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*Armenian Church
Hill Street
29 March 2012*

*Mixed media on paper
42 x 59.4 cm*



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*Central Sikh Temple
Towner Road
26 April 2012*

*Mixed media on paper
42 x 59.4 cm*

02. Buddha Tooth Relic Temple

288 South Bridge Road

by Wong Yue Bin

Venerable Shi Kwang Sheng, President of the Singapore Buddhist Federation, consecrated the present building of the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple on 17th May 2008.

The origins of the temple date back to the moment when the late Venerable Cakkapala, Abbot of the renowned Bandula monastery in Mrauk-U, Myanmar, made a decision to place the sacred Buddha Tooth Relic under the care and guardianship of Venerable Shi Fa Zhao. As for the story behind the Buddha tooth relic itself, history has it that a monk named Dhammika had obtained the relic during the cremation of Buddha using his superpowers. The tooth relic has since been passed through many hands and relocated several times. Eventually in 1980, Venerable Cakkapala found the relic at Bagan Hill during restoration works of a collapsed stupa, a dome-shaped structure serving as a Buddhist monument and a large statue of the Buddha. He then strongly suggested to Venerable Shi Fa Zhao that a monastery be built to house and safeguard the relic for the benefit of Buddhists, that they might be able to gather from all over the world to Singapore to venerate the relic.

The temple has four stories with a roof garden, with an architectural style based on the Buddhist mandala, as well as Tang dynasty temples in China and Japan. The Beijing

architecture firm, Landscape Architecture Corporation of China (LACC) was given the task of developing the design of the temple. The final proposal for the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple was then submitted to the Singapore Tourism Board in December 2004, and construction began in around April 2005, with the building project given mainly to the company Sato Kogyo (S) Pte. Ltd.

As for the interior layout of the temple, the first floor is the main place of worship, where it is customary for devotees to kneel and kowtow in prayer. The ceiling of the main temple hall is 27 feet high, to accommodate the 15-foot statue of the Maitreya Buddha Trinity. The interior style and fittings take reference from a typical Tang Dynasty Buddhist temple's interior design. It is interesting that Maitreya, dressed in Indian-style clothing, is placed in a distinctly Tang-styled house of worship. The second and third floors of the temple are actually a museum and a gallery, housing exhibits of Buddhist relics. The sacred Buddha Tooth Relic itself is located on the fourth floor of the temple, enshrined in a stupa and kept in a golden tiled room. It is inaccessible to visitors and devotees alike, and can only be viewed through the glass panel.

The images and icons of the temple are vast in number and various in sizes. For this essay, I would like to introduce briefly the Main Hall.



The first and foremost thing that a devotee or visitor would see after passing through the front court into the main hall, called the Hundred Dragons Hall, is the Maitreya Trinity. The icon of Maitreya is the main Buddha and focus of worship in the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple. He is also bestowed upon and known by titles such as "The Compassionate One", "The Loving One", "The Future Buddha" and "Ajita" (which means invincible). Maitreya is considered to be a bodhisattva, according to the Sutras. It is believed that Maitreya is the future Buddha, who is destined to appear as the next Buddha. The prophecy of the arrival of Maitreya is found in the canonical literature of all Buddhist sects.

The Hundred Buddhas are another key feature and sight in the Hundred Dragons Hall. These statues were handcrafted in traditional Chinese Buddhist style by Huangmu Art Center in Miao Li, Taiwan.

All Hundred Buddha statues have either different hand positions or are holding onto different items in their hands, or both. These hand signs are known as mudras. What is

interesting about the mudras is not just their meanings but their origins. Displaying the Hundred Buddhas altogether in the same hall might easily give the impression that they originated from the same source or are universally the same. However, one of the mudras, the *dhyana*, is apparently found almost exclusively in Japan and associated specifically with Amida Nyorai. In China, this mudra is rarely seen.

In addition, at first glance, one would not notice immediately that the walls are tiled with miniature Buddhas everywhere, filling the entire wall and surrounding the Hundred Buddhas, adorning every inch and corner of the Hundred Dragons Hall with great detail. These miniature icons of Buddhas are in fact of the Maitreya bodhisattva kept in *gaus*.

The overall effect of the hall is majestic, overwhelming in its gold and red colour themes reminiscent of traditional oriental royalty in Chinese culture and history. The ornate dragon structures and designs, gold statues of the Buddhas big and small, as well as the high

from left:
Hundred Buddhas in the
Hundred Dragons Hall;
Maitreya Buddha Trinity

34. Masjid Malabar

471 Victoria Street

by Tan Seok Woon, Jill

Unknown to most tourists, and even locals, Masjid Malabar was featured by Lonely Planet in 2012 as one of the must-see sights in Singapore. As far as religious sites go, its unique architecture makes it stand out. Despite being a picturesque scenic spot and having rather distinctive traits, most tourists have not visited the mosque because it is not regarded as a place of interest. Masjid Malabar also goes by other names such as the Blue Mosque or the Golden Dome Mosque.

The Malabar Mosque takes its name from the south-western coast of India, where the people spoke Malayalam. The Malabar Muslims began settling in Singapore during the early 19th century, and were mainly traders dealing in textiles and jewellery. In 1927, these immigrants formed an association, the Malabar Muslim Jama'ath, to attend to the affairs of their community. In time, the Malabar Muslims realized the need for their own mosque, where they could practise their faith and for community building. The Malabar Muslim Jama'ath took up the task, and a site at the corner of Victoria Street and Jalan Sultan was selected for the mosque. The location was particularly apt as the site stood next to an old Malabar Muslim cemetery, which dated back to 1819, strengthening their bond as a community. With the finalization of the construction plans, the foundation stones for the mosque were laid on 10 April 1956 in a ceremony officiated by the Mufti of Johor, Tuan Syed

Alwi Adnan, who represented Sultan Ibrahim bin Abu Bakar of Johor. However despite the initial construction works starting off in full momentum, the pace eventually slowed due to a lack of funds. The Jama-ath officials braved the weather and persevered on for the collection of funds to complete the building project. But with the contributions from both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, the mosque was finally constructed. On 24 January 1963, "Malabar Mosque" or Masjid Malabar was declared open by the Yang di-Pertuan Negara, Encik Yusof bin Ishak.

The mosque's architecture was designed by A.H Siddique, an immigrant from northern India who also designed the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, a Sikh temple in Katong. The mosque has a traditional architecture design, adorning a big central golden onion dome decorated with a crescent and star, and smaller domes on its *minarets*. Besides its gold onion dome, the mosque has a separate two-storey *minaret*. The ground floor houses the Koran study area, the Imam's room, a visitors' lounge, and a small storeroom for the preparation of food. Offices and the ablution area are situated in a separate double-storey annex. The main prayer hall, facing Mecca, is situated on the first floor, surrounded by spacious verandas on its three sides. The staircase that leads to the first level is also oriented towards Mecca. The mosque's external façade is covered in distinct blue and white lapis lazuli tiles.



from top (opposite page):
The external façade of the mosque is covered in distinct blue and white lapis lazuli tiles;
another perspective of the building



In the early 1990s, the whole of the Jalan Sultan area underwent redevelopment work. With improvements being made throughout the area, the mosque decided to follow suit by modernizing its facade and redecorating the building to suit the modern settings of its new surroundings. Tiling works were done on the interior walls, and except for a few areas, all the interior walls of the mosque were fitted with either green and blue or white and blue tiles. The mosque used a palette of garnish green and blue for both the interiors and exteriors of the mosque. Uniquely designed gold and blue mosaic tiles were specially ordered to redecorate the exterior. By 1995, the interior of the mosque was also tiled. In 2009, the mosque underwent another round of renovations in order to preserve its unique architecture, and today the mosque is entirely covered with the mosaic tiles.

Currently, the Malabar Mosque has been selected for the second phase of the Mosque Upgrading Programme (MUP) and is seeking to raise funds. The opportunity this presents raises hope to expand their premises, upgrade their female prayer halls, lifts and rooms for madrasah education.

In addition, the mosque also holds various activities on site. There is a free legal clinic that is held on the last Tuesday of every month. Lawyers are available to provide free legal counsel and guidance. This is open to all members of the public, regardless of race or religion, with priority given to the needy.

Although Masjid Malabar was initially meant to serve the needs of the Malabar Muslim community, the mosque has broadened its scope and also serves the needs of society. Its legal clinic helps to attend to the needs of individuals while acting as a pillar of the community. In today's fast-paced society, it is necessary for mosques to keep up with the times and stay relevant, which Masjid Malabar has certainly achieved. While it still serves its primary purpose as a house of worship, it has evolved with the times and this can be seen through the various initiatives that they offer.

Since 2012, Masjid Malabar has become part of the Kampong Glam Heritage Tour.

perhaps amongst the most avant garde structures in Sikh Temples in Singapore. In fact, it is a beautiful depiction of the blend of modern architecture and conventional designs. The *takht* looks like a white nest made up of beautifully entangled flowers. It has a symmetrical, dome-like floral structure, topped off with the Sikh symbol 'Ik Onkar' which represents the One Supreme Reality and is a central tenet of Sikh religious philosophy.

The Darbar Sahib contains a high ceiling and windows all around the interior of the dome with shades attached so as to let in just enough light for peaceful worship. There are also dim lights and chandeliers that are used during celebratory occasions such as weddings, the birth anniversaries of the Gurus or festivals like Diwali and New Year. Like many other religions, in Sikhism, light symbolizes a divine path to self-enlightenment, dispelling all darkness.

Amrit, derived from the Sanskrit word 'amrita', refers to holy water for the Sikhs. The holy water is used in ceremonies for children when they are baptized upon birth. It also refers to God's name as 'Nectar'. *Sarovar* is a Punjabi term used to mean 'pool'. It is often incorporated in gurdwara complexes to symbolize spirituality and the gaining of worldly benefits. In Wadda Gurdwara, this religious feature is given a modern twist as it is located on the second level of the temple, while most *sarovars* are on the ground level. The temple also houses the Langar Hall, a central place for gathering and serving the community.

The Central Sikh Temple also has several tall buildings, attached to the main prayer building, that are used for office and administrative purposes. The Singapore Sikh Education Foundation operates in an office there.

Central Sikh Temple, on a whole, is a religious centre that serves the entire community in different aspects of life, be it education, spirituality or marriage. The centring of such essential social events within the spiritual and architectural beauty of the gurdwara only accentuates its effects and brings the *sangat* or community together as one under the divine Guru.



▶ **The *takht* looks like a white nest made up of beautifully entangled flowers.**

from top:
The 13-metre high central dome that houses the Darbar Sahib; the sarovar on the second level of the Temple



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