

From stilt houses to eco-houses: Former Lazarus islanders recall their old home

Redevelopment of the island is finally taking shape after its residents were resettled nearly 50 years ago

Jean Iau

Lazarus Island to many Singapore residents is an escape from the hustle and bustle of the mainland – now even more so, with tiny houses being built there for short stays – but to Mr Rabull Jalel Kasman, it was once home.

Before he was resettled in 1975, the 81-year-old spent languid days teaching at a school that used to be on the island.

At night, he flung his fishing net into the inky blackness of the sea. When he pulled his catch in, there would be enough fish, and the occasional cuttlefish, to share with his neighbours who lived in stilt houses above the water.

“Life on Pulau Sekijang Pelepah was really harmonious. The residents always worked together in everything to help one another,” Mr Rabull told The Sunday Times, calling Lazarus Island by its former Malay name.

But in 1975, he and his neighbours were resettled into Housing Board flats in Telok Blangah to make way for what they were told would be redevelopment on Lazarus.

Nearly half a century later, redevelopment is finally taking shape in the form of “tiny houses”.

Minister of State for Trade and Industry Alvin Tan announced in Parliament on Feb 28 that Lazarus Island will be transformed over the next three years into a “light touch” destination. This means visitors will be able to experience the island’s rustic charm while minimising their impact on the environment.

The first of the initiatives, run by Sentosa Development Corporation (SDC), is Tiny Away Escape @ Lazarus Island. Five “tiny houses”, between 150 sq ft and 170 sq ft in size, will be launched for the public to stay in from May.

In response to ST queries on whether the history of the island or its cultural heritage would be included in the transformation, SDC said the Government continually reviews tourism development plans to keep pace with changes in global tourism, and to ensure that the industry in Singapore stays competitive.

SDC said it recalibrated what the island offered to better suit the changing preferences of visitors and the rising trend of travellers

seeking sustainable travel.

On the small-scale, low-carbon footprint leisure experiences it is piloting on Lazarus and Seringat islands, it said these low-intensity offerings allow visitors to experience the rustic island environment in a sustainable and sensitive manner, while prioritising the conservation of ecologically sensitive areas.

“We will assess the type of offerings that resonate with visitors and will work closely with the operators, government agencies, including SLA (Singapore Land Authority) and National Parks Board, and nature groups to ensure that suitable measures are being undertaken during this pilot,” said SDC.

The tiny houses are the first tourist accommodation built on Lazarus Island, but it is not the first time plans were made to build short-term accommodation there.

In 1988, the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board called for tenders to turn the then 33ha island into a beach resort. The following year, ST reported that Shangri-La had been awarded a \$40 million contract to develop a hotel.

Ms Ashlynn Loo, director for attractions, entertainment and tourism concept development at the Singapore Tourism Board, said the project did not materialise due to various reasons, and there was no urgency to pursue a development project on Lazarus Island at that time.

“We are unable to share more details due to business confidentiality,” she added.

Assistant Professor Hamzah Muzaeni of the National University of Singapore’s Department of Southeast Asian Studies said that in the 1970s, the general sentiment was that the island would be developed for recreational purposes in conjunction with Sentosa, especially to replace the loss of land, beach and recreational options on the mainland’s east coast following the development of Changi Airport.

In the end, however, the focus was mainly on Sentosa, and St John’s and Lazarus islands were left relatively untouched.

But Lazarus Island was changed in several ways. The stilt houses were removed, a white sandy beach was added, a causeway was built to link Lazarus to St John’s Island, and Lazarus is now also connected by land to the neighbouring Pulau Seringat.



Houses on stilts (above) at Lazarus Island in the 1950s. The island will be transformed over the next three years into a “light touch” destination, with eco-friendly “tiny houses” (below) for the public to stay in from May. PHOTOS: NANYANG SIANG PAU, GAVIN FOO



Lazarus has only basic public amenities like toilets, shelters, benches and rubbish bins.

There is still not much public representation of the communities that used to live on both Lazarus and St John’s islands, noted Prof Hamzah, who has studied Singapore’s southern islands.

He said that while he cannot pinpoint exactly when Lazarus’ community was established, people were already living on the island as far back as the early 1800s.

At the height of its community in the mid-1900s, the island had 44 houses inhabited by more than 100 people in two kampungs. According to the 1957 census, it had 251 residents, including 13 Chinese, three Indians and one Pakistani.

The island also had the Pulau Sekijang Pelepah Malay School, cem-

eteries, a community centre, a mosque and a provision shop, and residents described it as a vibrant community.

“The inhabitants were predominantly Malay and Orang Pulau (island people),” Prof Hamzah said. He is urging for stories about how the communities used nature in their daily living to be highlighted as part of the eco-tourism transformation.

Former islander Adam Salleh, 72, is glad that there is now a plan for Lazarus, even though it comes decades after he was resettled.

“Words cannot describe how sad we were to leave and watch as all the historical sites and stilt houses were demolished completely,” the retired engineer said.

He said the former islanders still meet and spend a day together on

Lazarus Island at least once a year.

Mr Mohamed Fawzi Md Nasir, 53, who left Lazarus when he was just five, hopes that more can be done to include the heritage of the former inhabitants in the tourism efforts so that their community will not be forgotten.

The character development trainer said that even though the island now looks completely different from when he lived there, he takes comfort from the fact that he can still access it, and Singaporeans still have a place to enjoy the rustic outdoors.

“For us, there is an opportunity to go back even though the facade has changed. At least we will always have the memories of the island,” he added.

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New vaccine offers broader protection

FROM A1

and memory B cells, which can mount a response against invasive bacteria even after the level of antibodies has waned.

Professor Ooi Eng Eong, a microbiologist at the Duke-NUS Medical School, also said the immune responses from a conjugate vaccine “would theoretically be broader and more lasting than what is elicited by polysaccharides alone”.

Associate Professor Lim Poh Lian, who heads the Travellers’ Health and Vaccination Clinic at Tan Tock Seng Hospital and is also a senior consultant at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, said: “Conjugate vaccines like PCV13 or PCV20 are better able to stimulate an immune response compared to the polysaccharide vaccine PPSV23, which was the reason conjugate vaccines were developed.”

Associate Professor Hsu Liyang, an infectious diseases specialist at the National University of Singapore Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said the newer vac-

cine can certainly replace the PCV13.

“It is also possible that the use of this vaccine can obviate the need for the use of the 23-valent polysaccharide vaccine,” he added.

Agreeing, Prof Lim said: “For those who have not had the PCV13 and PPSV23 combination yet, having a single dose of PCV20 greatly simplifies the vaccination regimen for patients and families. Instead of trying to sequence two vaccines with all the other health visits, this vaccine allows them to just get ‘one and done’.”

While Dr Asok Kurup, who chairs the Chapter of Infectious Disease Physicians, agrees that the wider coverage from PCV20 can mean just a single dose for the vast majority, he said people at higher risk, such as the immunocompromised, should still get the PPSV23 as well, as it covers more strains.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) told The Sunday Times that while the new vaccine has been approved for use here since November 2022, a review is on to decide “whether the vaccine should be

recommended for inclusion in the national immunisation schedules”.

If it is not, there will be no subsidy for its use.

Prof Lim said the Expert Committee on Immunisation is assessing the clinical- and cost-effectiveness of PCV20 and how it should be used.

Dr Kurup said that in the private sector, the PPSV23 costs just under \$100 and PCV13 about \$200. The price of PCV20 should be about the same as that of PCV13, he added.

An MOH spokesman said those who have been recommended to receive the PCV13 and PPSV vaccines under the National Adult Immunisation Schedule are advised to do so. The PCV20 is currently not for use in children.

The infectious diseases experts ST spoke to agree that people who have received the two pneumococcal vaccines do not need to get the PCV20 as well.

Professor Paul Tambyah, a senior infectious diseases consultant at the National University Hospital, said: “The big question to me is whether PCV20 will be replaced by PCV25.”

An ongoing study for a 25-valent pneumococcal conjugate vaccine, which started in 2022, is expected to be completed by 2025.

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Malaysian couple die in JB highway accident on way to S’pore for work

Michelle Chin

A Malaysian couple were killed on the Bukit Indah Highway in Johor Bahru on Thursday morning while commuting to Singapore for work on a motorcycle.

The accident happened at about 7am while they were on their way to the Tuas Checkpoint, according to Shin Min Daily News. Mr Low Kim Cheong, 36, and Ms Tan Lay Ru, 30, were 18.4km from the checkpoint.

They were pronounced dead at the scene, according to a report filed with the Johor police.

Mr Low’s younger sister, housewife Low Shi Mei, who is in her 30s, told The Sunday Times that Ms Tan was due to give birth to a boy in May. The couple also had a son who is about three years old.

They lived in Setia Indah and for years had travelled to Singapore on working days, Ms Low said.

Mr Low worked as a warehouse assistant at Topsteel Solutions



Mr Low Kim Cheong and Ms Tan Lay Ru, seen here with their son, were killed while on their way to the Tuas Checkpoint. Ms Tan was expecting her second child in May. PHOTO: COURTESY OF TAN LAY RU’S FAMILY

Asia, a distributor for the energy industry, while his wife was a sales coordinator at Vista Hardware Supplies. Both companies are located in Singapore’s west.

Madam Serene Tan, 70, the owner of Vista Hardware Supplies, told The Sunday Times that she was heartbroken over the deaths.

She said: “Lay Ru was with our company for about a year. She was

hard-working and always keen to learn new skills.”

Madam Tan added that she had told Ms Tan motorcycle riding was dangerous and advised her to drive instead. “She told me it was cheaper to ride in than drive in,” Madam Tan said.

The couple will be buried on Sunday, Ms Low said.

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