



One of the first series of monorail trains operating in Sentosa, early 1980s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

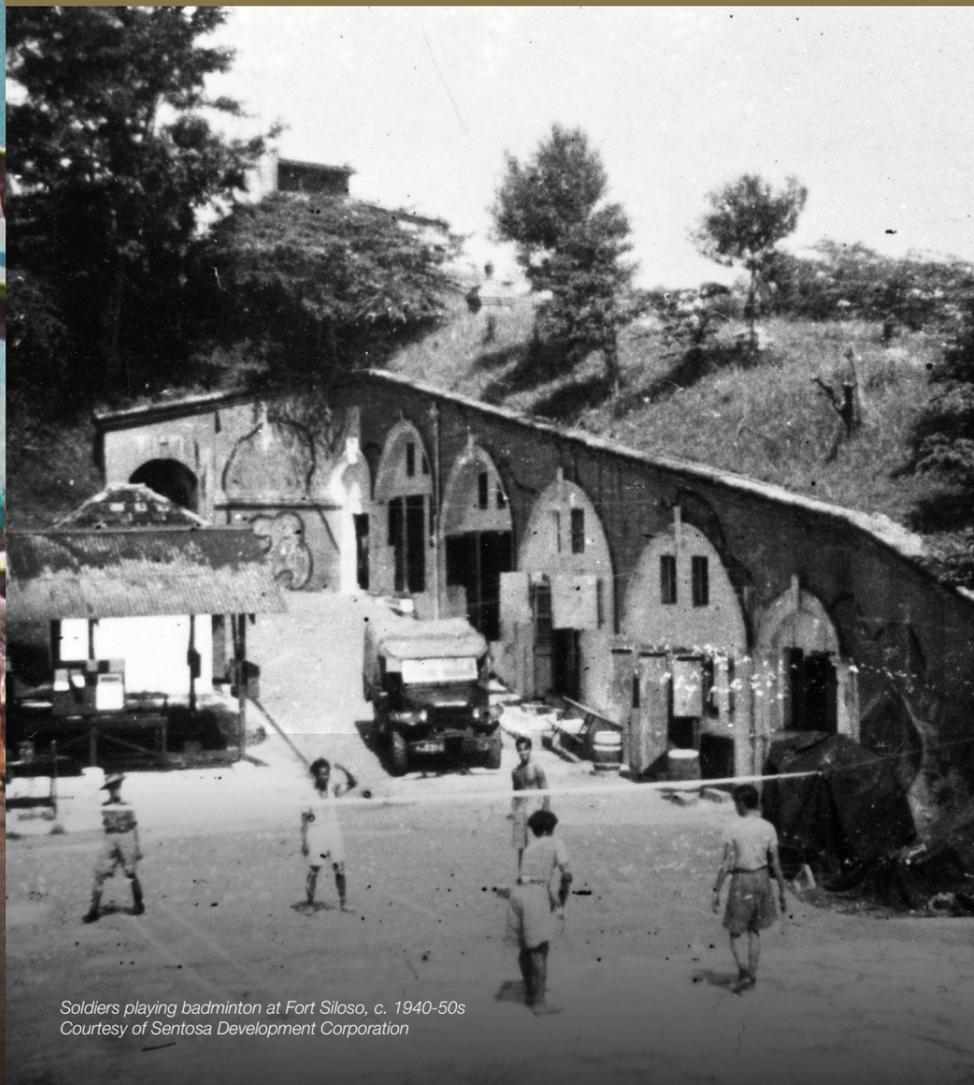
The Sentosa Heritage Trail is part of the National Heritage Board's ongoing efforts to document and present the history and social memories of places in Singapore. We hope this trail will bring back fond memories for those who have worked, lived or played in the area, and serve as a useful source of information for visitors and new residents.

SENTOSA HERITAGE TRAIL

A COMPANION GUIDE



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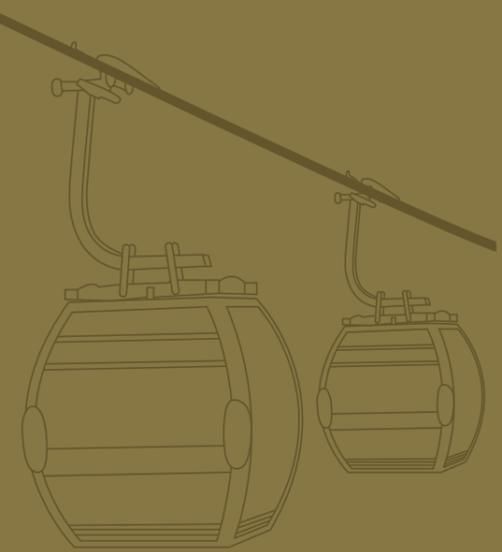
Soldiers playing badminton at Fort Siloso, c. 1940-50s
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation



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INTRODUCTION



The 2015 expanded cable car route that traverses the southern beaches of Sentosa, 2021
 Courtesy of National Heritage Board

Since the 1970s, Sentosa has been a go-to leisure destination for its beaches and amusement joy-rides, parties and concerts, as well as theme parks and attractions. Before its modern incarnation as an island of fun however, it was known as Pulau Blakang Mati - literally, "Death from the Back Island" in Malay.

From at least the 1600s, Blakang Mati was coveted by colonial powers for its strategic location between the straits of Singapore, which were part of wider trading routes connecting east and west. Nearly 300 years before the British constructed Fort Siloso, the Flemish trader Jacques de Coutre advised the King of Spain and Portugal to build a fort here to command the region.

However, these plans did not pan out, and it was only from 1878 that Blakang Mati's defence-strategic qualities were realised by the colonial British authorities. The island's forts and batteries formed key components of what was known as "Fortress Singapore", with supporting barracks and other infrastructure giving Blakang Mati a distinctly military character. Local communities that had predated the British arrival co-existed alongside the troops, growing to encompass a diverse

range of settlers from sea-dwelling Orang Laut groups to those from what is today Malaysia, Indonesia, China and India.

After the withdrawal of British troops from Singapore in the late 1960s, Blakang Mati began its transformation into Sentosa. As a leisure and tourist island, Sentosa played its part in the economic, social and cultural development of independent Singapore, drawing visitors through popular attractions and the performing arts. Attractions such as the cable car, Underwater World and the Sentosa Monorail remain vivid in the memories of Singaporeans, as do the *mat rock* concerts of the 1980s and 1990s held at the Musical Fountain.

Today, Fort Siloso stands as a National Monument and heritage site, serving to educate and entertain visitors through its well-preserved infrastructure as well as its exhibitions. The barracks that dotted the island have been conserved and repurposed as hotels and restaurants. The modern story of Sentosa's adaptation and reinvention is a continuing thread weaving together narratives of maritime, military and community heritage. We hope you enjoy this exploration of Sentosa and its multi-faceted heritage.

PRE-COLONIAL PULAU BLAKANG MATI

PLACE NAMES

Before its redevelopment as a leisure and tourist island from 1970, Sentosa was known as Pulau Blakang Mati. Translated literally as “Death from the Back Island” in Malay, the toponym can also be interpreted in a variety of other ways, including “Dead Back Island” and “Island of Death (from) Behind”.

The origin stories behind the island’s name draw on oral tradition, legends and folk memory, as well as historical events and practices. Explanations of Blakang Mati’s name often reference piracy and coercive dealings at sea, which were well-noted occurrences in the waters surrounding the island. The earliest recorded tale of piracy in the area comes from Chinese traveller Wang Dayuan’s 13th century text, *Dao Yi Zhi Lue*. Writing about what is today the waterway between Keppel Harbour and Sentosa, Wang claimed:

“... the sailors (on trading vessels) prepare their armour and padded screens as a protection against arrows for, of a certainty, some two or three hundred pirate perahu (vessels) will put out to attack them for several days. Sometimes, (the junks) are fortunate enough to escape with a favouring wind; otherwise the crews are butchered and the merchandise made off with in quick time.”

Pirates also feature in another etymology for Blakang Mati, this time involving the neighbouring island of Pulau Brani (“Island of the Brave” in Malay). The people of Brani were said to be courageous enough to battle the pirates, and their reward in the after life was the “paradise” of Blakang Mati.

Besides Blakang Mati, European colonial powers also referred to the island using several

other names. A British manuscript map of 1680 names it Burne Beard Island, while another account from that period refers to Pulo Nuttee, likely a transliteration of Blakang Mati.

European maps in subsequent decades called the island P. Nirya, Niry and Isle Niry, names that are likely derived from the Malay word *nyiur*, meaning “coconut”; as well as Toly or Tooly. The Dutch appear to have applied the name Lange Eylandt to the island on a number of maps, a moniker that is possibly connected to its Malay variant Pulau Panjang, although these names have also been used to refer to mainland Singapore.

BLAKANG MATI AND THE ISLAND OF MORTAL COMBAT

An oral tradition once passed down among the communities living around the straits of Singapore connects Pulau Blakang Mati with a smaller island to its south, known today as Pulau Tekukor (“Dove Island” in Malay).

In this account, the latter island was previously known as Pulau Penyabung, a name derived from the word *sabung* (“fight” in Malay). Penyabung was uninhabited and by tradition, a place to settle scores and grudges through duels and battles to the death. Some of these battles were said to be between factions of Bugis and the Malays of Johor and Singapore. In a newspaper article from 1960, a boatman elaborated on the oral tradition:

“There were days when as many as a hundred Bugis will come in their perahu (boats) from Riau... raise their flag and wait for the inevitable

onslaught of the Malays... Sometimes one side was wiped out and sometimes the other; on rare occasions, the battle would (see) every combatant dead or dying of their wounds."

Other battles on Pulau Penyabung were between inhabitants of the Southern Islands, Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani on one side, and marauding, invading pirates on the other.

The dead would be buried on Blakang Mati, which might explain its name. In addition, the strait of water between the two islands was known as Selat Tanjong Hakim, a name which may point to the presence of a judge or adjudicator of the battles.

The names of places and natural features on Blakang Mati also reference the economic and social history of local communities, as well as the island's flora and fauna. At the western tip of the island, near where Fort Siloso stands today, was an area known as Sarang Rimau ("tiger's den" in Malay). This place name

appears to have been used by the Orang Laut and may reflect their knowledge of the area.

The name Siloso is thought to be derived from *salusuh*, a herb used to aid childbirth, or a Malayan word meaning "rock", which may have referred to the rock outcrops in the area. In the vicinity of Siloso are areas known in the 19th century as Khampang Bay and Berdaun Rock (Terumbu Berdaun), but little is known of their etymology.

Bukit Gemia was another name for the hill we know today as Mount Imbiah, with the word *gemia* thought to be a variant of *rembia* or *rumbia*, a palm that produces sago. To the east of Mount Imbiah were places known as Lubu Bakau (possibly referencing *bakau*, a mangrove species used for timber) and Kuching Gila Creek ("crazy cat" in Malay). At the eastern end of Blakang Mati was Ayer Bandera ("flag water" in Malay), so named possibly because of the flag signal system installed on nearby Mount Serapong by the British in the early 1800s.

Pulau Selegu, an islet off the northern coast of Blakang Mati, was also known as Button



An 1865 hydrographic map of Singapore indicating the names of places and former kampongs on Pulau Blakang Mati
Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Island, a name it acquired for its round shape. To the east of Selegu was another islet, which remained unnamed until the 1960s, when it was opened as the leisure locale known as Sarong Island (more about Sarong Island can be found on p. 54). Both islets were later merged with Blakang Mati through land reclamation.

THE STRATEGIC POTENTIAL OF BLAKANG MATI

Early records

For centuries before the arrival of Europeans in the region, vessels from maritime Southeast Asia, India, China, Arabia and elsewhere travelled through the strait between mainland Singapore and Pulau Blakang Mati. Some travellers wrote accounts of their journeys and the places they visited, while others drew maps and detailed sailing directions for various purposes.

In Wang Dayuan's *Dao Yi Zhi Lue*, he detailed his travels around the region, including a place he called Longyamen ("Dragon's Tooth Gate" in Chinese). The location of Longyamen has been much debated, but historians

generally agree that Wang was referring to Singapore and the surrounding features of the Old Singapore Strait and Blakang Mati. A translation of Wang's account of the area goes:

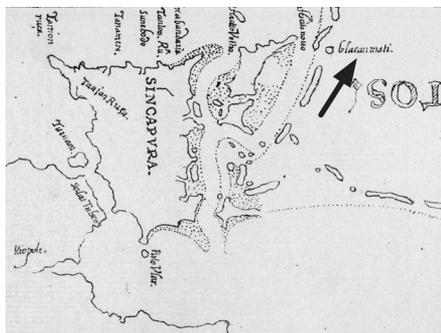
"The (Old) Strait runs between two hills of the Dan Ma Xi (Temasek), which look like dragon's teeth".

Specifically, the "dragon's teeth" are thought to reference Batu Berlayer ("Sail Rock" in Malay), a rock outcrop at what is today Labrador Point. The corresponding "tooth" across the strait likely referred to a promontory or small hill around what is today Fort Siloso. This high ground was removed during the construction of the fort by the British in the 19th century, while Batu Berlayer was also demolished by the colonial authorities to aid navigation around Keppel Harbour.

The first appearance of the Blakang Mati toponym dates to an early 17th century map and the text *Declaracam de Malaca e da India Meridional com Cathay*. Written by the Portuguese-Melakan cartographer Manuel Godinho de Erédia, the text included a map showing an island named "Blacanmati" located south of Singapore.



A replica of the "dragon's teeth" at Labrador Park, 2019
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Detail from Erédia's map of Singapore showing a small island identified as "Blacanzati", 1604
Collection of National Library, Singapore

The early 1600s also saw European empires begin to grasp the strategic and commercial potential of this area, as detailed in the accounts of traders and navigators including de Erédia and the Flemish merchant Jacques de Coutre.

The straits around Singapore had long been a key passage within global trade networks, as they were the shortest route between the Strait of Melaka and the South China Sea, connecting east and west. Located between the Old Strait of Singapore and what would later become known as the New Strait of Singapore, Blakang Mati occupied a strategic position.

Vessels utilising the strait would anchor off the north-western tip of the island (today's Siloso Point) to await favourable tides. One notable example was that of a vessel on which Saint Francis Xavier, a missionary later canonised by the Catholic Church, was a passenger. While at anchor off Blakang Mati in 1552, he signed his letters with the phrase "ex freto Syncapurano" ("from the Strait of Singapore" in Latin).

The island's strategic potential was highlighted by the trader Jacques de Coutre in a series of memorials to Philip IV, King of Spain and Portugal, in the 1620s. The memorials included his account of trading networks in Southeast Asia and recommendations to restore the commercial fortunes of the Estado da India

(the Portuguese colonial dependencies and forts along the coasts of India), including Melaka. Portuguese trade and shipping in the region had been in decline under the pressure of commercial competition and naval attacks from the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC).

In order to revitalise trade as well as protect vulnerable zones within their trade network, de Coutre recommended the construction of forts on Blakang Mati and Singapore. The forts would enable the Portuguese to exert control over the key routes of the Old Strait and the New Strait. De Coutre elaborated:

"This island forms a stone peak between the Straits that resembles a fortress by nature... No vessel can pass through either of these straits without being within reach of the citadel, which can sink them with artillery."

"It is advisable that these [proposed] citadels be very strong, [for] then the [Dutch] rebels will not be able to pass through here, nor the [king of] Aceh with his armadas to sack Johor or the Kingdom of Pahang."

De Coutre identified the north-west tip of Blakang Mati, where the British would later build Fort Siloso, as an ideal location. He added that a naval squadron of five to six "Manila galleys" should be stationed at the forts on both Blakang Mati and mainland Singapore, which would also be mutually reinforcing given the distance of around nine kilometres between them.

Emphasising that there was plenty of stone, coral for mortaring and firewood available on Blakang Mati for the construction of fortifications and quays for vessels, de Coutre assessed the cost of erecting these citadels as being relatively inexpensive. The proposed forts did not come to pass however, likely due to the costs of maintaining the defences as well as his proposed naval force.

The Dutch, rivals of the Portuguese in the 17th century, were also said to have considered a

fort on Blakang Mati. Writing to Dom Jeronimo de Azevedo, the Portuguese viceroy at Goa in 1614, a contact in Melaka reported that the Dutch were “trying to make (a fort) in the Singapore Strait, on a small island that divides the old from the new strait”. This places the probable location of the proposed, but never built fort on Blakang Mati or Pulau Brani.

BLAKANG MATI IN EUROPEAN ACCOUNTS

Orang Laut

Before the 1800s, several travellers’ accounts provided brief sketches of settlements and early economic activity on Pulau Blakang Mati. Merchant Peter Floris, who sailed past the island on the *Globe* in November 1613, noted the presence of “Salettes” (a term likely deriving from the term *selat*, which means “straits” in Malay, and referring to the Orang Laut). Living on their roofed *perahus* (boats), the Orang Laut made their living by fishing as well as selling freshwater, palm leaf umbrellas and hats, fruit, fresh and dried fish and other commodities to passing vessels.

Given the use of both the Old Strait and New Strait of Singapore in the 17th century, the Orang Laut could also be hired as pilots on European vessels to navigate the reef-strewn straits and to set beacons on dangerous rocks

hidden in the straits. Floris also noted that the Orang Laut owed their allegiance to the ruler of Johor.

Peter Mundy, a trade agent travelling on the *Planter* in 1637, wrote of the Orang Laut “(bringing) us from the shoare in those little boates plantanes (bananas), sugarcanes and pineapples, which they sow and plant in certain plottes [sic]”. This observation provides evidence of agriculture by the Orang Laut or other groups, which was still the case on Blakang Mati some 200 years later in the colonial era.

On a voyage between Melaka and Tonkin (northern Vietnam) in 1688, English freebooter and navigator William Dampier’s ship anchored at Blakang Mati and he noted:

“We anchored near an Island called Pulo Nuttee, belonging to the Kingdom of Jihore (Johor). Here Captain Weldon took in Wood and Water, and some of the Indian [sic] Inhabitants came aboard us in their Canoas (canoes), of whom we bought a few Coconuts, Plantatains [sic], and fresh Fish. ...Ships do usually take in Water at Malacca Town, yet they do as frequently discharge it again at some of these Islands (around Blakang Mati), and take in better (presumably fresher water supplies).”



Stilt houses of the Orang Laut off Pulau Brani, 1900s
Andrew Tan Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



The seashore of Blakang Mati, c. 1907
Arshak C Galstaun Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

Early inhabitants and kampongs

After Singapore became a British colony from 1819, more in-depth accounts of Blakang Mati and its inhabitants emerged. The population of the island was noted to be diverse, with various groups including Bugis, Chinese and Indians settling there.

In the early 1830s, naturalist George Bennett described a visit to Pulau Panjang (another name for Blakang Mati). He wrote:

"We landed on Pulo Panjong, among some neat Malay houses, near a sandy beach. The thatched houses, towering cocoa-palms (coconut palms), plantain trees, with rude plantations of sugar-canes, yams..."

"A kind of millet, called Sukue, (Pennisetum italicum, foxtail millet) was also cultivated in small patches by the Malays, and several magnificent trees of the Bombax pentandrium, or silk cotton-tree (a species of Kapok), rose in towering beauty, mingled with the cocoa-palm above the dwellings. Only a very small portion of this island was cleared, the remainder forming an almost impenetrable jungle, a refuge only for monkeys and wild hogs, We found it very difficult to penetrate the luxuriant and entangled branches of the pine-apple plant..."

From Bennett's observations, several changes from the accounts of the 1600s can be

gleaned, including permanent residences and extensive agricultural areas. The cultivation of fruits like pineapples and coconuts had also expanded to include foxtail millet, yams and possibly kapok (cotton).

In 1833, the colonial government installed a flag signal station on Mount Serapong in the east of the island, for the purpose of alerting Singapore town if hostile vessels approached. A village called Kampong Ayer Bandera was formed near the station, and may have been named after the station, as *bandera* means "flag" in Malay. After many of the colonial staff assigned to the station contracted malaria, the flag station was moved to Mount Faber on the mainland in 1845.

One of the most illuminating accounts of life on Blakang Mati in the 19th century was published by a British doctor, Robert Little, in 1848. Visiting the island on a number of occasions to investigate a mysterious epidemic, Dr Little described its kampongs and economic activity, population and living environment. He detailed three villages: Kampong Ayer Bandera, Kampong Serapong and Kampong Blakan Mati, and described the first as being inhabited by Bugis settlers of the Wadju tribe, the second by Malays and the last by Bugis and Chinese.

Kampong Ayer Bandera, whose residents suffered the most from what Little called

“remittent fever”, was located on a flat strip of land bounded by a crescent-shaped beach and Mount Serapong. Little noted that the kampong at one time had up to 60 inhabitants, but when he visited in 1847, these numbers had dwindled to fewer than 20 people.

The Bugis also told Little that 18 Chinese people previously lived on a sandy promontory in nearby Telok Bendera, making their living by collecting and burning coral (perhaps for construction mortar), but 12 had died of the fever and the rest had left. There were also houses built on Mount Serapong and its valley fringed by mangroves and the sea.

Meanwhile, Kampong Serapong was about 1.2 kilometres away from Kampong Ayer Bendera and located between two hills. Little noted about 50 Malay persons living there, with the houses built on the gentle slope at the base of a nearby hill which also had a freshwater stream connecting to a creek.

Little also wrote about the plantations on Blakang Mati and the economic circumstances of its residents. Describing the island as being about 2.5 miles (four kilometres) in length and spanning around 400 acres, he added that it was “completely cleared of jungle”, which was likely an overstatement. The plantations and fruit orchards he observed included chempedak, coconut, jackfruit, guava and durian, although the main crop was pineapple.

Little estimated that pineapple covered at least 200 acres of the island, adding: “Blakang Mati is one vast pinery, supplying the island of Singapore with this delightful and refreshing fruit.” Besides the fruit, the leaves of the pineapple plant could be manufactured into pina cloth, and the Bugis also made fermented pineapple juices.

The Wadju Bugis of Blakang Mati were said by Little to possess more material prosperity than many others in Singapore during the mid-19th century, enjoying better income, food, housing and clothing. From their pineapple and other fruit plantations, and through fishing, they

derived incomes of a third more than the average wage of Singapore at the time. A prominent earner for the Bugis community came from the women, who wove silk and gold thread sarongs. Their houses on Blakang Mati were described by Little as being built in the Malay style on elevated posts, roofed and walled with Nipa palm attap (palm thatch), with flooring of Nibong or Pinang timber.

The island’s economic potential had also caught the eye of entrepreneurs early in the colonial period. In 1863, Hammer and Company secured a private reservoir on the island and sold freshwater to vessels, while the Borneo Company (a shipping and docks concern) operated a 10-ton dynamite magazine there. Jacob Clunis, a shipwright and harbour pilot for the Peninsular & Oriental Company, also built and occupied a hill bungalow on Pulau Selegu.

Others found various means of realising profit from Blakang Mati; in a shady venture, a Chinese person was arrested for running a currency counterfeiting operation turning out Mexican and Hong Kong dollars from Blakang Mati in 1869. The plantations and other ventures on the island were cleared when the British colonial administration put in motion their plans for defence works on Blakang Mati in the 1870s.



A pineapple plantation in Singapore, 1880s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

THE EMPIRE AND BLAKANG MATI



Royal Garrison Artillery soldiers loading equipment onto ferries to Blakang Mati, 1918
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

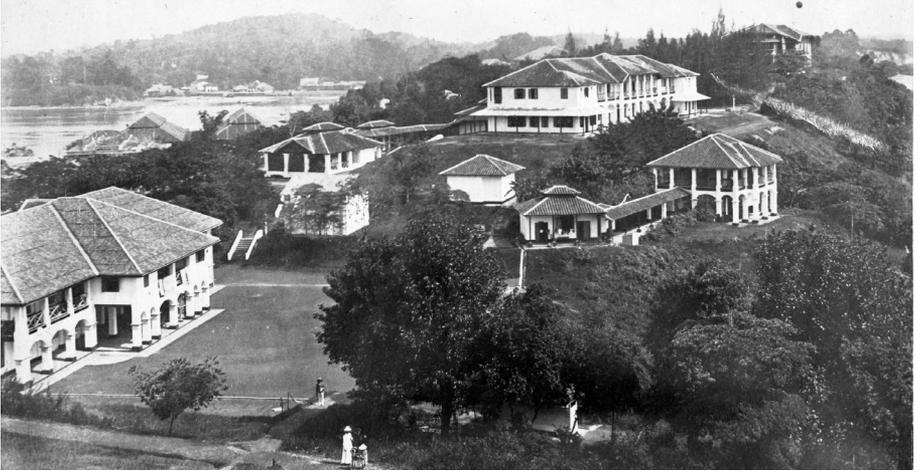
Throughout the 19th century, Pulau Blakang Mati had always been part of Britain's defence strategy for Singapore, which was centred on defending Keppel Harbour and the shipping straits around Singapore. These defence plans were articulated in reviews by Captain Edward Lake in 1827, Captain Samuel Best in 1844 and Captain George Collyer in 1858. Lake's report made it clear that:

"In my project for the defence of the harbour, it must be considered that if an enemy were to land and make themselves masters of Blakang Mati, it would give them command of the harbour, and therefore that island should be fortified to prevent that contingency, as well as to protect the entrance of the harbour from attack by sea."

However, the recommended artillery batteries, fortifications and garrisons on Blakang Mati did not materialise until 1878, being delayed by debates over defensive strategy and cost.

From the 1860s, with the threat of imperial Russia looming, there was greater impetus for defence and security across the British Empire. In the case of Singapore, securing the port and coaling facilities were imperatives given that the island was the third most important British coaling station. Singapore's annual trade and shipping also constituted around an eighth of all British commerce.

The plans for defence works on Blakang Mati took a decisive step forward in 1875, when Straits Settlements governor William



Royal Garrison Artillery barracks at Pulau Blakang Mati, 1915
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Drummond Jervois recommended the construction of forts on Mount Siloso and Mount Serapong, and raising a corps of artillery volunteers. These measures would all later come to pass.

In 1878, the plans and stratagems of de Coutre, Lake, Collyer and all the rest finally began to take physical form. Construction began on gun batteries on Mount Siloso and at Blakang Mati East (later known as Fort Connaught), which were designed to cover the eastern and western approaches to the harbour. To protect the batteries, redoubts (fortifications) manned by infantry were installed on Mount Imbiah and Mount Serapong.

By 1887, all private property rights on Blakang Mati had been acquired by the colonial government, a process that may have included the clearance of kampongs that stood at Telok Bendera, Serapong and at the south-eastern tip. However, in the 1890s, the colonial administration issued leases for villages, fishing areas and plantations on the island, permitting civilian settlement alongside the military installations.

By the 1890s, the defence scheme protecting the all-important Keppel Harbour, the shipping straits, as well as the town of Singapore,



A village on the northern coast of Blakang Mati, 1935
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

featured batteries at Fort Siloso, Fort Serapong, Fort Connaught and Berhala Reping on Blakang Mati. There were also batteries at Teregeh on Pulau Brani and Fort Pasir Panjang, Berlayer Point and Mount Palmer on the mainland.

The decades around the turn of the century saw the militarisation of Blakang Mati intensify, and extensive infrastructure was installed to support the forts and batteries. Barracks and officer bungalows to house the troops, machine gun pillboxes and posts to protect the artillery and ammunition magazines were built. The soldiers trained at the rifle range and drilled on the parade ground, ate at the cookhouse and sought treatment at the military hospital, known colloquially as "Sick Quarters".

WORLD WAR I AND THE SEPOY MUTINY OF 1915

In February 1915, a number of sepoys from the 5th Bengal Light Infantry Regiment rose in rebellion against the colonial authorities. During what became known as the Sepoy Mutiny, the soldiers attacked European soldiers and civilians in Singapore, stormed Tanglin Barracks and freed German prisoners of war, including crew from the *Emden* warship. Fighting did not take place on Blakang Mati, although the HKSRA and the Singapore Volunteer Corps' (SVC) Maxim Machine Gun Section, training on the island at the time, were sent to combat the mutineers on the mainland.

Singapore was placed on military alert before the colonial authorities eventually put down the mutiny. The SVC artillerymen were mobilised for garrison duty at Blakang Mati's forts, while the SVC's Chinese Company,

including prominent lawyer Song Ong Siang, was also sent to the island. The Sultan of Johor too provided men and officers from the Johor Military Forces for duties on Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani.

Another local volunteer unit, the Singapore Field Ambulance Company, was in the process of taking over the running of Blakang Mati's military hospital from the Royal Army Medical Corps since the outbreak of World War I. During the mutiny, the hospital's capacity was expanded from 40 beds to a hundred, and received the wounded as it was judged to be a secure location. Among the doctors that likely treated casualties at the hospital during this time was Dr Charles Joseph Pemberton Paglar, who was then a non-commissioned officer of the Field Ambulance Company and later became a prominent leader of the Eurasian community.

To maintain morale and mental health, recreational facilities including bathing *pagars* (enclosed swimming areas in the sea) and pools, canteens, mess halls, sports grounds and a cinema were provided, though living quarters and most facilities were segregated by the British between "Asiatic" (or "Native") and European troops, as was the convention at the time.

One of the earliest military units to be based on Blakang Mati was the Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery (HKSRA). The unit was formed in 1841 in Hong Kong, and comprised soldiers recruited from Punjab in India. Renamed the Hong Kong Asiatic Artillery in 1891, the unit had a Singapore Company formed that same year and assigned to the coastal batteries on Blakang Mati. Another name change, this time to the Royal Garrison Artillery, followed in 1898, before a final change to the Hong Kong and Singapore Battalion Royal Garrison Artillery.

The Singapore Volunteer Artillery Corps (SVA), reformed in 1881 from an earlier European volunteer unit, also trained at Fort Connaught. A 16-strong group colloquially known as the "Blakan Mati squad" underwent artillery training courses on the island, and the corps' first officers and non-commissioned officers were selected from this group.

FORT SILOSO

Accessible via Fort Siloso Skywalk from Siloso Point
Visit go.gov.sg/fortsiloso for more information

Between 1878 and 1956, Fort Siloso stood guard over the western entrance to Keppel Harbour and the straits of Singapore. Built into the hill known as Mount Siloso, the fort encompasses an extensive complex of artillery emplacements, magazines, barracks and casemates. The site was laid out by Colonial Engineer Henry McCallum, who also oversaw the construction of the fort.

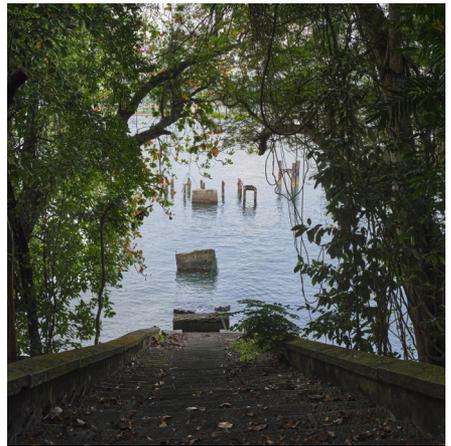
Across different eras, a Battery Command Post, a Fire Director Tower, and machine



Soldiers playing badminton at Fort Siloso, c. 1940-50s
 Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation



The Fire Director Tower at Fort Siloso, 2021
 Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Stairs leading to the remnants of the former Siloso Pier, 2021
 Courtesy of National Heritage Board

gun, searchlight and observation posts were constructed to monitor the straits and coordinate artillery fire from the emplaced guns. The fort's underground infrastructure housed magazines, tunnels and a powerhouse that provided electricity for the fort and submarine electro-contact and ground mines laid off the northern coast.

The construction of the fort was carried out by soldiers and locals, including Chinese coolies. With the fort being built at a time when roads had yet to be laid in the area, construction

material, guns and other equipment had to be brought in via the Siloso Pier and hauled up the hill using the parbuckling system. This was a labour-intensive, arduous system of sledges, wooden rollers, planks, ropes and blocks, as well as a tripod lifting device known as a gyn installed at the top of the hill.

During World War II with the Japanese invasion of Singapore, Fort Siloso and the other batteries on Blakang Mati were bombed by Japanese aircraft in January and February 1942, although they remained operational until the Fall of Singapore.

THE GUNS OF FORT SILOSO

The earliest gun emplacement at Siloso was an earthwork battery housing three 7-inch rifled muzzle loading (RML) guns and two 64-pounder RML guns. Within the span of several years however, the RML guns were seen as inadequate to deal with the threat of ironclads.

By 1890, the British War Office had agreed to replace all the RML guns with breech loading (BL) guns, which had a faster rate of fire and were more effective at penetrating the armour of ironclads. Other guns emplaced on Siloso included a 9.2-inch Mark IV BL gun and two 6-inch Mark II quick firing (QF) guns.

In the 1920-30s, Singapore's defences were reorganised to prepare for new potential military threats and to protect the newly constructed HM Naval Base at Sembawang, completed in 1938. By 1936, Fort Siloso had become part of the Faber (West) Fire Command and housed two new 6-inch Mark VII BL guns.

An anti-motor torpedo boat (AMTB) emplacement with a 12-pounder QF gun, named OSO Battery, was also installed to combat

fast-moving small vessels. Complementing these was a new Fire Director tower.

Upgraded searchlight posts, housing Coast Artillery Searchlights (CASLs) manned by British and Malay soldiers of the Royal Engineers, could illuminate the entrance to the harbour and track raiding craft. The searchlight posts on what is Tanjong Rimau beach remain visible today, although public access is restricted.

In 1950, the two remaining 6-inch BL guns that had survived the Japanese Occupation were replaced by two more modern 6-inch Mark XXIV BL guns, with its range-finding controlled by new radars installed on Mount Siloso and Mount Serapong.

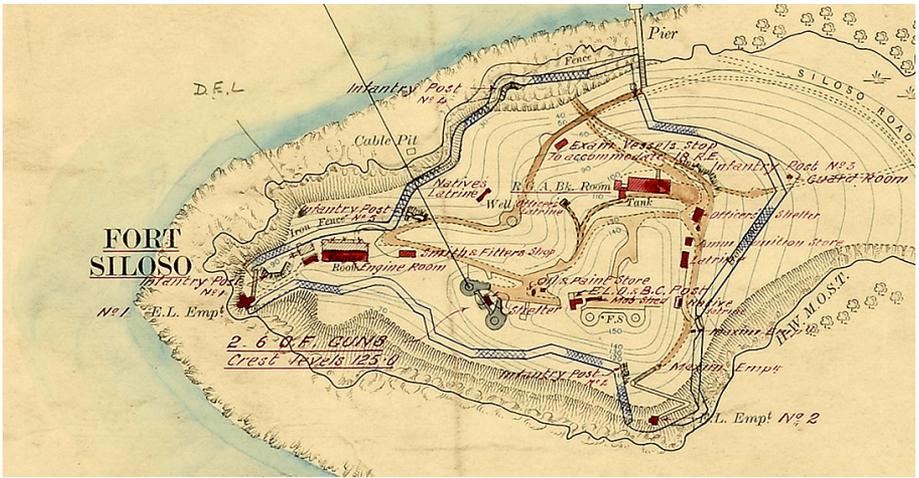
Today, a variety of guns are mounted for display at Fort Siloso, including two 9.2-inch BL guns salvaged from the Fort Connaught area, an 8-inch Mark VII BL gun from Fort Serapong and other guns excavated on the island. There are also replicas of 6-inch QF and 7-inch RML guns of the type formerly mounted at Siloso, as well as Malayan and Japanese artillery.

After the Japanese landed on Singapore's north coast on the night of 8 February and advanced towards the city, the Siloso guns were used to fire on enemy troops on West Coast Road and around the Jurong River. The Siloso battery also fired on and sank a vessel identified by Faber Fire Command as a Japanese target, as well as to disable the oil refineries of Pulau Bukom.

After a false report of a Japanese landing on Blakang Mati (see p. 31 for more on the incident), the guns of Siloso were destroyed at around 5am on 14 February with some 36 kilograms of explosives, in order to deny their use by the Japanese.

During the Japanese Occupation of 1942-1945, the Japanese military was apparently able to recover a 12-pounder quick firing (QF) gun and re-mount it at Siloso, despite a report by the British battery commander that the gun had been disposed of into the sea. The Japanese also recovered two 6-inch breech loading (BL) guns from batteries at Beting Kusah in Changi and Labrador, among others.

After the end of the war and the return of the British, the 1st Singapore Coast Battery, Royal Artillery (later renamed the 1st Malay Coast Battery, RA) was formed and trained to man the guns, and barracked at Siloso.



Detail from a map titled Singapore, Blakan Mati, depicting the various defense emplacements and guns at Fort Siloso, 1911
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



The former Fort Siloso monorail station, which now houses the Surrender Chambers exhibition, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

In 1956, the United Kingdom announced that it would end the use of fixed coastal defences, with the role of counter-bombardment being taken over by the Royal Navy. That year, Fort Siloso and other batteries on Blakan Mati were dismantled and rendered non-operational. Between 1957 and 1967, Gurkha detachments were barracked here and manned the fort, including during the period of military conflict known as Konfrontasi.

When Blakang Mati was redeveloped into the leisure island of Sentosa in 1972, Fort Siloso was converted into an attraction. A Gun Museum opened on 8 February 1975 with various guns mounted as displays, including



The reconstructed guardhouse at Fort Siloso, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Imbiah Battery, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

9.2-inch Mark IV BL gun barrels recovered from Fort Connaught, Japanese artillery, and naval guns found at the Istana, as well as replicas of the original Siloso guns. With the inception of the Sentosa Monorail in 1982, a monorail station was built near Fort Siloso's original 7-inch RML gun emplacements and the main road entrance to the fort.

For some three years from 1989, a reconstructed guardhouse at Fort Siloso was home to Chia Thye Poh, a former member of Singapore's Legislative Assembly. Chia was arrested under the Internal Security Act in 1966 and detained until 1989. That year, he was released from detention and confined to live and work on Sentosa, before the restrictions were gradually lifted in 1992.

Renovation works were carried out at Fort Siloso in the mid-1990s to accommodate multimedia displays and improve visitor access. After the monorail was replaced by the Sentosa Express light rail in 2007, the station was adapted to house the Surrender

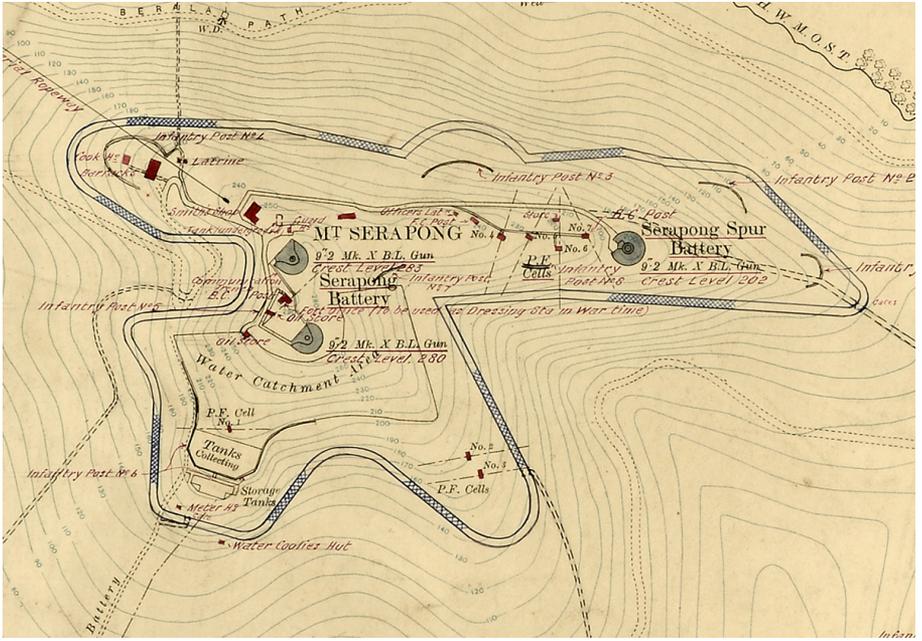
Chambers exhibition. The fort also includes a military museum showcasing memorabilia including artworks by former prisoners of war, as well as narratives, dioramas and film documentaries that present various aspects of World War II and life during wartime.

On 15 February 2022, 11 structures at Fort Siloso were collectively gazetted as a National Monument, including the Battery Command Post, underground magazines, casemates and four gun emplacements.

IMBIAH BATTERY

Accessible via Imbiah Hill Road and Mount Imbiah Nature Trail

The first defence development on the 61-metre-high Mount Imbiah was an infantry redoubt completed in 1890. A type of defensive emplacement or enclosure, redoubts protected the batteries on Blakang Mati and were used by troops tasked to defend against enemy landing forces. The Imbiah redoubt was initially manned by 82 infantry



Detail from a map titled Singapore, Blakan Mati, showing the various defense emplacements on Mount Serapong, 1911
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection

soldiers of the Northampton Regiment and 19 gunners for the two 9-pounder RML cannons, with the complement rising to 149 soldiers within a year.

After a 1906 armament review, a new battery with a 9.2-inch Mark X BL gun, along with fire control and targeting instrumentation of Position Finding (PF) cells and a Depression Range Finder (DRF) were approved for Mount Imbiah. Imbiah Battery was operational by 1912 and Fire Control West, which directed the fire of the Imbiah and Siloso batteries, was based here.

In the 1920s, Mount Imbiah also included a Battery Command Post, infantry posts encircling the summit, a magazine, a smith and stores, a bungalow that housed on-duty soldiers, as well as a camping ground and cookhouse on its western slope. In 1936, Fort Connaught was upgraded and rearmed with longer range guns, which rendered the 9.2-inch gun at Imbiah obsolete. Imbiah Battery was subsequently decommissioned.

Mount Imbiah then became an assembly point for troops and later a reserve magazine, before being abandoned after World War II. After the development of Sentosa, the infrastructure of Imbiah Battery was restored, with the 9.2-inch gun battery the last of its kind left standing in Singapore. A bird-watching tower was also added as an attraction.

FORT SERAPONG

Visit go.gov.sg/sentosanature for more information

From the early 19th century, the hills of Siloso and Serapong, standing watch over the western and eastern approaches to Singapore respectively, had been identified as suitable sites for military fortifications. Mount Serapong was also the highest point on Blakang Mati, reaching 92 metres at its summit.

An infantry redoubt thought to have been completed in the early 1880s was the first defensive work here. While the construction of the Siloso battery involved hired labourers, the Serapong redoubt was built by Indian convicts,



Gunners firing the Mark X 9.2-inch breech loading gun at Fort Serapong, c. 1930s
 Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation



The view from Mount Serapong towards mainland Singapore, 1955
 Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation



Former casemates at Fort Serapong, 2021
 Courtesy of National Heritage Board



A former Battery Observation Post at Fort Serapong, 2021
 Courtesy of National Heritage Board

who had worked on numerous other public projects in 19th century Singapore. In the early 1880s, the British War Office approved a new battery on Serapong, which became operational in 1887. During that period, the troops stationed at Serapong included 32 men and two officers of the Royal Artillery, 27 gunners from the Asiatic Artillery and 26 infantry soldiers.

The battery housed two 8-inch Mark VII BL Armstrong guns of English make, which the colony of Singapore purchased from the Chinese government in May 1885. The 19th century 8-inch Mark VII BL guns are considered uncommon today, with one of the original Serapong guns now mounted at Fort Siloso.

In 1908, the 8-inch gun emplacement was demolished and the battery rebuilt to house two Mark X 9.2-inch BL guns, with major reconstruction affecting earlier stores, magazines and casemates. The 9.2-inch battery was operational by 1910, as was another battery located to its east, named Serapong Spur Battery and armed with another Mark X 9.2-inch BL gun.

While Serapong Battery was decommissioned in the 1930s after the upgrading of armament at Fort Connaught, Serapong Spur Battery was modified to house two Mark VII 6-inch BL guns in 1935. A Battery Observation Post for Fort Connaught was also built on Mount Serapong in 1938.

During World War II, Serapong Spur Battery was bombed by the Japanese in January 1942 and one of its 6-inch guns was damaged. The battery was manned at the time by gunners of the Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery, but its war diaries did not record any firing on Japanese targets, unlike the batteries of Siloso and Connaught. Over the last two days before capitulating to the Japanese on 15 February, British engineers destroyed the battery and its guns.

In 1946, after World War II and the return of the British, Keppel Fire Command was based

at Mount Serapong. This Fire Command controlled the battery of Fort Siloso and guns at Batu Berlayar and Berhala Reping, and a fire control radar was also installed on the hill. A four-gun 25-pounder Saluting Battery, used for ceremonial gun salutes, was also built over the former No. 2 Gun emplacement in 1950.

Like the other batteries on Blakang Mati, Serapong's guns became non-operational after the British military ended its use of fixed coastal artillery defences in 1956. The final instance of military use of Mount Serapong occurred in the 1960s during the military conflict of Konfrontasi, when two mobile radar stations were installed here.

FORT CONNAUGHT

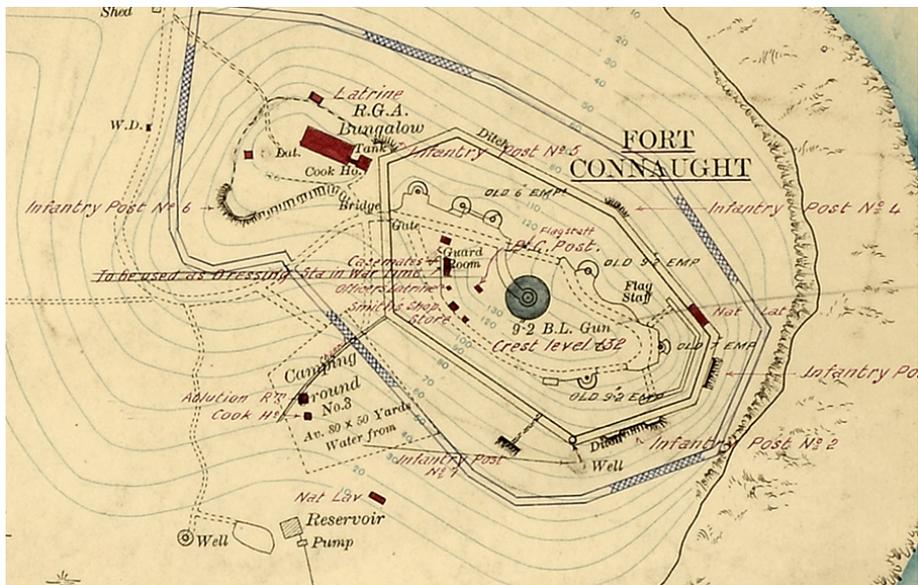
Remnants of the fort are sited within Sentosa Golf Club and not open for public access

Established as Blakang Mati East Battery in 1878, Fort Connaught guarded the eastern entrance to Keppel Harbour and the surrounding straits. Built on an unnamed hill to the south-east of Mount Serapong, the battery was renamed Fort Connaught after a visit by Prince Arthur, the Duke of Connaught in 1890.

The first battery constructed at this site was an open earthwork battery, and housed three Mark I 7-inch RML guns and two 64-pounder RML guns. By 1886, the latter two guns had been replaced by two Mark IV 9.2-inch guns mounted *en barbette*, while two Mark II 6-inch QF guns were added in the 1890s before being removed in 1907. By 1913, after a number of changes, a Mark X 9.2-inch BL gun added three years earlier was the sole gun remaining at Fort Connaught.

As part of the 1930s rearmament of Singapore's forts and batteries to meet the threats of the era, Fort Connaught was rebuilt and its battery came to house three Mark X 9.2-inch BL guns. The new guns had better range than existing guns at Mount Imbiah and Mount Serapong, and had rendered those batteries obsolete.

During World War II, Fort Connaught was manned by the 7th Coast Regiment, Royal



Detail from a map titled Singapore, Blakan Mati, showing Fort Connaught, 1911
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection



The battery observation post at Fort Connaught, undated
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

Artillery. The fort was bombed by Japanese aircraft in January 1942, with a number of soldiers killed and a gun having to be replaced, but the battery was able to play its part in the British defence of Singapore.

In February, the Connaught guns fired on invading Japanese troops at the villages of Jurong and Ulu Pandan, along Bukit Timah Road, Jurong Road and targets in Pasir Panjang, as well as bombarded the Tengah aerodrome where Japanese units were forming up.

Much of the artillery fire from Connaught consisted of heavy armour-piercing shells

designed to hit warships, and the high explosive ammunition that would have been effective against troop targets was in very limited supply. Still, Connaught was one of the most active batteries during the Japanese invasion and the sustained firing caused a breakdown of the magazine lifts, leaving the exhausted gunners to manually move shells weighing 172kg each up from underground bunkers. All of Fort Connaught's ammunition was expended within two days.

The war diary for Fort Connaught records that the battery was destroyed by British engineers at around 7.30am on 14 February, to prevent its capture. Soldiers from the other forts and batteries on Blakang Mati, as well as troops from other positions that had sought refuge on the island, then regrouped at Fort Connaught.

After World War II, Fort Connaught was retired from service. The development of the Tanjong course of Sentosa Golf Club demolished a number of the fort's structures, although the emplacement for the No. 3 gun and its magazine remain standing.



A view of Berhala Reping from Pulau Blakang Mati, 1947
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

BERHALA REPING

Berhala Reping is located within Sentosa Golf Club and not open for public access

Berhala Reping was an islet located off the north-eastern coast of Pulau Blakang Mati. After the development of Sentosa in the 1970s, the islet and the adjacent area of Buran Darat were reclaimed and are today part of the Sentosa Golf Club and Sentosa Cove respectively.

Historically, Berhala Reping has also been known as Berhala Keping, Tanjong Berhala or Gun Island. The Malay word *berhala* can also be understood as “toward the direction of”, and Berhala Reping may have been a navigational landmark indicating a safe entrance into the reef-strewn, potentially dangerous Sengkir Strait for local sailors. The word *berhala* also refers to an idol, but the area is not thought to have any religious significance for the Orang Laut or other communities.

As part of the British defence scheme, a 6-pounder QF gun and a machine gun had



The concrete bridge leading to the islet of Berhala Reping, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

been mounted at a battery on Berhala Reping by 1892, to guard the Sengkir Strait and the east entrance to Keppel Harbour. The 6-pounder gun was removed by 1910, and later replaced by two 12-pounder QF guns. In 1937, the 12-pounders were moved and two 6-pounder anti-motor torpedo boat (AMTB) guns, designed to repel fast raiding craft, were emplaced there.

The guns of Berhala Reping were demolished by British forces during the Japanese invasion of Singapore. After World War II, the battery was rearmed and was operational until the phasing out of fixed coastal defences in 1956.

BARRACKS AND QUARTERS

After the forts and batteries on the island had been constructed in the 1870s and 1880s, preparations were made for the housing of the gunners, infantry soldiers and other military personnel. These units included what the British termed “Asiatic Artillery” (gunners recruited from India) and British soldiers of the Royal Artillery. Before the barracks and quarters were built in the 1890s, the troops lived in temporary quarters of attap and timber houses, or in tents.

Most of the island’s barracks and quarters were located in an area between the former military hospital and Mount Serapong. After World War II, a number of bungalows near the former military hospital were also used as accommodation for officers. These included the bungalow at 6 Imbiah Road, which was later redeveloped into a restaurant. There were also smaller scale accommodations at the forts, including Fort Siloso and Imbiah Battery.

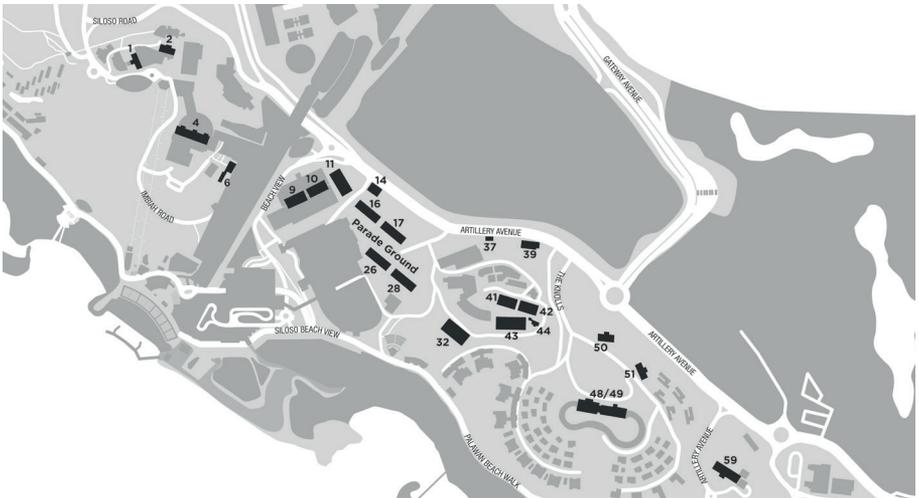
Today, the area where most of the former barracks are located is roughly bounded by Imbiah Road in the east and Woolwich Road in the west.

SOLDIERS BLOCKS AND MARRIED SOLDIERS QUARTERS

Blocks 26 and 28 are now part of The Barracks Hotel. Blocks 16 and 17 have been repurposed for retail and dining at The Mess Hall. Blocks 32, 41-44 are now part of Amara Sanctuary Resort.

Among the oldest buildings in Sentosa are the former barracks along what is today Gunner Lane and Larkhill Road. In maps dating to the 1890s, these blocks appear as Soldiers Blocks and Married Soldiers Quarters, accommodating the non-officer ranks.

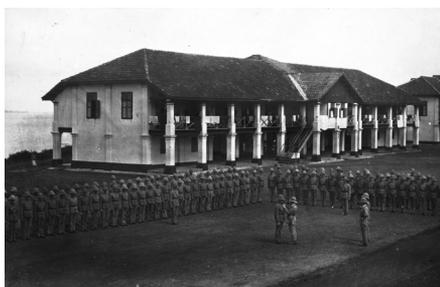
Constructed of brick with tiled roofs, the barracks had offices and dining halls, stores and armouries on the ground floor. The barrack



A map showing the conserved barracks and the parade ground for the troops stationed on Blakang Mati, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Block 16 of the soldiers' barracks, which today houses The Mess Hall, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



A military parade by the Royal Garrison Artillery at the parade ground, with block 28 in the background, 1918
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Block 43, formerly quarters for married soldiers, is now part of Amara Sanctuary Resort, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

rooms were in the upper floors, and soldiers could also visit tailor and shoemaker shops, bakeries, as well as reading and recreation rooms that were housed in the building. Dotted around the barracks were cookhouses and lodgings for the waiters and servers that serviced the troops. Sandwiched between the Soldiers Blocks was Blakang Mati's parade ground, where military parades and inspections, ceremonies for awards and commendations, and other assemblies were held.

Blocks 41 and 42 are located along a road formerly known as Bird Cage Walk, which has since been expunged from modern maps. These two blocks consisted of interconnected two-storey terrace houses with columned verandahs and courtyards, with six units in each block. An underground air-raid shelter is also located nearby.

After the development of the island into a leisure destination, the barracks were restored

and adapted into holiday chalets and later into hotels, restaurants and shops, and the parade ground is today known as the Barracks Lawn. The buildings were accorded Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) conservation status in 2004 and are among 16 buildings within the Sentosa Conservation Area.

FORMER OFFICERS' MESS AND QUARTERS

Blocks 48-51 are now part of Capella Singapore

The Ironside Conservation Area is located on a hill bounded by what is today Ironside Road and Palawan Street. Four buildings here were given conservation status in 2000 in respect of their long history as the former Officers' Mess and Quarters, with the site having been designated for officer accommodations from the 1890s. Blocks 48 and 49, which today form the sweeping facade of a hotel development, housed the mess and quarters for unmarried officers.



Blocks 48 and 49 now form the façade of Capella Singapore, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



The back façade of blocks 48 and 49, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Block 50 which served as the residence for more senior officers, 1991
Courtesy of Urban Redevelopment Authority

These two blocks feature wide, airy verandahs, onto which the parties and celebrations held by officers often spilled into. Donald McDonald, who was an officer with the 1st Singapore Regiment Royal Artillery in the 1950s, lived in the Officers' Mess, which he recalled as being "luxurious". He also remembered:

"Every so often, we would have Regimental Dinner Nights in uniform evening dress complete with punkah wallahs (pulley fan operators). In 1954, we had a farewell dinner for the General Officer Commanding (GOC) Singapore Base District, Major-General O'Carroll Smith, and hauled him at 2am in a Land Rover to the jetty."

Richard Williams, who grew up on Blakang Mati in the 1950s, recollected:

"On the weekends, there would always be a curry lunch at the Officers' beach club and people would go swimming or water skiing. In the evening, at the Officers' Mess, there was always an outdoor movie (screening) at the (lawn at the) circular driveway. The Queen's birthday was always celebrated, it was always the event of the mess. Everyone would put on dinner jackets and go there to have drinks and dance."

An urban legend has it that the regimental silver and other silverware of the Officers Mess was buried in the front lawn before



Blocks 9 and 10, which are now part of Oasia Resort Sentosa, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, passing by the former barrack blocks 9 and 10 during his visit to Blakang Mati, 1959
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore



Block 59, which today houses So Spa, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

the Fall of Singapore in 1942, leading later inhabitants of the island to search unsuccessfully for the silver.

To the north of the mess were blocks 50 and 51, two manor-like bungalows. They were labelled Field Officers Quarters in a 1911 map, and were reserved for more senior officers. The Married Officers Quarters were located to the south of the mess, while the Native Officers Quarters and the Asiatic Soldiers Block were to its west. Sporting and recreation facilities including tennis and racquet courts were also built on the hill.

FORMER RECREATION GROUND AND BARRACKS

Blocks 9 and 10 are now part of Oasia Resort Sentosa
Block 11 is now part of The Village Hotel Sentosa

Another three former barrack blocks, located to the west of the parade ground and along what is today Beach View, were built in the 1930s and 1940s. These blocks stood on a former recreation ground for soldiers

before the barracks were constructed. The development of Sentosa saw block 11 adapted into the Rare Stone Museum from 1985 to 1995, while blocks 9 and 10 became part of a hotel.

BLOCK 59 (ASIATIC SOLDIERS BLOCK)

Block 59 was one of the barracks designated for “Asiatic” soldiers. In the British military parlance of the time, “Asiatic” or “Native” soldiers referred to troops recruited from the Indian subcontinent. This block is thought to have been built in the early 1900s, and was located near the Native Officers block, a guard room and gun shed, as well as a bathing pool.

After the development of Sentosa as a leisure island, the building was used as a recreational centre for the former Beaufort Hotel. Given conservation status by the URA in 2004, block 59 was restored and is today a spa. The building’s notable features include distinctive cross-shaped motifs along its balustrades.



Block 69, Australia House, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

BLOCK 69 (AUSTRALIA HOUSE), THE FORMER ROYAL ENGINEERS' YARD AND POWER STATION

Block 69 is thought to have been constructed in the 1930s and 1940s, and was used as prisoner of war barracks during the Japanese Occupation. Among the prisoners, block 69 was known as Australia House, while another nearby, block 67, was called English House. In 1977, the three-storey block 69 and nearby quarters were redeveloped into Apollo Hotel, the first hotel on Sentosa. The quarters were used as chalets after the hotel's closure in 1986, before the site was redeveloped into Beaufort Hotel in 1988.

Block 69 also housed Sentosa Development Corporation's (SDC) corporate office from 1977 to 2014, before it was leased out as EtonHouse International School Sentosa.

The former Royal Engineers' Yard and the Power Station (blocks 37 and 39 respectively) are located along Artillery Avenue. The Royal Engineers were based on neighbouring Pulau Brani, but a small contingent here supported engineering and development works with its workshop, shed and stores. The building, thought to have been built in 1895, was later used as a station for SDC's rangers. The former Power Station, constructed in the 1920s, was first used as a cement store before being converted to house generators and other electrical infrastructure.

A SOLDIER'S LIFE ON BLAKANG MATI

Life on Blakang Mati, even within the regimented routines of British and Indian soldiers stationed there since the 1870s, could appear the very picture of island idyll. However, in reality, life on their island home was characterised by carefully observed hierarchies and divisions of class, ethnicity and military rank.

One of the most obvious cleavages was that of ethnicity, mirroring the practices of colonial administration. The Indian soldiers of the Hong Kong and Singapore Royal Artillery, commanded only by British officers, had segregated quarters, were paid less and were obliged to find their recreation in different places.

Perhaps the only place on Blakang Mati where the Indian or the kampong civilian could meet the European as an equal was on the recreation ground, as one British veteran recalled:

"Sport was... (the) main preoccupation which all ranks shared a common interest. Inter-unit competition with the Indian batteries for hockey and athletics was fiercely contested, with the Indians always winning the hockey tournaments and tug of war. ... (After tea) native boys from the village would be waiting for us to come out... to play football with them on some unused area of the lower padang ('field' in Malay)."

Outside that sporting arena, social distancing between ethnicities and ranks ruled the day, with segregation of "Asiatics" or "Natives" and Europeans, and then further between ranks. The European soldiers of non-officer ranks who had families living with them on Blakang Mati were further constricted by their relative lack of disposable income, with another veteran stating:

"...the isolation the married experienced is (explained by) their financial positions. The Singapore Europeans consisted of commercial people and the administration staff of the Straits Settlements government, and they were millionaires compared to a soldier's family. (The



Royal Artillery personnel in their barracks on Blakang Mati, 1941
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

wealthy in Singapore) living in a large bungalow could entertain his friends royally with the help of his native servants, frequent Raffles Hotel and no doubt be a member of the Yacht, Golf and Racing clubs. This then would be a community into which the British military families could never encroach."

However, even the non-officer ranks could rely on an army of domestic helpers. The *dhoby* (a community of mainly Indian laundry workers) could have uniforms washed and ironed in less than eight hours, while each barrack room enjoyed the services of Indian workers who cleaned and polished brass equipment, boots, bandoliers, rifle slings and lanyards for an affordable 50 pence per week from each soldier.

At meals, Chinese cooks served up their best renditions of Western cuisine, while waiters were on call. A former British soldier remembered:

"One sat at a table in the dining room with your friends and the Chinese waiter would bring you the food, also your own knife, fork and spoon, which he kept clean for you for a few cents a week.

"(The food was)... extremely well cooked by the Chinese staff, under the supervision of the mess sergeant. It certainly became monotonous after a time, which was inevitable... with rice included in



A Royal Garrison Artillery sports meet at Blakang Mati, 1918
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

most of the dishes. I well remember the cry 'What, Chinese wedding cake again'. I do remember that we had a good cooked breakfast - egg, bacon, sausage and tomato - and a plum duff... was often served up as a sweet. The evening meal, between 5.30 and 7pm was the one we enjoyed the most and all in all we were fed very well."

Outside of military duties, which consisted of arms and physical drills, training and manning on the guns and other defences, the troops kept themselves entertained through sports, observing the shipping pass through the straits or swimming in the pools and bathing pagars, or watching the 16mm film shows screened above the canteen. They often paid visits to the village shop, which was owned in the pre-WWII years by a person known as Pasha and offered the comforts of home. A veteran recalled:



A soldier's family members buying silk from a merchant known as Silk John on Blakang Mati, c. 1930s
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation



A swimming pagar ("fence" in Malay) on Blakang Mati, c. 1930s
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation



A local barber at Blakang Mati, undated
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

"One of the focal points of the island was Pasha's store in the centre of the native village (located near the main landing point on Blakang Mati). Here, European goods could be purchased, (such as) Australian butter and tinned milk, coffee, tea, sweets... plus local fruit and vegetables. Pasha allowed credit, which increased his trade, and people were known to leave without paying!"

Soldiers who were married generally did not join their colleagues in the cookhouses or messes for meals, eating with their families in their own quarters after collecting army-issued rations of meat, bread, sugar and tea. Their children, of whom numbered around 40 in the pre-war years, attended classes held by a teacher who travelled from Pulau Brani each day, and their school building was turned into a church every Sunday. Students also travelled from Brani to join their counterparts on Blakang Mati, including Lynne Copping, who recalled: "I lived on Pulau Brani in 1958 as an eight-year-old, and travelled by army ferry to

Blakang Mati and then army truck to the little British army primary school."

For a ten-cent to twenty-cent sampan ride to the mainland, soldiers could seek the bright lights of the city. The single men often landed on the comforting arm of a cabaret hostess colloquially known as a "taxi dancer", with whom a soldier could dance with after buying tickets at any of the three "Worlds" amusement parks.

A more family-oriented place was the Union Jack Club on North Bridge Road which had solid British fare on offer, without the dancing girls. The soldiers also ate at steak cafes around the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus or at Chinese restaurants, or caught movies at the Cathay cinema. After a weekend in town, the British soldier was expected to return to Blakang Mati in the same smart turnout in which he had left; drunk or bedraggled men could expect a short stay in the guardroom lockup.

Despite their weekend pleasures however, the isolation of most European soldiers from the wider society of Singapore meant that their Blakang Mati stints could be alienating experiences. As one veteran said:

"The twenty months I spent on Blakang Mati were the most sterile period of my army service... I never spoke to a European female the whole time and, like a large number of my friends we were just waiting for the troopship to transport us back to England."

WORLD WAR II AND THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

FIRE, FURY AND CONFUSION: THE LAST DAYS OF BLAKANG MATI BEFORE THE FALL

As World War II reached Southeast Asia in late 1941, the Japanese military landed at Kota Bahru, Kelantan on 8 December and steadily moved through Malaya as Allied forces retreated south through December and January.

Proving that the Blakang Mati guns were seen as a threat, the Japanese carried out bombing raids on the island in January and February 1942. On 18 January, an estimated 100 bombs fell on Blakang Mati, bringing about a reported 17 casualties, damage to the reserve gun at Fort Connaught and to a 6-inch gun at Serapong Spur, as well as to the reservoir at Serapong.

Having landed on Singapore's north-western coast in the night between 8 and 9 February, the Japanese invasion force was met by Allied defenders and artillery fire from the Changi Fire Command. However, the southern guns of Faber Fire Command were held back from firing landward until 11 February in anticipation of a naval assault, which did not materialise. By then, the Allied defensive line was in disarray.

From midday, the batteries of Fort Siloso and Labrador on the mainland began firing at enemy targets on West Coast Road and Jurong River. Over the next three days, the Siloso battery also destroyed oil installations and tanks on Pulau Bukom and Pulau Sebarok to deny the Japanese their use, bringing about fires that burned for days and ominous black clouds of smoke.



A replica of a 6-inch Mark VII BL gun at Fort Siloso, which was used in the defence of Singapore during the Japanese invasion, 2021

Courtesy of National Heritage Board



A map showing the firing range of the guns on Blakang Mati, 1907
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection

THE MYTH OF THE GUNS POINTING THE WRONG WAY

In the decades in the wake of World War II, journalists and writers, soldiers and military volunteers as well as others sought to explain the Fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942. A common explanation offered was that the guns of Singapore, including those on Blakang Mati, were “pointing the wrong way”, leading to the ultimately doomed British defence of Singapore.

The claim went that the much-touted guns of what was commonly called “Fortress Singapore” were virtually useless as they could not be turned to fire on Japanese forces advancing from the north. While it was true that the guns of Blakang Mati, Pasir Panjang, Mount Faber and Pulau Brani were largely ineffective against targets in the north, a number of academics and analysts have since made the case that this interpretation may be

overly simplistic. In this reading, the Fall of Singapore rested on a more complex, layered set of strategic failures, and did not pivot on the coastal artillery system alone.

One rebuttal to the “wrong way” claim has been that the majority of the Blakang Mati guns could be traversed to fire either landward into the north or seaward. These included a pair of 6-inch guns each at Fort Siloso and Serapong Spur, and three 9.2-inch guns at Connaught Battery. These guns had been upgraded in the 1930s when the British reorganised Singapore’s coastal defences as part of the Fortress Singapore system.

At the outbreak of war, Blakang Mati had the largest concentration of artillery within the Faber Fire Command, which it was a part of. The erection of Fortress Singapore may have inspired undue hubris in some quarters however, with *The Times* newspaper declaring

in 1938 that: *“The defences of Singapore have... been rendered as nearly impregnable as modern military science can approach.”*

A combination of factors ultimately led to the guns being ineffective against the Japanese advance, including the lack of suitable ammunition (the batteries were supplied mainly with armour-piercing

shells, which were designed to hit warships and inadequate against land forces) and a strategic decision to hold the guns of Faber Command in preparation for any naval attack. Ultimately, the claim of the “wrong way” guns is a complicated tale; its endurance as a myth may lie with how it aptly symbolised British failures, rather than its full veracity.

Hours later, the guns of Fort Connaught were turned from their seaward bearing and fired on targets in the centre, west and north of Singapore. That night, Connaught Battery concentrated its fire on Tengah Airfield, where the Japanese had captured and established their forward headquarters.

Over two furious days of firing, Connaught Battery depleted most of its ammunition. Its guns hit Japanese targets in Jurong, Ulu Pandan and Bukit Timah, and may well have struck the southern end of Johor, which the commander of Faber Command reported firing at. Much of their ammunition was of the armour-piercing variety as well as a precious but extremely limited supply of high explosive (HE) shells. In an account, Japanese officer Tsuji Masanobu described his experience of being at the end of shelling from Connaught Battery:

“When we reached the south-eastern extremity of Tengah aerodrome, we found that bombs or heavy-calibre shells were blowing large holes in the roadway... Abandoning the car, the orderly and I continued on foot... Just at that moment there was a shell-burst which shocked our eardrums, while the blast jarred our spines. The flash seared my eyes, and I was thrown into the roadside ditch. In my agitation I thrust myself into an earthenware drainage pipe.

“The heavy shelling continued... Up to this moment I had no experience of such heavy projectiles, which tore holes in the ground fifteen or sixteen metres in diameter and four- or five-

metres deep. They were probably the... fortress guns which had been swung round 180 degrees to fire over the land instead of over the water out to sea... Crouching like a crab inside the earthen pipe, I imagined what would happen if a shell fell on me.”

The armour-piercing shells, which the Japanese described as “petrol drums”, failed to deal as much damage as the HE shells however. Another Japanese account, this time from historian Saito Yoshiki, described the impact of artillery fire on Japanese troops near the reservoirs in the heart of Singapore:

“Under bombardment we had no chance of leaving our foxholes. Often the enemy’s shells hit the water sending up huge columns of spray. Huge limbs from the rubber trees were blasted into the air. Shells like petrol drums with their baleful whine and their fragments fell among us. When that happened the walls of our foxholes caved in.”

On 13 February, the batteries at Labrador and Berlayer had been blown up to prevent their capture and use by the Japanese. Crossing the narrow strait via *tongkang* (light vessels), infantry and gunners from these batteries landed at Siloso Pier, while a number of Indian and Australian troops who had been dispersed after battles throughout the island also retreated to Blakang Mati. Their movements were mistaken for Japanese landings, with the view from the island’s observation posts obscured by clouds of black smoke from burning oil tanks.

The false reports of Japanese landings set in train the eventual spiking of the batteries and their ammunition magazines; Fort Siloso was the first to go in a controlled demolition at 5am on 14 February, and the Connaught battery followed some two hours later. Some of the gunners reorganised into infantry sections and dug in around the hills in Blakang Mati's east for a final defence.

Others decided that the British cause was as good as lost; after being instructed to destroy their own artillery, a number of Indian gunners removed their uniforms and told their officers that the British Raj (Empire) was in its last days and that further resistance was useless.

As the Japanese military steadily approached Singapore from December 1941, the normally placid days of routine and idyll on Blakang Mati quickly turned into a time of fear. Refugees, including injured soldiers who had met the Japanese in battle in Malaya, landed on the island, bringing news of British defeats and a sense of foreboding. Most peacetime lines of communication with Singapore were curtailed and the troops had to sift through fragments of information to learn about happenings on the frontline, which drew ever closer.

The recollections of Chelliah Thurairajah Retnam, a hospital attendant with the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) stationed on the island, depicted the anxiety and confusion of those on Blakang Mati before Singapore fell on 15 February 1942:

"...originally, there were only gunners, Royal Artillery... but towards January, Blakang Mati was flooded with people who were retreating... (the island) was full of troops, tents all over the place. The evacuees were there, (including) the Volunteer Corps—Melaka boys, Penang boys—were there.

"All of them seemed to be sort of demoralised because they had actually seen the fighting down there, which we (hadn't)... And their movement was also fast. They were here one day, (the next) they were not there. I believe some of the boats

came along and picked them up... some found their own way out.

"(In January and February) I think buildings were burning in Singapore. We don't know where it was burning... there were no (newspapers). Some of the boys used to go across to Singapore and come back with all sorts of news."

On 5 February, Retnam was part of a RAMC effort to rescue casualties from the *Empress of Asia*, a ship carrying troops and vital military equipment which had been attacked by Japanese dive bombers near Sultan Shoal. He recalled:

"I got the (order to) 'take your boat Florence Nightingale (an ambulance tongkang), go pick up casualties'. We found the Empress of Asia burning, and the whole day was spent picking up casualties. We were under heavy machine gun (fire from Japanese planes). All we can (hear) on the seas (was) 'chu chu chu' like that. We could not see them, we dare not look at them.

"(At first) we dared not go near because the Japanese were still attacking at the early stage. But the fellows (from the Empress) have jumped into the sea... we picked up the casualties from the sea. We were carrying the usual red flag (indicating a medical operation)... There were a lot of boats, (the sea was) littered with boats from Singapore."

After the spiking of the batteries on 13 and 14 February, the RAMC was ordered to evacuate the island. Some had already taken evasive action earlier, while Retnam also took part in the disposal of military equipment, weapons and other items in anticipation of the Japanese arrival:

"...most of my stretcher bearers and wagon orderlies, they told me they are not going to stay anymore because (if) the Japanese catch them, (there would be consequences), because they were Chinese. They disappeared into Singapore. They got these small boats from these Malay boys.

"... on the 13th, my captain... received a message to destroy all the things inside there. Take the guns and throw into Serapong Pier. You will find a lot of revolvers there. We buried a lot of things.



An aerial photograph of prisoners of war camps (bottom left) on Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani, 1945
The National Archives, United Kingdom Collection

We buried some (bottles of) whiskey in the air raid shelters. And we were told to evacuate and go across to Pulau Brani."

SYONAN-TO AND KASHIMA

As the Japanese Occupation dawned on 15 February 1942, the people of Singapore had to navigate a new, unpredictable and often violent reality. Weary and wounded, Allied soldiers were now prisoners of war (POWs). Even the names of places took on unfamiliar tones; by edict, Singapore was renamed Syonan-to ("Light of the South Island" in Japanese) while Pulau Blakang Mati had become Kashima ("Deer" in Japanese) Island.

As on the mainland, life on Blakang Mati underwent a reordering. In peacetime, the gunners and other soldiers previously

garrisoned on the island had been segregated along the lines of rank, class and ethnicity. During the Occupation, they were separated once more, with the British and Australian POWs sent to Changi and other internment camps, while the Indians were pressured to join the Indian National Army or be interned elsewhere.

One of the internment camps for Western POWs was located on Blakang Mati; various sources have different estimates for the number of POWs on the island, ranging from 400 to 1,000. Joseph Cusselle, a gunner with the 11th Battery, 7th Coast Artillery, recalled the feeling on the ground:

"So here we were: prisoners of war. It was a very strange feeling. We had not seen a Japanese

all through the war. We did not know what to expect next."

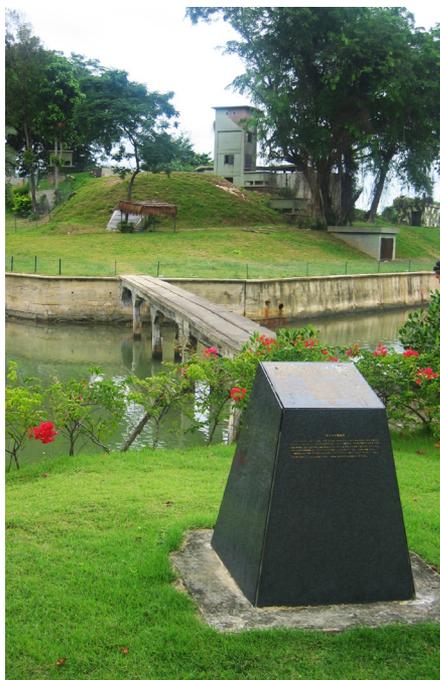
For those on Blakang Mati, a chilling demonstration of the Japanese military's authority quickly arrived. Days after the Fall of Singapore, Cusselle witnessed:

"...we were awakened one morning about 6.15am to the sound of machine gun fire. We looked across the water towards Tanjong Pagar. We saw a launch leaving the harbour and going out to sea. We then saw what appeared to be large bundles falling from the launch, then more machine gun fire. I saw splashes in the water. In the next three to four days, we soon found out what it was all about..."

"...there were bodies washed up on the beach of Blakang Mati. We had to bury these Chinese on the beach. They were all shot up and bloated, it was a nasty sight. We buried 45 to 50 bodies, maybe more. I will never forget those last few days on Berhala Reping."

Cusselle's account is corroborated by testimonies given by other Allied soldiers at post-Occupation war crimes trials, including one by Major A. C. Smith of the Federated Malay States (FMS) Volunteer Corps. Smith witnessed a number of people, their hands bound, pushed into the sea and executed with light automatic gunfire, adding that his fellow POWs later extricated an estimated 118 bodies from the sea and buried them. Most of these victims had been workers with the Singapore Harbour Board, as later war crimes trials testimony revealed. More than a decade after the end of the Occupation, in 1957, some 100 bones, including eight skulls, were found in a creek on Blakang Mati.

The people buried on Blakang Mati in early 1942 were killed as part of a Japanese military operation that became known as Sook Ching (a Chinese term meaning "purge") or Dai Kensho ("great inspection" in Japanese). The Sook Ching massacre claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Chinese in Singapore, and the full extent of the killings is not definitively known. There are thought to be several

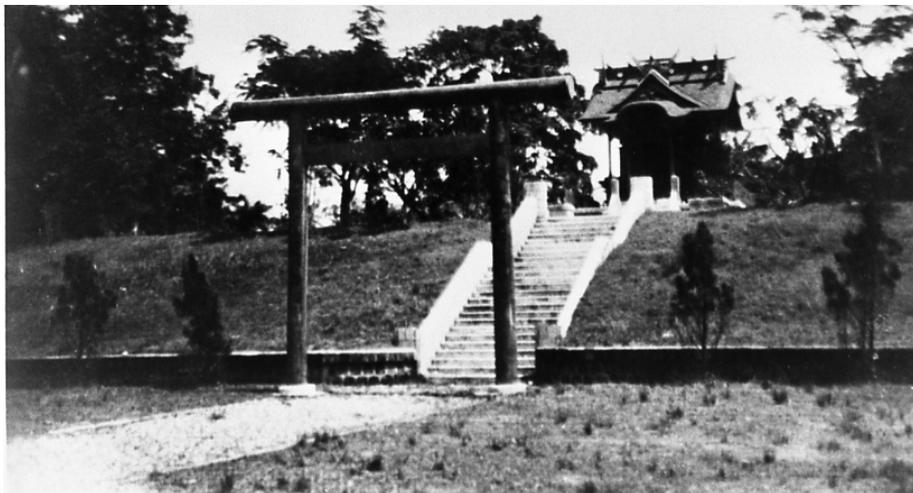


*A historic site marker was installed at Berhala Reping to remember the events of the Sook Ching massacre, 2004
Courtesy of National Heritage Board*

reasons behind the executions, including the Japanese military's desire to preemptively quell any potential resistance as well as reflecting Japanese aggression as an extension of the Sino-Japanese war.

As the POWs prepared for internment, the Japanese military took control of the island. Much of what is known about Blakang Mati during the Occupation comes from oral history accounts and post-war military documents. There were at least two Imperial Japanese Army units based on the island: the 20 Field Army Air Supply Depot and an artillery unit.

The former was also known as Miki Butai (roughly translated as Miki Unit in Japanese, as it was led by Colonel Kametaro Miki) or 9320 Butai, and handled bombs, petrol and oil for the Japanese airforce. The bombs and other military supplies were stored in the magazines of Blakang Mati.



Kashima Jinja, undated

Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

Kashima Jinja

In June 1943, a Shinto shrine was erected on Blakang Mati. This was Kashima Jinja, a Shinto shrine that was described in the *Syonan Shimbun* newspaper as a branch of the more widely-known Syonan Jinja in the MacRitchie area. Besides hosting Shinto rituals and ceremonies, Syonan Jinja was used as a propaganda tool and a representation of imperial Japanese authority and supremacy in Singapore as well as in the region. Kashima Jinja likely served a similar purpose.

Little is known of the structure's design or precise location. In the few surviving photographs of Kashima Jinja, what appears to be a *torii* gate can be seen, as well as what may be *chigi* (forked finials) and *katsuogi* (horizontal logs) detailing on the roof. A number of deer were allegedly imported from Java and relocated to Kashima Jinja, as the animals were held to be messengers of the *kami*, or deities in Shintoism. A former POW remembered raiding the food offerings left at the shrine to supplement his diet.

While local community leaders and the public were encouraged and at times coerced to attend ceremonies and offer prayers, including



Kashima Jinja being constructed, 1943

Image retrieved from *Greater East Asia War Magazine*, Volume 20

to the Japanese military's war dead, at Syonan Jinja, Kashima Jinja was open to the public only on the 8th of each month. For those seeking to pay homage at Kashima Jinja, a ferry service was available from Port Seizai, in the Keppel Harbour area.

Syonan Jinja was ritually deconsecrated and destroyed by Japanese soldiers in 1945 when it became apparent that the British were set to retake Singapore, and it is likely that a similar fate befell Kashima Jinja.

PRISONERS OF WAR ON BLAKANG MATI

There were up to an estimated 1,000 POWs on Blakang Mati, quartered mainly in two

barrack buildings and consisting of troops from the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), British Army and the FMS Volunteer Force. POW labour was used in the transport, handling and maintenance of bombs and aviation fuel, which constituted a violation of the Geneva Convention, as well as other tasks. Major D. T. Okey of the AIF, who was officer commanding of a POW working party, described the work in a post-war report:

"The work was continuous; at times very heavy, especially in 1942 and early 1943. It was required by day and night, even to the extent of loading ships continuously for five days and four nights, meals being carried out to men who worked in shifts of two hours on and four hours off, with no provision for ablution or hygiene.

"Other work consisted of small parties, some paid at specialist rates, of motor engineers, motor boat engineers, kitchen orderlies, mess orderlies, tailors, boot makers, electricians, cycle mechanics, men to work in kitchens and Japanese canteens, parties to dig slit trenches and machine gun pits and even men to assist in the manufacture paper and cloth."

POW officers in working parties were paid 25 cents per day, non-commissioned officers received between 15 and 60 cents daily while other ranks were paid between 10 and 40 cents per day, plus an additional five cents for specialist pay. The POWs also received monthly rations of rice, oil, sugar, salt, tea, dried fish, curry powder, pepper and soap distributed by the Allied forces, in addition to daily rations of meat, fish and vegetables supplied by the Japanese.

Okey noted that the meat, which initially included pork, beef and mutton, was replaced by dried fish from 1943, and that the food: "varied considerably in quantity but were generally sufficient to maintain good health". He added: "The quality of daily rations was sometimes poor, owing to the time factor in delivery and to the Japanese practice of extracting the best for their own use..."

Beatings by Japanese soldiers, or bashings as POW slang had it, were common, and in a notable incident, a private drowned off Pulau Bukom after being pushed off a barge by a Japanese sergeant. Okey's report detailed some of the mistreatments the POWs on Blakang Mati received, as well as his opinions of their causes:

"...Japanese soldiers, as compared with British and Australian soldiers, had different methods of administering discipline. The system within the Japanese Army is that any soldier of inferior rank could be ill-treated by another soldier of superior rank. As the POWs were regarded as inferior to the lowest grade of Japanese soldier, they were liable, at all times, to disciplinary action from all Japanese soldiers... It was a common occurrence for the Japanese soldier to lose complete control of himself when in charge of a working party which was not working as fast as he thought they should.

"Another cause of ill-treatment was the language difficulty... the Japanese soldier would issue instructions and orders in Japanese frequently at a rate far too rapid for the average man to understand. If his orders were not carried out promptly he flew into a rage. Numerous beatings with the fist, sticks, belts, shovels, posts, iron pipes and similar implements (ensued). (These beatings) were officially reported... and it is definitely known that the worst of these were dealt with (by the Japanese punishing their men). On one occasion only was a form of punishment that might be referred to as torture applied to any member of the working party. This consisted of lighting a fire underneath a man who was in the press-up position."

In another post-war account, Australian Paul Gemmill reflected on his time as a POW on the island. In the early years of the Occupation, POWs on the mainland regarded Blakang Mati as a dreaded assignment, as they had heard stories of the arduous workload. Gemmill opined however that there were better conditions for POWs on Blakang Mati, including a sanitary water and sewerage

network as well as a camp commandant who effectively advocated for their welfare. The main hardships came from physical punishment and a lack of meat and fish from 1944, as he recalled:

"Blakang Mati... was known as the ('Bashing spree old place'). No one (among the POWs on the mainland) wanted to go there. They hated it, because it was constant heavy work and with the Japanese guards among you all the time. A lot of my mates were sent there, and I volunteered to go with them. It turned out that (Blakang Mati) was the best place to be in the whole of the business. Despite the work and hardship, we only had two deaths on the island.

"I remember catching snails and (trying) to fry them in a bit of diesoline (a blend of diesel and gasoline). I had never been so ill (as a result). We were just desperate for protein. Towards the end of the war, the (American) B-29 bombers from Ceylon came over and bombed all the wharves and then they cut our rations. Our rice ration was reduced drastically but we still had to work. So it got a bit grim towards the end."

CIVILIAN LIFE DURING THE OCCUPATION

During the Japanese Occupation, there were at least two kampongs on Blakang Mati: a mainly-Chinese village on the coast facing Keppel Harbour and a predominantly-Malay village facing Pulau Selegu. Most were fishermen while some worked for the Japanese as interpreters, cooks, mechanics and in other jobs.

The Japanese military undertook measures to improve relations with the civilians, including engaging a former hospital surgical assistant to provide medical treatment. Alexander Henson, a former policeman and assistant at Woodbridge Hospital, arrived in 1943 and his small, 10-bed hospital served primarily the kampong residents who suffered from illnesses including malaria, tuberculosis and typhoid.

Okey described the morale among the POWs as being generally good, in part due to the efforts of an English member of the FMS Volunteer Force. Sergeant Thomas A. Dineen had been a radio hobbyist before the war, and worked for the General Electric company. Interned at Blakang Mati, Dineen built and operated a radio receiving set in his quarters from 1943. Tuning in to broadcasts from the United States and the United Kingdom, Dineen disseminated news of Allied victories and the course of the war to his fellow POWs, sustaining their morale.

Dineen's first radio was hidden in a mess can underneath a covering of boiled rice, before being destroyed after nearly being discovered. Using odd parts such as silver paper and wire, he built another wireless set while working as a telephone mechanic in the camp's workshop. Okey later reflected: "...if (Dineen was) detected operating a wireless receiving set, he would certainly be executed. He knew that in other camps executions had taken place for this offence." For his courage and efforts, Dineen was awarded the British Empire Medal after the war.

Stationed on Blakang Mati, military interpreter Fujiwara Takashi organised Japanese and mathematics classes for children. He also took the initiative to request a Malay-language teacher to be sent from Pulau Brani, recalling in a post-war interview that:

"Nearly six months I was there in Sentosa island teaching the children - small Malay children. Still I am very proud of my behaviour there. When I was teaching Japanese... I had some doubt that these (Malays) are taught Japanese only. Then they can only be the slaves of the Japanese army. So they must have... their own education (in the Malay language). One day I went to ask the Municipality to send one Malay teacher from Pulau Brani... I invited a Malay female teacher to teach mathematics and the Malay language."

POST-WAR ISLAND LIFE



1st Singapore Regiment, Royal Artillery officers at the parade ground in front of block 28, 1955
Courtesy of Stuart James

The formal surrender of the Japanese in September 1945 ended World War II and the Japanese Occupation, but conditions on the ground continued to be difficult for much of Singapore's population. Food shortages and steep commodity price inflation, overcrowding, disease and other social problems persisted for some time.

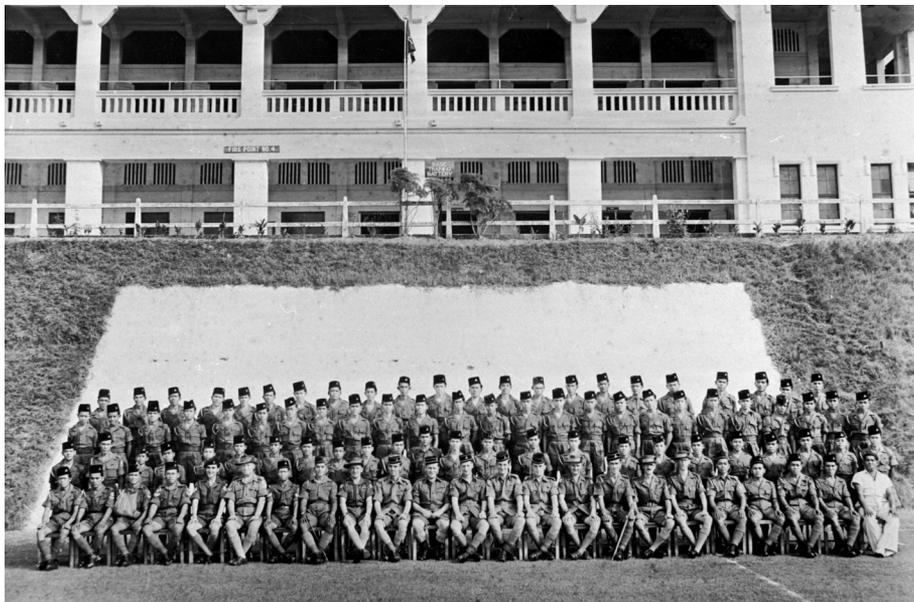
The immediate post-war years saw several government campaigns for the public to grow more food in the light of food shortages. Exhibitions on vegetable planting schemes were held and small-scale farming initiatives were highlighted in the newspapers, including a military-civilian cooperative effort on Pulau Blakang Mati.

The island saw its population surge as it became a temporary home for 2,000 servicemen from the Royal Navy's shore establishment HMS *Sultan*, and its civilian numbers increased as well. In March 1946, the military set up a 2.5-acre duck farm, a pig farm and a five-acre vegetable plot, tended to by

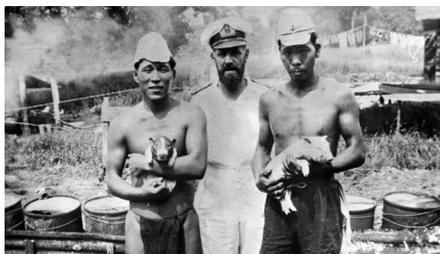
kampong residents, Japanese prisoners of war (POWs) and soldiers on punishment duties. The meat, eggs and vegetable produced were sold to the island's civilians and military messes at affordable prices, including 10-cent eggs, \$2.50 ducks as well as sweet potatoes and soybeans at three cents and \$2.50 per kati respectively.

The Blakang Mati scheme was touted as exemplifying self-sufficiency and held up in the press as an example for other communities on Singapore to follow, although those on the mainland would have lacked the advantages of easy access to farming land and Japanese POW labour.

The post-war years also saw the return of the British military to Blakang Mati. Over the following decades, a number of military units cycled through stints on the island, including those of the Royal Navy and the Royal Marine, the 1st Malay Coast Battery (later reorganised as the 1st Singapore Regiment, Royal Artillery), as well as units of Gurkha troops.



The 1st Singapore Regiment, Royal Artillery officers and personnel in front of their barracks, c. 1950s
 Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation



A British military personnel with Japanese prisoners of war at the pig farm set up on Blakang Mati, 1946
 Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

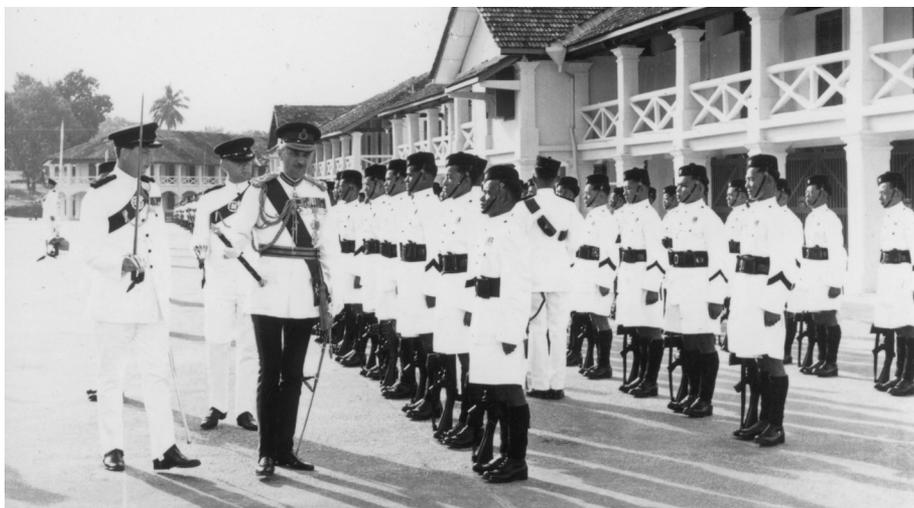
MOLCAB 2 AND BLAKANG MATI

From September 1945, Pulau Blakang Mati was used as a hub for newly liberated prisoners of war to receive medical treatment and as a transit camp. The Royal Navy used Mobile Landing Craft Advanced Bases (MOLCABs) to quickly establish field hospitals, accommodation for up to 1,500 men, engineering and repairs for landing craft, as well as recreational facilities and amenities.

The MOLCABs had been created in the wake of the experiences of some crews during Allied landings in Europe from 1943 to 1945; a number of crews had been left without support or provision after the initial stages of an assault before eventually being absorbed into other units.

The MOLCAB assigned to Singapore operated from a ship named HMS *Landlock*. The medical personnel, malarial and hygiene unit together with Royal Marine engineers reconditioned barracks into treatment quarters and carried out other work for the sanitation of the island.

HMS *Landlock* was decommissioned in December 1945, but its staff and facilities became part of the shore establishment HMS *Sultan I*, responsible for the Navy's medical commitments in the southern portion of Singapore. This included the 2,000 servicemen in the transit camp on Blakang Mati, as well as nearly 400 civilians on the island.



Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer visiting the 2nd Battalion, 7th Duke of Edinburgh's Own Gurkha Rifles in Blakang Mati, 1960
 Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

THE GURKHAS AND KONFRONTASI

Between 1957 and 1969, there were two battalions of Gurkha troops based on Pulau Blakang Mati. These were the 2nd Battalion, 7th Duke of Edinburgh's Own Gurkha Rifles and the 10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles. The battalions were British military units and should not be confused with the Gurkha Contingent which has been a part of the Singapore Police Force since 1949.

The 2nd Battalion, 7th Duke of Edinburgh's Own Gurkha Rifles had been formed in 1907 and had been involved in military engagements in Egypt, the Middle East and North Africa during World War I. During the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), the battalion fought in battles against communist guerrillas across Malaya, claiming the lives of 224 combatants and capturing numerous others. This battalion was also headed by Field Marshal Gerald Templer, who was British High Commissioner for Malaya and the architect of the United Kingdom's military and social policy during the Emergency.

During the Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation (1963-1966, also known as Konfrontasi), Gurkhas and other military units guarded

various locations across Malaysia against Indonesian infiltrators and saboteurs. During this time, there were more than 40 incidents of bombs being planted in Singapore, including on Blakang Mati.

The first bomb exploded in a forested area in the west of the island in April 1965, but did not cause any casualties or other damage. Later that month, another two explosive devices were safely detonated by bomb disposal experts after being discovered at Tanjong Rimau beach by a Gurkha sentry. A fourth bomb was then detonated at the island's southern tip.

In 1966, Lance Corporal Rambahadur Limbu of the 2nd Battalion, 10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles was honoured for his valorous actions during a battle with a platoon-sized force of Indonesian infiltrators in Bau, Sarawak. Having attacked and killed an enemy manning a machine gun in a trench, he braved some 20 minutes of heavy automatic weapons fire to rescue two wounded comrades a distance away. For his courage, Limbu was awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest honour in the British Armed Forces.



Former kampongs located next to the jetty on Blakang Mati, 1957
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

While living in the barracks and quarters of Blakang Mati, some Gurkha soldiers were accompanied by their families and participated in the island's communal social life. In an oral history interview, former kampong resident Yeo Hong Peng recalled watching animal sacrifices being conducted for Gadhimai, a Hindu festival celebrated by some Gurkhas, as well as locals taking part in gambling and other activities in the days following the Gadhimai rituals. Gurkhas also attended weddings and other social events on the island.

In June 2018, Gurkhas returned to Blakang Mati, by then renamed Sentosa, when members of the Gurkha Contingent were involved in security operations for the summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and President Donald Trump of the United States of America. Together with other members of the Singapore Police Force, the Gurkhas helped secure the summit venue of Capella Singapore, as well as surrounding roads and routes.

POST-WAR COMMUNITIES AND LIVELIHOODS

As the British military presence was gradually rebuilt on Blakang Mati, the island's civilian population grew in tandem. It was noted in



A kelong (offshore fishing platform) near Siloso Point, 1957
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

1946 that there were 377 Malay, Chinese and Tamil residents, a number which increased to some 1,000 by 1959. These communities lived mainly in two kampongs, both of which were located on the island's northern coast.

One kampong, which faced Keppel Harbour and stood on where Universal Studios was later built, was said to be inhabited mainly by Hokkiens. The other was further west, and had a mainly Malay population mixed with a few Chinese residents. While this was referred to as a "Malay kampong", Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew noted after a visit in 1964 that three quarters of the villagers had roots in Riau and Java, and others had come from Johor.



Boat operators at Blakang Mati, 1955
Courtesy of Stuart James

While the two kampongs were casually separated into “the Malay kampong” and “the Chinese kampong”, oral history accounts note a significant degree of social and cultural interaction between them. During festive occasions including Chinese New Year and Hari Raya *kenduris* (feasts), the different communities gifted food between villages and neighbours. Maarof Salleh remembered:

“(the Chinese lived) in a village which is now the jetty... facing the Telok Blangah area. On the western part (of the island), there was a Malay kampong... the majority of the residents were Malay with a few Chinese families. The Chinese were mainly running provision shops. I remember that (the Chinese there) were almost like Malays. The way they talked, their accents, the way they pronounced their words was almost like Malay.”

Many of the Chinese residents of Blakang Mati were of the Yeo clan of Meishan Village in Dongshan County, in China’s Fujian Province. They had migrated to Singapore in the early 20th century, settling on Blakang Mati as it was less populated than the mainland. Unlike many of the Hokkiens on the mainland,

the Yeos spoke the Zhaoan variant of the Hokkien language, distinct from the Xiamen strain more commonly heard in Singapore and Malaysia. The Singapore Meishan Yeo Clan Association, established in the 1960s, continues to bring the Yeo clan and former residents of Blakang Mati together through dinners, social gatherings and festivals in the honour of the deity Tua Pek Kong.

Other residents of Blakang Mati included soldiers from across Malaya and those who worked for military officers or in the canteens and messes. The military restored or rebuilt quarters and bungalows which had been damaged or left derelict during the Occupation to accommodate newly recruited troops.

In some instances, Malay Other Ranks (M.O.R.) soldiers and their families were charged a nominal one cent per day rent, with water and lighting, for single-room quarters in 1950. By the 1950s, the quarters for Malay soldiers encompassed flats, refurbished barracks and kampong-style housing, and included Kampong Salaman and Kampong Jukes, named after officers of military units.

In 1948, the military noted that it had issued more than 1,000 passes to Blakang Mati for civilians with work connections to the War Department. Abu Bakar Ali, a civilian technician employed by the British army and a resident of Pulau Brani in the 1940s and 1950s, recalled the jobs available in the immediate post-war years:

"The first question is how to fill our stomachs, how to carry on living - that's the important thing. Every morning, before 8am, (the British military would) send two landing craft to Pulau Brani. Those who wanted to do some work or get some British money will cross over to (Blakang Mati), get one docket, start work with the Royal Marine or the Royal Navy. That money is no more than 50 cents (per day), the same amount that I started (with while working with) the Japanese. You worked from 9am to 3pm.

"(We) board the lorry, the lorry will be taken by landing craft out to sea to the supply ships. The supply ship would lower down all the foodstuff required by the Marines and the Royal Navy, we would ferry these things back to Blakang Mati. Each of us would be given two tins of sardine and one big loaf of bread to bring home... in addition to our salary.

"In the afternoon for tea, you don't worry. You simply go to the cookhouse and say, 'Sergeant! Tea, please' or 'Sergeant! Bread, please!' At the time, lunch was referred to as tiffin, maybe because of the tiffin carriers. You can be sure of getting one lunch, two tea breaks and carrying home some foodstuff like butter. But that was no small thing. This was butter, which we had not tasted for more than three years (during the Japanese Occupation)! Everything now was heavenly."

Other civilians working with the British military included shoemakers, *dhobys* (laundry workers) and *amahs* (female domestic servants). Maarof Salleh lived on the island in the mid-1950s when his mother worked for a military officer as a cook:

"When the captain's family stayed in Orange Grove Road, we moved to a place near there. Then

subsequently, when the captain moved to Pulau Blakang Mati, the family wanted my mother to continue working for them, so they arranged quarters (on the island) for us. I think most of the residents there were employed in the Royal Artillery. Not only did they have several British officers, but they also had several Malay officers... at the time, (Malays) who worked in the British army got transferred to Singapore."

A number of oral history accounts from people who lived on the island in the 1950s and 1960s reflect the economic opportunities created by the military presence, as well as how they could evolve over the years. Adi Akbar bin Jamal, whose father Jamal ran a well-known tailor shop on Blakang Mati recalled:

"My parents were from Bukit Tinggi in Sumatra. My father migrated here after the war, and learnt dressmaking and tailoring (as) an apprentice. He then moved to Blakang Mati together with (his tailor partner) to set up a shop... (my family) followed the British army (here). My father made dress (suits) and uniforms for the British army and the Gurkhas that were in Blakang Mati.

"The (British) officers would make suits before going on their home leave. The same for the Gurkhas who would make at least two white shirts and a pair of grey pants... It was a good time for my family as the Gurkhas gave us business, but when they left, (and) the Singapore Army came, business was affected."

In the first half of the 20th century, most of Blakang Mati's residents who were not in the employ of the British military were fishermen or operated small-scale ferryboat services. However, by the 1950s, former residents of the island recalled that fishing had become a mainly recreational activity. The main employers during this period included the military and the ferryboat services, while kampong residents also ran sundry shops and hawker stalls that military personnel could patronise.

These included the Bee Sun provision shop, which had imported goods including Huntley



The Bee Sun provision shop on Blakang Mati, 1956
Courtesy of Stuart James



The shopfront of R. Koh, a photo studio and sundry shop on Blakang Mati, 1956
Courtesy of Stuart James

& Palmers biscuits, Milo, Nescafe coffee, Carr's Table Water biscuits, Spam tinned meat and Heinz baked beans.

Islander Robert Koh made a name for himself as a photographer for the military, and also operated a shop that developed photographs, repaired watches and sold stationery and books. His business continued to thrive into the late 1960s, by which time the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) had taken over the military

facilities. SAF officer Winston Wong, who was stationed on the island from 1968, remembered:

"(Koh) was a famous photographer who had a studio there... and catered for all the army ceremonial photographs. He was well-known throughout the army. When you have a parade or (an event) of significance, you (could) engage him, and he was very professional."

Another notable area of economic activity was transport. More soldiers and more islanders meant more of the 10-minute boat journeys between Blakang Mati and mainland Singapore, and the number of boat operators grew to support this traffic.

Many of the boat operators were of the Yeo clan, and they also ferried passengers to Kusu Island and the rest of the Southern Islands, as well as on diving and fishing trips. The transport of passengers and goods to and from ships anchored in the Singapore Strait were another source of income, and this business grew in tandem with Singapore's maritime-borne entrepot sector in the 1960s.

Despite the presence of the official military ferry between Blakang Mati and the mainland,



Children carrying buckets of water at Blakang Mati, undated
 Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

WATER AND THE PULAU

Before the arrival of modern piped water networks, freshwater sources and access to them shaped the course of settlement, commerce and daily life on Pulau Blakang Mati and the islands surrounding it. When the trader Jacques de Coutre proposed that the Spanish crown build a fort on Blakang Mati in the 1620s, he did so partly because of the availability of freshwater on the island.

He also observed that vessels often anchored off Siloso to await favourable tides, and obtained freshwater from a spring in the area. That spring is thought to still be in existence today, and may well have sustained the servicemen of the British military during the colonial era.

Accounts from de Coutre and other European travellers during this time also noted that the Orang Laut of the area managed freshwater sources on Blakang Mati as a commercial and strategic resource, by selling water to passing vessels and alerting allies to their availability. From the 19th century, Hammer & Company leased a freshwater source on Blakang Mati from the colonial government and used it as a private reservoir, supplying ships in the area with freshwater at a profitable rate until the 1930s.

The kampong residents of Blakang Mati and islands around it had to obtain their water by other means. Maps of the 19th century note several freshwater sources on Blakang Mati, and these may have guided the locations of early settlements on the island. Up to 1959, villagers on the island got their water from these natural sources, wells or purchased water from the reservoirs maintained by the military near Fort Connaught. An artificial pond was also located near the reservoir, and residents remember using the pond to wash clothes and to bathe.

In the 1950s, when well water had come into short supply, the Rural Board paid the War Department about \$1,000 a month to transport water from the mainland to Blakang Mati for the villagers' use.

In 1959, the British army installed a 3.2km-long pipeline that connected a water main at the No. 6 godown, Keppel Harbour, to a reservoir in Blakang Mati's south, which had a capacity of some 396,000 gallons. The pipeline, which consisted of overland and submarine portions, also ran through Pulau Brani. While water supplied to kampong houses was metered and charged at municipal rates, the military also fixed public standpipes from which water could be taken for free.



An island bus waiting at the jetty, 1956
F W York Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

pilots of sampans, bumboats and *tongkangs* (light vessels) could make a decent living. Yeo Geok Leong recalled that a significant number of Blakang Mati residents became boat operators in the early 1960s, and how his family's life changed as a result:

"At first, my father used a small boat (which could carry) about six people. He then had a bigger one, (and brought) a lot of people going fishing. A lot of ships (were) coming in (to the anchorage) and all the (Blakang Mati) boatmen ferried these passengers (to and from) the ships.

"Our life became better after he became a boatman. When I was younger, my father worked in a rubber (factory on the mainland). (Then), I (would) overhear my parents talking about not having enough money for Chinese New Year. After he became a boatman, I didn't hear about this anymore and we had new clothes every Chinese New Year."

Transport on the island also represented an economic opportunity. While most of the kampong residents walked or cycled, there was also the option of a bus and later a taxi operated by Tan Kim Lai. Having arrived on Blakang Mati in 1944, Tan first drove a bus, before switching to a taxi when the bus broke

down. Waiting for passengers at the jetty, Tan derived his business mainly from military officers and their families.

While the British military helped sustain economic activity by creating jobs in the post-war period, relations between the army and civilians were not always harmonious. In 1948, the military caused a stir when it began strictly regulating civilian passage on the army ferries between Blakang Mati and Jardine Steps, at what is today HarbourFront. Kampong residents and those working for the army had been allowed to travel for free on the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) ferries since 1945, but three years on, the military felt that this concession was impeding its operational efficiency.

After the change of policy, civilians had to pay between 30 cents and 50 cents to travel via sampan or other boats, adding up to significant expenses each month. Islanders wrote to the newspapers appealing for the military to act as "good neighbours", but were reminded that those not working for the British army had no legal right to reside on Blakang Mati in the first place.

For much of the 1950s and 1960s, the military families living on the island generally enjoyed

much latitude in their daily lives, in parallel to the kampong residents. Richard Williams, who grew up in a bungalow at what is today the Butterfly Park and Insect Kingdom, recalled:

“Living on Blakang Mati was fantastic... it’s your own island basically. I learned to drive a car when I was 14, I could drive (on the island) because it was all military. There was no control over what I was doing, it was different from Singapore because it was fairly undeveloped in those days - there was still jungle, monkeys and snakes.

“(On a visit during Konfrontasi) my brother (serving with the Australian army during the Vietnam War) brought a few things back from Vietnam which were not allowed, like flare guns. We set off this red parachute flare right into the sky and it alerted all the police and army in Singapore. We could have gotten into big trouble.

“The Gurkha battalion which my father was a part of, they had a pig farm on the island. I remembered going down there when they killed a 14-foot python that was trying to take down the pigs. All the old gun emplacements were amazing for a kid to go play with (as well), they were pretty well untouched and you could go and limb all over them and have a lot of fun.”

While the military and civilian communities enjoyed the comforts and carefree lifestyles of the same island, there was little social interaction between them. Williams remembered:

“(When the kampong residents) had events like Chinese New Year or Hari Raya, they would invite the officers. To some extent, it was a shame that most Europeans in those days didn’t really interact much with the locals. I didn’t have any friends who were Malay, I knew some Chinese. It was an insular environment.”

In the early 1970s, as Blakang Mati was being redeveloped into a leisure island, the residents of the kampongs were relocated to mainland Singapore, with many of them resettled into public housing in the Telok Blangah area. Chua Bee Tin, a former kampong resident, remembered:



Local fishermen at Siloso Pier, 1970s
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation



Norashikin’s late grandmother and her family, who were residents of Blakang Mati, enjoying an afternoon at Siloso Beach, 1965
Courtesy of Norashikin

“Many people were sad to leave because (the community) thought they would be split up. Even after moving to our first Housing & Development Board flat at Telok Blangah, I would come back with my brother to stay a day or two at our old house.”

The charms of island life also drew visitors from the mainland to Blakang Mati. CT Lim remembered:

“Pulau Blakang Mati was an idyllic place. (I) used to camp there often, along the island’s coastlines. We made friends with some of the kampong dwellers and were allowed to take baths at their houses.



The opening of Blakang Mati Integrated Primary School, 1964
Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

"We spent our time sleeping under the twinkling stars (with) the sound of waves pushing against the shoreline. (Those were) magical moments I will always cherish in my memories. We plucked fruits (including) jambu (guava or rose apple) and coconuts, and helped ourselves to almost anything available there. We caught fish, sotong (squid) and crabs... and barbecued what we caught. Our kampong friends would cook chicken curry (as well)."

EDUCATION

In the 1950s, the military restarted the Blakang Mati British Army Primary School. The school catered mainly to the children of servicemen, but also accommodated a small number of children from the island's kampongs as well as those whose parents were working for the army. Maarof Salleh, who attended the school from 1955, recalled:

"We were given quarters so we lived by ourselves, but we came into contact with the residents through my studying in the school. The children of the families in the village also studied there. There were a number of Chinese children (who) also attended the Malay school so we studied together. We felt more a sense of togetherness there. Every time after school, we would go to the seaside and have fun.

"(The school) was a military building...(it) occupied one floor. I remember we had three or four classes so one floor is big enough to accommodate all of us. There was only one session in the morning because there were not many students. The teachers themselves came from outside Blakang Mati so they had to travel by ferry to get here. Many of the students, being children of soldiers who served in the units there, got free transport. We never had a problem with latecomers... the students will come at one go. We also cannot delay dismissing students from school because the transport will be there on the dot.

"The British military provided almost all the facilities, not only the classrooms. They (provided) us with refreshments during school break. Whatever food the soldiers ate, we got it free also. Five or ten minutes before school break, the teachers would detail a few students to go (to the military canteen) and bring up refreshments - which (was) I think very healthy food. Normally bread, sometimes hardboiled eggs, sometimes Campbell's soup."

Besides the army-run school, Blakang Mati also had a Chinese vernacular primary school, Sin Hwa. This school was registered with and received funding from the Ministry of Education, and had some 50 to 60 students in 1950. By that time, awareness of the



The mosque at Blakang Mati (pictured with its minaret), undated

Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

importance of formal education had spread among the kampong residents of Blakang Mati, who sought the establishment of English and Malay-language schools on the island as well as classes for adults.

By 1963, three primary schools catering to some 750 students had been established on Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani, along with Islamic classes for Muslim students. The following year, the government constructed the Blakang Mati Integrated Primary School, which brought together the Malay, English and Chinese language education streams and cost \$175,000.

After the kampong residents of Blakang Mati were relocated during the redevelopment of the island in the 1970s, some of the teachers, other staff and students at this school were transferred to Telok Blangah Integrated School. The site of the former school was then redeveloped into Sentosa's Maritime Museum.

RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Before the redevelopment of Pulau Blakang Mati in the early 1970s, there were a number of religious institutions on the island. Not many details survive of these institutions, but they included a Muslim mosque and a

surau (prayer house), a Christian chapel used mainly by military servicemen, a temple established by the Chinese community as well as a Hindu temple.

The mosque was located near the island's former Ferry Terminal, and hosted religious classes for the Muslim children of the kampongs. The *surau* meanwhile was located behind the former military hospital (today Madame Tussauds Singapore), and was used mainly by Muslim soldiers serving with the Royal Artillery.

The Chinese temple stood near the jetty, and may have included Tua Pek Kong as one of the enshrined deities, as the Meishan Yeo clan association that was formed by the former residents of the island maintains a tradition of organising festivals in the deity's honour today. Little is known of the Hindu temple or the deities enshrined within, except that before the island's redevelopment, the temple's deity statues were moved to a temple in Queenstown.

In 1957, St. Martin's Chapel was established for Christian members of the military. The chapel near Serapong Point, which could accommodate some 40 people, was designed by Corporal Malcolm Lovibond of the Royal Engineers. Previously, the chapel had been housed within a nissen hut, or a prefabricated steel structure. St. Martin's, named after the patron saint of soldiers, was multi-denominational, being used by worshippers of Church of England, Methodists and Presbyterians.

Up to the redevelopment of Blakang Mati in the 1970s, a Muslim cemetery was located at the south-eastern tip of the island, in the area known as Tanjong China. A road, Cemetery Road, led from Allanbrooke Road to the cemetery, which served as a burial ground for Muslim residents of Blakang Mati and Pulau Brani. During the Hari Raya festive period, kampong residents from both islands would visit the cemetery to clean its tombstones and surrounds.

FROM BLAKANG MATI TO SENTOSA



An illustrated map of Sentosa in the mid-1970s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

INDUSTRY, DEPOT, DEFENCE OR LEISURE?

When Prime Minister Lee Kuan Kew signed the Malaysia Agreement in London on 8 July 1963, it heralded a new era for Singapore and in particular, the island of Pulau Blakang Mati. For nearly a century since the 1870s, Blakang Mati had been a virtual fiefdom of the British military, with civilians living on the island only at the forbearance of the War Department.

The signing of the Malaysia Agreement between the governments of Malaya, Singapore and the United Kingdom brought Singapore into federation within the new country of Malaysia from 31 August 1963. The agreement also included the United

Kingdom's release of some 1,300 acres of military land to Singapore, including 658 acres on Blakang Mati. In a letter, the Colonial and Commonwealth Secretary Duncan Sandys wrote:

"(Blakang Mati) is not in any way surplus to our requirements. It contains barracks, married quarters and other facilities for the Gurkha battalion... Since no alternative accommodation exists for this battalion and since the building of new accommodation will be extremely expensive, we have naturally been most reluctant to release this island.

"We have done so only because we realise that in the future planning of bonded area for Singapore's entrepot trade, (Blakang Mati) could be of great



The Economic Development Board Press Conference, chaired by the board's director Lim Ho Hup (fourth from left), to announce the study of the usage of Blakang Mati, 1966
 Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

value to you. In order to allow time for building new barrack accommodation elsewhere, the island cannot be released until August, 1966."

Speaking to reporters in London, Lee outlined the government's development plans for Blakang Mati as a free port zone. At the time, entrepot trade made up a large portion of Singapore's economy and had been a major issue with implications for Singapore's access to a Malaysia-wide common market. Blakang Mati was seen as an ideal location for a free port zone with warehouses for storing goods in transit without the payment of duty.

By mid-1965, months away from the separation of Singapore from Malaysia and its emergence as an independent nation however, the Blakang Mati as free port zone plan had been put in cold storage because of the potentially high costs involved.

After independence, a Canadian consultant working with the Economic Development Board (EDB) recommended that deepwater berths for an industrial port be constructed on Blakang Mati. The waters off Tanjong China in the island's south-east were said to be among the deepest in the region and suitable for the largest ships operating at the time. The Canadian engineers also considered a tunnel or

causeway from Blakang Mati to the mainland, as well as land reclamation in the Sengkir Strait between the island and Pulau Brani.

The free port plans and the EDB's engineering survey were opening salvos in the contest to determine Blakang Mati's future. When the British release of the island was eventually formalised on 1 September 1967, *The Straits Times* opined that: "Blakang Mati is about to lose its calm. The British withdrawal yesterday opened the way for a rush of interests which promises to change the island unrecognisably over the next few years."

There were numerous options on the table in 1967. The newly-formed Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) took over the barracks and other military facilities, with the Singapore Naval Volunteer Force, the School of Maritime Training and the Naval Medical Centre moving to the island upon the British departure. The Port of Singapore Authority envisioned Blakang Mati as a regional distribution depot for bulk cargo, capturing the surging traffic of container ships.

With some Singaporeans venturing to Blakang Mati's beaches in the 1960s, even before the island's redevelopment, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board (STPB) was also eager to

A CASINO ON BLAKANG MATI

When the integrated casino, entertainment and tourism complex Resorts World Sentosa opened in February 2010, it represented the culmination of a proposition first put forth some 50 years earlier. The idea of a casino in Singapore had been mooted in the 1960s, and Pulau Blakang Mati was a prime candidate for its location.

In September 1967, newspapers reported that a consortium of investors from Hong Kong, Macau, the United States and Singapore sought land on Blakang Mati for a casino, hotels and a stadium for greyhound racing to draw tourist dollars. The unnamed investors pushed their case by warning that newly independent Singapore would be losing out on potential investments of between \$20 million and \$50 million (representing some one percent to two percent of Singapore's gross domestic product at the time) if they were not granted a franchise.

develop a tourism complex. The confluence of competing interests even led the STPB to keep the details of their plan, including its location, a strict secret.

Aptly summing up the debate in Cabinet over Blakang Mati's future, Minister for Law and National Development Edmund Barker said in June 1967:

"The Defence Minister wants the security guns to be there first. The Finance Minister wants part of the island for industries, and the Port of Singapore Authority needs it for more deep water wharves. I sincerely hope tourism will not be left out."

A TURNING POINT

Out of the public eye however, a significant project was already in the works for Blakang Mati in 1967. In an oral history interview in 1982, Albert Winsemius, a key adviser on Singapore's economic development, recalled:

That same month saw the visit to Singapore of Henrique Leitao, the brother-in-law of Macau's casino tycoon Stanley Ho, on a scouting trip. He was quoted in the newspapers as saying: "Money is the least problem. If the Singapore government is prepared to give us the franchise, then we will spare nothing to build a first-class casino on Blakang Mati. As a tourist attraction (a casino) has no equal."

The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board had also factored a casino into their calculations for Blakang Mati. In a speech to the tourism industry in June 1967, Minister for Law and National Development Edmund Barker discussed plans for a casino and acknowledged that it would boost tourism.

By January 1969, the casino concept had been left out of tourism plans drawn up by the STPB. It would take another half a century before a casino would be built on the island.

"Part of our (economic) programme was to attract some 10 large projects which would draw international attention (and promote investment in Singapore). Esso... had expressed its willingness to establish an oil refinery in Singapore if it could be done on Blakang Mati. After internal discussion Cabinet decided that Esso could do so if this refinery would eventually expand into a petro-chemical complex."

"In the middle of '67, I arrived in Singapore and heard about this decision. I must say I was dismayed. Although we were at the very beginning of our economic development, I was quite sure that we had taken off and it was just a matter of a few years before we would have full employment, and then we would start on upgrading policy. That means that we had to take into account that over 10 or 20 years from (that time), we would have a much higher level of living... we (would) need room for people to spend their time and part of their money."



Albert Winsemius, a key adviser on Singapore's economic development, 1971

Courtesy of Nationaal Archief and Spaarnestad Photo

"So I started protesting and suggested to try and keep Blakang Mati for recreation and tourist purposes. It had been part of the British base, there were barracks on it and one or two small Malay villages and a Chinese village. But (the rest of the island) was empty. The only large empty place in Singapore.

"I got hold of the Urban Renewal (department, now Urban Redevelopment Authority), Mr Alan Choe, and with him we made a fantasy - more his fantasy than mine. What we could eventually do as a holiday resort with Blakang Mati. It was beautiful, it had everything which you need - an imitation kampong, a grand marina, a hill resort and even had a casino complex, sea sports, then tours and tourists' shopping. And all the rest of it, hotels in every group or class. Armed, fortified with these drawings (from the URD), I tried to push Esso more or less from Blakang Mati."

Winsemius was also aware that the economic returns and jobs that would be created by the Esso project could not just be cast aside. Acknowledging that the Esso refinery was "one of the (early) larger projects which we badly needed", the Dutchman consulted with

the EDB and its Canadian engineering survey team to propose alternative locations. He then followed that up with a paper comparing the potential of Singapore's tourist and leisure industry with the economic and long-term impact of siting the refinery on Blakang Mati.

Winsemius had landed in the thick of competing interests for Blakang Mati, and he recounted an episode where Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his cabinet took a trip to the island:

"PM (Prime Minister) said, 'you know what we do? ... I'll invite everybody who took part in the discussion. We will go to Blakang Mati'. I thought that is my chance. I gave him (the URD's) beautiful drawings. I asked PM, 'can I take Alan Choe along?' He made the drawing, and he has a huge fantasy.

"That Sunday morning, I won that battle, helped somewhat by the fact that... (after the SAF had just taken over the former British barracks), the surroundings were not clean... I remember there was an empty tin, beer tin hanging around in the garden. You know, if you want to alert PM, show him something which is not clean.

"I more or less promised that I would convince Esso (to site their refinery elsewhere), which was a risky promise... My promise was, more or less, let me go to New York and I'll arrange it. And then (PM) signed my authorisation, and there we went."

Meeting with the oil company Esso in New York in the morning, Winsemius put his case forward and by lunchtime, the American company had agreed to site its facility in Jurong instead. Winsemius reflected:

"Blakang Mati was saved from manufacturing industry and reserved for recreational purposes. Every time I come on Blakang Mati, I walk ashore with a certain pride, which is of course vanity... I'm glad I tackled it rather drastically at the time because it would, especially in view of later developments, have been a major mistake to have (Blakang Mati) full of factories.

"(Sentosa) is the only place apart from Shangri-La (hotel), and ministries, and the Istana, where I come regularly when in Singapore, with (former civil servant and cabinet minister) Howe Yoon Chong. We occasionally have a good laugh when he or I say: 'When I die there should be a plaque (on Sentosa saying) 'this island was saved for you by the late Dr Winsemius'."

Another proponent of developing Blakang Mati as a leisure island was Cabinet minister Dr Goh Keng Swee, who supported the move of the proposed refinery and later championed various developments and projects on Sentosa. In a letter to Dr Goh after his retirement from politics in 1984, then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew wrote:

"...you catered for more than bare living. Singaporeans who bring their children to the Bird Park, Chinese Garden, Japanese Garden,

Jurong Golf Club, or Sentosa, owe their pleasures to you. Year after year you strenuously pressed me to support these loss-making companies. You convinced me that if we are to achieve our long-term aspirations for Singaporeans then, as a people we must begin to have some feeling for the aesthetic in life."

Sarong Island: the proto-Sentosa

Before Sentosa opened its doors to tourists and pleasure seekers, a dot-sized islet off its shores served as an early experiment for the island's viability as a leisure and entertainment locale. This was Sarong Island, a five-acre islet off Pulau Selegu and Pulau Blakang Mati that had previously been unnamed.

The islet was connected to Blakang Mati by a footbridge and according to newspaper reports when it was put up for sale in 1957, had a bungalow named "White House". The three-

BLAKANG MATI AND THE SAF

Between 1967 and 1973, Blakang Mati was home to a number of units of the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). Upon the withdrawal of the British military in September 1967, the SAF was the logical choice to take over and maintain barracks and other military facilities.

The first SAF unit on Blakang Mati was the Singapore Naval Volunteer Force (SNVF), the predecessor to the Republic of Singapore Navy. The SNVF had been based at Telok Ayer Basin before its move, and its commanding officer (CO), Lieutenant-Colonel Jaswant Singh Gill, also became the CO of Pulau Blakang Mati Camp. In an oral history account, LTC Gill recalled that Camp Command took over the responsibility for operating and securing ferry services between the island the mainland, the security of the island as well as its water and electricity supply, as well as other facilities.

In February 1969, the School of Maritime Training was established and began training



Singapore Naval Volunteer Force at Blakang Mati, 1968
MRNVR/Singapore Naval Volunteer Reserve Confrontation Veterans Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

its first intake of 160 recruits for the naval force, which had by then been renamed the Singapore Maritime Command. The navy left Blakang Mati when Brani Naval Base was established in 1973. Other SAF units that were based at Blakang Mati included the School of Field Engineers and 36 Singapore Combat Engineers (36 SCE), which occupied Fort Siloso and Fort Serapong, as well as the SAF Basic Military Training School.

bedroom house was said to have been built before World War II by Frank Blackwood, a former government Chief Surveyor, and was later sold to E. J. Bennett. In 1957, the islet's owners, the Chartered Bank (M) Trustee Ltd, priced it for sale at \$95,000.

By the early 1960s, the islet had been purchased and was occupied by Christina Loke, the wife of cinema magnate Loke Wan Tho. The potential conversion of the islet into a leisure centre with chalets, a swimming pool and sports facilities had been mooted by 1964, although it was only in 1967 that Sarong Island was open. The Sarong Island concept had been developed by Christina, who had divorced Loke in 1962, and her American husband Jeffrey Stone.

Sarong Island, named for its easy recognition by Western tourists, featured an open-air amphitheatre, a restaurant with a capacity for 200 people and a gift shop. Visitors who landed at the "White House" pier could dine, dance, watch floor shows or have drinks while watching the maritime traffic pass through Keppel Harbour.

The islet was also advertised as being available for rent for parties, sales promotions and presentations, weddings and other functions. Sarong Island was said to be able to accommodate 1,000 people for a cocktail party. Entertainment was provided with shows reflecting the traditional dance styles of the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities, as well as a house band. The party location was closed in August 1968 however, and the government acquired the islet in 1971, eventually merging it with Blakang Mati through land reclamation.

DEVELOPING SENTOSA: THE EARLY YEARS

By late 1968, the government had formally decided on the development of Pulau Blakang Mati as a tourist resort. This was seen as a critical economic development project, one of several that would create jobs and plug the economic gap that arose from the full

pull-out of the British military in 1972. Within Singapore's tourism industry, government planners looked to the Blakang Mati project to increase tourist arrivals as well as the length of their stays here.

In October 1969, the Dillingham Overseas Corporation of the United States was engaged to produce a comprehensive master plan study of Blakang Mati, to confirm its potential as a tourist draw and propose attractions for development. The Dillingham study was completed in September 1970, and in 1972, the government announced that the development programme for the island would cost some S\$124 million over nine years.

A committee under the Ministry of Finance was formed to steer the redevelopment of Blakang Mati into the leisure island of Sentosa. This multi-ministry and government agency committee was headed by George Bogaars, then the permanent secretary of the Economic Development Division. The committee handled policy and the early development of the island, before the government established the Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) as a statutory board through legislation.

In its first annual report, the SDC declared that its development philosophy for Sentosa would be guided by a desire to "to retain as much of the island in its natural state - taking full advantage of the island's greenery and sea location. Where appropriate, many of the projects will utilise existing buildings which will be converted and made suitable for the use intended".

Before the SDC came into being on 1 September 1972, several government agencies had already begun work on development projects on Sentosa. The Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) oversaw the construction of a 150-acre golf course at Serapong from January 1970. The golf course's development saw the filling in of mangrove swamps, the creation of a freshwater lagoon and the land reclamation of the Berhala Reping islet. JTC also worked on a 30-acre swimming lagoon in the south of the island, a project which involved the dredging of



An aerial view of the golf course at Sentosa, mid 1970s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Sentosa Golf Club, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

the seabed to increase the depth of the waters, as well as the Gun Museum at Fort Siloso.

Besides coordinating the planning of Sentosa, the Urban Renewal Department (URD) also developed the Coralarium in the east of the island. Another government arm, the Port Authority of Singapore (PSA), oversaw the development of the Main Ferry Terminal and Plaza Building, a project which saw the reclamation of the island's Kuching Creek. The PSA also operated the Maritime Museum,

and was a partner in the Singapore Cable Car Company developing the cable car system that would connect Mount Faber on the mainland to Carlton Hill on Sentosa (where present-day Sentosa Station is located). PSA operated the cable car along with a souvenir business on the island.

The SDC itself also began several projects in the early 1970s, including the Malay and Chinese villages (re-creations of kampong life), the Artists' Village, beach cottages and picnic grounds. By the end of 1973, the various development projects on Sentosa were estimated to total S\$4.84 million, funded by loans from the government.

The earliest development projects on Sentosa by the private sector were hotels, amenities and facilities at the beaches and the construction of restaurants. Alan Choe, who headed the URD and later became chairman of the SDC recalled in a 2014 interview:

"We were able to sell land for private development, which enabled us to generate a lot of income. We sold sites to Beaufort Hotel,



The swimming lagoon located on the southern coast of Sentosa, mid 1970s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Shangri-La Hotel... I devised a scheme where (the developers) paid (SDC) a lump sum, which was a fraction of what the land was worth. In exchange, I took 20 per cent of gross takings as long as the project continued.."

For much of the 1970s and the 1980s, despite the tourism and leisure developments that were furiously springing up across Sentosa, the only cars that were allowed on the island consisted of those belonging to the SDC's management and taxis ferrying visitors from the mainland. This restriction on motor traffic may reflect the influence of then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who said at the opening of the Sentosa Golf Club in 1973:

"On Sentosa, the noise and bustle of Singapore seems remote and cut off... there is the sea. There is no roar of motor traffic. It is important to keep Sentosa this way, free from motor traffic. I hope (SDC) will try to keep this island as a retreat for those who seek a place where they can walk, without competing with cars, lorries and buses... most important, a place where they can get away from the noise of machines."



Leisure cyclists at Sentosa, 1978
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

Besides the development of tourism and leisure projects, Sentosa also became home to Singapore's first communications satellite earth station. Located on the southern slope of Mount Serapong, the station was completed in 1971 and enabled direct satellite connections to numerous countries, increasing the speed and capacity of telecommunications. The 10-acre site at Serapong was chosen as it was clear of built-up areas, which could potentially interfere with reception and transmission of signals.



The Sentosa Satellite Earth Station, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

On 8 August 1971, the earth station facilitated the first broadcast of television footage received via satellite from an overseas source – the landing of the Apollo 15 spacecraft in the Pacific Ocean.

EARLY ATTRACTIONS

The first wave of Sentosa's attractions and leisure developments opened from 1974, with the Coralarium, the Cable Car, Sentosa Golf Club, Palawan Beach (then known as the Swimming Lagoon) and the Gun Museum at Fort Siloso being built during this period. In 1976, an adult admission ticket of S\$1.50 to Sentosa included entry to the Maritime Museum, the lagoon, Fort Siloso and Surrender Chambers, as well as rides on the island's bus service.

Cable Car

Linking a station at the summit of Mount Faber at one end to Sentosa's Carlton Hill (now Sentosa Station) at the other, the Singapore Cable Car system was opened on 15 February 1974. Developed at a cost of S\$5.8 million, the gondola lift system also encompassed a station at Jardine Steps (now HarbourFront).

Designed as both an attraction and a means of transportation, the project was overseen by the URD (which later became the Urban Redevelopment Authority) and the PSA, with the cable cars supplied by the Swiss company Von Roll. Proving popular for the

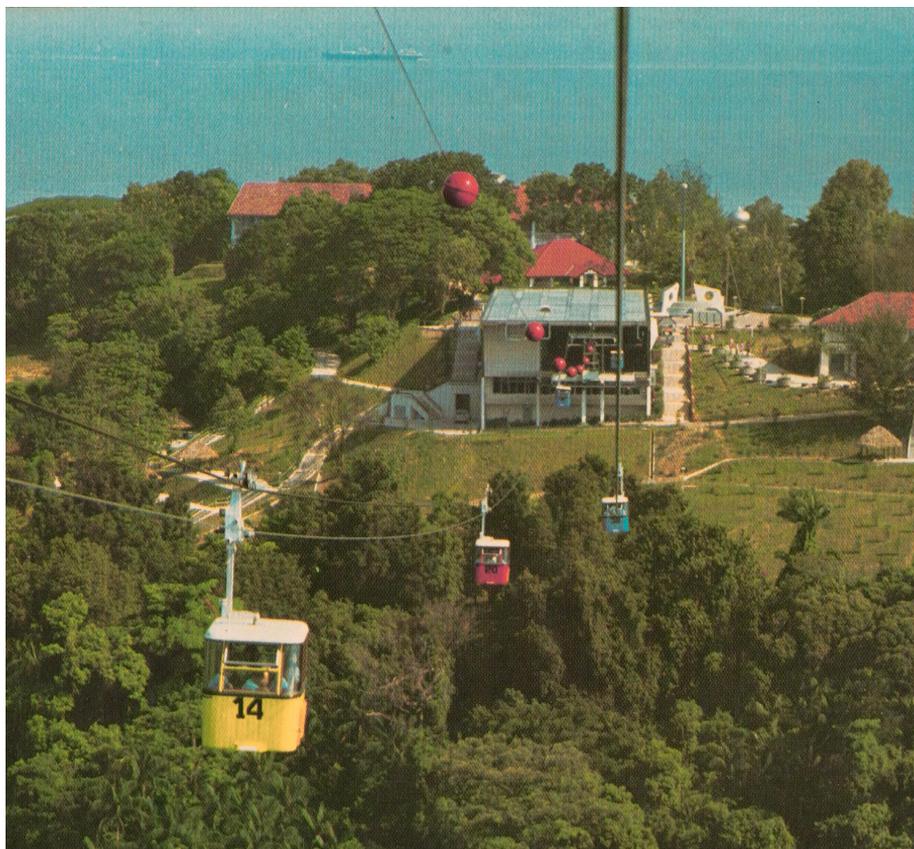
scenic, panoramic views of Keppel Harbour and Sentosa that it afforded, the cable car was drawing an average of 50,000 passengers per month by 1975. Until the late 1980s, when the Sentosa Causeway was constructed, the cable car and the ferry were the only means of getting onto the island.

In 1983, the ensnarement of the oil drilling ship *Eniwetok* with the cableway caused an accident which led to the loss of seven lives. When the cable car system was built, a maximum height clearance of 56.5m had been imposed on vessels passing through Keppel Harbour.

In the case of the 1983 accident, the *Eniwetok* had recently been fitted with a drilling derrick that took the ship's height to 69m. At around 6pm, the vessel made contact with the cableway and dislodged a car cabin, killing American engineer Fred Kunimoto, Fred Kresser, Dr Aileen Wong Foong Oi, Dr John Frederick Jex and Pam Mitchel. Another cable car had its door forced open, leading to the deaths of Pritam Kaur and Mahinder Singh. Madam Pritam's 22-month-old grandson, Tasvinder Singh, was saved by Abdul Latip Jantan, a PSA marine assistant who braved strong sea currents to rescue the child.

Another four cable cars containing 13 passengers were affected in the accident, and remained ensnared on the cableway for some six hours due to the potentially fragile state of the system after the accident. The passengers were eventually rescued by the Singapore Armed Forces using two military helicopters, with soldiers connected to the helicopters by winch bringing passengers to safety. A commission of inquiry into the accident later found the captain of the *Eniwetok* and the marine pilot guiding the vessel negligent as they did not know the correct height of the ship.

After months of repairs and safety testing, the cable car system returned to operation in August 1983. In 2015, the system was expanded with the addition of the Sentosa Line, with new stations added at the former



Cable cars leaving the former Carlton Hill station (now Sentosa Station), mid 1970s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Merlion Plaza, Mount Imbiah and Fort Siloso, providing aerial views of Sentosa's forests, coastline and attractions.

Former Coralarium

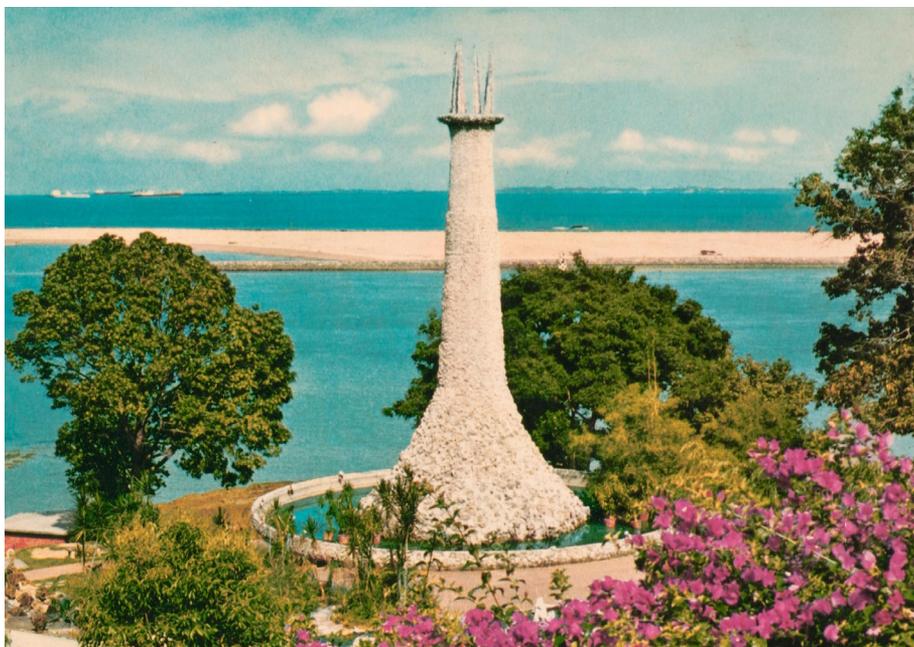
Operating from 1974 to 1995, the Coralarium exhibited a wide variety of corals, seashells and marine invertebrates, including live corals and organisms in display tanks. Mooted by Cabinet minister Goh Keng Swee, the Coralarium also featured a 18-metre-tall Coralon tower and dioramas on the evolution and life cycles of shells and corals.

In early 1970s, the authorities had envisioned a coral garden as an attraction for visitors to Sentosa. The project was undertaken by the



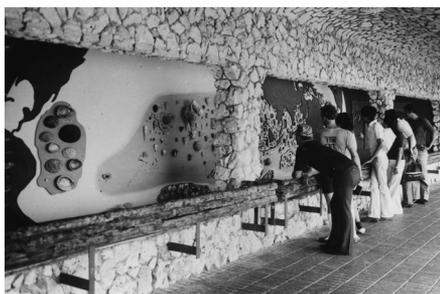
The Sentosa Cable Car Station and souvenir kiosk, undated
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

URD and a marine biologist, Dr Tham Ah Kow, was engaged to oversee experiments in growing and cultivating coral. A lagoon with live coral was considered, as was an underwater tunnel affording views and glass-bottomed tour boats.



The Coralon tower, mid 1970s

National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



Visitors looking at a display of seashells at the Coralarium, 1975

Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

After encountering issues with the coral cultivation however, Johnny Johnson and Jack Fisher were hired to collect coral from Singapore's waters and develop the Coralarium, having previously run the Dari Laut shell museum and tourist attraction in Loyang on mainland Singapore. A coralarium complex designed and built by the URD was opened to the public on 3 August 1974. As it was one of the earliest attractions on Sentosa,

a number of former kampong residents of the island were hired as staff there.

By the mid-1990s, the Coralarium had become less attractive to visitors and it made way in 1995 for the development of the Sentosa Cove residential estate.

Former Maritime Museum

Showcasing the maritime heritage of Southeast Asia, this museum was open from 1975 to 2001. Built on the site of the former Blakang Mati Integrated Primary School near the Ferry Terminal, the museum also displayed a signal mast formerly erected at the Albert Dock in Keppel Harbour.

The Maritime Museum's galleries featured models of vessels from the *perahus* and *jongkongs* used by local coastal communities to modern cargo ships, as well as maps and other artefacts. Its first curator was Eric Alfred, previously a curator at the National Museum of Singapore, and the museum also hired craftsmen and carpenters from the



The former Maritime Museum at Sentosa, 1975
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation

islands around Sentosa. These crafters carried on centuries-old traditions of local vessel-building, using materials including *pulai* timber harvested on the island.

Later phases of the museum's development also featured boat-building sheds and a demonstration fishing village. By the early 2000s, the museum was only drawing an average of some 50 visitors a day, and was closed in 2001.

Surrender Chambers

Fort Siloso

Opened on Sentosa from 16 February 1976, the Surrender Chambers displayed waxwork dioramas of the surrender ceremony that ended the Japanese Occupation in 1945. An exhibit depicting the 1942 surrender of the British following the Japanese invasion of Singapore was added later.

Both exhibits were originally housed in the former military hospital building in 1976,

with the building named the Sentosa Art Centre. The attraction evolved into the Sentosa Wax Museum (1982), Pioneers of Singapore/Surrender Chambers (1984) and Images of Singapore (1995), following the addition of a new wing showcasing exhibits on Singapore's heritage and culture. In 2016, the attraction became known as Madame Tussauds Singapore.

The Surrender Chambers exhibit, featuring waxwork models of British admiral Louis Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia Command, and Japanese general Seishiro Itagaki among others, had originally been displayed at City Hall, the site of the surrender ceremony.

The exhibit was then relocated to Sentosa in 1975 and officially opened the following year, with the display also including galleries featuring photographs, maps and films of World War II. By 1976, the exhibit was receiving around 21,000 visitors per month. In



The Surrender Chambers exhibit at Fort Siloso, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



The former military hospital building housing the Surrender Chambers exhibition, 1970-80s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

2004, the Surrender Chambers exhibits were moved to Fort Siloso.

ATTRACTIONS FROM THE 1980S

A second wave of attractions followed in the 1980s as Sentosa continued to grow as a leisure island, with the year between 1980 and 1981 being the first in which Sentosa's annual visitorship had exceeded one million visitors.

By 1982, the government and the SDC had decided to concentrate their development philosophy on attractions and activities that

would draw locals, given that tourists would also enjoy them. Articulating this philosophy, then-SDC chairman Tan I Tong said:

"The mainland is getting overcrowded and we must develop our offshore islands for young people to get out and enjoy themselves after work. Our concern for them is as great as that we have for providing for the tourists."

Former guide and telephone operator Asmah Aziz grew up on the nearby island of Pulau Seking (now part of Semakau Island) before joining SDC. She recalled:

"I remember there would be large crowds on Sentosa, especially during (events like) the Housing & Development Board's Family Day, and there would be long queues at the Ferry Terminal and the monorail. As a guide on the red double-decker buses, I would tell visitors and tourists stories about the history of Sentosa and Singapore, about the island's attractions and the former kampongs here."

"Sentosa is not just a workplace for me - it's also where I met my late husband (Masturi Lehwan, who worked at Sentosa Golf Club) and spent time

with my children. From the beaches or Fort Siloso, we would point out my family's former houses on Pulau Seking."

The attractions developed by the SDC and private interests over the 1980s and 1990s included the Sentosa Monorail, the Musical Fountain and the Fountain Gardens, Underwater World and the Sentosa Merlion. The Butterfly Park and Insectarium, Rare Stone Museum, Fantasy Island waterpark and Volcano Land theme park were also among the island's attractions during this era.

From the 2000s, an increasing number of theme parks, rides and other attractions were developed on Sentosa, to meet the changing tastes of visitors and evolving leisure trends. These included the Skyline Luge Sentosa (2005), with tracks at Siloso Beach and Imbiah Lookout, the Mega Adventure Park (2009) on Mount Imbiah and Universal Studios Singapore (2010).

Former Sentosa Monorail

Started in 1982, the Sentosa Monorail was a light rail system that spanned six kilometres and five stations. Beginning and ending its loop service at the Ferry Terminal, the monorail stopped at stations at the site of the former Apollo Sentosa Hotel, Fort Siloso, the swimming lagoon and Carlton Hill next to the cable car station (now Sentosa Station).

Riders on the monorail enjoyed intimate yet elevated views of the island, its diverse, leisurely scenes and the natural environment along its route. The section of the monorail route curving around Sentosa's western tip was said to be one of its most scenic, with views of Fort Siloso, the Southern Islands and the forested Mount Imbiah.

The monorail was first mooted in the mid-1970s for its reduced air and noise pollution impact, a major factor in preserving Sentosa's resort atmosphere. Utilising an electric rail system, it replaced double-decker buses as the main mode of transport on Sentosa. Many of the train drivers had previously been employed

as bus drivers and guides on Sentosa, before being retrained to operate the monorail. Each train had 15 cabins and a carrying capacity of around 1,000 passengers per hour.

Chua Bee Tin, who grew up in a Blakang Mati kampong before becoming a monorail driver, recalled:

"Most people liked to take (a round trip) and enjoy the view of the island - after one round, they would know where they wanted to go. Even now (after the replacement of the monorail with a light rail system), I still get people coming to Sentosa and looking for the monorail."

In 2005, the monorail ceased operations and was replaced in 2007 by the Sentosa Express, a light rail system with a higher passenger capacity and more comfortable rides. Today, sections of the monorail tracks can still be seen on Sentosa, including near Siloso Beach and along the Mount Imbiah Trail. A number of former monorail stations have



A section of the former monorail tracks along Mount Imbiah Nature Trail, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board



A monorail train heading to the west of Sentosa, mid 1980s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

been repurposed as attractions, including the Sentosa Nature Discovery at Imbiah Lookout and the Surrender Chambers exhibition at Fort Siloso. A section of the remaining monorail tracks has also been re-used as an elevated walk from the Sentosa Nature Discovery to Mount Imbiah Trail.

Recalling rides on the monorail, administrator Jo-Anne Lee said:

“Growing up in the 1980s as a teen, there weren’t many ‘date’ places. Sentosa seemed far away enough from the parents, and taking a cable car ride was romantic. I also miss the monorail. It was a bit rickety, but I liked its simplicity, how low it was, going through tall trees, and being able to stick your head and hand out. It felt like doing a low-energy roller coaster!”

Former Musical Fountain

Opened in 1982, the Musical Fountain featured light and music shows synchronised with water displays, and was also a venue for concerts and cultural events. Designed to draw families and groups to visit Sentosa in the evening, its popularity inspired further nightlife-centric attractions including *pasar malams* (night markets), the Rasa Sentosa food centre and a waterfront promenade for strolls.

Developed in several phases and expansions in the 1980s and 1990s, the Musical Fountain included a swan-shaped pool, terrace pools and an electronic system that synchronised water jets, music and lighting. In the 1980s, community centre groups and tour groups organised trips to the Musical Fountain, while the events held there were of a multicultural



A night view of the Musical Fountain, early 1980s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

variety, including Hindi music nights, *ronggeng* and *joget* dances, pop music shows and talent contests.

From 1984, the Fountain was a key element of Singapore's thriving Malay rock scene. Concerts featuring Ramli Sarip and Sweet Charity, Lovehunters, Search and others regularly drew more than the Fountain's 5,000 seating capacity. During this era, rock concerts were held roughly every one and a half months at the Fountain, bringing thousands of fans known as *mat rock* to Sentosa.

In 1993, the South East Asian (SEA) Games Flame Lighting ceremony was held at the Musical Fountain. The attraction operated until 2002, when it was further expanded into a multi-sensory water and pyrotechnic show

with video images projected onto multiple water screens, performers and fire effects, known as Songs of the Sea and set on a *kelong* (offshore fishing platform).

Former Fountain Gardens and Ferry Terminal

Together with the Musical Fountain, these two developments were built on 17ha of land reclaimed from Imbiah Bay, Kuching Creek and the foreshore of Sarong Island. Opened in 1987, the Ferry Terminal replaced older landing stages and enabled vessels with larger passenger capacities to dock. It also housed a monorail station, food outlets and shops. Constructed at a cost of S\$18.5 million, the three-storey terminal building featured colonial-style green balustrades, red tiled roofs and a clock tower.



A postcard featuring various attractions at Sentosa, including the Fountain Garden in the centre and the Ferry Terminal in the background, late 1980s

National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board



The Ferry Terminal, late 1980s

National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Forming a scenic thoroughfare connecting the Ferry Terminal and the Musical Fountain, the Fountain Gardens was another attraction built in the 1980s. Designed in the style of 18th century European gardens, it included an amphitheatre modelled after the 17th century Villa Gamberaia in Tuscany. With the adjacent terminal and Musical Fountain, this area served as the gateway into Sentosa

and the start of the island's central spine that connected to the beaches in the south.

Former Underwater World

The Underwater World oceanarium was opened in 1991, after former Cabinet minister Goh Keng Swee had suggested the concept to the SDC. Remembered for its 83-metre-long tunnel which afforded a view of its 2,500 sharks, turtles, rays and fish, the oceanarium closed in 2016.

Developed by a group of investors with the majority interest owned by the Marinescape Corporation of New Zealand, Underwater World's design was inspired by that of a sea-life park in Auckland. The attraction boosted Sentosa's visitor's numbers and was a popular choice for families and students on holidays. Ummi Nurul Syafiqah, a therapist, remembered: "One of the most awesome parts of Underwater World was that you could see sea creatures like sharks swimming above".



Visitors at Underwater World, early 1990s
National Museum of Singapore Collection, courtesy of National Heritage Board

Sentosa Merlion

The 37-metre-tall Sentosa Merlion was a sculpted viewing tower completed in 1996. It was inspired by the Merlion first designed for the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board in 1964, before the first Merlion sculpture was installed at the mouth of the Singapore River in 1972.

The Sentosa Merlion was sculpted by Australian James Martin and built at a cost of S\$11.5 million, with the nearby Merlion Walk connecting pedestrians to the southern sea front. It was designed with a flowing water feature and fountains embedded with attractive mosaics that were inspired by Spanish architect, Antoni Gaudi. The viewing tower afforded sweeping views of the island and its surrounds, and also included exhibits and animated displays. In 2019, it was announced that the Sentosa Merlion would be demolished to make way for the Sensoryscape thoroughfare connecting the north and south of the island.



The former Sentosa Merlion, 2004
Courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation



The view of Mount Imbiah from Fort Siloso Skywalk, 2021
Courtesy of National Heritage Board

TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE OF SENTOSA

From the inception of Sentosa in the early 1970s, visitors have been drawn to its heritage, including its pre-colonial history and military narratives, as well as the island's leisure offerings and natural beauty. Former barracks became examples of adaptive reuse, converted into hotels and restaurants, while forts and other military structures were restored and utilised for education and entertainment, helping preserve heritage sites and cultures while meeting the needs of modern visitors.

In his National Day Rally speech in 2019, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that the former military, industrial and shipping island of Pulau Brani would be developed as a leisure destination together with its neighbour, Sentosa, with both islands becoming a part of the Greater Southern Waterfront.

The Sentosa-Brani Master Plan envisions five zones with distinct characters leveraging on island charms, with the Vibrant Cluster as the new festive and attraction zone with large-scale attractions, and the Island Heart as the lifestyle and commercial node containing hotels, conference spaces, retail, dining and activity spaces. The Waterfront zone marks the

transition from city to island, complementing developments on the mainland, while the Ridgeline encompasses green spaces from Mount Faber to Pulau Brani, through Mount Serapong to Mount Imbiah and completing at Fort Siloso on Sentosa. Lastly, the Beachfront will revitalise Sentosa's beaches for different groups of visitors.

The preservation of Sentosa's island character and natural environment has long been a conscious decision on the part of the authorities even amid heavy development, and sustainable development continues to be a key design principle of the Sentosa-Brani Master Plan. In a sustainability roadmap launched in 2021, the SDC detailed plans to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030, by implementing renewable energy solutions, forming a sustainability-focused business network and embarking on green tourism, among other initiatives.

With the island character of Sentosa and Pulau Brani forming an important element, these plans look set to bring the two islands into the latest stage of their evolution, drawing upon centuries of community and heritage as well as more recent decades of adaptation for authentic, environmentally sustainable leisure and recreation.

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Additional information courtesy of Sentosa Development Corporation.

CREDITS

Amara Sanctuary Resort

Capella Singapore

National Archives of Singapore

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The Barracks Hotel

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SUGGESTED SHORT TRAIL ROUTES

KAMPONGS AND BARRACKS

2 hours; public transport, 3km

From the Orang Laut and kampong settlers to British Army personnel, a diverse range of people and communities have called Pulau Blakang Mati home. This trail explores the lives and livelihoods of the people of Blakang Mati, as well as their living spaces that spanned kampongs, barracks and luxurious bungalows.

Start your island journey with the **People of the Straits** trail marker at the HarbourFront end of the Sentosa Gateway boardwalk, which links mainland Singapore with Sentosa. For centuries, the straits in this area have been part of global maritime trade routes, bringing merchants and sailors from across the world into contact with local communities.

These local communities included the earliest known inhabitants of the area, the Orang Laut, a boat-dwelling people comprising different *suku* (tribal groupings) from across Southeast Asia. Later settlers on Blakang Mati included diverse groups of people from across the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesia Archipelago, China and India. In the early 1800s, there were kampongs at the foot of Mount Serapong and on the south-eastern part of the island. By the 20th century, most kampong residents lived along the northern coast where Resorts World Sentosa is today.



Continue on the trail by taking the Sentosa Express light rail from VivoCity and alight at Imbiah Station. Cross Beach View Road to Oasia Resort Sentosa, which contains a **former recreation ground and barracks**. Between 1878 and 1967, Blakang Mati served as a defence outpost of the British Empire, and housed military personnel including British, Indian and Australian soldiers in barracks and quarters located around the island. Here you will find a trail marker describing how these soldiers lived and worked on Blakang Mati.



Take the stairs to the left of the hotel building and follow the sheltered walkway to explore **barracks at the former parade ground** behind Oasia Resort. This area, now part of the Barracks Lawn, was used for training, parades and military ceremonies. The barracks around it have been conserved and redeveloped into hotels and restaurants, including The Barracks Hotel and Mess Hall. Look out for boot scrapers used by soldiers that remain in front of the barracks, and learn more about military life through the Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) information boards within the Barracks Lawn.

Exit the Barracks Lawn via Gunner Lane and make a right turn at Artillery Avenue. Along this road, you will find a building that formerly served as the **Royal Engineers' Yard**, with information boards detailing its history. The



Royal Engineers were based on Pulau Brani, but a small contingent on Blakang Mati supported engineering and development works with its workshop, shed and stores. The building was later used as a station for SDC's rangers.

Continue along Artillery Avenue until you reach the trail marker for the **former Officers' Mess and Quarters**, which is now part of Capella Hotel. The hotel development includes colonial bungalows that previously housed officers, including two buildings that now form the hotel's grand façade, as well as two manor-like bungalows that were reserved for senior officers. In the past, the officers' mess hosted parties and festivities, with celebrations spilling out into the wide verandahs of the buildings. Head up the hill to take a closer look at the conserved buildings, and explore the dining options here!



To reach the final stop on this route, head back to Artillery Avenue and take buses A or C to Imbiah Lookout. Head past Sentosa Cable Car Station to arrive at the **former**

military hospital, which now houses Madame Tussauds Singapore. This building was completed in the 1890s and served as the military hospital for British troops. During the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), the hospital was used as barracks by Japanese troops. From the 1970s, the building housed the Surrender Chambers exhibition and other attractions, including Madame Tussauds Singapore in 2014.

FORTS

2 hours; on foot, 4km

Pulau Blakang Mati had been identified as a potential defence outpost since at least the 17th century. However, it was only in the late 1800s that the island was militarised, with artillery batteries, forts, barracks and other infrastructure constructed by the British. This trail explores the extensive fortifications on Sentosa, including Fort Siloso, Imbiah Battery and Fort Serapong, and how they featured in the defence of colonial Singapore.

Start your journey from **Siloso Point Station**, which is accessible via buses A and C, and by cable car. Head to **Fort Siloso Skywalk** and ascend the tower for sweeping views of Keppel Harbour and the straits around Singapore. Located between the harbour and the straits, Sentosa was well-placed as a base from which to protect the maritime trade vital to Singapore over the centuries. During the colonial era, the artillery batteries and forts installed by the British were key elements in the wider defence of Singapore.



Enter [Fort Siloso](#) via the Skywalk to explore the only preserved coastal fort in Singapore. Fort Siloso was constructed from 1878 and its artillery emplacements protected the western entrance to Keppel Harbour and the surrounding straits. Over the decades, Fort Siloso also incorporated anti-aircraft and anti-motor torpedo boat gun emplacements, as well as searchlight and command posts.

The extensive infrastructure built into Mount Siloso includes barracks, casemates, underground magazines and tunnels. Here, you can take a deeper exploration of Fort Siloso through the various self-guided trails by Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) or wander around at your leisure.

Leave the fort through the Guardroom exit, which was the fort's original entry point. Here, you will find a trail marker detailing the [fortification of Pulau Blakang Mati](#). In the 17th century, the rival colonial powers Portugal and the Dutch Republic had both considered building a fort here, but it was only in the 1800s that the British constructed Fort Siloso, Imbiah Battery, Fort Serapong, Fort Connaught, as well as a battery at Berhala Reping and other military infrastructure.

Continue down Siloso Road to reach [Siloso Pier](#), where you'll find a trail marker exploring the history of this pier and others on Sentosa. Siloso Pier was constructed from 1878 to service the nearby fort, and is located near the western end of the island known as Sarang Rimau ("tiger's den" in Malay). Before roads were laid on the island, the pier was essential for the construction of Fort Siloso.

Go down the stairs, and head east back to Siloso Point Station. Access the Mount Imbiah Nature Trail via Siloso Road, and take an uphill stroll towards the former Imbiah Battery, which is next to Mega Adventure Park.

In the early 20th century, [Imbiah Battery](#) housed an infantry fortification and a battery with a 9.2-inch breech loading gun. The battery became non-operational in the 1930s, after



gun upgrades at Fort Connaught rendered it obsolete. Today, a Battery Command Post, Position Finding Cells and gun emplacements remain, and you can learn more about Imbiah Battery through the information boards here.

To exit Imbiah Battery, head down Imbiah Hill Road to reach Imbiah Lookout bus station, where you can take a bus to other parts of Sentosa island.



Optional: To experience more of Sentosa's defence heritage, head to [Fort Serapong](#), which is a short walk from Sentosa Cove Village bus station (accessible via bus B). The summit of Mount Serapong is the highest point on the

island, and the hill afforded a vantage point for artillery batteries. Learn more about the guns and history of Fort Serapong through information boards here, but please do not stray off the road as public access to forested areas and some structures is restricted. If you would like to explore these structures, please visit go.gov.sg/sentosanature for more information.

MEMORIES OF SENTOSA

1 hour; on foot, 2.5km

Since the 1970s and following its reinvention as a leisure destination, Sentosa has continually refreshed its attractions to adjust to shifting visitor preferences over the decades. A number of former attractions including the Musical Fountain and the monorail helped define Sentosa in the 1980s and 1990s, and still feature significantly in the social memories of Singaporeans. This trail revisits some of these locations and the memories associated with them.

Start at [Siloso Point Station](#), which is accessible via buses A and C, and by cable car. From the station, head down the stairs to [Siloso Beach](#), one of three beaches with swimming lagoons created by Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC) during the 1970s and 1980s.



Head towards Siloso Beach Walk, and you will come across the entrance to Mount Imbiah Nature Trail on your left. Here you will find a section of the [former Sentosa Monorail](#) tracks, as well as a trail marker detailing its history. The monorail service operated from 1982 to 2005 and served both as an attraction and as transport on the island. A 30-minute ride around the island afforded scenic views of the island's varied environments and locations, spanning forests, beaches and the sea as well as man-made attractions.

Head into the nature trail and follow the monorail tracks overhead. Cross Imbiah Walk and then make a right turn when you reach the T-junction further ahead. Exit the nature trail at Imbiah Lookout and cross Imbiah Road, before





taking the sheltered walkway towards Sentosa Cable Car Station.

Installed in 1974, the [Singapore Cable Car](#) is a gondola lift system connecting mainland Singapore and Sentosa, and quickly became popular for offering panoramic views of the island and surrounding waterways. At the outset, the network comprised stations at Mount Faber, HarbourFront and Carlton Hill (now Sentosa Station), before undergoing expansion in 2015 to include stations at the former Merlion Plaza, Mount Imbiah and Fort Siloso.

From Sentosa Station, take a short stroll towards Madame Tussauds Singapore. This conserved building was a [former military hospital](#) for British troops. After Sentosa's development into a leisure destination, the building was turned into an attraction that housed the Surrender Chambers exhibition, and subsequently, the Sentosa Wax Museum, which was later renamed Images of Singapore. Today, it houses Madame Tussauds Singapore, which opened in 2014.

To get to the final stop, follow the signs to Resorts World Sentosa (RWS), which is also in the direction of Imbiah Station. Head down the escalators and you'll find a trail marker for three well-loved attractions that formerly stood in this area from the 1980s: [the Musical Fountain](#), [the Ferry Terminal](#) and [the Fountain Gardens](#). The Musical Fountain drew crowds for its music and laser light shows, and was also a popular concert venue for Singapore's thriving Malay rock scene, including regular concerts by Ramli Sarip, Search and Lovehunters in the 1980s-90s.

Completed in 1987, the Ferry Terminal allowed for vessels carrying a larger number of visitors on each trip, while the Fountain Gardens was a scenic thoroughfare designed in the style of 18th century European gardens.

This is the final stop of the trail, and to conclude your exploration of Sentosa, you may wish to treat yourself to one of the many dining options available at RWS!

