



A Day in Kampong Glam: Heritage, Hipsters & Mouth Itchy Moments

Description

If you have been following my adventures for a while, you know that I absolutely love exploring the nooks and crannies of our little red dot. Today, I decided to take a little wander through one of Singapore's most vibrant districts—**Kampong Glam**.

Historically designated as the ethnic quarter for the Malay community, this area is a fascinating melting pot where history, culture, popping colours, and undeniable good vibes all meet. Whether you are a history buff, a foodie, or just someone looking for a great Instagram spot, this place has it all. The juxtaposition of ancient heritage alongside the modern, street-art-splashed shophouses creates an energetic atmosphere that truly captures Singapore's diverse soul.

The Jewel of the District: Sultan Mosque

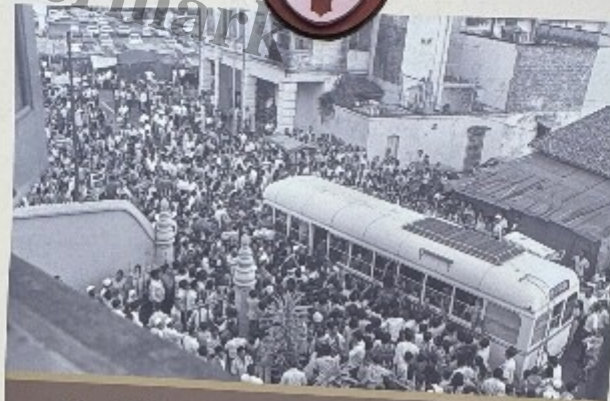
You simply cannot miss the golden dome that dominates the skyline here. As I walked down the pedestrian street, the view of **Masjid Sultan (Sultan Mosque)** against the cloudy blue sky was just fascinating as always. The immense onion-shaped dome and the graceful minarets stand as a silent testament to the area's deep roots.

Did you know that this mosque was originally built in the 1800s for Sultan Hussein Shah? He was the Sultan of Johor who came with his entourage from Riau to settle right here when he signed the treaty with Sir Stamford Raffles and Temenggong Abdul Rahman to establish Singapore as a free trading port. That treaty formalised the Sultan's presence and granted this land for his residence and the mosque, cementing its role as the cultural heart of the Malay and Muslim community. It stands as a massive reminder of the area's royal past and its significance in Singapore's founding narrative.



KAMPONG GLAM

HERITAGE TRAIL



Masjid Sultan

Masjid Sultan, also known as Sultan Mosque, is an important focal point for Muslims in Singapore and the most prominent landmark in Kampong Glam. Every year, during the fasting month of Ramadhan, Muslin gather in the vicinity of the mosque to await the prayer call to break their fast.

Though the current building was constructed in the late 1920s, Masjid Sultan has a history that goes back to the early part of the 19th century. In 1810, Sir Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) signed a treaty with Sultan Hussein (1776-1835) and Temenggong Alimuddin Bahman (d. 1825) allowing the British East India Company (EIC) to establish a trading post in Singapore.

In 1825, the Sultan wanted a mosque near his residence at Kampong Glam. Raffles made provision for the mosque to be built near the Istana and allocated funds towards the construction. The mosque, a brick structure with a three-tier tiled roof, was constructed between 1826 and 1829, and served the community for a century. In 1879, Sultan Abdulaziz Alim Shah (d. 1894), also known as Tanke Alam, who was Sultan Hussein's grandson, and a Tanke Alevina gave more land to the mosque.

By the early 1900s, the mosque had become inadequate for the Muslim population. In January

1924, it was decided that the mosque would be demolished and rebuilt. The present building, commissioned in 1924, was designed by Irish architect Denis Sullivan of Swan and MacLaren in the Indo-Sarawatic style, with distinctive domes and minarets.

The mosque was built in phases over a few years so that funds could be raised, and devotees could continue performing their prayers in the mosque. The cost of the rebuilding was funded with donations from the Muslim community. In addition, to monetary contributions, the community also donated glass bottles which were incorporated into the base of the dome.

When war broke out in Malaya in 1941, people of different ethnicities and creeds sought shelter at the mosque and one of its minarets served as an observation post to look out for enemy aircraft.

Masjid Sultan was gazetted as a national monument in 1978. The annex building, designed in a similar style to the mosque, was officially opened in 1973.

A festival and prayer gathering at Masjid Sultan to send off pilgrims going to Mecca, 18 Dec 1971.



If only my history classes were this interesting, I should do pretty well

While admiring the architecture, it is a great time to reflect on the culture that shaped this community. The mosque is the focal point for the **5 Pillars of Islam**, which are the core beliefs of the faith:

1. **Declaration of Faith** (Shahada)â??the profession of belief in one God.
2. **Prayer** (Salah)â??performed five times a day facing Mecca, a beautiful commitment to faith that you can feel across the neighborhood.
3. **Zakat**â??a form of almsgiving that involves giving alms to the needy, embodying community spirit and responsibility.
4. **Fasting** (Sawm)â??observed during the holy month of Ramadan, a period of spiritual reflection.
5. **Pilgrimage** (Hajj) to Meccaâ??a sacred journey for those who are financially able, marking a significant milestone in a Muslimâ??s life.

Interestingly, because of the religious significance of the mosque, the immediate street forbids the sale of alcohol. It creates a very respectful, family-friendly atmosphere that feels quite different from other busy parts of the city, especially once you cross over to the more bohemian lanes nearby.

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Whatâ??s in a Name? The Gelam Tree

As I continued strolling near the Heritage Centre, I spotted a tall, rugged-looking tree that looked like it had seen a century of changes. This brings us to a fun fact: Do you know how Kampong Glam got its name?



This tree is the multi-tasker of trees

“Kampong” means village in Malay, and “Glam” refers to the **Gelam Tree** (also known as the Paperbark tree). In the past, these trees grew in abundance around this area. It wasn’t just for shade, though; the locals were incredibly resourceful. The Gelam tree’s unique, flaky bark made it famous, and every part of the tree was utilised. The timber from the Gelam tree was strong, used to construct boats and served as firewood, while the bark had various uses too, including seasoning or sealing joints. Seeing one of these trees standing tall today really connects you to the humble beginnings of this now-bustling district.

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Another of Mr Yip's masterpiece

Street Art and Nostalgia

One thing I love about Singapore lately is the explosion of street art, and Kampong Glam is practically an open-air gallery. I came across another impressive mural by the talented **Mr. Yip Yew Chong**.

His artwork showcases what this area looked like in the past, detailing the traditional trades that were predominant here. The scale is massive, and the detail is incredible; his signature style captures the quiet, everyday life of yesteryear, from street vendors to old coffee shops. I honestly wonder, how long did Mr. Yip take to draw this, considering his level of intricate realism? He has over 50 murals across Singapore, and each one feels like a beautiful, hand-painted time capsule of our heritage.

Speaking of murals, I found a quirky one on the side of a shophouse featuring some woven baskets and cats. This one triggered a major childhood memory for me.

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I recalled that my grandma had furniture made entirely out of **rattan** in her house. For the longest time, I never understood why she insisted on using them. As I got older, I finally realised that these materials are cooling and resilient, which is perfect for our humid, hot climate. The airy weave allows for better circulation, which is a lifesaver in the tropics.

However, I have to admit, I didn't like it when I was young because it wasn't soft and comfortable! Looking at the mural, I couldn't help but laugh at the grumpy-looking cat nestled in the baskets. Is that cat grumpy because the rattan is too hard, just like I used to think? LOL.

When the Mouth is Itchy

After all that walking and reminiscing, my mouth was itchy—a local way of saying I was craving a snack badly. You can't come to Kampong Glam without indulging in the food.

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This snack costs \$6 in total, welcome to Singapore

I stopped for a break and grabbed the essentials: a hot **Teh Tarik** (pulled milk tea) and some crispy curry puffs (epok-epok). The Teh Tarik is essential here; it is just frothier and more fragrant than anywhere else, especially when you watch the vendor pull the tea between two vessels to cool and aerate it, giving it that perfect creamy texture. Other delicious common snacks you'll find around include *goreng pisang* (fried banana fritters) and traditional Malay *kueh*. It was the perfect pick-me-up to watch the world go by and enjoy the breeze.

Scents of Tradition: Jamal Kazura Aromatics

Further down the street, I found myself drawn into **Jamal Kazura Aromatics**. The intricate designs of the perfume bottles lining the shelves are absolutely stunning. They range from small, ornate vials to large, jewel-toned flacons.

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Can you smell the difference?

Jamal Kazura specialises in alcohol-free perfumes (known as *attar* or perfume oils), which is a big draw for many in the community and a traditional form of perfumery. Because these scents are oil-based, they cling to the skin much longer—apparently, between 6 to 8 hours! Unlike alcohol-based scents that dissipate quickly, these oil blends offer a deeper, lingering fragrance. You can pick and choose the scent and the bottle based on your preference, creating a truly unique and personal souvenir. Honestly, they have so many designs that I was completely spoiled for choice. It's a sensory experience you just don't get at a typical department store.

Shopping and Vibes at Haji Lane

Other than the hip cafes and restaurants, the main streets are still home to plenty of traditional businesses like tailors, textile shops, and carpet sellers. This mix is largely due to the Arab families who settled in this area alongside the Malay community years ago, making Arab Street the hub for silk, batik, and Persian rugs.

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However, once you cross the street away from the immediate mosque area, the vibe shifts again. This is where you can start drinking, and where the party vibe kicks in, contrasting the historical solemnity with modern, youthful energy.

My favorite lane in this neighborhood has to be **Haji Lane**. I can go on for hours here! It's a narrow alleyway packed with wall-to-wall vibrant street art, everything from cafes and bars to thrift shops and local handmade souvenir shops. I celebrated my 21st birthday at one of the bars here a decade ago and the bar place is still standing! It's amazing how this lane has managed to retain its independent, bohemian spirit.

Great deals and savings

I spotted a "Thrift Vintage" sign guarded by a hilarious skeleton prop wearing a t-shirt that said "Business Open As Usual." Oh well, what can I say? I'll be letting myself down if I don't go in! These thrift stores are fantastic for finding unique, sustainable fashion gems that tell a story.



Buy 1 get 2 free!!

I also popped into **Loka Made**, which is just too cute to resist. The shop entrance is colorful and inviting. They have shelves full of stickers and postcards (which you can also post it our on the spot) that are locally designed and made, featuring iconic Singaporean motifs and humor. If you are looking for a souvenir that screams "Singapore" but isn't a generic Merlion keychain, something with true local character, this is definitely the place.

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Finally, we came across a unique shop called **Iris Galerie**. The concept is super cool—they capture your eye's iris colour and turn it into art. They use a special camera to photograph the intricate details of your iris, resulting in a beautiful, abstract print. You can even make a whole lot of things out of it, like bracelets or necklaces. I think mine is blue—so cool! What a memorable way to capture a part of yourself.

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Great idea for a Christmas gift!

Kampong Glam is truly a place where the past and present coexist beautifully, offering a little something for everyone. If you haven't been in a while, take a walk this weekend. You might learn something new, grab an incredible snack, or at least, find a really good cup of tea.



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