

# LIVING IN SINGAPORE

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# Charming Changi

## The History of Singapore's Commercial Airports

By Asif R. Chowdhury

Many of us who haven't left Singapore in close to two years are probably missing airports right now. What better time to learn about the airports that preceded our beloved Changi Airport?

Changi Airport was probably the first place that welcomed many of us to our new home in Singapore. Arriving here after our long flights, we were likely happy and relieved to see how quickly our checked-in baggage showed up, how efficiently we cleared customs area, and how neat and clean everything was. As we were driven off from the airport and our families got the first glimpse of Singapore, most of us were probably delighted by the beautiful flora and fauna that lines the ultra-clean highway which runs in and out of the airport. With its diverse work force of Chinese, Malay and Tamil descent, Changi Airport truly represents everything that is Singapore – clean, orderly, and efficient.

It is interesting that the tiny city-state of Singapore boasts one of the largest and busiest

airport hubs in Southeast Asia. Based on a recent study conducted by Institute of Policy Studies on Singapore's history, the opening of Changi Airport is placed among the five most important events in Singapore's brief fifty-six years of history. Indeed, Changi Airport epitomizes Singapore's rise from a developing nation to a fully developed first-world nation within a single generation. During non-COVID times, about 400,000 flights fly in and out of Changi annually. Since its opening in 1981, when it handled seven million passengers, it has gradually and continually been expanded and upgraded. In 2019, just before the COVID19 pandemic hit, Changi Airport handled a record 68 million passengers.

In addition to being a regional hub and one of the busiest airports in Asia, Changi is like no other airport in the world! Whereas most passengers dread going to airports with semi-chaotic and crowded security and immigration check points, Changi is one of the few airports that most

passengers look forward to visiting. People don't actually mind having a long layover there. Especially for transit passengers, the entertainment, food, and shopping Changi offers can be simply out of this world. Unlike most airports around the world, Changi is a mixture of amusement and theme park. It boasts an upscale shopping mall, with all sorts of restaurants from local hawker-center style food to world-class cuisines; various gardens in each of the terminal buildings; a cultural museum; the largest indoor slide on the island; a rooftop swimming pool; and a large indoor waterfall surrounded by tropical forests. The airport just happens to be attached to all these amenities! The airport complex has more than 150 dining and 400 shopping outlets, including Asia's largest Nike store.

Interestingly, there were three different commercial airports in Singapore before Changi Airport had solidified Singapore as a key aviation hub, each with its own interesting history.

## Seletar Airport

Seletar Airport, which still serves as a commercial airport today, originally opened in 1928 as a military air base for the British Royal Air Force (RAF). From 1930 to 1937, it served as the very first commercial airport of Singapore. It served as the primary air base for the British Forces leading up to the World War II, but fell to the Japanese occupying forces during the early part of 1942. Subsequently, it became the air base for the Imperial Japanese Navy during the war. After the war ended, it went back to the RAF and stayed with them until the closure of the base in March



of 1971. RAF handed it over to the Singapore Air Defence Command, which was later renamed as the Singapore Air Force. In its heyday, Seletar Air Base was home to some of the well-known classic aircrafts such as the Spitfire and the De Havilland Mosquito. Currently, Seletar Airport operates as a general commercial airport primarily servicing private jets and chartered flights. More recently, some international flights to and from Malaysia have started to operate from Seletar Airport. The Singapore Flying Club operates out of Seletar as well.

An aerial view of Seletar airfield, with Royal Air Force Mosquito and Dakota aircraft parked up



## Kallang Airport

The first true commercial airport in Singapore was the Kallang Airport. In 1931, the Governor of Singapore, Sir Cecil Clementi, proposed a permanent location for a new international airport in Singapore, since Seletar was primarily serving as the air base for the RAF. The Governor proposed the Kallang Basin as the location for this new airport, which is off the present-day Nicoll Highway, very close to the Singapore Sports Hub. The British government went all out in designing an ultra-modern airport facility in Kallang. The terminal

building was designed by the Chief Architect of Public Works Department, Frank Dorrington Ward, a well-respected architect during his time. The main terminal building was a masterpiece of modernist style made of glass and steel. During its early days of operation, Kallang Airport had the reputation of being one of the finest airports in the British Empire. With a budget of \$8 million, it took a total of six years to build it and it officially opened in 1937. The work included reclaiming lands in Kallang Basin, which used to be a large mangrove swamp filled with crocodiles and mosquitoes. Kallang Airport served the Malaya area well for 18 years.

However, by the early 1950s, with the increase of civil aviation during the post-war era, the increasing amount of air traffic started to strain the capacity of Kallang Airport. Initially, the British government contemplated expanding Kallang. But since the area was surrounded by heavily populated Geylang area, it did not make sense to expand the existing airport.



*Kallang Airport Terminal*

The colonial government decided to build a brand new airport in the district of Paya Lebar. After the Kallang Airport was decommissioned in 1955, the compound was used by different organizations, most notably by the People's Association from 1960 until 2009. Parts of the airport were redeveloped – the runway was converted into Kallang Park and later served as the area for the old National Stadium. Singapore's first modern residential precinct was built in the eastern part of the airport and is now known as the Old Kallang Airport Estate. In 2008, the government gazetted

the original airport terminal building, some of the administrative buildings, the aircraft hangers, and the control tower for conservation. While it is sitting empty today, hopefully it will be transformed into a museum where people can visit and get a glimpse of Singapore's commercial aviation past.

## **Paya Lebar Airport**

For the next larger commercial airport, the government chose 1,033 acres of land in the Paya Lebar area. Unfortunately, it was a populated area also at the time and the local residents had to be relocated. More than 300 families had to be moved to free up the designated space for the new airport. The Paya Lebar International Airport opened in August 1955. It became one of the two primary hubs of then Malayan Airways, a predecessor to the Singapore Airlines. It is from Paya Lebar that the airline took its maiden international flight to Hong Kong using a DC-4 turboprop aircraft leased from Qantas Airlines. In 1962, the airport also started to serve as a military air base for Air Defence. It was also the home to the supersonic Concorde in 1979 and 1980, when British Airways, in conjunction with Singapore Airlines, began the supersonic service between London Heathrow and Singapore.

By the 1970s, with the advent of the jet-age, the number of passengers at Paya Lebar Airport had already started to increase. It rose from 1.4 million to four million during the early to mid-seventies. Once again, Singapore found itself needing to expand its airport capacity. This time, foreign consultants were brought in to review the possibilities of expanding Paya Lebar or finding a suitable location for a new airport. Even



*Royal Air Force personnel pass in front of a Consolidated B-24 Liberator aircraft at Kallang Airport.*

though Paya Lebar Airport was surrounded by a populated area, the recommendation was to expand the existing airport. Instead of following the recommendation of the foreign consultants, the Singapore government decided to build a new airport on the eastern coast of Singapore at the site of the old Changi Air Base where there was plenty of space for future development if needed. It is a testament to the foresightedness of Singapore's leader, Lee Kwan Yew, and the government at that time, as they rightfully realized that perhaps there will be a need to expand the airport again in the decades ahead.

## Changi Airport

With the opening of Changi in 1981, Paya Lebar was completely transformed into a military air force base. It's a major air force base today and serves various operations for the US Air Force, including using it as a refueling base. All of the Air Force One flights carrying various US presidents, including George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and most recently, Donald Trump used the Paya Lebar Air Base.

In 1975, the construction of the new airport in Changi started at what used to be the old Changi Air Base. Changi Air Base was built during World War II by the Japanese occupying forces using their prisoners-of-war. It was later briefly used by the RAF after the end of the war. The original plan for Changi Airport included two runways and four passenger terminals; the first phase included only Terminal 1 with plans for other terminals as needed. The construction of the new airport involved significant land reclamation work. Almost 1,700 acres of land was reclaimed from the sea where Changi Airport stands today. Even though it was a massive undertaking and there was a shortage of material and workers during

those years, the airport was completed in a record time of six years and within budget. Changi Airport became operational in July 1981, and was officially opened in December of the same year. The first flight to land at Changi was Singapore Airlines SQ101, carrying 140 passengers from Kuala Lumpur, and the first flight departing Changi was SQ192 to Penang.



Subsequently, Terminal 2 opened in 1990 and Terminal 3 became operational in 2008. The newest terminal, Terminal 4, opened in 2017. Not so widely known is the CIP terminal at Changi which serves as a luxury terminal, but is open to all passengers. For a fee, passengers can feel like a VIP.

Today, Changi Airport continues to serve as a major connection hub in Southeast Asia. It has become a household name for many travelers, including those who have never stepped foot into Singapore, but have used the airport to transit to their final destinations. They have fallen in love with Changi Airport in the process – just like many of us expats and locals alike. We all look forward to the days when Changi's halls are full of passengers once more.



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