



# LIVING IN SINGAPORE

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## THE STORY OF THE SINGAPORE QUAYS

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# The Story of the Singapore Quays

By Asif R. Chowdhury

The four Singapore Quays today serve as prime recreation and entertainment districts of the island for families, friends, singles, locals, and expats alike, each with its own choices of dining, from local dishes to cuisines from many parts of the world; bars and night clubs; and access to various choices of chain and local hotels and upscale condominiums. Starting at Collyer Quay, located at the mouth of the Singapore River where it meets the waters of the Singapore Straits, you'll come to Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, and finally, Robertson Quay as you goes upstream along the Singapore River.

It is difficult to fathom that not too long ago, these clean, pristine, and well-manicured entertainment quays were dirty, chaotic, and bustling commercial areas also serving as major shipping hubs throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century. It is equally difficult to imagine that in the not-too-distant past, these were also sites with old and rundown buildings, shops, and godowns (warehouses) along the shoreline of a heavily polluted river. What has transpired with the quays, in a relatively short period of time, is nothing short of a modern-day miracle, transforming these areas into lively recreational areas and beautiful neighborhoods, completely unrecognizable from only a couple of decades earlier. Each of the four quays has its own story to tell to any eager listener. But the story of the Singapore Quays will remain incomplete without first telling the story of the



Singapore River, as they are inseparably woven together, from how the river encouraged the early inhabitants to call this place home more than one thousand years ago, to how it shaped and wrote the history of the island through trade and commerce throughout the centuries and played a key role in the development of modern Singapore.

From the perspective of the long history of the world, Singapore is a newborn baby nation, gaining independence only in 1965, a mere 58 years ago. But the island's history goes back more than one thousand years, as early as the 10th century when it was first established as a small fishing village called Temasek. With the waterways of the surrounding sea and the river, it is not surprising



that the early inhabitants of the island were primarily sea gypsies known as *orang laut* in the local Malay language. Ancient Chinese historical reports, as well as the Annals of Malay (known as *Sejarah Melayu* in the local Malay language), mention a thriving city and community around the 11th century called Kuala Temasek, the capital of Temasek, located at the original mouth of Singapore River, which is around the present-day Queen Elizabeth Walk.

It is worth digressing from the story of the river just a tad to share the tale of how the island came to be renamed Singapore. By the late 13th century, the island of Temasek was ruled by the prince of Palembang (the capital city of the Indonesian province of South Sumatra), Sang Nila Utama. The story goes that when the prince landed in Singapore in 1299, he spotted an auspicious-looking beast resembling what seemed to him a large lion. So, he named the island after the beast calling it the city of the lion or Singapura (eventually Singapore), which comes from the Malay words *singa* meaning lion, and *pura* meaning city. Knowing what we do today, it was likely the creature he saw was a tiger as lions never inhabited Singapore, but the name has stuck.

Over the course of the following centuries, the Singapore River not only continued to serve as a key provider of livelihood for the

local inhabitants but also helped the island to grow continually through ever-increasing trade. By the 1800s, Singapore was ruled by the Sultan of Johor of Malaysia, and during the early 1800s, the chief public security officer of the Sultan, Temenggong Abdul Rahman, and his followers had started to build their settlement at the mouth of the Singapore River. Even before the British set foot on the island, it had developed into a relatively busy port. The river had already become an active waterway with all kinds of boats, barges, and junk constantly sailing in and out of the harbors. Several buildings and warehouses were already built along the river for the purpose of housing the officials and the workers, and for storing the goods. When Sir Stamford Raffles arrived on the island in 1819, he was quick to realize the potential of these waterways and deep-sea access, especially to challenge the trade monopoly of the Dutch and the Portuguese in the Southeast Asia region, and he was eager to establish a British colony on the island. Temenggong Abdul Rahman played a major role in signing the Treaty of Singapore with the British East India Company in 1819, which officially established the colony. Sir Stamford Raffles almost immediately started work on fulfilling his ambition and initiated redesigning the layout of the city-state. The river and the quays were instrumental to his plan to increase the volume of trade and



commerce on the island, which helped turn it into a major free port in the region. By 1823, a mere four years after the British established the colony, it is estimated that the Singapore River was used by more than 3,000 boats and barges with a total trade volume of about \$13 million. This subsequently led to an economic boom attracting immigrants from China, India, and other neighboring countries, and the rest is history.

Over the next century, Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, and Robertson Quay along the river would play key roles as major shipping and trading ports and hubs along the river in this tiny island state. By the turn of the late nineteenth century, the Singapore River, abuzz with all sorts of trade and economic activities, had started to give rise to communities along the river, starting at Boat Quay. With the meteoric rise of trade, commercial activities started to extend more upstream starting from the 1860s. Many Chinese villages, Malay *kampongs*, godowns, rice mills, boat yards, and other trades started to spring up along the river towards Clarke Quay and then on and beyond Robertson Quay. By the early 1900s, these areas along the Singapore River had become heavily industrialized and hence crowded with businessmen, tradespeople, coolies, and watermen, all living around and up the riverbanks. With the explosive population growth and increased shipping activities, the heavily used waterways of

the river had started to get filthy with garbage and sewage as well as with pig waste from the nearby pig farms. By the middle of the last century, the river had become significantly polluted. By the 1970s, the situation had worsened further with oil spills and wastewater from the boats and ships. Things eventually got so bad that the government had to step in, making a monumental decision to take on the massive task of cleaning up the river. A detailed plan was submitted to the Prime Minister accordingly in October of 1977. The first part of the plan entailed moving all the trade and commerce away from the quays to a new modern port facility in Pasir Panjang, which was built in 1974. Subsequently, the project of cleaning the river would start. As the boats, barges, junk, and ships slowly started to move to the new shipyard, all the trade-related activities also started to fade away from the quays. Soon, all the hustle and bustle of Boat Quay, Clarke Quay, and Robertson Quay started to unwind until they all fell silent for the first time in more than a century. It truly marked an end of an era in terms of the history of the quays.

The cleaning of the river continued for the next ten years, and the project was successfully completed in 1987. Over the next few years, with the clean waters of the Singapore River and with no shipping activities, new plans were being drawn up to revamp the quays and turn them into commercial, residential, and entertainment precincts. This marked the beginning of the layout of the quays over the next decades and transformed the areas into what we see and experience today. While the story of the Singapore River indeed binds the history of the Singapore Quays together, each of them has an interesting tale to offer about its own journey – its formation, transformation, and what each has to offer today to its many patrons and visitors.



View of twakows or lighters in Singapore River showing the level of pollution; 1982

## Collyer Quay

While Collyer Quay is located at the mouth of the river, interestingly, it never quite served as a trading post. In fact, the development of Collyer Quay was almost like an afterthought by the British colonial government. The city center had originally grown a little further up the river around Raffles Place, where the godowns and trading houses were clustered. During the early years, the shoreline of Collyer Quay was known as *Tho Kho Au* in the local Hokkien dialect, which means “behind the godowns.” In 1859, as the upstream Singapore River was getting congested, the shoreline of Collyer Quay was reclaimed by a municipal engineer to help with the increasing commerce. The engineer was George Chancellor Collyer, after whom the quay was named. Within a few years, the quay started to sprout with activities, with shops and trading houses built in the area. From the shores of Collyer Quay, the merchants were known to scan the seas with telescopes for arriving vessels. Reciprocally, this was the shoreline that provided the very first glimpse of Singapore for the many arriving immigrants. The reclamation and the subsequent increase in trading activities led to further development of a grander scale in the early 20th century as many new buildings with colonial architecture were built along the shoreline. Some travelers would compare the new skyline with Shanghai’s famous Bund area. Author and historian Julian Davison recalls of the Singapore waterfront



at Collyer Quay, “Here were 1920s blockbusters: Ocean Building, The Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, Union Building, and the Fullerton Building, so mammoth because of their cutting edge, lighter reinforced concrete frames.....the skyscrapers of Asia Insurance Building and the Bank of China were gigantic legs soaring into the clouds.” Today, among many of the colonial-era buildings, the Fullerton Building - which used to be the post office and is now Fullerton Hotel - and the former Asia Insurance Building still stand. The glamorous financial district showcasing Singapore’s modern-day skyline stands close to Collyer Quay.

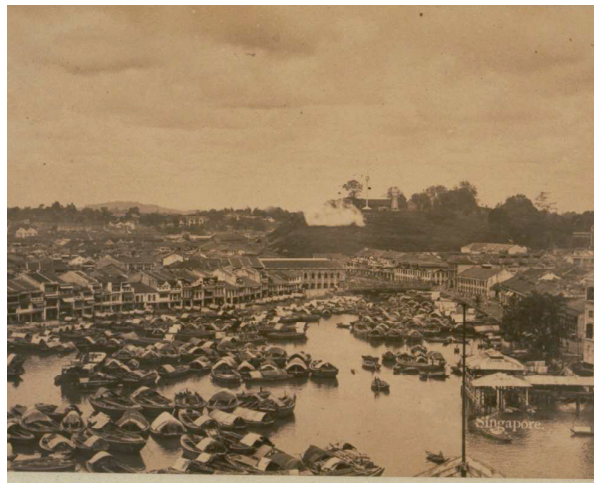
## Boat Quay

The historic Boat Quay lies upstream from Collyer Quay. In line with his plan to establish Singapore as a major shipping and trading hub in Southeast Asia, Sir Stamford Raffles decided that Boat Quay, located not exactly at the mouth of the river (but also not too far inland), was ideally located for handling all



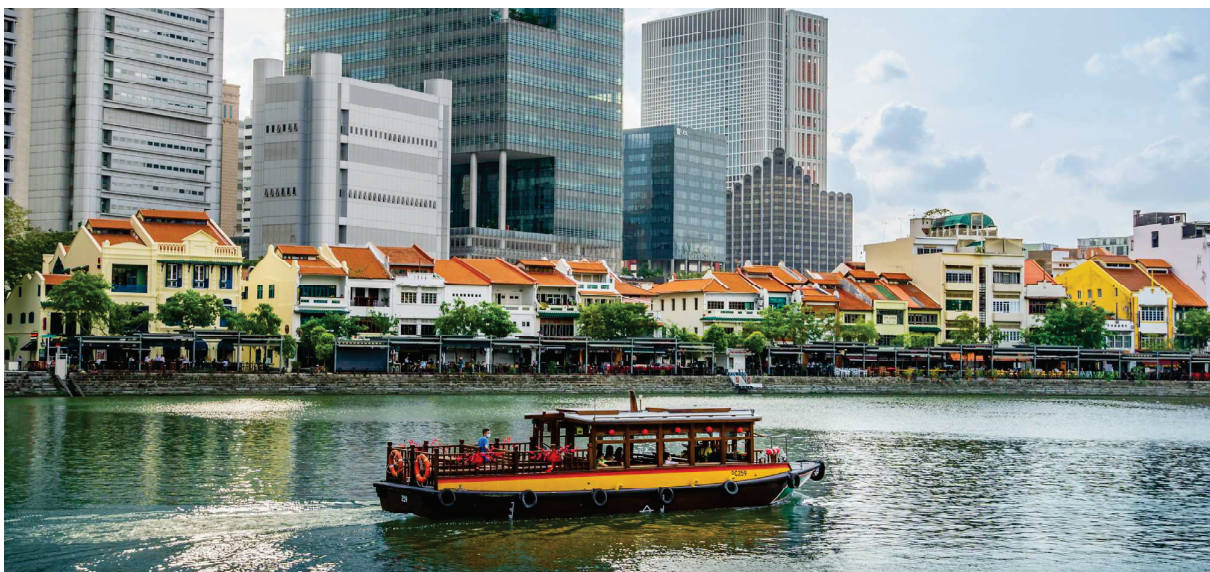
the shipping and commercial activities. However, at that time in the early 1800s, most of the area around this quay was swamp land and somewhat unsuitable for establishing an elaborate trading zone. But Raffles was determined to use this as the island's main business area and in 1822 and 1823, he undertook what would be the island's first land reclamation project. A number of small hills around the area were leveled, and land from the leveling was used to create embankments around the river, forming what would soon become Boat Quay. The leveled hills were turned into places of trade and business, first known as Commercial Square and later renamed Raffles Place.

During its heyday, Boat Quay was the busiest port of Singapore and, by the mid-1800s, was known to handle 75% of all shipping business on the island. Boats and junks from all over Southeast Asia - China, Siam (Thailand), India, and Indonesian islands - hauled in all kinds of goods, from coffee, spices, silk, porcelain, and rice to opium, making the return journey to their respective homelands filled with ironware, steel, guns, cotton, and many other goods. With the increasing volume of trade, multiple godowns were built in Boat Quay to house the goods. Alongside the godowns, many shops also started to spring up to display and sell these items. Boat Quay, along with Raffles Place, remained the primary center of commerce in Singapore through the 1800s.



*View of Singapore River at Boat Quay, looking towards Fort Canning Hill, Singapore ~ 1900. The covered landing stage on the right was the site of the original Hallpike Boatyard where boat building and repairs were carried out from 1823 to late 1860s.*

After the epic Singapore River cleanup, Boat Quay's days as a shipping hub came to an end. The area was deserted from 1983 to 1986. Then in 1986, a master plan was undertaken to conserve the Singapore River and key areas around it. Part of the plan included conserving the historic shophouses in Boat Quay. In 1993, the redevelopment started, and the shophouses went through major reconstruction under strict guidelines of restoration as defined by the Urban Redevelopment Authority. The entire area has since been revamped as a shopping and entertainment district, with many of the original shophouses transformed into nice bars and restaurants, giving it an elegant and rustic look.



Some folks prefer a night out at Boat Quay due to its relatively quiet and low-key environment compared to the more boisterous and livelier Clarke Quay.

## Clarke Quay

With the rapid growth in trade activities in Singapore, Boat Quay was soon bursting at the seams, and there was a need to expand the island's commercial and trading hubs. As a natural progression, development continued upriver along the banks of Clarke Quay. Very quickly, the area became another key site to carry on the increased shipping commerce. Accordingly, many commercial offices, shophouses, and godowns were also built in Clarke Quay. The two- to three-story shophouses served as trading offices and shops while the working-class families lived in the upper quarters of these iconic buildings. The quay is named after Sir Andrew Clarke, who was the Governor of the Straits Settlement from 1824 to 1902. Along with being major ports and commercial hubs, both Boat Quay and Clarke Quay became well known for various kinds of lively entertainment, such as Chinese opera performances and street storytelling sessions – both very popular at the time, especially for the local Chinese folks.

With the Singapore River cleanup project and the shipping moving to Keppel Harbor, Clarke Quay also fell victim to the eventual improvement of the waterways and soon became irrelevant to shipping. The government wanted to transform the area into an entertainment district. So, from 1989 through

1993, Clarke Quay went through a major revamp, which is considered to be the largest conservation project at that time, costing about S\$186 million and covering an area of more than 230,000 square feet. It involved the restoration of five blocks of 60 old shophouses and godowns under the stringent requirement to keep their original “look and feel” to ensure that they didn't lose their historical luster and significance. The project also included creating a large promenade with many restaurants and bars. Perhaps one of the most iconic parts of the redevelopment was having 80 gaslights that had to be manually lit every night. This created a very nostalgic atmosphere, along with the restored shophouses and godowns. When it opened in 1993, Clarke Quay was promoted as a family-friendly place for dining and entertainment.

Unfortunately, despite the great effort to restore Clarke Quay, it didn't bring the commercial success that the investors had hoped for. During the early 2000s, Clarke Quay underwent a second round of upgrades with further improvement of infrastructure while increasing both the quantity and quality of nightlife, catering more to the tastes of young professionals, expatriates, and foreign visitors. This second revamp proved to be more successful compared to the original restoration and indeed increased the popularity of the place. Today, it remains the most visited site among the four quays of Singapore by expats and locals alike.



## Robertson Quay

Robertson Quay is located the most upstream of the Singapore River and is the largest of all the four quays. Named after Dr. J Murray Robertson, a municipal counselor under the British colonial government, it covers an area of 126 acres or nearly 5.5 million square feet. The area remained a swampland through most of the nineteenth century. But to cope with the ever-increasing

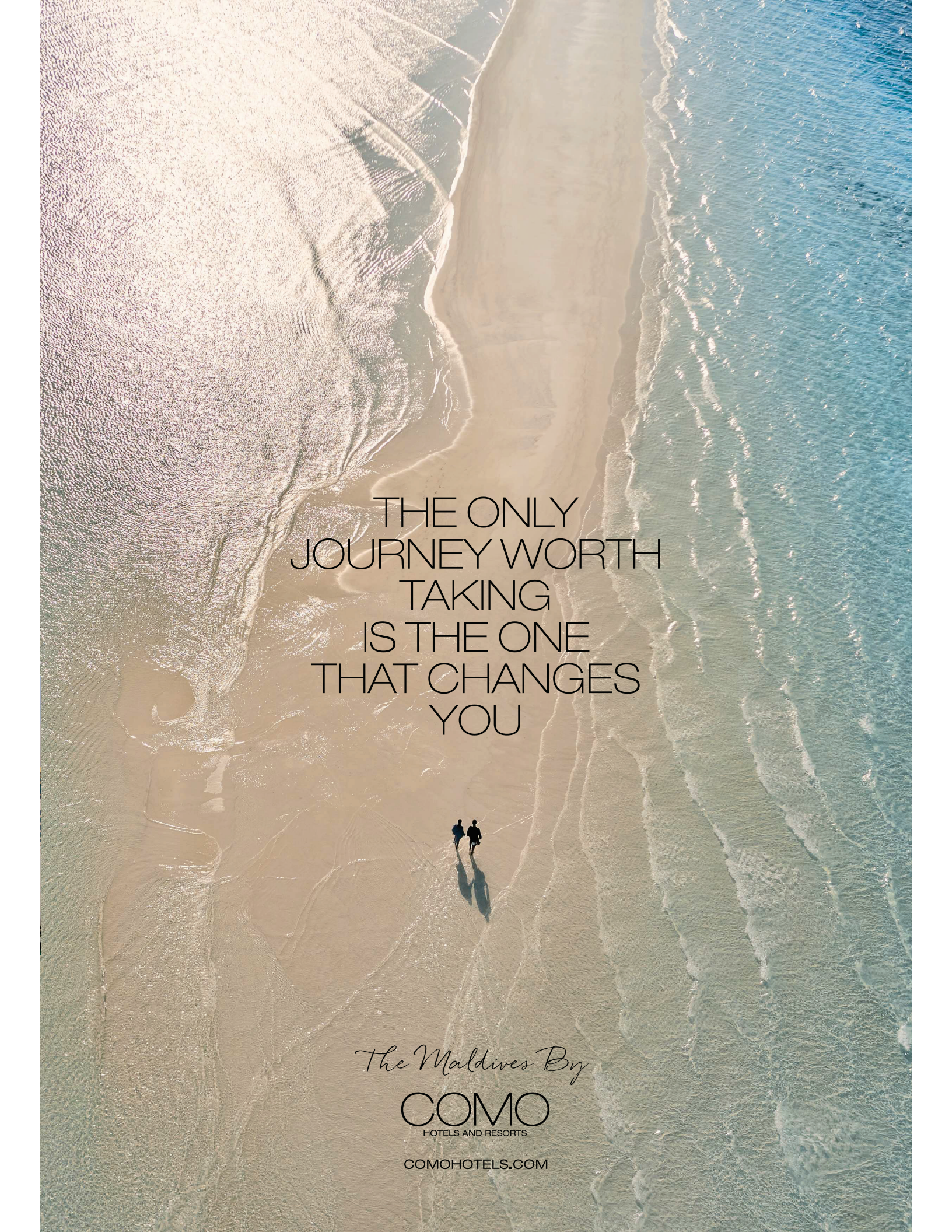


demand for shipping and commerce along with the rising population, another commercial area was established further upriver from Clarke Quay. The area around Robertson Quay was reclaimed in the 1880s. By the beginning of the 20th century, the area started to develop and take shape as another major business site. Much like the transformation of Boat Quay and Clarke Quay, many Chinese and European-style boathouses and buildings were constructed at Robertson Quay, catering to the needs of increased trade activities. Ultimately it met a similar fate as that of the other quays when the shipping activity stopped in the mid-80s. The area was rezoned for residential, commercial, and hotel use in the 1990s. However, unlike the preservation efforts during the reconstruction of Clarke Quay and Boat Quay, most of the original godowns and

shophouses in Robertson Quay were demolished or integrated into the new developments and architecture. The area was eventually transformed into a more family-friendly neighborhood with nice condominiums, restaurants, and bars. In 2016, the area underwent a major renovation, and upon reopening in 2017, it was completely reinvigorated as one of Singapore's most sophisticated areas.

Each of the four quays on the island offers a level of unique experience to all its visitors. When visiting any of them for a nice and enjoyable evening of entertainment, dinner, or just simple leisure, it's worth taking a moment to remember that not too long ago these were the sites of major commerce and trade. They were crowded with various kinds of merchant vessels, and the riverways were polluted with all kinds of filth but nevertheless, were instrumental in paving the way for the creation of modern Singapore. The amazing turnaround that each of the Quays has witnessed in the last couple of decades stands as a testament to the astonishing transformation of Singapore from an underdeveloped nation to a first-world city-state within a generation.





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