facing the wrong way, out to sea, when the Japanese attack came overland from Malaya to the north. The guns were able to traverse, but she explained that they were mainly equipped with armor-piercing shells, great for blowing ships out of the water but far less effective against advancing infantry.

Original Singapore Walks advises that you bring water with you and by the end of this part of the tour you'll know why. Although there isn't that much walking to do, Singapore's climate is hot and humid, a fact worth remembering when thinking about the conditions troops had to endure when fighting or as POWs in camps such as that at Changi, near where the international airport is now located.

Next on the itinerary was a drive around Alexandra Hospital, the scene of a massacre of patients and staff by Japanese troops. Helena explained that we wouldn't be getting out of the bus as the hospital was still in use and the current occupants of its beds probably wouldn't benefit from hearing tales of the atrocity.

The last stop was the Kranji War Cemetery, the final resting place of 4,458

allied servicemen who died fighting in Southeast Asia or in its prison camps. The Kranji War Memorial overlooks the cemetery, its walls inscribed with the names of 24,346 allied combatants whose bodies were never found.

It was at this somber location that Helena told the individual stories of some of the men buried there, pointing out their gravestones and emphasizing that they were not just names but real people. One of them was an Australian POW, Rodney Breavington, captured along with three other prisoners while attempting to escape from Changi. The four were executed despite Breavington pleading that he alone was responsible for the escape attempt and should therefore be the only one to die.

The forces that defended Singapore were diverse, as the rows of gravestones commemorating British, Australian, Dutch and Indian troops and the Chinese and Malay names on the walls of the war memorial attest.

The youngest victim, an Indian, was 16, while the oldest was a man in his 60s, his presence in a Chinese volunteer force highlighting the desperate situation Singapore found itself in.

Original Singapore Walks also offers a guided visit to the Changi Chapel and Museum every Saturday. The museum houses a collection of paintings, photographs and personal effects donated by former POWs.

The tour includes a walk on Changi Beach, site of one of the massacres perpetrated by the Japanese, and a trip to the remains of Johore Battery, with its replica 15-inch guns.

There are also brief stops outside the old Changi Jail and Selarang Barracks, both of which served as POW internment camps.

All the sites included in the tours can be visited individually.

Two sites well worth a visit that are not included on either tour are the Battle Box and Fort Siloso.

The former was the underground headquarters of the British forces in the days before the final surrender on Feb. 15, 1942. It houses waxwork figures, some of which can move and talk using animatronics. The



Contrary to popular belief, Singapore's guns, like this replica at Fort Siloso, were not pointing the wrong way in 1941.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SENTOSA

admission fee includes a tour with a guide who describes the gruesome methods used by the Japanese secret police to extract information, although the squeamish can skip this part.

Fort Siloso sits somewhat incongruously at one end of the leisure and entertainment hub that is Sentosa Island, with its swanky hotels, casinos and theme park; you can easily spend half a day wandering around Singapore's only preserved World War II coastal gun battery. It has a large collection of memorabilia with life-size replicas of guns and their crews and interactive exhibits. You might even spot the peacock that wandered into the site from one of Sentosa's neighboring attractions during my visit.

Another interesting site is Reflections at Bukit Chandu, which focuses on the story of the members of the Malay Regiment who fought virtually to the last man at the Battle of Pasir Panjang on Feb. 13 and Feb. 14, 1942. Its exhibition gallery covers the history of World War II in Malaya and contains photographs, maps and artifacts, including Japanese and British weapons.

At Memories at the Old Ford Factory you can see the boardroom where the surrender negotiations took place on 15 Feb. 1942. The exhibition gallery highlights life in Singapore under Japanese rule and documentary screenings cover various aspects of the invasion and its aftermath.

Getting there

China Airlines, EVA Air, Jetstar Asia Airways and Singapore Airlines all fly to Singapore from Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport.

Getting around

Singapore is not big and its extensive MRT and bus networks make visiting its World War II sites straightforward. The Singapore Tourist Pass offers unlimited rides on the public transport system and costs S\$8 per day for a one, two or three-day pass.

Exchange rate

S\$1 = approximately NT\$23

Information

National Museum of Singapore Singapore History Gallery
93 Stamford Rd, Singapore 178897
Opening hours: Daily from 10am to 6pm
Admission: Adult S\$8 (includes Singapore Living Galleries)
MRT Dhoby Ghaut or Bras Basah stations

Reflections at Bukit Chandu
31-K Pepys Rd, Singapore 118458
Opening hours: Tuesdays to Sundays from 9am to 5:30pm
Admission: Adult S\$2
MRT HarbourFront Station and take bus SBS bus 10, 30, 143 or SMRT bus 188 from HarbourFront Centre

The Battle Box
51 Canning Rise, Singapore 179872
Opening hours: Daily from 10am to 6pm
Admission: Adult S\$8
MRT Dhoby Ghaut or Bras Basah stations

Kranji War Cemetery
9 Woodlands Road, Singapore 738656
Opening hours: Daily from 7am to 6pm
Admission: Free
MRT Kranji Station

Fort Siloso
33 Allanbrooke Road, Singapore 099981
Opening hours: Daily from 10am to 6pm
Admission: Adult S\$8
MRT HarbourFront Station then Sentosa Express or bus to Sentosa Island

Changi Chapel and Museum
1,000 Upper Changi Rd North, Singapore 507707
Opening hours: Daily from 9:30am to 4:30pm
Admission: Free
MRT Tanah Merah Station then SBS bus 2

Memories at Old Ford Factory
351 Upper Bukit Timah Rd, Singapore 588192
Opening hours: Mondays to Saturdays from 9am to 5:30pm and Sundays from midday to 5:30pm
Admission: S\$3
MRT Bukit Batok Station then SMRT bus 173

The Original Singapore Walks
www.journeys.com.sg
Reservation is encouraged but not essential for tours
Cost S\$45

Suggested itineraries

➤ The National Museum of Singapore and the Battle Box are located near each other, close to the city center. Time permitting, a trip to Fort Siloso would also be feasible.

➤ Changi Chapel and Museum and the remains of Johore Battery are located close to each other in the east of Singapore.

➤ Reflections at Bukit Chandu, The Kranji War Cemetery and Memories at Old Ford Factory are to the west and northwest of the city center.



The Changi Chapel and Museum tells the story of Singapore's World War II POWs.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHANGI MUSEUM