

# SULTAN'S HOME SWINGS NOW

TEXT HUANG HUIMIN PHOTO COURTESY OF SINGAPORE PRESS HOLDINGS



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KAMPONG GLAM, at what was once the mouth of the Rochor River, started off as a fishing village. In the 1820s, Sir Stamford Raffles designated it as the home of the Sultan of Singapore, as well as an area for the Malay and Arab communities.

It was called Kota Raja then, which means “the King’s enclave”. The area, which is bounded by Ophir Road, Victoria Street, Jalan Sultan

and Beach Road, got its current name from the many gelam trees that grew there. These were sought for their bark to caulk ships.

The spine of this area is Arab Street, which was laid in 1824. It was a hub for Arab traders and pilgrims on their way to Mecca. Many of the shophouses lining it were built in those early days.

Today, Kampong Glam continues

to be a centre of Malay and Muslim culture. Singapore’s largest mosque is there, as well as stores selling Muslim books, clothing and other items. In 1989, it was gazetted as a conservation area.

In the last decade, its Arab roots have re-emerged – Middle Eastern eateries and shisha shops have opened. Trendy boutiques and backpacker hostels have also sprung up.



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### Sultan Mosque

The mosque, Singapore's first, was built in the 1820s. It was commissioned by Sultan Hussein, the island's first Malay ruler. In 1924, it underwent a massive restructuring to accommodate the growing Muslim population.

An Irish architect, Denis Santry, designed it, and it combines Islamic and Indian influences. Its large golden dome sits on a ring of glass, which is an acknowledgement of the contributions made by poorer Muslims, whose donations were a result of collecting and selling used glass bottles. Inside, mosaic tiles, bearing inscriptions from the Quran line the huge prayer hall.

### Yellow Mansion

The restaurant *Tepak Sireh* in Kandahar Street is believed to have been the home of one of Sultan Hussein's grandsons. Hence, its bright yellow colour, the colour of Malay royalty. The building goes back 150 years. It used to be called *Gedung Kuning*, or the Yellow Mansion. It is a popular venue for Malay weddings.

### Malay Heritage Centre

This was the home of Sultan Hussein and his descendants for more than one and a half centuries.

The government earmarked the site for development in 1993. Now the Istana Kampong Glam is called The



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Malay Heritage Centre.

The original Istana was a massive attap structure. In 1846, it was rebuilt as the colonial looking building seen today. The compound was renovated in 2004. It is now a showcase for local Malay history and culture. Exhibitions, cultural activities and performances are held there.

### Haji Lane

This narrow lane, named after the hajj, was where many pilgrims put up en route to Mecca in the 19th century.

In the last three years, trendy boutiques opened up there. It has also become synonymous with the shisha culture. In the evenings, young people slouch on Middle Eastern rugs along the walkways and puff on large Turkish water pipes.

### Bussorah Street

Backpacker hostels, eating places and outlets offering touristy trinkets linked to Malay culture fill the colonial shophouses along this landscaped pedestrian walkway, which used to be known as Pilgrims' Village.

This is where pilgrims came to attend classes and buy supplies for their long sea journey to Mecca. The exchanges between them, the Javanese and Bugis migrants, and the Malay locals resulted in the dishes *mee siam* and *nasi padang*.



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