

Balestier

A HERITAGE TRAIL



From sugar cane plantations to shops filled with sweet and savoury delights, Balestier is an area that offers a taste of history. From tigers in the woods to temples with deep roots, Balestier Road tells a tale that spans nearly 180 years and has borne witness to Singapore's remarkable journey from a British trading post to a modern city-state.

Today, Singaporeans make a beeline to Balestier Road to feast on chicken rice and *bak kut teh*. Others come for a wide selection of goods to light up their homes and add sparkle to their bathrooms. But behind the five-foot ways that still line much of Balestier Road, there are other discoveries to be made. This district was where key moments of the 1911 Chinese Revolution were hatched and classic Malay films were shot, where coffee was, and is still, brewed in the traditional way and conversations shared over freshly baked loaves of bread and flaky confectionery.

A joint effort by the National Heritage Board and the Urban Redevelopment Authority, and supported by the Moulmein Citizens' Consultative Committee and the Whampoa Citizens' Consultative Committee, the

Balestier

HERITAGE TRAIL



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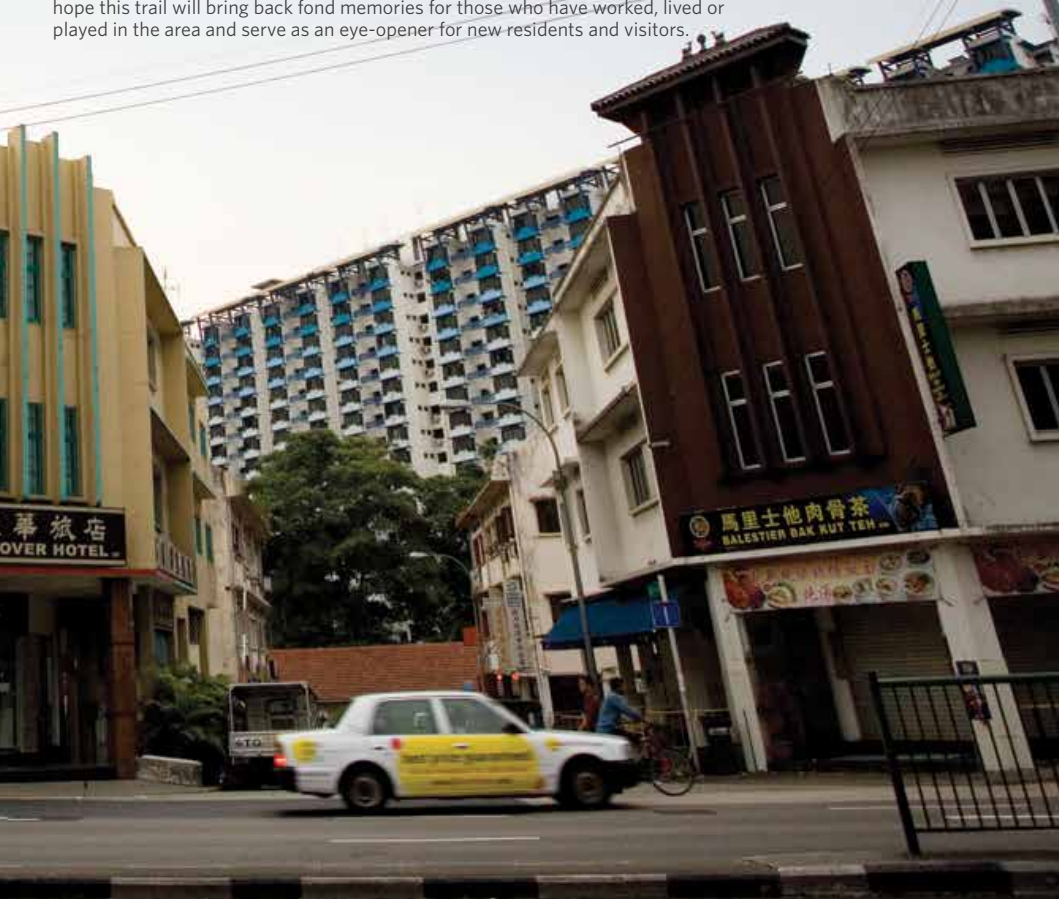
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Balestier Heritage Trail is a result of extensive archival research as well as interviews with residents and business owners who have witnessed the growth and development of Balestier Road. We hope this guide will serve as a reminder, or even an occasion for rediscovery, of Balestier's rich heritage for both residents and visitors.

So put on a pair of sturdy shoes, dress for the tropical heat and arm yourself with a camera – grab a friend or your family and play local tourist for a day. Experience for yourself the charm and colours of a place that has seen tremendous change and yet remains a thriving reminder of Singapore's past and peoples.

Readers are also welcome to share your own encounters and experiences by submitting photographs, videos and personal accounts to our website, <http://heritagetrails.sg>. This will form a growing body of stories and sightings that add to our knowledge and enrich the collective memories of a community where history lives on by the sidewalk.

The Balestier Heritage Trail is part of the National Heritage Board's on-going efforts to document and present the history and social memories of places in Singapore that many may not be aware of. Jointly presented by the National Heritage Board, Urban Redevelopment Authority, Moulmein Citizens' Consultative Committee and Whampoa Citizens' Consultative Committee, we hope this trail will bring back fond memories for those who have worked, lived or played in the area and serve as an eye-opener for new residents and visitors.





Left: Village life in a side lane during the 1950s. Right: The famous Balestier Road Hoover Rojak stall, now at Whampoa Food Centre.

A NEIGHBOURHOOD OF MANY NAMES

Like many other places in Singapore, Balestier Road and its surrounding area have acquired multiple names as various communities settled or worked in the neighbourhood over time.

The road is named after Joseph Balestier (1788-1858), the first American Consul to Singapore and the owner of a large sugar cane estate in the area. Later, the growth of numerous sports and recreation clubs along the lower reaches of the road (between Tessensohn and Moulmein Roads) led to the popular nickname Recreation Road.

As early as 1904, Balestier Road was also known as *Or Kio* ('Black Bridge' in the Hokkien dialect), a name still used by some old timers to refer to the area. This name arose as there was said to be a dark wooden bridge spanning Sungei Whampoa (Whampoa River) between Ah Hood Road and Toa Payoh, near the Thomson Road end of Balestier Road. *Or Kio* also referred to a bridge that ran across Kampong Java Canal (now known as Rochor Canal). This neighbourhood, which lies south of Balestier Road, was popularly known as *Pek Kio* ('White Bridge'), after a bridge that spanned Dorset Road. There was also an *Ang Kio* ('Red Bridge') at Norfolk Road in the same neighbourhood.

Another old Hokkien name was *Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Koai*, after a prominent Chinese temple along the road. *Koai* means 'street' in Hokkien, while *Goh Chor* is the transliteration of Rochore, the name of the district in the mid 19th century.

In the early 20th century, the Cantonese used the name *Wu-Hap Thong* or 'Taro Pond', as this semi-aquatic root crop was grown in the neighbourhood.

Thannir Kampam or 'Water Village', an old Tamil name of the road, refers to a time when bullock carts were used to ferry water from the nearby Sungei Whampoa to the city centre. Meanwhile, the Malays used the name *Kebun Limau* or 'Citrus Garden' to denote the area around the present Lorong Limau (off Kim Keat Road), where many lime gardens once flourished. The area bordered by Balestier and Serangoon Roads, where a Malay village used to be, was also known as *Mang Ka Kha*, which in Hokkien means 'Foot of the Jackfruit Tree' (*mang ka* being a corruption of *nangka*, Malay for 'jackfruit').

CONSUL AND CANE PLANTER: THE LEGACY OF JOSEPH BALESTIER

The story of Balestier Road began half a world away in New England, on the eastern coast of the United States of America. This was where Joseph Balestier grew up after he was born in 1788. Little is known about his early life, but he once resided on the island of St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies as well as Guayama in Puerto Rico. He had also worked as a merchant in New York and Boston. Captain Charles Wilkes (1798-1877), an American naval explorer who visited Singapore in 1842, described Balestier as being "well known among men of science in the United States".



Bustling street scenes in the 1950s. Some of the buildings in these photographs have survived to the present day and have been conserved by the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

In May 1834, Balestier arrived in Riau (now Bintan) as the American Consul to Riau with the mission to render aid to American shipping. Balestier chose to reside in Singapore, however, as he felt the island was a more important trading hub. He was named Consul to Singapore on 4 July 1836. His consular duties included fostering American trade and the welfare of Americans in Singapore. To earn extra income, Balestier acted as a shipping agent and supplied provisions to visiting ships from a godown by the Singapore River.

A keen horticulturalist, Balestier was among the founders of the Singapore Agricultural and Horticultural Society in 1836. In 1834, Balestier leased 405 hectares of land on which he planted 89 hectares of sugar cane. The land, which became known as Balestier Plain, covered an area now bounded by Sungei Whampoa, Serangoon, Balestier and Kim Keat Roads. By 1846, Balestier Road, which adjoined part of Balestier's estate, was already marked in a map of Singapore by the surveyor John Turnbull Thomson.

Unfortunately, the sugar cane estate proved unviable due to heavy British import duties on Singapore-grown sugar and rum (a liquor distilled from sugarcane). In 1848, Balestier's plantation was put up for sale to pay off debts.

TOIL AND TIGERS

Sugar cane is native to tropical Asia and has served as an important source of crystallised sugar since the Gupta Dynasty of India in the

third century CE.

Making sugar was a highly labour-intensive activity, so each plantation would usually have its own processing plant. Balestier's estate housed a steam-powered mill and a boiling facility able to make 5,000-6,000 pounds (2.2-2.7 tonnes) of sugar a day. There were also copper stills and fermentation vats for distilling rum from molasses or sugar syrup.

The cane fields were surrounded by broad ditches and linked by a 4.2 metre wide canal on which the crop was transported by boat to the mill. Horses, cattle and even a young elephant were used to plough the soil, and Chinese and Indian workers were hired for three Spanish dollars a month. There was also a two-storey residence with a garden where Balestier grew many fruit trees and rare plants.

Life on the plantation, carved out of swampy terrain and dense jungle, was far from sweet. The land had to be cleared, ploughed and irrigated. Tigers continued to hunt in their former territories, making every workday in the estate a harrowing experience. Balestier is recorded to count it as "no uncommon thing" to see tiger tracks about his house in the morning and two of his workers were killed by the big cats in 1842. The following year, another man succumbed to a tiger while he was digging a pit at the back of Balestier's estate.



FOR WHOM THE BELLS TOLL

Apart from the failure of his estate, Balestier's later years in Singapore were plagued by ill health and personal setbacks. His son, Joseph Warren Revere Balestier, died in Singapore, aged 24, on 2 March 1844. Maria Revere, his wife, died three years later and was buried with her son at Fort Canning. Balestier finally left Singapore for good in 1852. He is recorded to have lived in New York City before moving to York, Pennsylvania, where he died on 12 November 1858, aged 70.

Balestier's wife, Maria Revere (1785-1847), was a daughter of Paul Revere, a bell-maker and hero of the American Revolution. In 1843, she presented a bell cast by her father's foundry to the Church of St Andrew (which was rebuilt as St Andrew's Cathedral in 1856), with the condition that it be rung for five minutes every evening after eight to signal the start of the nightly curfew. This tolling reminded residents to be watchful and sailors to return to their ships in a time when the streets were badly lit and relatively unsafe. The Revere Bell, which measures 89 cm in diameter and 81 cm in height, is now

part of the National Museum of Singapore collection.

AFTER THE CONSUL: BALESTIER ROAD IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

After Balestier's departure, his estate was acquired by the authorities and part of it leased out to Chinese farmers. Another portion was turned into a burial site for paupers and lepers from Tan Tock Seng Hospital (then known as the Chinese Pauper's Hospital), which was located at the junction of Balestier and Serangoon Road from 1861 to 1909. There were also a few brick kilns operated by Indian convicts during the 1860s. (During the 19th century, many prisoners from India were sent to Singapore, where they were employed as labourers and builders. After serving their term, many of these convicts remained in Singapore as traders, artisans or skilled craftsmen.)

As new settlers populated Balestier Road from the late 19th century, they established villages and grew crops such as taro, as evidenced by the area's Cantonese name *Wu-Hap Thong*



(Taro Pond) in the early 1900s. Lime was cultivated in the aptly named *Kebun Limau*. Rattan workers set up cottage industries along Sungei Whampoa and sugar cane continued to be grown on small plots of land not occupied by buildings and dwellings.

Meanwhile, wealthy townfolk had begun to move out of the city centre in the late 19th century, acquiring land and building mansions along Balestier Road and its side lanes. Among them were the Aljunieds, a notable Arab family who resided here for over a century, and the Sultan of Sulu, who maintained a house in the early 1900s. The Sultan of Siak (a small kingdom in Sumatra) also owned a stately mansion at 7 Jalan Rajah with stables and coach houses. Bin Chan House at Tai Gin Road, which survives as the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, is another example of this trend. In the wake of these new residents came tradesmen and merchants who operated from shophouses along the main road, turning Balestier into “a very busy place” by the 1910s (Anonymous letter to the *Straits Times*, 10 October 1916).

» *Who are the Aljunieds?*

The founder of this family is Syed Sharif Omar Aljunied (1792-1852), a princely descendant of the Prophet Mohamed who moved to Singapore from Palembang in 1819. Having acquired wealth through trade, the Aljunieds shared much of their blessings with the community. Among the family’s gifts were the Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka located off Havelock Road (Singapore’s oldest mosque) as well as land for St Andrew’s Cathedral and Tan Tock Seng’s Pauper’s Hospital.

» *Revere’s ride into history*

Paul Revere (1735-1818) was an American patriot who played a pivotal role in the American Revolution for independence from the British. He is famed for his midnight ride to the towns of Lexington and Concord to warn the American forces of approaching British troops, an act immortalised in the poem *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882).

We suggest you begin your walk through the Balestier Heritage Trail at the Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple near the junction of Moulmein and Balestier Roads.

249 Balestier Road
**Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong
Temple**



No traces of the sugar cane estate remain today. Instead, a modest temple established in 1847 by Hokkien labourers on the northern fringes of the plantation serves as the only visible reminder of the pioneers who worked on Balestier's land.

Such temples served the religious and spiritual needs of early migrants to Singapore and fostered a sense of community amongst those living far from their ancestral homelands. The Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple provided, and still offers, an abode of peace and tranquillity to devotees who burn incense and joss to seek blessings for their loved ones.

Goh Chor is the Hokkien transliteration of Rochore, the name of the surrounding area in the

mid 19th century, while *Tua Pek Kong* (literally 'Grand Old Man') is a Taoist deity widely worshipped by overseas Chinese across Southeast Asia for his ability to grant fortune, cure diseases and ward off storms and other perils. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the temple was also known as *Fu De Tang* (Shrine of Prosperity and Goodwill). The temple also houses other deities such as the Tiger-lord, from whom devotees seek redress from injustices.

The temple's small scale, with a single forecourt, belies a wealth of detail. Built in the southern Chinese style, the low, tiled roof features ornate ridges decorated with prancing dragons, birds, fish, blazing pearls, phoenixes and flowers. The roof and brick walls are supported by timber beams, rafters and battens. Some of the granite columns were made by craftsmen from China.

Three stone plaques record the temple's establishment in the 27th year of the Chinese Emperor Daoguang (r. 1820-1850) as well as subsequent renovations in 1920 and 1928. The plaques also bear the names of donors who contributed to the temple's reconstruction and repair. Today, the temple, which is under the trusteeship of the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan, is still maintained by the descendents of the original keepers.

A notable feature of the temple grounds is a freestanding Chinese opera or *wayang* stage, one of two that has survived on the mainland of Singapore (the other is at a temple at Jalan Kebaya off Holland Road), built in 1906 by Tan Boon Liat (1878-1940), a merchant and philanthropist. Though a dwindling tradition, Teochew and Hokkien operas are still performed here during important festivals. In the past, many street hawkers would gather at the temple grounds during *wayang* performances to sell food and other goods. One stewed duck seller, who has since moved to the market at Whampoa Drive, was said to have been especially popular.

Until the early 1990s, there was another popular Chinese temple located behind the Tua Pek Kong Temple called *Tian De Gong*. This temple was dedicated to Nezha the Third Prince (*San Tai Zi*), a boyish deity who rides on wheels of fire and wields a magic ring. This temple has since moved to 95 Tampines Link.



From Chinese religious architecture, we move on to marvel at shophouses built in a range of styles that fused western architectural trends, tropical urban design and traditional motifs. The first examples lie right across the road from the temple.

230 & 246 Balestier Road
Art Deco Shophouses



The traditional shophouses that survive to this day reflect a number of architectural styles. However, one universal feature is the five-foot way, which offers pedestrians shelter from the sun and rain. The five-foot way was introduced by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781-1826), who stipulated in his Town Plan of 1822 that every shophouse must include a verandah “open at all times as a continued and covered passage on each side of the street.”

Two noteworthy examples of the Singapore shophouse lie almost right across the road from the Tua Pek Kong Temple: a pair of buildings built in the 1950s in a style known as Art Deco. An architectural trend popular in the 1930s to 1950s, Art Deco designs feature clear geometric shapes with an air of subtle sophistication. Structural elements such as arches, keystones

and pediments are simplified, streamlined, and concentrated at the top or centre of the building. The Chrysler and Empire State Buildings in New York City are examples of this style.

Art Deco influences can be seen in the vertical fins that convey a sense of stature and height to the building housing the Hoover Hotel (246 Balestier Road). Meanwhile, the corner shophouse at 230 Balestier Road offers a bold contrast in its deep brown façade with slit-like windows between vertical fins. Look out for a pair of small deer figurines between a leaf-life shape on the top of the pitched roof. These are Buddhist symbols, the deer being a reference to Buddha’s first sermon in the Deer Park of Sarnath and the ‘leaf’ depicting a Dharmachakra, the Buddhist wheel of truth.

» *An entertainment hub*

The name Hoover is a reminder of Balestier’s recent past as an entertainment hub. During the 1940s and 1950s, public housing developments in the area led to a growing population and demand for new leisure facilities. One unhappy dweller of Lorong Limau complained (in a letter to the press in 1949) that life was “monotonous, and there is no amusement park or theatre hall or any other form of recreation in this locality” for some 70,000 residents. He had to wait nearly a decade, however, before the first cinema,

Ruby Theatre, opened at the site of the present Balestier Point in 1958. But soon, filmgoers were spoilt for choice with the opening of the Hoover Theatre in 1960 and the President Theatre in 1973.

In the 1980s, the popularity of home video led to falling numbers of cinemagoers, so Hoover Theatre was converted into an entertainment centre for Chinese variety shows. It became a venue for church services from 1989 to 1992 before returning to its roots as the New Hoover Cinema, which screened Indian movies until its closure in 1996. The name ‘Hoover’

still survives, however, in nearby establishments that had borrowed the name, such as Hoover Hotel and Hoover Rojak (at Whampoa Market).

Shaw Studios, whose Chinese martial arts or *wuxia* movies were often screened in the theatres, also enjoys a long association with Balestier Road. At a studio in Jalan Ampas, the company produced groundbreaking Malay films for close to 30 years. The company continues to have a presence in Balestier Road with the Shaw Plaza Cineplex (360 Balestier Road), which occupies the site of the former Hoover and President Theatres.



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From the Tua Pek Kong Temple, walk along Balestier Road until you reach the junction of Balestier and Kim Keat Roads, where there is a pedestrian crossing. Cross the road when it is safe to do so and you will arrive at the Sim Kwong Ho shophouses.

292-312 Balestier Road
Sim Kwong Ho Shophouses



The distinct form of the Singapore shophouse was laid down by colonial administrators who insisted that urban dwellings be built with stone and tiled roofs to reduce the risk of fire. Buildings had to face the public road and have common walls that form a terrace linked by a covered five-foot way. Ranging from two to five storeys in height, traditional shophouses often doubled up as business premises and family dwelling, although the upper levels might have been occupied by different tenants. Some owners used the ground floor as a shop, office or godown, while other units might house clan headquarters or trade associations.

The earliest shophouses were simple affairs with little or no ornamentation and plain façades with exposed pillars, rafters and beams. Later developments incorporated greater embellishments to produce elegant yet functional buildings. From the turn of the 20th century to the 1930s, a rubber boom in Malaya brought great wealth to many merchants in Singapore. Some of these landowners engaged European architects who added Western features such as classical motifs, Venetian arches, baroque foliage and open balustrades to traditional Chinese plant and animal iconography.

This spectacular hybrid style, which became known as 'Singapore Eclectic' or 'Chinese Baroque', is exemplified by a row of distinct shophouses by the junction of Balestier and Kim Keat Roads. Designed by the architectural firm of Westerhout and Oman, the shophouses were built in 1926 by a lady called Madam Sim Cheng Neo who also owned other properties in the area. The characters 'Sim Kwong Ho' are inscribed on the roof façade and people in the neighbourhood often refer to the building by this name. Old-time residents also recall a centre-piece in the form of a dog which has since vanished.

European glazed floral tiles cover the pastel-shaded walls, and elaborate festoons (carved garlands) overhang the upper windows, which are fringed by moulded pilasters (projecting columns) and capitals (the topmost section of a column) with floral wreaths. The tripartite or

three-window arrangement on the upper level reduces wall space to a minimum and provided maximum ventilation to the interior in a time before the widespread use of air-conditioning.

Apart from flowers, birds and mythical beasts, bats also appear as carved reliefs on some of the shophouse walls. These flying mammals are an ancient symbol of good fortune to the Chinese and stylised bat motifs often appear in Chinese architecture, furniture and ceramics.

The corner unit formerly housed an old fashioned *kopitiam* or coffeeshop with high back-to-back seats and narrow formica-topped tables. For many older Singaporeans, such *kopitiam* were fond hangouts where residents and neighbours would sip freshly brewed coffee and catch up with the latest news and each other. After more than 60 years, however, the third generation of owners discontinued the business and a modern establishment has taken over the unit.

Eastern Rice Dumpling

One current occupant of the Sim Kwong Ho shophouses is Eastern Rice Dumpling (300 Balestier Road). Here, you will find a shop selling traditional rice dumplings (also known as *bak chang* or *zongzi*), which consist of steamed glutinous rice stuffed with a savoury filling and wrapped in bamboo or fragrant pandan leaves. Depending on the kind of dumpling, the filling can be meat, shrimp or beans with egg yolk or spices.

Traditionally, *bak chang* were made to commemorate the mid-year Dragon Boat Festival or *Duan Wu Jie*, which began when the people of the kingdom of Chu threw rice into a river to feed the spirit of Qu Yuan, an official who had drowned himself to protest against corrupt leadership. Today, many people enjoy the dumplings all year round. Founded more than 30 years ago, Eastern Rice Dumpling is a family business currently run by the third generation, using recipes created by the grandmother of the present managing director Mr Lim Cheng Hwee.



Our next landmark lies just across the road from the Sim Kwong Ho shophouses and presents an unmissable sight and study in architectural contrast.

279 Balestier Road
Balestier Point



Balestier point



The former Ruby Theatre. IMAGE: THE STRAITS TIMES © SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS LIMITED. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.

The Singapore shophouse represents a long tradition of mixed-used urban developments. A more contemporary expression of this trend can be seen in Balestier Point, a visually striking building facing the junction of Kim Keat Road.

Resembling an assembly of colourful Lego bricks, this building made the headlines as “the new boy on the block” (*Straits Times*, 26 January 1988) when it opened in 1986. The building presented a sharp contrast in the neighbourhood which used to consist mainly of low-rise developments, but Balestier Point is now a major landmark along the road. The 18-storey building brings to mind the cubist structures of Pablo Picasso.

When Balestier Point first opened, residents and passers-by alike noted the unusual modular design of the \$35 million multi-purpose complex, which housed 62 retail units on the first two floors, car parks on the third and fourth levels and 13 floors of residential apartments with two or three bedrooms.

The designers, RDC Architects, were inspired by Habitat ‘67, a cellular housing project in Montreal, Canada, created by the renowned international architect Moshe Safdie, with whom they had earlier collaborated. To ensure that residents had ample privacy, the architects raised the homes above the commercial levels and provided each apartment with its own private terrace and garden in the air.

The upper apartments are arranged like a graded pyramid with a pair of penthouses on the topmost levels, followed by four units on the floor below and about ten when one reaches the level above the shopping podium. The lower podium, with a square grid and cascading modules that form the ‘foot’ of the pyramid, also shields the residences from traffic noise from the street. The traditional five-foot way was also reinterpreted as framed hollow cubes on the ground level through which pedestrians can walk.

Balestier Point received an Honourable Mention Award from the Singapore Institute of Architects in 1987. The building sits on the site of the former Ruby Theatre, which opened from 1958 until the early 1980s.

In the neighbourhood

Just before Balestier Point is a short street called Ava Road, where there is a Buddhist temple called *Nan Hai Si* (South Seas Temple). Across the road from Balestier Point at 266 Balestier Road is Ban Hin Hoe, a Chinese medical hall founded in 1954 by the father of the present owner, Mr Kok Kim Siew.

Street of Lights

Visitors will quickly notice a great number of shops stocking lighting systems along Balestier Road. Dozens of such shops line both sides of the street; some cater to homeowners seeking to dress up their houses, while others serve interior decorators and lighting contractors.

An example of a positive cluster effect, the high concentration of lighting shops arose from the success of a handful of pioneers who took advantage of then low rents. These businesses thrived and drew more competitors to the area. As more establishments opened, Balestier Road became synonymous with lighting supplies and this has spilled over to shops that sell related household materials such as bathroom equipment and tiles.

“I first started my shop in 1985 in a tin shed. Business was good as rent was cheap and I was able to survive the 1985-86 recession. Today there are almost 40 lighting shops in the area.”

– Mr Dennis Liew, owner of Chan Huat Lighting House (391 Balestier Road) the oldest operating lighting shop in the area. The company now has four retail outlets along Balestier Road.



Staying on the same side of the road as Balestier Point, a short walk up the road will bring you to Pegu and Martaban Roads, our next stop.

2-12 Pegu Road & 1-35 Martaban Road
Pre-war Terrace Houses



Retreat into these side lanes and you will find two rows of conserved terrace houses built in the 1920s and 1930s and lovingly restored in recent years. What sets these houses apart is the way they were arranged to follow the roads' gentle ascent up the hill, creating the pleasing effect of unbroken slopes. This feature is particularly visible at Martaban Road, which offers a reminder of the charming terrace houses at Emerald Hill Road and Saunders Road off Orchard Road.

The architecture reflects European neo-classical influences from the 1920s. The façades are decorated with pilasters (projecting columns), architraves (beams) and cornices in neo-classical proportions. Adaptations for the tropics include high level vents that allow warm air to escape from the roof and the use of coloured glass to diffuse harsh ambient light.

Forecourts with low surrounding walls front all the houses, enclosing each unit within a private compound with gate posts that convey a grand sense of entrance. The 1920s units have front walls with pre-cast balustrades shaped like vases, while those built in the 1930s have solid walls with eye-catching circular reliefs.

The last five houses along Martaban Road are distinguished by their Art Deco-style façades, which feature strongly geometric elements such as rectangular plaster panels on the upper parapets and incised plasterwork that mimics 'stone' work. Above the windows are pre-cast cement vents in a 'windmill' pattern. The buildings were originally finished in grey Shanghai Plaster.

13 Martaban Road was formerly a dormitory for attendants from the nearby Tan Tock Seng Hospital. This terrace house was built in the second transitional style (a simplified architectural style that reflected the economic austerity of the 1930s) and has since been restored into a contemporary home that retains the integrity of its humble heritage. During the conservation effort (which won a URA Architectural Heritage Award in 2007), many of the original roof rafters, timber doors and windows were preserved, along with the original roof profile.

CONSERVED SHOPHOUSES

315-321, 329-333 Balestier Road

Between Pegu and Martaban Roads is a row of conserved pre-war shophouses. The corner unit (333 Balestier Road), which features lively lions and delicate plaster lotuses and birds, is believed to have been built by the family of Madam Sim Cheng Neo, who was associated with shophouses along the road bearing such decorative elements. These shophouses, however, were probably built at a later time than those at 292-312 Balestier Road, as they feature more austere, simplified designs, which may reflect an economic downturn during the 1930s.



Scenes from the past

During the 1950s and 1960s, Pegu Road and the nearby Ava Road were bustling scenes where street vendors sold fish, vegetables and pork along the pavement in the afternoons and evenings. The Salvation Army also held church services at a worship hall at Martaban Road from the late 1940s. The site was later sold to private developers in 2006.

For many Singaporeans who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, Pegu Road was synonymous with the spectre of visits to the dentist and his array of stainless steel tools. A government outpatient clinic and dispensary opened here in 1959. This was followed by a school dental clinic opened by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in September 1963. The Pegu Road clinic was the first in Singapore to provide adequate dental healthcare to schoolchildren, in particular those from schools lacking proper dental facilities. Dental services came to an end at Pegu Road when the clinic's operations were transferred to the National Dental Centre in the late 1990s.



When you emerge from Pegu or Martaban Roads, cross the road at the pedestrian junction facing the Sim Kwong Ho shophouses and you will find yourself at Kim Keat Road.

Kim Keat Road



Kim Keat Road is named after Chua (Choa) Kim Keat, a Peranakan merchant and the only son of Chua Kai Hoon, a native of Malacca who moved to Singapore and died in 1865. Born in 1859, the younger Chua was also a son-in-law to Tan Kim Cheng (1829-1892), whose father Tan Tock Seng (1798-1850) founded Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

Chua Kim Keat started out as a tin salesman for Lim Tiang Wah and Sons. In 1886, he joined the newly formed Straits Trading Co. Ltd and became a leading figure in the tin smelting company. Chua, who also managed the rice business of Tan Kim Cheng & Co., maintained a country residence off Balestier Road by the road that bears his name. He also owned a lavish house at Pasir Panjang named 'Fairlyland', where he hosted garden parties that were well-attended by both the Chinese and European elites. Known to be a great lover of orchids and rare plants, Chua took part in flower shows at the Botanic Gardens, where he won prizes for his roses and dahlias. He died in 1907, aged 48.

Kim Keat Road once stretched all the way to the area around the Lian Shan Shuang Lin Temple in Toa Payoh. Well worth a visit if you have the time, this National Monument houses the oldest Buddhist monastery in Singapore. The temple was built in 1908 by two Hokkien merchants, Low Kim Pong and Yeo Poon Seng.

In the past, it was possible to walk directly from Balestier Road to Toa Payoh, but today the two areas are separated by the Pan-Island Expressway (PIE) and many have disassociated Kim Keat Road from Kim Keat Link, where the temple is located.

LAM YEO COFFEE POWDER

328 Balestier Road

Back in the days before Starbucks and instant 3-in-1 blends, the only way to get your daily cuppa' was to brew it from scratch by mixing hot water with coffee powder and straining the fluid through a fine mesh cloth. You could then enjoy your *kopi* (Malay for 'coffee') with sugar or add sweetened condensed or evaporated milk.

In the past, many households and *kopitiam* (Hokkien for 'coffee shop') would obtain their coffee from suppliers such as Lam Yeo Coffee Powder, which opened at 328 Balestier Road in 1960. The shop's name stems from the Hokkien transliteration of *Nanyang* (literally 'South Sea', an old Chinese term for Southeast Asia), as the father of the current owner, Mr Tan Bong Heong, used to work at night as a deputy editor with *Nanyang Siang Pao*, a local Chinese daily, while

selling coffee by day.

Little changed since the 1960s, the shop continues to furnish customers with various types of coffee powder, mainly from Indonesia. Mandheling, a highly aromatic coffee originating from Sumatra, is said to be one of the most popular blends at Lam Yeo.

Kopitiam in Singapore were traditionally the province of Hainanese migrants, many of whom worked as cooks or domestic servants for the British in colonial times. They probably learnt to brew coffee during their service and later opened coffee shops which became popular hangouts for locals.

"Balestier Road was described in the 1980s by the Straits Times as 'the most dangerous road in Singapore' for the most number of accidents per kilometre.

Yet this was the road I spent half my childhood traversing. While cars zipped by, I would be happily walking on narrow ledges next to the drain canals pretending to be a tightrope walker. Cars drove a lot slower then, and my hot rod was my sister's bicycle that let me speed happily around the unpaved roads. Today, one grumbles when one drives over bumpy roads, but back then, I hardly got to travel over anything that wasn't horribly rocky."

- Ian Tan, 36, a former press photographer who spent his childhood along Balestier Road.

» Did You Know?

In September 1960, Lam Yeo marked its opening at Balestier Road with a special offer to customers during the first month: each kati (about 0.6 kg) of coffee powder purchased would come with a free tin of condensed milk and one kati of sugar.

A neighbour of Lam Yeo but of even older origin is Lim Kay Khoo Optical & Contact Lens Centre (330 Balestier Road). The shop began in 1948 and moved to its present location in the 1960s. Here, one can find classic 'retro-style' spectacle frames of the sort that are now coming back into style among fashionable youths.

10/12 Kim Keat Lane &
4 Whampoa Drive

Traditional bakeries



TRADITIONAL BAKERIES

Sliced toast with butter or margarine and *kaya* (a local jam made from coconut and egg) plus a steaming cup of freshly brewed coffee – for decades, this has been the quintessential breakfast for Singaporeans who seek a quick yet hearty pick-me-up before starting the day's labours. Many coffeeshops along Balestier Road still offer this classic combination, to which some add a couple of runny soft-boiled eggs with a dash of white pepper and light soy sauce.

Take a walk down Kim Keat Road, turn right into Kim Keat Lane, and you will soon smell the rich aroma of bread loaves fresh from the oven. Follow the fragrance and you will find a traditional bakery known as Sweetlands Confectionery, where bread is produced around the clock for delivery to coffee shops and provision shops across the island. It can be hard to resist

the racks of brown loaves that line the bakery's walls, but try not to touch them, as they are still piping hot and have been placed there to cool down until the staff can safely pack them for delivery. A far cry from the automated factories that mass-produce bread for supermarkets and convenience stores, the bakery continues to make bread, buns and rolls in small batches, much as it has for more than 50 years. There is also a retail counter where the public can buy white bread, French loaves and buns with a variety of fillings such as curry and coconut.

About 5-10 minutes' walk away is another old-fashioned bakery which has been churning out traditional bread for at least half a century. Located at 4 Whampoa Drive, Sin Hon Loong Bakery (also known as Ghee Leong) offers bread, baguettes and buns to passers-by and also supplies many coffeeshops and sundry stores in Singapore.

"I cannot forget what it meant to grow up in a Balestier Road shophouse during the late 1970s and 1980s. For one thing, 233A Balestier Road was a most remarkable building. Originally a simple two-storey shophouse right next to the road, it was somehow extended almost four times its depth backwards to form one of the largest and longest houses in the area. All I know was that by the 1960s, it was inhabited by a huge number of people.

Most of the roof was covered with zinc sheets which meant unbearably hot interiors on warm days or a biting chill during the rainy season. It also meant that any thunderstorm sounded as if the Apocalypse was at hand. I remember when I was about three, there was a devastating downpour. I huddled with my siblings to watch TV as the house sounded as if it was taking millions of watery bullets.

– Mr Ian Tan, 36, a former press photographer who grew up at Balestier Road.

» Did You Know?

Whampoa Drive (which runs parallel to Kim Keat Road) is named after Hoo Ah Kay (1816-1880), a Chinese businessman who was also known as Whampoa after his birthplace in Guangdong, China. A successful ship chandler to the British Navy thanks to his fluency in English, Whampoa rose to become one of Singapore's leading merchants and the first Asian member of the Legislative Council. He also became the first and only Chinese to serve on the island's Executive Council and also held the post of Consul for China, Russia and Japan.

Whampoa was famous for his house at Serangoon Road, which was surrounded by a lavish garden where he grew many flowers and kept exotic pets such as an orang-utan who preferred brandy to water. During his lifetime, Whampoa's Gardens (known as 'Nam Sang Fa Un' in Cantonese) was open to the public during the Chinese New Year. When he died, the house was bought by Seah Liang Seah, a wealthy businessman who renamed it Bendemeer House. By the early 1960s, however, the grounds had deteriorated and the house was eventually demolished to make way for the Boon Keng Housing Estate.

76 Kim Keat Road

Masjid Hajjah Rahimabi
Kebun Limau



MASJID HAJJAH RAHIMABI KEBUN LIMAU

Located at the far end of Kim Keat Road just across Sungei Whampoa, this mosque traces its history to 1959 when residents of *Kebun Limau* sought to build a *surau* (prayer hall) where they could hold Friday prayers and other community events. In 1961, the government granted the residents a 573-square metre plot by Kim Keat Road. The Muslim community then gave \$20 per household to help fund the building of the *surau*, which was designed by architect H.M. Siddique. Known as *Surau Kebun Limau*, the result was a simple two-storey building of wood and concrete, with a prayer hall on the second floor.

As the Malay-Muslim community grew in the 1970s, its members raised funds to expand the *surau* into a mosque with room for more worshippers and facilities for religious events. In 1981, the mosque-building fund received a donation of \$1.6 million from Hajjah Rahimabi Ahmad Angullia, who gave from the proceeds of a sale of land inherited from her late father.

Hajjah Rahimabi (Hajjah denotes a Muslim lady who has completed the Haj or pilgrimage to Mecca) wanted to continue a family tradition of building mosques and gave in the memory of her daughter who passed away in 1976. The old *surau* was then replaced by a new mosque and renamed to honour her generosity. Completed in 1984, the mosque has space for about 500 worshippers and is decorated with woodcarvings sourced from Kelantan in Malaysia. The two smaller domes on the roof form skylights that reduce the need for artificial lighting.

» Did You Know?

Hajjah Rahimabi comes from a prominent family of Indian-Muslim merchants called the Angullias. Originating from Surat, a port in Gujarat, India, the Angullias are known for their substantial contributions to the local Muslim community. The family funded the building of the Angullia Mosque at Serangoon Road in 1890 as well as another Angullia Mosque in Angullia Park (off Orchard Boulevard).

RAYMAN ESTATE

From the mosque, it is possible to walk along Sungei Whampoa via a Park Connector that links Toa Payoh Town Park to Jalan Rajah and runs alongside the river until it reaches the Kallang Park Connector. Canalised in the 1930s, the river is popular with anglers. Birds such as herons and kingfishers can also be spotted hunting for fish. Developed by the National Parks Board, the Park Connector Network forms an islandwide trail of paths that link major housing estates, recreational parks and nature sites. Suitable for joggers, strollers and cyclists, the park connectors offer a safe and pleasant route to travel from park to park.

The Whampoa Park Connector will bring you past modern Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats by Whampoa Drive. This area used to be called Rayman Estate, after Lazarus Rayman (1889-1948), a former chairman of the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) and member of the Straits Settlements Legislative Council. Established in 1927 to tackle a severe housing shortage, SIT developed a major housing estate off Balestier Road in the 1940s, which was named after Mr Rayman in 1949. This estate, which has since been redeveloped, used to be connected to Towner Road via Jalan Kebun Limau, but the link was removed when the Central Expressway (CTE) was built in 1983.

REMINDERS OF FORMER KAMPONGS

A number of Balestier Road's side streets bear Malay names, a reminder of the kampongs or villages that once thrived in the area. Jalan Raja Udang is named after a kingfisher. Jalan Dusun means 'Orchard Road' in Malay, while Jalan Rama Rama means 'Butterfly Road'.

Jalan Kemaman is probably named after a district in Terengganu, Malaysia. Old residents of the area recall that there used to be rattan factories along Jalan Dusun, Jalan Raja Udang and Jalan Datoh (Datoh means 'grandfather' or 'chief' in Malay).



To return to Balestier Road, walk back up Kim Keat Road. Then, turn right and walk towards Shaw Plaza. After passing the shopping mall, turn right into Jalan Ampas. Walk for about 120 metres and you will find on the left side of the road the remains of 'Singapore's Hollywood'.

8 Jalan Ampas

The Former Shaw Malay Film Studios



IMAGE: THE STRAITS TIMES © SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS LIMITED. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.



"In 1951, I started working as a messenger boy. My duty every morning was to go to P. Ramlee's house to wake him up. He was staying at Boon Teck Road and my house was at Jalan Ampas. Then I learnt how to become a continuity clerk. Slowly, I became very interested in music. I first learnt by ear and then learnt to read and write music notation. The first song I wrote for P. Ramlee was 'Berkorban Apa Saja' for the film 'Hang Tuah' (1955). I learnt from P. Ramlee how to compose. He told me, 'The song must be easy to sing, the melody must be nice and easy to remember.' It was very enjoyable to work with him. He was a very patient man and very nice. But he's very detailed and demanding. That was why all his films were box office hits."

- Kassim Masdor, 74, a composer and musician who worked closely with P. Ramlee at the Jalan Ampas studio and a living legend in the Malay music scene. Shaw Studios maintained staff quarters at Boon Teck Road for P. Ramlee and other actors.

'SINGAPORE'S HOLLYWOOD'

From the 1930s to the 1980s, Shaw Studios was a major force in Asian cinema, with production houses in Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong that churned out regular hits on the silver screen. The company was founded in Shanghai in 1924 by six brothers, two of whom (Runme and Run Run Shaw) later moved to Singapore. Apart from making films, the Shaw brothers also operated cinemas and amusement parks. In 1947, the studio launched its ambitions to be a leader in the Malay motion picture industry with a production site at Jalan Ampas, which became a veritable film factory and launch pad for the careers of many Malay movie stars.

The studio was staffed by experienced technicians from Hong Kong and Shanghai, while singers and actors were hired from local *bangsawan* (Malay opera) troupes. The studio also roped in Indian directors such as Lakshmana Krishnan, B.N. Rao and S. Ramanathan, as audiences enjoyed the 'Bollywood' style with its lively songs and dances. (The nickname 'Bollywood' is derived from a combination of Bombay, the capital of India's Hindi film industry, and America's Hollywood movie district). Under the banner of Malay Film Productions Ltd, the studio's first release, *Singapura Di-Waktu Malam* (Singapore at Night), directed by the celebrated

B.S. Rajhans, was a hit in 1947.

Besides the old studio plot, there were two other nearby sites (9A and 9B Jalan Ampas) that served as production centres for Shaw Studios. An entire kampong scene might be recreated on the site for a film shoot, as this artificial set gave the crew greater control over lighting and sound compared to an actual village.

Perhaps the most famous name to emerge from the studio is P. Ramlee (1929-1973). Born Teuku Zakaria bin Teuku Nyak Puteh, P. Ramlee began his career in 1948 as a little-known playback singer in the movie *Cinta* ('Love'). His talent was quickly recognised and in 1950, P. Ramlee became the first actor to sing using his own voice in the movie *Bakti* (Dedication). P. Ramlee's debut as a director came in 1955 with *Penarek Becha* (Trishaw Puller). In all, P. Ramlee wrote, directed and acted in more than 70 films and composed more than 300 songs.

After producing more than 160 films, the Golden Age of Malay Cinema came to an end when the studio closed in 1967. By then, interest in Malay movies was on the wane due to the rising popularity of imported films and television. Shaw then moved its Malay film work to Merdeka Studios in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The former studio buildings still remain on the grounds at Jalan Ampas.



**TEMPLE TO KUAN YIN:
PHANG PHENG MEI TEMPLE**

12 Jalan Ampas

Just before the Whampoa Park Connector at the end of Jalan Ampas lies a Buddhist temple and home for senior citizens. Known as the Phang Pheng Mei Temple or *Feeha Cheng Seah*, this four-storey building was built in 1977 and is dedicated to Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy. This temple has its origins as a *Zhai Tang* or Vegetarian Hall called *Fei Hsia Tsing She* (Lodge of Flying Roseate Clouds), which was founded by a Cantonese businessman in the first half of the 20th century.

**LODGE FOR SENIOR CITIZENS:
TAI PEI YUEN TEMPLE**

7 Jalan Kemaman

Located beside the studio grounds on the Jalan Kemaman side is another Buddhist temple. Formerly known as Kuan Yin Lodge, this temple was founded by Chow Siew Keng, a lady from Guangdong province in China who arrived in Singapore in 1936. The original Kuan Yin Lodge in 1938 used to consist of just two wooden houses and a statue of Kuan Yin.

After the founder passed away in 1958, her daughter Poon Sin Kiew (1927-2002) took over as chief abbess with the title Venerable Sek Fatt Kuan. The old lodge then made way for a new building in 1964 and was renamed Tai Pei Yuen Temple. Apart from providing an activity centre for senior citizens, the temple runs the adjacent Tai Pei Old People's Home (10 Jalan Ampas) and the Tai Pei Buddhist Centre at 2 Lavender Street.

» Did You Know?

Jalan Ampas is a reminder of the area's now vanished sugar cane plantations. In Malay, *ampas* *tebu* refers to the fibrous pulp that remains after sugar cane has been crushed to extract its juice.

**A RELIGIOUS REFUGE:
CHAN CHOR MIN TONG**

2 Jalan Kemaman

This single-storey house with a large compound filled with fruit trees and medicinal herbs is one of the last surviving *Zhai Tang* (Vegetarian Hall) in Singapore. Named after its founder, a philanthropist from Guangdong, Chan Chor Min Tong was founded in 1926 as a home for Cantonese men with no family or means of support. They were accepted as residents if they adopted a vegetarian diet, remained single and performed regular Buddhist rituals. A sister lodge exists nearby at 3 Bassein Road, which was built in 1936 and catered to women from the Shunde district in Guangdong.

In the 1950s, there were several *Zhai Tang* in Singapore, most of which formed part of a Buddhist temple or monastery. Others were set up by religious sects or private individuals such as Chan Chor Min, who was regarded by his followers as a spiritual teacher and expert in divination and herblore.

Zhai Tang were studied at length by Marjorie Topley (1927-2010), curator of anthropology at the Raffles Museum (now National Museum of Singapore) from 1951-1955. Topley's research revealed that *Zhai Tang* were not nunneries, as the residents need not take lifelong vows of devotion to religious duties and could go out to work as seamstresses, cooks or amah (housekeepers). They were simply expected to be vegetarians, live piously, recite the Buddhist sutras and attend religious observances. There were a handful of *Zhai Tang* for old, destitute men, but most *Zhai Tang* took in impoverished widows or mistresses who had been deserted by their menfolk. Other residents included actresses, prostitutes and dancers who could not marry while young and found themselves alone in old age. Another surviving *Zhai Tang* is Sian Teck Tng at Cuppage Road, which was founded in 1883 for widows and orphaned girls.

*Opposite page: Phang Pheng Mei Temple (above)
and Chan Chor Min Tong.*



Exiting from Jalan Kemaman back to Balestier Road, you will arrive at a row of traditional shophouses standing between Jalan Kemaman and Boon Teck Road.

412-418 Balestier Road

Traditional shophouses



This surviving row of traditional shophouses at the junction of Balestier Road and Jalan Kemaman was developed by Madam Sim Cheng Neo in 1928 and restored in 2000.

Designed by architect Kwan Yow Luen in a style that marries East and West, the shophouses feature walls with moulded designs that recall the reliefs of classical architecture. The images, however, are Chinese dragons and bats. In a local twist to the Chinese tradition of placing guardian warriors by the entrance to one's dwelling, the pillars of the corner unit feature carvings of Sikh men, who were often employed as guards and policemen during colonial times.

A longstanding tenant of one shophouse is Original Herbal Shop (414 Balestier Road), which was opened in 1989 by Mr Hang Kim Juan. The shop's signature dessert is *kwai leng guo*, a herbal jelly said to relieve acne, 'heatiness' and digestive problems. Also popular is a herbal tea made from a secret family recipe of 24 herbs, chrysanthemum tea with honeysuckle and ginseng, and bird's nest with rock sugar.

RETURN OF THE BEANCURD SELLER

Stop by at the nearby Public Mansions (432 Balestier Road) for a taste of the past at Rochor Beancurd House. The founder of this chain, Mr Xu Kunming, once sold soymilk from a pushcart which he plied from Rochor Road to Beach Road and Balestier Road. A popular local beverage, soymilk can be drunk hot or chilled. One of the earlier multi-purpose developments along the road, the eight-storey Public Mansions was built in 1974 as a mixed-use building with shop units and upper floor apartments surrounded by a landscaped garden with a fountain.

A fair spot for fowl delights

Chicken rice is a local dish closely associated with Balestier Road. For many years, Loy Kee (342 Balestier Road) and Boon Tong Kee (401 Balestier Road) have been mainstays for chicken rice along the road, although both establishments now have outlets elsewhere in Singapore.

Founded in 1953, Loy Kee began as a stall at Whampoa manned by Mr Loy Nie In and his wife Mdm Quah Tee, both migrants from Hainan Island, China. Loy Kee serves Hainanese chicken rice, which features steamed chicken served with rice cooked in chicken broth and a garlic-chilli dip.

Boon Tong Kee was first opened in 1979 by Mr Thian Boon Hua, who moved to Balestier Road from Chinatown in 1983. Chicken rice at Boon Tong Kee is done in the Cantonese style, in which lime is added to the chilli sauce and the birds are tender and young.

A number of other shops along Balestier sell chicken rice as well, and one of them is Hock Nam at Teck Seng Coffeeshop at the junction of Jalan Datoh. Hock Nam is also a popular spot for stewed duck rice. Beside Balestier Market, there was until the mid-2000s a famous shop named 933 Duck Stall which had a larger-than-life model of a roast duck hanging from its signboard.

» Did You Know?

These traditional shophouses appeared in P. Ramlee's film 'Penarek Becha', in which Amran, a honest but poor trishaw man, rescues Azizah, a rich man's daughter, from bullies.



Corner of Boon Teck Road
Water Kiosk





WATER KIOSK

A small cart stands at the corner of Boon Teck Road, offering water and tea to any thirsty passer-by at no charge. This service is a legacy of past times when clean drinking water was a luxury.

The provision of water was an act of charity for poor labourers such as the drivers of horse carriages or bullock carts, rickshaw pullers and other workers toiling in the area. This service continues to be provided by Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sin Sia, a religious charitable organisation along Boon Teck Road. The kiosk holds two containers: one with plain water and the other with a tea called Su Teh in the Teochew dialect, which is said to relieve the effects of heat.

In the past, there were two other water kiosks in the area providing free water and tea to the public. These were along River Valley Road, by the present Liang Court mall, and near the old Hoover Theatre along Balestier Road. Temple caretakers would ride in trishaws to fill up the kiosks every morning.

» Did You Know?

Boon Teck Road was named after Wee Boon Teck (1850-1888), the only son of Wee Bin (1823-1868), a China-born merchant who set up Wee Bin & Co. in Market Street. The younger Wee continued his father's business and was a charitable man who gave \$4,000 to the Tan Tock Seng Hospital and had a ward named in his honour at the hospital's former site by Moulmein Road.

THONG TECK SIAN TONG LIAN SIN SIA (Thong Teck Charitable Institution)

1A Boon Teck Road

This sprawling complex originated from the 1950 merger of two religious organisations with roots in China, the Buddhist Thong Teck Sian Tong and the Taoist Lian Sin Sia. The former was known for works of charity, while the Taoist partner focused more on religious studies and rituals, including the provision of funeral rites and services. The temple, which was rebuilt in 1971, has a pyramidal roof crowned with a *hulu* (a bottle gourd flanked by a pair of dancing dragons) and is dedicated to a number of patron saints, including Lord Fu You Di Jun (also known as Lu Dong Bin), Saint Sung Da Feng (1039-1127) and Yun Jie Bodhisattva (1881-1926).

Since its establishment, Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sin Sia, which relies on the contributions of members, has concentrated on providing help to the needy of all races and religions through the delivery of free meals and rations, home services, free medical services (both Western and Chinese), financial assistance, and free burial, cremation and funeral rites. In 2000, the organisation opened a home for senior citizens in Geylang East as well as a dialysis and kidney resources centre in Woodlands in collaboration with the National Kidney Foundation (NKF).



At the junction of Boon Teck Road and Balestier Road, there is a pedestrian crossing you can use to reach the next stop, Balestier Market, across the road.

411 Balestier Road
Balestier Market



Built in the early 1920s, Balestier Market provided local vendors with a permanent place to sell their produce. The original market, which was described in 1924 as being “secluded but busy”, was an open-air affair; a roof was added only in 1925. During World War II, the market served as a centre for distributing food rations. Due to its proximity to a dark timber bridge said to have spanned *Sungei Whampoa*, the market was popularly referred to as *Or Kio*, which means ‘black bridge’ in Hokkien.

Such early attempts by the authorities to set up permanent market spaces were in part to remove temporary hawkers who would otherwise sell their wares by the roadside as well as to improve the licensing and regulation of hawkers. But even then, inspectors would still at times find false scales, with three pork sellers at Balestier Market arrested and fined for this offence in July 1924. Perhaps to elude the authorities, some hawkers continued to sell from makeshift stalls by the roadside outside the market, a practice that led one irate resident of Balestier Road to complain in 1923 of great difficulty in procuring pork from the market proper.

The original market consisted of a row of small huts with a pitched zinc roof. This facility was renovated in 1999. Unfortunately, the number of vendors had fallen by then, so customers preferred to do their marketing at Whampoa Market (also known as *Tua Pah Sat* or ‘Big Market’ in Hokkien) at Whampoa Drive. As business dwindled, many stallholders who had been at Balestier Market over generations retired when the market closed for redevelopment in 2004. Today, the only surviving ‘rural’ market on mainland Singa-

pore houses a food court serving familiar local favourites such as chicken rice and satay.

LENG ERN JEE TEMPLE

15 Jalan Rajah

This temple has its origins in the upper floor of a shophouse along Circular Road, where its founders set up a shrine to Ji Gong and Lu Dong Bin during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. After the war, devotees raised money to move the temple to its current site at Jalan Rajah. The original single-storey structure was redeveloped into the present three-storey building in the 1980s.

On the ground level, the main temple hall is dedicated to Lu Dong Bin and Ji Gong. Lu Dong Bin is one of the Eight Immortals of Taoist mythology. Ji Gong is a Buddhist monk from the 12th century CE who became a folk hero for helping the poor and downtrodden with the aid of a magic fan. The rear hall provides space for devotees to place memorial tablets honouring their ancestors. On the second storey is a hall devoted to Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy. The temple also runs a free traditional Chinese medicine clinic and provides financial assistance to needy families and students.



Bak Kut Teh

Literally ‘pork ribs tea’ in Hokkien (or *rou gu cha* in Mandarin), *bak kut teh* consists of pork ribs stewed with spices such as garlic, cloves, cinnamon and star anise, and served with rice, vegetables and *you tiao* (fried dough fritters). Old-time fans would wash down their meal with freshly brewed Chinese tea to help

cleanse the body of the oils and fats consumed. With at least eight *bak kut teh* sellers, Balestier Road has become synonymous with this aromatic dish, and popular shops attract even busloads of tourists and the occasional celebrity from Hong Kong or Taiwan. As the sellers usually open late in the day and close in the wee hours

of the morning, the best time to try out *bak kut teh* at Balestier Road is during dinner or supper. Probably the most famous seller here is Founder Bak Kut Teh (347 Balestier Road). The proprietor, Mr Chua Chwee Whatt, is a former pig farmer who has been selling *bak kut teh* since 1975.



Continue walking down Jalan Rajah until you reach Ah Hood Road. Turn left into Ah Hood and walk pass the Home Team National Service Clubhouse on your right until you reach Tai Gin Road. Then turn right into Tai Gin for the next two highlights of the walking trail.

14 Tai Gin Road

Maha Sasana Ramsi Burmese Buddhist Temple



This temple, which was founded by a Burmese man named U Tha Hnit (also known as Tang Sooy Chin) in 1878, was originally located at Kinta Road off Serangoon Road.

In 1907, a Burmese physician named U Kyaw Gaung (1866-1935) was elected as a temple trustee. A devout Buddhist, U Kyaw Gaung sought to furnish the temple with a large marble statue of Buddha similar to those in his homeland. To this end, he made several trips to Burma (now Myanmar), where he found a 10-tonne slab of marble in Saygin Hill, a quarry north of Mandalay. This stone was carved into an 11-foot high image of Buddha in 1918. U Kyaw Gaung then transported the statue to Singapore in 1921 and enshrined it at the temple in 1925. His descendants continue to live in Singapore and take care of the temple.

The temple moved to its present site at Tai Gin Road in 1991. The design of the new temple followed advice from Burmese architects to reflect its historical ties to the country. The tiered roof is adorned by woodcarvings made from 19 tonnes of Burmese teak and there is a golden pagoda on the roof which houses a Sima House for religious discussions and ceremonies.

On the temple walls are figurines of *tha-djar-*

min, a King of celestial deities who is also the Guardian of Buddha Sasana (the meaning of Buddha's teachings). There are also lion figurines called *chin-thay*.

A number of Burmese cultural and religious artefacts are displayed on the third floor, where there is also a mural depicting the history of the temple. One striking sculpture depicts a *Panra Rupa*, a mythical beast with the traits of five animals: the tusks and trunk of an elephant; the hoofs and ears of a horse; a deer's antlers; the wings of a bird; and scales and tail of a carp. There is also a royal alms bowl gilded with gold leaf and decorated with precious stones.

During Buddhist festivals, the temple welcomes a large gathering of worshippers. One of the most important festivals is *Thingyan*, the Burmese New Year, which usually falls in mid-April. Also known as the Water Festival, this is a time for rejoicing and devotion, as people bathe images of Buddha with scented water and splash water at passers-by to symbolise the washing away of past misdeeds. The temple also holds a puja or offering session every Wednesday evening, during which devotees honour Buddha with offerings of flowers, water and lighted candles in the shape of a lotus.

The Burmese connection

An interesting feature of this end of Balestier Road are side streets named after places in Burma. Some believe this arose from a suggestion by an old and respected Burmese resident of the area. The roads could also have been named to reflect British rule in Burma, which was colonised from 1824 to 1948.

- **Akyab Road** – Akyab is a port city, now known as Sittwe.
- **Ava Road** – Ava is the ancient capital of Burma by the Irrawaddy River.

- **Bassein Road** – Now known as Patheingyi, Bassein is an important river port noted for its pottery.
- **Bhamo Road** – Bhamo is a town in northeastern Burma.
- **Irrawaddy Road** – The Irrawaddy is the main river in Burma.
- **Mandalay Road** – Mandalay was the royal capital of Burma from 1860 to 1885.
- **Martaban Road** – Martaban is a port in southern Burma, now known as Mottama. This road was named in 1929.
- **Minbu Road** – Minbu is a city in the Magwe region of Burma.
- **Moulmein Road** – Moulmein (now Mawlamyine) is a port in southeast Burma.
- **Pegu Road** – Now known as Bago, Pegu is a city near the former capital Yangon (Myanmar's current capital is Naypyidaw).
- **Prome Road** – Now known as Pyaw Bwe, Prome is a town northwest of Yangon.
- **Rangoon Road** – Rangoon (now Yangon) was the administrative capital of British Burma.
- **Shan Road** – The Shan are an ethnic group from the east of the country.

» Did You Know?

On the temple grounds is a Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) with a small shrine beneath it. Buddha attained enlightenment while meditating under such a tree.

» To get a flavour of contemporary Burmese life in Singapore, visit Peninsula Plaza at North Bridge Road, where you can find many shops stocking Burmese goods, Burmese restaurants and even a food court with Burmese cuisine.

12 Tai Gin Road
**Sun Yat Sen Nanyang
Memorial Hall**



Originally called Bin Chan House, this elegant villa was built in the 1880s by a businessman named Boey Chuan Poh for his mistress, Bin Chan. In 1905, the house was purchased and re-named Wan Qing Yuan (Serene Sunset Garden) by Teo Eng Hock (1871-1957), a rubber magnate, as a residence for his mother to enjoy her later years in peace and tranquillity.

Teo was a keen supporter of the Chinese Nationalist Movement to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. In 1906, he offered the house to Dr. Sun Yat Sen (1866-1925) as the Southeast Asian base of Dr. Sun's *Tong Meng Hui* (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance). The villa served as the centre for *Tong Meng Hui*'s activities and fund-raising efforts in Southeast Asia, and important uprisings were planned here during Dr. Sun's visits to Singapore. Later, it became the local headquarters of Dr. Sun's *Kuomintang* (Chinese Nationalist Party) after the 1911 Revolution, which led to the establishment of the Republic of China in January 1912 with Dr. Sun as its first Provisional President.

In 1937, the villa was bought over by six Chinese businessmen – Lee Kong Chian (1893-1967), Tan Ean Kiam (1881-1943), Chew Hean Swee (1880-1964), Lee Chor Seng, Yeo Kiat Tiow and Lee Chin Tian. During the Second World War, the Japanese used the building as a communications centre and office for the dreaded *Kempeitai* (Japanese Military Police). In 1951, the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce obtained ownership of the villa.

In 1966, the Chamber converted the house into a museum called the Sun Yat Sen Villa. The building was gazetted as a National Monument on 28 October 1994 and later renamed the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall in 1997. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1911 Revolution, the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall underwent a revamp in 2010 and reopened on 8 October 2011. The galleries within now house important artefacts, paintings and photographs that trace the story of Dr. Sun and also highlight the contributions made by Chinese communities in Southeast Asia to the Revolution.

Victorian grandeur is evident in the architecture of the two-storey villa, which features spa-

cious verandahs with chick blinds and arches supported by modified Doric and Corinthian columns and pilasters. The style is fairly typical of Chinese bungalows built in the colonial era. Visitors would arrive at a covered porte-cochère (entrance porch), above which was a sitting room. Ornate cast-iron railings line the second floor corridors and the roof features natural orange-brown clay tiles.

Tai Gin Road & Ah Hood Road

Tai Gin means 'great man' in Chinese. Some have suggested that it refers to Dr Sun Yat Sen, but as the road's name was already in existence in 1904, it may have originated from the nickname given to William A. Pickering (1840-1907), the first Protector of Chinese in Singapore (the Chinese Protectorate was established in 1877 to administer the needs of the Chinese community in Singapore). Tai Gin Road once had a direct connection to Balestier Road but this road link was lost in 1982. Along the road there were factories making wooden crates for soft drinks, which shut down in the early 1970s when the beverage industry shifted to using plastic crates.

Formerly known as Mandarin Road, Ah Hood Road was renamed in 1902 after Wee Ah Hood, a wealthy Teochew merchant whose family owned land in the area. Born in 1828, Wee started out as an assistant in a textile shop at Telok Ayer Street. He later established his own business, Ah Hood & Co., dealing in various Straits produce. Wee also owned large gambier and pepper estates. He died in 1875 in his residence at Hill Street, which is now the site of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

Various industries had grown around Ah Hood Road throughout the 20th century. Textile dyeing houses were located in the area in the early 1900s, while rubber smoke houses arose in the 1920s during the Malayan rubber boom. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were cane and rattan factories as well as oil mills and soap factories. Tongkangs (a kind of boat used to ferry cargo) would transport timber up the Kallang River to sawmill plants at Ah Hood Road. There was even a biscuit manufacturer, Siong Hoe Biscuit Factory, which opened in 1952.



The Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall marks the formal end of the Balestier Heritage Trail. However, you can continue to explore Balestier Road by walking through Zhongshan Park, which faces Tai Gin Road. When you reach Balestier Road, turn right and keep on walking until you reach a traffic crossing after Jalan Dusun. Cross the road and you will reach a delectable row of single-storey shophouses.

601-639 Balestier Road

Single-storey shophouses



Once common in various parts of Singapore, single-storey shophouses offer a glimpse of life outside the city centre in the 1950s and 1960s. Though much simpler in design than pre-war shophouses, such shops combined functionality with understated elegance in a time of rapid urbanisation when old villages were giving way to new townships with residents who sought modern amenities and conveniences.

Architecturally, these terrace shophouses exemplify the earliest forms of modern buildings to be constructed in formerly rural areas. There is a touch of Art Deco in the pediment of 627 Balestier Road and the five-foot way is retained to provide sheltered access for pedestrians.

This row of shophouses, which was developed by Ngee Ann Kongsi after the Second World War, has been conserved by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) for its historical value, which means that the owners and tenants are not permitted to alter the shopfront or external façade.

Ngee Ann Kongsi is a self-help foundation established in 1845 by migrants from Ngee Ann county in China's Guangdong province to look after the religious and welfare needs of the local Teochew community. 'Kongsi' means 'Company', but the foundation's activities included many social functions, including the acquisition of land for the proper burial of Teochews who died in Singapore. In fact, the terrace shophouses occupy the plot of a former Teochew cemetery, as the location by the foot of a hill was favoured as a burial site by the Chinese.

Ngee Ann Kongsi also owned other burial sites in Toa Payoh, Bukit Timah, Changi, Seletar and Upper Serangoon, many of which have been acquired for the building of MRT stations, schools and other public facilities. One notable former burial site which the kongsi has redeveloped is *Tai Shan Ting*, a large parcel of land by Orchard Road which is now the site of the Ngee Ann City shopping and office complex. Rental income from its property holdings allow the kongsi to support education, cultural and community services for Singaporeans of all origins.

Tau Sar Piah:

Balestier's famous flaky confectionery

For many Singaporeans, this stretch of shophouses is synonymous with *tau sar piah*, a flaky pastry made from flour with a bean paste filling. In the past, there were only two varieties of *tau sar piah*, sweet and salty, but some bakeries also offer flavours such as yam, pineapple, green tea, durian and black sesame to draw in a younger clientele.

Perhaps the most established *tau sar piah* shop along the road is Loong Fatt Eating House and Confectionery (639 Balestier Road), which is reputed to be the first to sell the traditional confections along the road in the 1970s. A later arrival to the scene is House of Tau Sar Piah (529 Balestier Road), which was founded by Mr Heng Hung Guan, a baker who moved his business from Ang Mo Kio to Balestier Road in 1984.

You can easily tell the difference between salty and sweet *tau sar piah*: the latter has a sprinkling of sesame seeds on top of the dough.

» Did You Know?

Ngee Ann Kongsi also runs a Traditional Chinese Medicine Centre at 563A Balestier Road. Opened in 2000, this 5,000 sq ft non-profit facility is a collaborative effort with top hospitals in China to provide traditional treatment of various ailments with modern convenience and comfort. Among the services provided are an acupuncture and physiotherapy centre and a herbal brewing centre where traditional herbal remedies are prepared and packaged using modern, hygienic processes.



From the single-storey shophouses, you can explore the next marked heritage site, the Novena Church at 300 Thomson Road, by walking or taking a bus (catch SBS 21 or SBS 131 from the bus stop at the shophouses and alight at the third bus stop).

300 Thomson Road
**The Church of St. Alphonsus
(Novena Church)**



IMAGE: THE STRAITS TIMES © SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS LIMITED. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION.

One of the first churches to be built in Singapore after the Second World War, the Church of St. Alphonsus offers a notable landmark for strollers between Balestier Road and the Novena MRT station. It is also called the Novena Church, after the perpetual novenas, a devotional prayer performed nine consecutive times in exchange for a granting of petitions. The novena has its origins in the Bible, which recorded that Mary and Jesus' disciples prayed together for nine consecutive days before Pentecost.

The church is dedicated to Saint Alphonsus Maria de Liguori (1696-1787), an Italian preacher who founded the Redemptorists, a Catholic missionary order, in 1732. The Redemptorists arrived in Singapore in 1935 at the invitation of the then Bishop of Malacca, Adrien Pierre Devals, and set up a temporary chapel at 339 Thomson Road, the site of the present Thomson Medical Centre. After the war, the church sought a new home and in 1948, the Redemptorists obtained a plot of land from Wee Kah Kiat, a Chinese businessman who was a member of the Board of Trustees for the Singapore Improvement Trust.

The church building was completed in 1950, but the still immensely popular Saturday novena sessions began in January 1949. As the congregation expanded over the years, the church made new additions to the original structure. In 1997, the old administrative building was replaced by the St Clement Pastoral Centre. To ac-

commodate the growing crowd, which includes many non-Catholics, pews were even added to the verandahs in 1998 to boost seating capacity.

To this day, the church holds ten novena sessions every Saturday, which attract as many as 20,000 people each weekend. On the first Sunday of September, there is a procession to celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour (a title bestowed on the Virgin Mary). This event, which draws up to 12,000 participants from Singapore and Malaysia, sees the church façade covered by thousands of flowers in designs that change every year with a Gospel or Marian theme, a tradition which began in June 1953.

The architecture of the church, which was conserved in June 2011, reflects a tropical eclecticism in its use of Doric columns that support a distinctive neo-classical semi-circular front pediment with triple arches and a central stained glass window. The bell tower stands by itself as it was added only in 1964. Covered walkways link the various buildings in the church complex.

Another notable addition is a three-storey Redemptorist Monastery built in 2004. Located at the private rear of the church complex and surrounded by garden courtyards and terraces, this cylindrical building combines the functions of refectory (communal dining hall), library and chapel, providing the community an abode for quiet meditation and study.

"In the early 1970s I lived in Jalan Novena Selatan which overlooks Kampong Chia Heng from the hilltop next to Novena Church. Looking down from my bedroom window was this huge lush green land with a few zinc roof and attap houses to my right. It was very, very peaceful, and in the late evenings and morning the entire area would resound with insects and birds chirping. There was a little stream where people would go to wash clothes and bathe. On top of the opposite hill would be the hostels blocks for the Tan Tock Seng Hospital staff – I can still remember seeing the big letter 'G' on the side of the block and the kids from the families playing about. Lovely memories, like out of a misty dream."

– Mr Foo Cheow Ming, 47, a lawyer and resident of Jalan Novena Selatan from 1969-1979.

» Did you know?

The area near the Novena Church was formerly a Jewish cemetery. In the 19th century, there was a Jewish cemetery by Orchard Road at the site of the present Dhoby Ghaut MRT station. When this plot ran out of space in 1900, the Jewish community acquired land by Thomson Road, which was used as a burial ground until 1973. The Thomson Road Cemetery was closed in 1982 to make way for the Novena MRT Station. The Jewish community now bury their dead at the Jewish section of Chua Chu Kang Cemetery.

In the 1950s, Novena Terrace led to a village of about 1,000 called Kampong Chia Heng. The settlement was commonly labelled "the village of forgotten souls" due to its severely neglected state with no proper sanitation or electricity. This situation probably arose as many of the attap dwellings in the village were built without permission from the authorities and deemed fire hazards.

Senior Police Officers' Mess (SPOM)



Once a residence for senior British police officers deployed to uphold law and order in colonial Singapore, the Senior Police Officers' Mess (SPOM) encompasses the shared heritage and comradeship among the Senior Officer corps, for both serving and retired officers.

Constructed in 1931 within the enclave of spacious black-and-white bungalows, SPOM was built by the British Government's Public Works Department between the two World Wars. The architecture is typical of English houses around the turn of the 20th century, incorporating elements of the "Tudorbethan revival" style.

This style incorporates elements of the British Art and Craft and Art Deco movements – characterised by simple forms and bold geometric shapes respectively – and an airy-spaciousness – much needed in the humid tropics. Based on the plantation-style model, the building features a large main porch, verandahs, balconies and corridors, all cooled by natural ventilation. Solid teak wood flooring, staircases and ceilings add an earthy warmth that softens the hard concrete, painted white to reflect the tropical heat.

During its previous heyday, from the 50s to the 70s, SPOM was the de-facto venue for elaborate fine dining, networking and hosting of guests, as it

served to formalise standards of interaction and socialisation among senior-ranking officials. Over the years, British customs and traditions survived and evolved. Rules of decorum and conduct expected of members are preserved in "The Constitution and Rules of The Senior Police Officers' Mess" booklet.

The rich heritage of the Singapore Police Force is also preserved in the many artefacts displayed around SPOM. These included the brass cannons and the brass gongs displayed at the entrance of SPOM.

Today, SPOM still exudes an air of quaint elegance, making it the perfect location for formal Dining-Ins in honour of many eminent visitors, such as Singapore Presidents, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and important foreign dignitaries. SPOM is not all about formalities; it is also the venue for many lively cocktail parties, local festive celebrations and even weddings of senior police officers.

SPOM is a living legacy and a contemporary social club for the Police Senior Officer fraternity that embodies the richness of the Force's esprit de corps. SPOM is also used by the various Home Team Departments and government agencies for retreats and meetings.

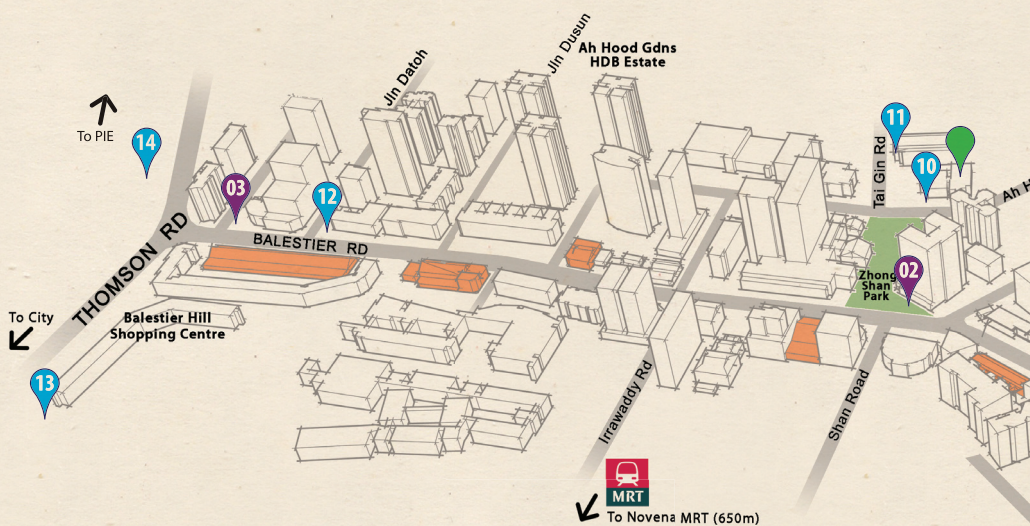
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TRAIL MARKERS

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 - Art Deco Shophouses
230 & 246 Balestier Road | 8 - Traditional shophouses
412-418 Balestier Road |
| 2 - Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple
249 Balestier Road | 9 - Balestier Market
411 Balestier Road |
| 3 - Balestier Point
279 Balestier Road | 10 - Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall
12 Tai Gin Road |
| 4 - Sim Kwong Ho shophouses
292-312 Balestier Road | 11 - Maha Sasana Ramsi
Burmese Buddhist Temple
14 Tai Gin Road |
| 5 - Kim Keat Road | 12 - Single-storey shophouses
601-639 Balestier Road |
| 6 - Pre-war Terrace Houses
2-12 Pegu Road
1-35 Martaban Road | 13 - The Church of St. Alphonsus
(Novena Church)
300 Thomson Road |
| 7 - The Former Shaw
Malay Film Studios
8 Jalan Ampas | 14 - The Senior Police Officers' Mess (SPOM)
153 Mount Pleasant Road |



STORY B



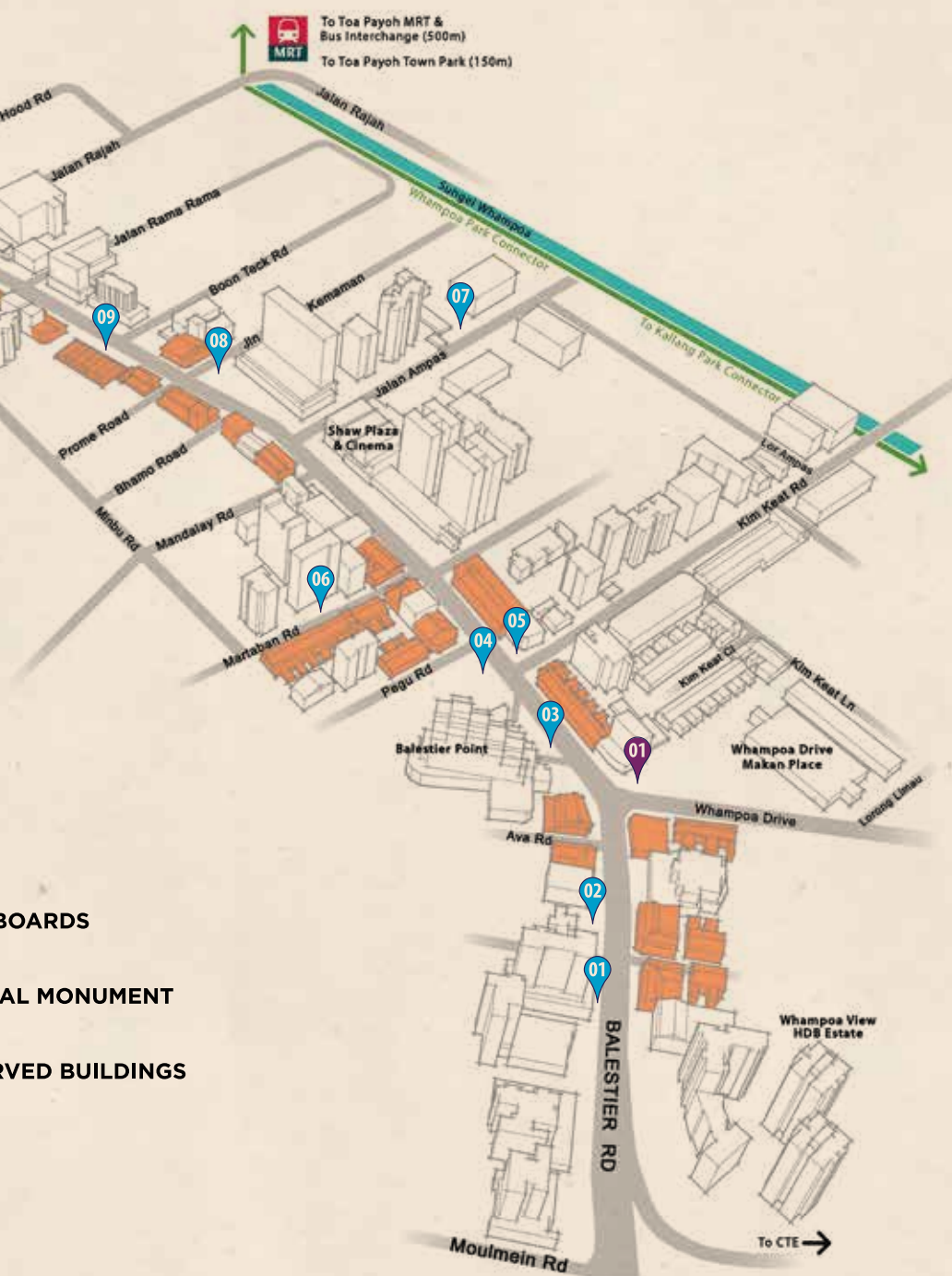
NATIONAL



CONSER

Balestier

HERITAGE TRAIL



BOARDS

AL MONUMENT

VED BUILDINGS



Colours of Balestier





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