



The beaches of St John's and Lazarus Islands are ideal for picnics, barbecues or simply just lazing the day away.

Get rustic on Ubin

Hop on a bumboat from Changi Point ferry terminal and wind up transported to a very different Singapore – where dirt paths lead to hidden shrines and green havens.

Of all the offshore islands, Pulau Ubin is the most self-contained, with facilities catering to visitors and about 40 residents. Get off the boat (\$2.50 for one-way, 15-minute ride), and find yourself on the 10km-sq island where time has seemingly stood still. A handful of provision shops, seafood restaurants and bicycle rental stalls are near the pier.

Rent a bike to ride around for the whole day (from \$6; the better quality bicycles, at \$8, are recommended). You can also walk around.

Take it slow and you have a greater chance of spotting a monkey gnawing on fruits or a baby wild pig foraging in the forest.

For the adventurous, book a kayaking tour with outdoor adventures agency Asian Detours (www.ubin.kayak.com, \$74.50 for four hours). Paddle along the coast and enter the mangroves dotting the island.

Nearly every inch of the rustic enclave is covered in greenery. Explore the abandoned granite quarries (Ubin means granite in Malay). At Chek Jawa wetlands, get to know natural habitats including the mangroves, coastal forest and seagrass lagoon.

Take a walk along the coastal and mangrove boardwalks. Sign up for guided tours organised by the National Parks Board and nature groups, such as the Naked Hermit Crab (nakedhermitcrab.blogspot.sg). Venture out during low tide in search of marine life, like the knobbleck or the unknown – as Ubinites and they will say it has been around for decades. It was erected in honour of a nameless German girl, said to have fallen to her death off one of the island's cliffs in 1896.

The original ramshackle yellow hut, dating back to the 1970s, which housed the urn of the girl, has since been rebuilt into a small brick-and-mortar temple. Devotees believe the girl's spirit has special powers, which could help them strike it rich, and a few worshippers can be found every now and then at the shrine.

Ubin residents are repositories of such island legends and more. Ms Ivy Choo, 52, who sells drinks by the road on weekends, has lived on the island all her life. She says: "It's a different feeling here from the city, so take your time exploring. Before you know it, your stress will melt away."



A popular way to explore Pulau Ubin is on a bicycle.

Explore shrines and have a picnic at Kusu

In the ninth lunar month each year, thousands of devotees flock to Kusu Island to pray for good health, prosperity, fertility and happiness.

They make a beeline for the Da Bo Gong Temple, which houses two main Chinese deities: Tua Pek Kong (God of Prosperity) and Guan Yin (Goddess of Mercy).

This year, the Kusu Pilgrimage takes place from Oct 13 to Nov 11.

Elsewhere on the island, a 152-step climb leads to three kratams or holy shrines of Malay saints. The site is dedicated to a pious man from the 19th century, Syed Abdul

Rahman, his mother and his sister. Popular among couples hoping to conceive, the shrines have walls filled with scribbles of four-digit numbers by devotees desperate to strike gold.

Visit the island outside of the pilgrimage period and the 8.5ha island is a quiet refuge.

Kusu Island, which means tortoise island in Hokkien and is home to more than 100 tortoises, is among three islands – including Lazarus and St John's islands – served by a ferry service that is run by Singapore Island Cruise. The

ride takes about an hour.

The ferry leaves from Marina South Pier daily. Timings vary, so check the website (www.islandcruise.com.sg) for the schedule.

Several pavilions line Kusu Island. On a Sunday afternoon, fewer than 10 groups of visitors were there. Tourists poke around the religious sites, while couples colonise the most secluded pavilions at the far end. Families let the children loose in the open space or swimming lagoon. Beware, though, of the island's monkeys, eager to get their paws on your belongings.

For IT manager Michael Vincent Pozzo, 39, who was at the island with his wife and their two children aged nine and six for the first time last Sunday, it makes a good family day-trip destination with its many shelters and benches, and drinks for sale at the temple.

They were at St John's and Lazarus islands earlier in the day. He says: "It's too hot at the beach at Lazarus and there were no facilities. Here at Kusu Island, it is convenient to have a picnic and laze by the lagoon."

Itching for a quick getaway from the city? Forget Batam or Langkawi – LifeWeekend gives you the lowdown on seven of Singapore's idyllic offshore islands.



Gurveen Kaur



The NParks' free guided walk to the Sisters' Islands during low tides is a good way to explore the area's marine life.

Join a guided shore walk at Sisters' Islands

Part of Singapore's first marine park which was established last year, Sisters' Islands are turning into a hot spot for the adventurous. Slots on the National Parks Board's bi-monthly free guided walk to the islands are snapped up quickly after they are released online.

Introduced in August, the three-hour tours give the public a chance to get close to marine wildlife. The common sea star, blue-spot nudibranch, octopus and five-spot anemone shrimp can be spotted during low tide in the area.

Corals and sponges abound too, such as the mushroom coral and pink puffball sponge.

The walks are planned according to the tides. It is best to visit during low tides of 0.4m and below.

IT manager Andy Lee, 41, attended the tour with two of his sons, aged 12 and 10, last year. He says: "The tour was like an outdoor classroom for my children as they learn that Singapore is home to all these marine animals that once existed for them only in textbooks."

Dr Lena Chan, director of NParks' National Biodiversity Centre, says

more than 1,000 people have participated in the walks.

Tours are capped at 45 people to minimise the impact on the intertidal marine environment. The next available tour date is Sept 2. Registration will open on Aug 1.

Dr Chan says there are plans to restore and enhance other marine habitats such as Changi Beach Park and Labrador Nature Reserve.

Other than during the guided walks, there are no regular ferry services to Sisters' Islands, which are close to 6ha in size combined. To get there, one can charter a

boat from companies such as Singapore Island Cruise operating out of Marina South Pier. Rentals start from \$350 for a small boat that can take up to 12 passengers.

Legend has it that the islands were formed out of two orphaned sisters. After a pirate kidnapped the younger sister, the elder one swam after the boat and drowned. Grief-stricken, the younger sister jumped into the sea and drowned too.

The next day, two islands formed at the spot where they died and were henceforth known as Sisters' Islands.

Trek nature trails on Sentosa



The lush greenery of the Mount Imbiah Nature Reserve, home to more than 30 species of trees.

Trek nature trails on Sentosa

Ask any Singaporean about Sentosa's attractions and Universal Studios Singapore or Fort Siloso might roll off their tongues.

But ask about Mount Imbiah and Mount Serapong nature reserves and you will likely be met with blank stares.

The two gazetted nature reserves span more than 40ha – making up 10 per cent of Sentosa's total space.

The island is also home to 31 Heritage Trees, a title conferred by NParks on mature trees with historical or ecological significance. Majestic beauties such as the Tembusu and Angasna trees add grandeur to the landscape.

So the next time you head to the island, add a nature trail to your itinerary. Of the two nature reserves, Mount Imbiah is more accessible and safer to wander into without a guide. The dense foliage at Mount Serapong makes for rough passage, even for the adventurous, and it is best to contact Sentosa if you are keen to test the route at the eastern end of the island.

At Mount Imbiah, visitors can soak up the fresh air under more than 30 species of trees. Examples include the Silverback, named for its leaves with silvery undersides, and the Palaquium obovatum, not found in mainland Singapore, with its leathery leaves and reddish-brown bark.

If you are lucky, you might spy peacocks stealthily crossing pathways or magpie robins rustling the canopy.

At the foot of the nature reserve is a natural spring, Siloso Spring, one of the main water sources supporting plant life on the island.

There are two man-made waterfalls too: Tempinis Cascade and Imbiah Falls.

Along the way, next to the MegaZip Adventure Park, stands a piece of history harking back to the 1880s – the dilapidated Mount Imbiah Battery.

For senior arborist Daniel Seah, 60, who has worked on Sentosa since 1978, the nature reserves trump the island's more popular man-made sights.

He says: "I like Imbiah Battery and the Altona Scholastic heritage tree best, as they bring back memories of my youth when I ventured to places many have not been before."

To get to Mount Imbiah, take the Sentosa Express and alight at Imbiah Station. Make your way to Imbiah Lookout.

Or you can also alight at Imbiah Lookout station, part of the new cable-car line, and head towards MegaZip Adventure Park to connect to the Imbiah Trails.

The Sentosa authorities decline to share more on Mount Serapong as they prefer visitors to contact them directly to check out the nature reserve.

Also known as Cement Hill because of its vast concrete surfaces, Mount Serapong once served as a military post in the late 19th century. Traces of gun batteries and underground tunnels still stand.

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The coral reefs of Pulau Hantu house creatures including the bamboo shark.

Scuba dive at Hantu

Despite its name, Pulau Hantu, which means "ghost island" in Malay, is far from eerie.

Calm waters, white sand and a rich bounty of coral reefs have made the island an increasingly popular haunt with divers. After all, it is a closer alternative to known diving spots in the region such as Tioman Island and Langkawi.

Founder of marine interest group The Hantu Bloggers, Ms Debby Ng, has been diving in the waters of Pulau Hantu for more than a decade.

Ms Ng, 33, says: "Pulau Hantu is a unique relic of Singapore's natural heritage. Since we began our work in 2003, more people have become interested in the island. We believe that people have not visited our southern shores simply because they did not know they existed."

The group also runs volunteer-guided monthly dive trips to the island that cost \$150, excluding the dive gear rental. Divers can sign up on its website (www.pulauhantu.sg).

Beneath the murky waters off Pulau Hantu lies more than 100 species of corals, as well as bamboo sharks, clownfishes, sea stars, sea-horse and turtles.

For non-divers, the main draw would be a small mangrove area and swimming lagoons. Facilities

such as toilets, shelters and picnic areas are available on the island too.

Legend has it that ancient Malay warriors once fought to their deaths on the island and their ghosts now linger there.

Pulau Hantu is made up of two islets – Hantu Besar (Big Ghost) and Hantu Kecil (Little Ghost). Both have shelters and picnic areas for visitors, while Hantu Besar also has two swimming lagoons and a public toilet with fresh water.

At low tide, it is possible to walk across the lagoon between the two islands and some of the corals can be seen.

Check the National Environment Agency website for tidal predictions before setting off. There are no regular ferries to the island so the best way to get there is to hail a boat from West Coast Pier.

Prices vary, depending on the cost of fuel, but expect to pay at least \$17 for the 45-minute journey.

The boat will pass through an immigration checkpoint, so identification is required in the form of one's identity card or passport.

You can also charter a boat if you prefer a cushier ride. Prices start from \$400 for a boat that can hold up to 12 passengers.

Explore in comfort

Dress comfortably
Keep cool in T-shirts, tank tops and shorts. Take along a cap and sunglasses.

Wear sturdy walking shoes
and have a pair of flip-flops by the beach.

Pack the necessities
Take along water, tissue paper, wet wipes and insect repellent.

Plan in advance
Check ferry schedules for trips

to and from St John's, Kusu and Lazarus islands to avoid long waits at the pier or being stranded after the last ferry has left. Check the weather forecast before heading out.

Throw a yacht party
Charter a yacht, berth at an island and spend the day there or onboard. Operators that offer charters include SingExperience (yachtrental.com.sg), Yacht Charter Singapore (www.yachtcharter.sg) and MarineBookings (www.marinebookings.com).

Rentals start from \$690, depending on the size of the boat (10 to 150 people) and which island you are going to. Some operators offer extras, such as rental of fishing and kayak gear, or karaoke.

Chill at St John's, Lazarus

Formerly a quarantine centre for cholera-stricken immigrants in the 1870s, St John's Island, 6.5km south of mainland Singapore, has been transformed into a place to escape the city bustle.

With its swaying coconut trees, swimming lagoon and grassy knolls for picnics or beach barbecues, the island – an anglers' favourite – offers a rustic getaway.

To get to the 39ha island, take a ferry from Marina South Pier, which also stops at Kusu Island. A round trip costs \$18 for an adult and \$12 for a child.

Holiday bungalows and camps are available for those who want to stay overnight. Managed by the Sentosa Development Corporation, a night's stay starts from \$53.50 during non-school holidays.

Do not expect first-class amenities at the island, however. The toilets and showers, for example, are spartan.

Connected by a short causeway to St John's Island is Lazarus Island, a hidden oasis for beach junkies.

The beach extends towards the southern end of Seriangat Island, although to a visitor's untrained eye, it is one long stretch of sand.

The 47ha island is a 10-minute stroll from St John's. There, young people somersault off yachts docked at sea. Couples snuggle close to each other on the sand. Families with pets in tow gambol on the nearby meadow.

In the late 19th century, the island housed several inmate confinement sheds, only to be abandoned after a prisoner escaped. It is unclear why it was renamed Lazarus Island from Pulau Sakijang Pelepah, or Island of One Barking Deer and Palms.

A regular to the island is Mr Kevin Steppé, 40, who discovered the sanctum eight years ago when he went for a sail on a friend's yacht. He now sails to the island nearly every month in his sailboat.

The Singapore Management University lecturer, who teaches information systems, says: "My friends and I used to be the only ones here. Nowadays, there are easily 10 other groups on weekends."

According to Sentosa Development, which manages the islands, annual visitation has doubled since 2010, to 40,000 last year.

Be warned: There are neither toilets nor dustbins in the area, so visit the loo and discard any rubbish at St John's before you stroll to Lazarus Island.

Ms Valencia Chia, 21, who was at Lazarus Island for the first time on Sunday, says it is a better alternative to the beaches on Sentosa or at the East Coast.

The university student, who was there with a friend, says: "It's much more peaceful here as not many people know about it yet. Her only gripe? "The ferry ticket prices are quite steep, compared with those at Pulau Ubin."

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