



# All Aboard the Imperial Cheng Ho!

Text and photos by Dr Chie Zhi Ying

I HAVE been very busy since housemanship started, and would spend whatever short breaks I had on staycations, relaxing in quiet corners of Singapore. Recently, I chanced upon a short harbour cruise to Kusu Island, one of the offshore islands south of Singapore, which offered a break from the everyday hustle and bustle of the city. I had never been to Kusu Island (Kusu is Hokkien for “tortoise”) before, and the only thing that I vaguely remembered about it was the heartwarming legend of how a divine tortoise saved two shipwrecked sailors by turning itself into the island.

Curiosity got the better of me, so I signed up for a cruise, and found myself waiting at the Marriott Hotel lobby one Sunday afternoon in February for the shuttle minivan that would send me to Marina South Pier in comfort.

Upon reaching the pier, I was greeted by the cruise boat, which was a replica of a famous Ming Dynasty imperial vessel. The craft was named *Cheng Ho*, after the renowned Ming admiral and explorer who commanded a massive imperial fleet that sailed to regions like India, Middle East, Southeast Asia, and all the way to Africa. It had an ornately carved pagoda roof with auspicious dragons at the flanks and a ferocious looking tiger’s head

at the bow. These creatures were supposed to guard ships against evil spirits and perils lurking in the boundless sea.

As I settled down in the well-furnished three-decker cruiser, I realised that I was probably one of the few locals on board. As the *Cheng Ho* started moving, I went onto the deck to breathe in some fresh sea air. Just closing my eyes, listening to the sound of sea waves crashing against our boat and feeling the salty breeze caressing my face gently was a splendid experience. The warmth and brightness of the midday sun, blue waters and surrounding tranquillity enhanced my enjoyment.

Alas, basking in the sunshine made one go hungry fast, so I returned to the comfort of the air-conditioned cabin for a high tea buffet. I wolfed down the delicious sandwiches, curry puffs, eclairs and Swiss rolls eagerly, before washing it all down with a cup of hot tea. A full stomach is indeed a happy stomach!

On our way to Kusu Island, we passed by the Singapore Flyer, Sentosa Cove and Tanjong Pagar Terminal, one of the busiest ports in the world. Once we reached our destination, we were given 30 minutes to tour the island, and I disembarked promptly as I did not want to waste a single second of my short stopover.



Clockwise, from top left  
Made a wish at this well  
Approaching Kusu Island  
The majestic Cheng Ho



First, I visited a quaint Chinese temple that housed the Goddess of Mercy and Da Bo Gong, worshipped for good health and wealth respectively. There were other visitors, who had arrived on another ferry and were there specially to pray to the deities. If this were the ninth lunar month, the whole building would have been swamped with thousands of devotees. There were tortoises bred in a sanctuary within the temple grounds. It was a joy watching them swimming in the shallow waters. Apart from living breathing tortoises, we also came across beautiful marble statues of these reptiles that were built to commemorate the island, which was a great spot to take photos for remembrance. Kusu Island lived up to its name indeed!

There was a lotus-shaped wishing well decorated with bells on the pier leading to Kusu Island. We were told that if you could strike the bells with your coin while making your wishes, they would come true. Before leaving the island, I tried my luck at the wishing well. Lo and behold, I got the bell ringing at my first shot!

If I had more time on the island, I would have gone on to explore further and perhaps even have a picnic on the sandy beaches. It was a pity I didn't get to visit another attraction, the three *kramats*. One has to climb more than 100 steps to reach these Malay shrines, where believers pray for wealth, peace and good marriages.

The return journey seemed much faster, and I savoured some cool Singapore Sling while revelling in the scenic view of the seas at dusk. Marina South Pier soon came into sight, signalling the end of my brief but interesting day cruise. I will definitely remember this trip fondly. It's the simple pleasures of life that re-energise us, so do go for little getaways once in a while, and discover the fun and joy in them! ■



Dr Chie Zhi Ying enjoys freelance writing and singing. She is a regular columnist for Lianhe Zaobao and Health No. 1. She can be reached at [chiezhiying@gmail.com](mailto:chiezhiying@gmail.com).

