

REST AND REWIND

Pulau Ubin, an island off the north-eastern coast of Singapore, is full of hidden delights

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“**T**ake cash, it’s old-school out there,” our Singaporean friend exclaims as we set off to explore a rare slice of this nation’s pre-industrial past. A short boat ride from the mainland, Pulau Ubin—Malay for ‘Granite Island’—was once home to quarries, farms, and fishing villages. With the

last quarries shutting down in the 1970s, residents started moving out and only a few dozen remain today. The rustic charm of this island-off-the-island has been consciously preserved from urban development, making it quite the hidden getaway right within the Lion City.

Hopping on a bumboat, we sail away from the

soaring skyline towards calmer shores. The moment the wooden hull thuds against the jetty, it feels like time has rolled back several decades. There are country-style signboards, tin-roofed houses in *kampongs* (traditional Malay villages), and a kind of silence that city dwellers aren’t quite used to.

Bicycles are the best way

On approaching the island, there’s an immediate sense of leaving the big city behind

FACING PAGE
Pulau Ubin has the largest mangrove cover in Singapore



LEFT AND RIGHT
Cycling is the easiest way to get around; The Wei Tuo Fa Gong Temple enshrines spirits and gods.

WHERE TO STAY

The Warehouse Hotel

Housed in a quaint 130-year-old godown by the banks of the Singapore river, this boutique property oozes an industrial-chic vibe with exposed-brick walls, sleek trusses, and in-room libraries.

Artyzen Singapore

This architecturally-distinctive property, a tower hotel in the heart of the city, boasts sky villas with elevated and lush gardens, and a rooftop infinity pool.

Amara Sanctuary Sentosa

The verandah suites are perfect to curl up with a book. Nibbles at the Sanctuary Tearoom are reminiscent of Singapore's bygone colonial era.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR DAY

- To reach Pulau Ubin, take a bumboat from Changi Point Ferry Terminal. Boats operate daily from 6am to 7pm.
- Bring cash, as there are no ATMs on the island.
- Bicycles, helmets, and accessories are available for rent near the jetty.
- Food and beverage options are basic; you can carry snacks and treats.
- To camp overnight, apply for a permit in advance through the National Parks Board (nparks.gov.sg/pulau-ubin).

to move around here, and a couple of rental shops are clustered near the jetty. We pick out a tandem bike, plot our path, and pedal off. Only minutes away, we come upon the Fo Shan Ting Da Bo Gong Temple, marked by its red-and-gold roof tiles and bright dragon motifs. Dedicated to Tua Pek Kong, the patron of seafarers, this temple is said to protect the island and its people. We wander in to find flickering candles, the heady aroma of burning incense, and a few locals reverently offering prayers.

We then follow a mapped route named 'Sensory Trail', cycling past fruit trees, herb plants, and vegetable patches. Piquing our interest are the uniquely-shaped soursop fruit, used for local desserts, and breadfruit, used in baking. The trail leads us to Teck Seng's Place*, a restored kampong house once home to a local shop owner. The building is furnished just as it would have been a half-century ago, with rattan furniture, tin cans, family portraits, enamel mugs, and wall calendars frozen in time.

It feels less like a museum and more like stepping into a relative's ancestral home, overflowing with personal stories and fond memories. Chek Jawa Wetlands, one of the island's ecological gems, beckons next. As we ride along the gravel path flanked by coastal forests, the sounds of cicadas and monkeys keep us company. We arrive at a boardwalk weaving through a thriving mangrove forest, where the roots of trees rise above the brackish water like stilts. The biodiversity here is remarkable—spotted



LEFT AND RIGHT
The jetty on the island; The fascinating Jejawi Tower.

mudskippers, fiddler crabs, and monitor lizards can all be seen on a lucky day.

The seven-storeyed Jejawi Tower soars above the dense tree canopy. From the top, the views are a breathtaking mosaic of forests and wetlands. With patience, one may spot oriental pied hornbills, white-bellied sea eagles or any of the numerous avian species that call this area home.

On our way back towards the main village, we pass the former Petai Quarry, now a calm, emerald-green lake. Herons perch silently on the rocks and the steep cliffs reflect perfectly in the still water. Nature has reclaimed all of yesteryears' quarries here—as if time runs backwards on Pulau Ubin when compared to the rest of Singapore.

Sun-drenched, we are ready for lunch. Across from the jetty, we find a few casual eateries with benches and handwritten menus. We seat ourselves at one serving *nasi lemak*

(rice cooked in coconut milk and *pandan* leaf), cold lime juice, and fried *bee hoon* (thin rice vermicelli). The dishes are simple and homely yet taste heavenly.

An elderly man in a straw hat urges us to visit the Wei Tuo Fa Gong Temple on the western side. Draped in prayer flags and filled with a curious mix of statues and spinning prayer wheels, it has a whimsical, hand-built charm. We spend time examining the Buddhist, Taoist, and Dato deities, surrounded by eclectic offerings of fruits, flowers, and yes, even some cans of Tiger Beer.

By evening, we make our way back to the jetty. Along the route is the Jelutong Campsite. The thought of spending a night under the stars lingers in our minds, but alas, we must leave. It's only a 15-minute ride back to the mainland but it feels like crossing decades. No wonder, then, that Pulau Ubin is often described as “the last *kampong*”; an escape into a different time that Singapore keeps tucked away.



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