10 stops along a Singapore historical trail

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City Hall was a key place in Singapore's path to independence - it was where the Japanese surrendered to the British in 1945, and where Mr Lee Kuan Yew proclaimed Singapore's self-government, merger with Malaysia and independence.

– PHOTO: A. KADIR PANDI

THIS essay is inspired by a book that I launched recently. The book is entitled Singapore's Heritage Through Places Of Historical Interest. The author, Dhoraisingam S. Samuel, is 86 years old.

The book describes 160 places of historical interest in Singapore. Using the book as a resource, I will take the reader on a journey through the history of Singapore by visiting 10 of the places described in the book.

First, let us start at Fort Canning: Its original name was Bukit Larangan (Forbidden Hill). According to the Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals), when Prince Sang Nila Utama from Palembang founded Singapura in 1297, he built his palace on top of the hill. When Stamford Raffles founded modern Singapore, he also built his residence on the hill, renamed Government Hill. It was only in 1859 that it was named after George Canning, then the British Governor-General of India. During World War II, the British general Arthur Percival had his headquarters in underground bunkers at the fort. During the Japanese occupation, the fort became the headquarters of the Japanese Imperial Army. In 1926, gold ornaments were found at the site during excavation works. These objects are on display now at the National Museum. They were made in Java in the 14th century, during the Majapahit period, and confirm the view that Singapore has been inhabited since the 14th century.

Second, let us visit the Eurasian Community House at 139, Ceylon Road. Although the house is relatively new, the community is old and can trace its roots back to the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511. In commemoration of the 500th anniversary of that historic event this year, the Eurasian Association and National Heritage Board (NHB) will co-organise an exhibition in November on the Portuguese heritage of the Eurasian community.

Next, I will combine the two statues of Raffles at Empress Place and at the Istana Kampong Glam at 85 Sultan's Gate. Taken together, they remind us of the remarkable story of how modern Singapore was founded by a young official of the British East India Company. The Istana was the seat of Sultan Hussein Shah. The current building, now the home of the Malay Heritage Centre, was built by Hussein's son, Sultan Ali, between 1840 and 1843.

Fifth, I will take the reader to the Armenian Church of St Gregory in Armenian Street. On March 26 this year, we celebrated the 175th anniversary of the consecration of the church. It is the oldest surviving Christian church in Singapore and has been designated a national monument.

Sixth, let us visit the Nanyang Memorial Hall at 12, Tai Gin Road. The man who overthrew the Qing dynasty, put an end to the rule of emperors and founded the Republic of China - Sun Yat Sen - received critical support from the Chinese community in South-east Asia. He visited Singapore nine times and stayed at this house on three occasions. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the 1911 revolution in October, the Singapore Foreign Minister will officiate at the opening of a new Zhongshan Park and the re-opening of the hall, now managed by NHB.

Seventh, my next choice, the Goodwood Park Hotel, will be a surprise to many readers. What is the historical significance of the hotel? The significance is that it was built in 1900 by the German residents of Singapore as their club house, the Teutonia Club. When World War I broke out in 1914, the British government requisitioned the place as enemy property. Another interesting historical fact is that the British Military Administration used the premises to conduct the war crime trials in 1947.

Eighth, let us go a little out of town to visit the Ford Motor Works in Bukit Timah Road. Ford used to assemble its cars in this factory. On Feb 15, 1942, Lieutenant-General Percival surrendered to General Yamashita Tomoyuki in this building. The building is now a national monument, under the management of the National Archives. It houses a small museum on World War II and the Japanese Occupation of Singapore.

Ninth, in order to be even-handed, we should go next to visit the place where the Japanese surrendered to the British in 1945. It was at the City Hall that Lt-Gen Seishiro Itagaki surrendered to Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten. The City Hall, like Fort Canning, is loaded with history. It was here that Indian independence leader Subhas Chandra Bose addressed the Indian National Army. It was here that Mr Lee Kuan Yew proclaimed Singapore's self-government in 1959, its merger with Malaysia in 1963, and its independence in 1965. The first and second prime ministers of Singapore were sworn in here. The City Hall and the adjoining building, the old Supreme Court, are currently being renovated. They will be reincarnated in a few years as our National Art Gallery.

Finally, I will conclude this journey at a happy place, the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Raffles started the first Botanic Gardens in 1822 in Fort Canning. The park was closed in 1829. After an interregnum of 30 years, the new Botanic Gardens was opened in 1859 in Napier Road. Henry Ridley, director of the gardens, successfully planted the rubber seeds smuggled out of Brazil, in the gardens. This was the start of the rubber industry in Malaya. In 2009, the Singapore Botanic Gardens celebrated its 150th anniversary. It is a jewel in our crown.

The writer is the chairman of the Centre for International Law, NUS. He is also chairman of the National Heritage Board. Think-Tank is a weekly column rotated among eight leading figures in Singapore's research and tertiary institutions.