

Your Guide to **Ancient History** Trail in Fort Canning Park

Fort Canning Park is steeped in ancient history. Artefacts uncovered during the construction of the reservoir in 1926 and recent archaeological digs reveal that the palace of ancient Malay rulers stood on the summit of what was once known as 'Forbidden Hill'. Extensive Malay and Chinese historical records provided further evidence of this.

As you embark on this trail, discover the era of the five kings and the Golden Age of Singapore in the 14th century. Visit the *keramat* sheltering an ancient tomb that purportedly contains the remains of Singapore's last pre-colonial ruler. Explore the site of an archaeological dig, where several 14th-century artefacts on display reveal evidence of trade with Chinese merchants in the 1300s.



Difficulty level: **Moderate**



Distance: **2km**



Walking time: **45min**





10 Mural Wall



13 The Forbidden Spring



15 Heritage Tree – Terap



2 Petai



4 Keramat



9 Parit Singapura



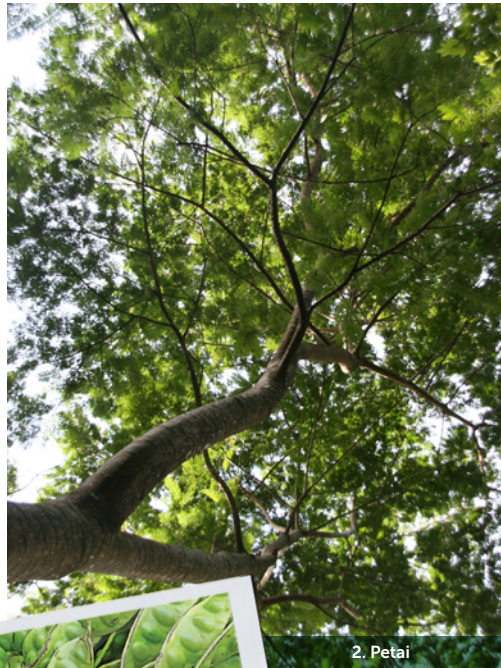
8 Possible Site of Royal Palace



6 Archaeological Dig and Exhibition Area



1. Rain Tree



2. Petai



Petai Seed Pods

START POINT

▶ 1 Heritage Tree – Rain Tree (*Samanea saman*)

This Heritage Tree marks the start of the trail.

The Rain Tree, a native of Central America, is planted in Singapore for its large, shady, umbrella-shaped crown. Its trunk and branches host beautiful ferns and orchids, and its leaves often fold up at dusk or before a rainstorm.

Scattered throughout the park are mature trees like this Rain Tree. These trees have been given Heritage Tree status under the Heritage Tree Scheme, as part of efforts to promote the conservation of mature trees in Singapore.

▶ 2 Petai (*Parkia speciosa*)

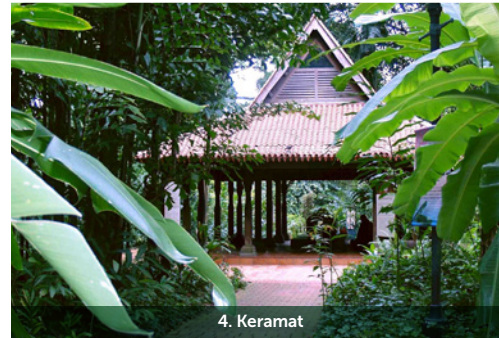
The Petai is a beautiful tree you can find on this walking trail.

This umbrella-shaped tree can grow up to 45m tall. Its flowers are small, creamy white, compacted onto a pear-shaped inflorescence and pollinated by bats.

The seeds of the Petai are commonly eaten, as they are believed to have cleansing properties for the kidneys.



3. Illustrations (Photo credit: Lat)



4. Keramat

▶ 3 Fort Canning Hill Pre-colonial History and the Five Kings

Stop here to get a quick overview of Fort Canning Hill's place in Singapore's history from the information boards. Also, read more about Singapore's five kings in the 14th century. This kingdom ended when the last king, Sri Sultan Iskandar Shah, was driven out of Singapore by attackers. He eventually founded a new capital at Malacca.

▶ 4 Keramat

At this terrace, view the *keramat* or shrine, an old tomb that purportedly contains the remains of Sri Sultan Iskandar Shah, the fifth and last ruler of pre-colonial Singapore.

This pavilion has been popularly regarded as an auspicious place; some people believe they can ask for specific favours here.

Look carefully at the architecture of the *keramat* with a 14th-century Malay roof called a *pendopo*. A fighting cock motif of Javanese origin is carved onto the 20 wooden pillars holding up the roof.



5. Banana Inflorescence in Spice Garden



5. Torch Ginger in Spice Garden

▶ 5 Spice Garden and Ancient Garden

You are now walking down the steps that pave the way through the Spice Garden. This Spice Garden is a small replica of the first experimental and botanical garden in Singapore that Sir Stamford Raffles established in 1822.

At that time, spices were as valuable as gold among the English, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. There was a fight for control over the sources and routes to the Spice Islands of Southeast Asia and India. In response to this fervour, the original experimental and botanical garden was planted mainly with nutmeg, clove and other economic plants.

This pandan-scented garden is now a showcase of herbs and spices. The Torch Ginger, Asam Gelugor, Curry Leaf, banana, nutmeg, clove and lemongrass are some of the plants you can see, touch and smell at the Spice Garden.

As you continue on your walk, imagine yourself in the midst of an ancient garden filled with fruit trees like the durian, rambutan, starfruit and *Duku* (some of which can now be found in the Spice Garden).

Gardens with fruit trees were a prominent feature in early Southeast Asian palaces. One such ancient garden was likely to have existed in the area you are walking towards now.



6. Archaeological Dig

▶ 6 Archaeological Dig and Exhibition Area

Go round the bend and follow the path that leads you to the archaeological dig and exhibition area, one of the biggest attractions on this trail.

On display are several 14th-century artefacts uncovered by researchers at the site. These artefacts show that, long before the arrival of the British in 1819, Chinese merchants were already engaging in trade in the region. The artefacts also suggest that the site was used by palace craftsmen to manufacture glass and gold items.

▶ 7 14th-century Gold Ornaments

From this spot, you can obtain a glimpse of the reservoir at the summit of the hill.

During the construction of this reservoir in 1926, Hindu Javanese gold ornaments in 14th-century style were found 3m below the surface of the ground. The most beautiful find was an armband decorated with the head of Kala, a demonic beast and the son of the Hindu goddess Durga. This motif was often showcased in the artwork of ancient Sumatra and Java.

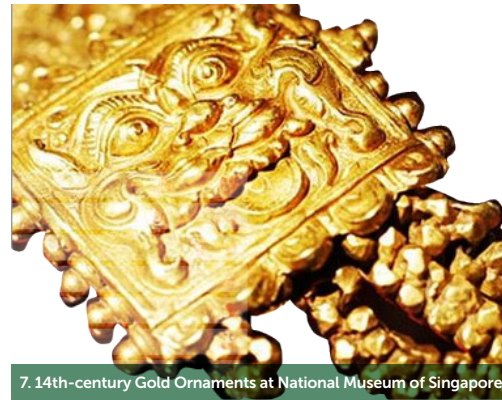
You can view the uncovered gold ornaments in the National Museum of Singapore.



6. Exhibition Area



Artefacts



7. 14th-century Gold Ornaments at National Museum of Singapore



8. Picnic Terrace

▶ 8 Possible Site of Royal Palace

You are now at the Picnic Terrace, an event space suitable for garden parties and small functions at Fort Canning Park. This area could possibly have been part of the palace grounds in the 14th century.

Like other ancient Southeast Asian palaces, the palace here would have comprised large wooden buildings on stilts (elaborately decorated with carvings), a royal bathing place near the spring, a garden, religious shrines and workshops for craftsmen.

Royalty, servants, guards and artists were most probably the people living within the palace compounds.

Stop at the far corner of the Picnic Terrace for a tongue-in-cheek cartoon depiction, created by Lat, a popular Malaysian cartoonist, of the five kings of Singapore and a summary of life in Singapore in the 14th century.



9. Parit Singapura



10. Mural Wall

▶ 9 Parit Singapura

You are now standing on a tiny bridge that most probably used to overlook a small freshwater stream. This stream has now completely disappeared.

According to ancient Malay and Chinese sources, Singapore had a moat and a wall. It ran along this stream that was most probably the *Parit Singapura* (Moat of Singapore). This wall was still standing when the British first arrived on the island.

▶ 10 Mural Wall

This interesting mural wall, carved by Balinese artisans, gives an artistic representation of 14th-century events and information pertaining to Singapore's history.

To follow the sequence of events depicted on the wall, refer to the boards opposite the mural wall. Read interesting nuggets of information on pre-colonial Fort Canning Hill, a Siamese attack on Singapore and Singapore from the 16th to 18th century.



12. The Singapore Stone at National Museum of Singapore

▶ **11 Settlements in 14th-century Singapore – Singapore’s Golden Age**

As you continue on your walk here, imagine yourself going back in time to the 14th century. Imagine standing right here in the midst of a thriving settlement extending from this hill to the flat ground of Padang and towards the north bank of the Singapore River.

Wang Dayuan, a Chinese trader who visited Singapore in 1330, described this settlement as ‘the hill back of Dragon’s Tooth Strait...It rises to a hollow-topped summit enclosed in a series of slopes; the people live all around it’.

‘Dragon’s Tooth Strait’, a pirate lair known as *Longyamen*, was the other settlement found in 14th-century Singapore.

Malay records and archaeological finds indicate that Singapore was a prosperous port between 1300 and 1400. Malay and Chinese merchants and probably Indian traders met here for barter trade.

▶ **12 The Singapore Stone and the 14th-century Strongman**

From this spot, you can see the Singapore River in the far distance ahead. A large boulder, known as the Singapore Stone, once stood at the mouth of this river, near to where the Merlion stands today. It was engraved with a long inscription written during the 14th century or earlier.

In 1843, the boulder was blown up by British Army engineers preparing the ground for Fort Fullerton, and only a few fragments were saved. These fragments are now preserved in the Calcutta and Singapore museums.

The Singapore Stone is linked to the story of the legendary 14th-century strongman called Badang. According to Malay historical records, Badang performed an amazing feat; he threw a stone from Fort Canning Hill to the mouth of the Singapore River (this was about 500m)!



13. The Forbidden Spring (Photo credit: Lat)

▶ **13 The Forbidden Spring**

You are now on the west side of Fort Canning Hill, along which once flowed a spring known as the Forbidden Spring. Only the wife and consorts of the king had access to bathe in this spring.

This spring provided enough pure drinking water to supply all ships visiting Singapore until 1830.

▶ **14 Singapore from the 15th to 17th Century**

As you journey on the last segment of this walking trail, read more about the turning of the tides in Singapore’s position as an important trading port when it became overshadowed by Malacca in the 15th century.

The following period for Singapore was an eventful one. The Portuguese gained control over Malacca in the 16th century and launched several attacks on Singapore in the 17th century.

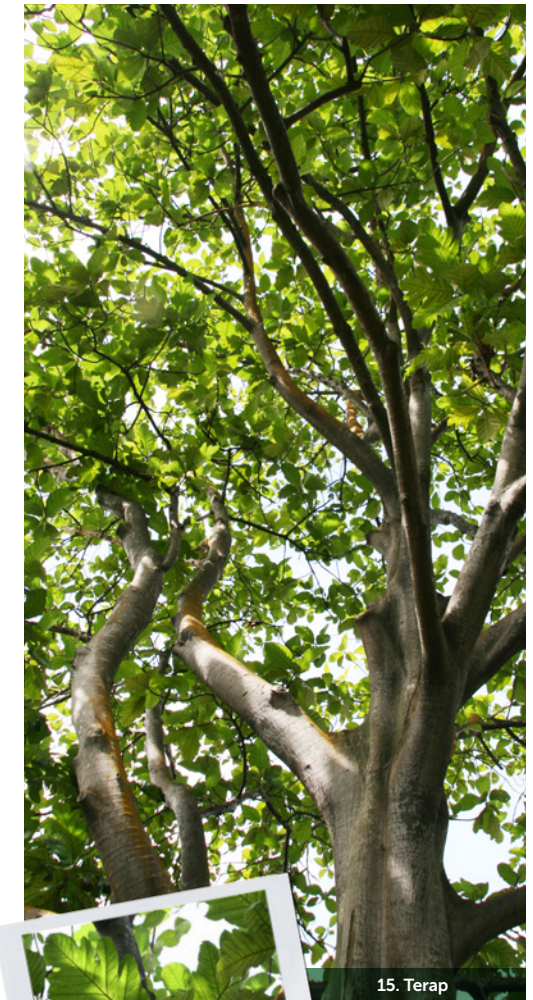
▶ **15 Heritage Tree – Terap (*Artocarpus elasticus*)**

This tall forest tree can be found throughout the Malay Peninsula. The young leaves have prominent, pointed lobes while the larger leaves of the mature trees are leathery and oval-shaped.

Its Latin name is a reference to the elastic latex produced by this tree. The tough and fibrous inner bark can be used for lining baskets or woven into ropes. The uniquely sweet-tasting fruit is slimy, much like the Chempedak, but with smaller seeds.

▶ **16 Ruins of Ancient Singapore**

You are now standing near the former summit of Fort Canning Hill, which was levelled to provide space for a fort in 1860. This location marks the end of the walking trail.



15. Terap

Terap Leaves

We hope you have enjoyed your walk on this trail. For another slice of Singapore’s history, embark on the Colonial History Trail in Fort Canning Park.

www.nparks.gov.sg/eguides
www.facebook.com/nparksbuzz