

# A bittersweet homecoming

Pulau Sakeng no longer exists, but evocative memories linger on

**Loh Chee Kong**  
cheekong@newstoday.com.sg

THE YOUNGER visitors to the landfill-cum-nature spot could barely contain their excitement.

But while they gushed about the view from the shoreline, and squealed at the sight of a rare bird preening its feathers on a reef, Mr Teo Yan Teck, 74, stood slightly apart, nursing bitter-sweet emotions.

He had dreamed of this homecoming for days. Now that he was back on the former Pulau Sakeng, the island where he had spent 40 years of his life, it no longer felt like his old home.

"It has changed so much. There used to be so many houses here and people I knew," he told TODAY in Mandarin.

Even the island doesn't exist anymore, having been merged with Pulau Semakau to serve Singapore's landfill needs and renamed Semakau Landfill. Originally home to a thriving fishing village, the island was a literal wasteland from 1994 until last

Saturday, when it was officially re-opened to nature-lovers from mainland Singapore.

Mr Teo, who had returned from the mainland for the occasion, said: "This brings back a lot of memories of my life here with all my friends. Many of them have passed away. I wish some of them can be back at 'Sakeng' with me."

Among the visitors were 40 families who had lived on Pulau Sakeng and were moved to Singapore in 1994. Mr Teo's family was one of the four who stayed until the very last day of the Government's deadline. "We really couldn't bear to leave. Life was very simple. We had no electricity and water and we would go swimming and fishing in our free time," he said.

On an island where most villagers got by on subsistence fishing, Mr Teo — who moved there in 1955 — ran one of three provision shops. He and his two brothers were the only Chinese family among the



PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

Villagers with one of their fishing boats at what was called Pulau Sakeng (left). Former residents Mr Ghani (right, figure at left) and Mr Teo (far right) returned to their old home when it was re-opened last Saturday.



LOH CHEE KONG

## YOU CAN TAKE NATURE WALKS AT THIS LANDFILL

Just a 30-minute ferry ride away from Pasir Panjang jetty, the Semakau Landfill's rich ecosystem offers opportunities for bird-watching, nature walks and fishing. To preserve the island's natural habitats and ensure public safety, visitors have to be guided by the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, the Nature Society or the Sport Fishing Association.

The island is about the size of Sentosa and receives 2,000 tonnes of waste from the mainland every day. Commissioned in April 1999, the landfill was initially expected to meet Singapore's need for landfill space for 30 years, but its lifespan has been extended beyond 2040 as a result of the nation's recycling efforts, the National Environment Agency said.

50-odd Malay families who reared goats and chickens, and sent their children to a Malay primary school on the island.

Mr Ghani Dualip, 60, who was the assistant village chief and worked as a labourer at nearby Pulau Bukom, recalled how the whole *kampung* once caught a burglar who had sneaked onto the island from Indonesia by boat.

Mr Ghani, whose father was a fisherman, said: "It was during the 1980s, some of us were at the jetty when we saw this burglar. It was easy to identify him as we could tell straightaway he was not from the village. We shouted and the whole village woke up and chased him!" They got back their stolen goods — and let the burglar go.

The island, which lies some 8km south of Singapore, is near Indonesia and the villagers enjoyed close ties with Indonesian fishermen. Every year, they would hold a "kolek" race, said Mr Ghani.

Slightly longer than a canoe, a "kolek" is made from meranti wood and it takes about one-and-a-half months to build one. Up to 40 boats would compete.

A sideshow to this prestigious annual event was the "jong" race. The villagers take their "jongs" — small *sampans* — out to sea. According to folklore, said Mr Ghani, spirits would guide the "jongs".

Mr Teo recalled that when huge storms broke, he always worried about his Malay friends who were out at sea. "Sometimes, the storms were so huge that our roofs got blown away!" he said, laughing.

While Mr Teo's face lit up each time he spoke of the past, his smile would fade quickly when the conversation turned to the present. As the day drew to a close, he lingered, saying: "I don't have much time left. I want to stay and look around longer ... This was our island, we will always want to come back."

## SINGAPOREsnippets

### President has support of Malays

Minister in Charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim said President S R Nathan, who is seeking re-election, had the overwhelming support of Malays in Singapore.

Dr Yaacob said Mr Nathan had shown genuine interest in the community, and had lent his support to many charitable causes. "His presidency will help Singapore to grow and mature into a country that is progressive, that shows the softer aspect of our society," he said. — Channel NewsAsia

### Illegal 4D, betting ring busted

Police smashed an illegal horse-betting and 4D syndicate, arresting 13 people in an islandwide operation on Saturday. Illegal bets would be collected in HDB flats while the betting transactions were conducted over the phone. Betting records amounting to about \$116,000 on illegal horse-racing and illegal 4D were seized. — Channel NewsAsia

## Nan Hua goes Autonomous

IF TANISHA, 15, gets her way, she'll be off on a school trip to Australia next year. That's top on her wish list now that her school, Nan Hua Secondary, has been accorded Autonomous status, a move that will bring in more Government funding.

With its new status taking effect next year, Nan Hua will get an extra \$300 per student annually, which works out to \$480,000 for its 1,600 students.

It will also have "more freedom and resources to create new programmes and activities," said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong last night at Nan Hua's 88th anniversary dinner cum official opening of its new campus in Clementi.

In addition, Nan Hua will join 13 Singapore schools that offer Malay language classes to non-Malay students.

"This will complement Nan Hua's strength in the Chinese language," said Mr Lee. He noted that the proportion of Nan Hua students taking Higher Chinese stands at 79 per cent this year, compared to 21 per cent in 2000 before the school came under the Special Assistance Plan.

— Christie Loh

Moving People, Enhancing Lives



**LOWEST  
BOOKING FEES\***  
ONLY WITH SMRT TAXIS

**\$2.80** Peak hours

**\$2.00** Off-peak hours

No booking fee from  
midnight to  
6am

**Congratulations, Jenny Neo (S7911191J)  
on your new Samsung P730C!**

**Book SMRT Taxis for your chance to win  
a Samsung P730C weekly.**

Book an SMRT Taxi from now till 18 July and a Samsung P730C handphone worth \$1,000 could be yours in our weekly draws! Call now to make your booking.

Call **6555 8888**

\* Applies only to current booking fees — \$2.80 during peak hours: 6:01am–9:29am & 5pm–11:59pm, \$2.00 during off-peak hours: 9:30am–4:59pm and no booking fee from midnight to 6am. Terms and conditions apply.