

# Buangkok villagers charge 'entrance fees'

It's compensation for intrusion – residents of Singapore's last kampung explain why they charge for visits to their homes lasting hours

David Ee

For most people, weekends are a time for calm and relaxation and, some might say, privacy at home.

But then, most people do not live in Singapore's last kampung.

Housewife Sharifah Rodziah, 43, a resident of Kampung Lorong Buangkok, said her family can no longer sit on their verandah without having their pictures taken by passing shutterbugs. Some pictures and videos have surfaced online and on YouTube.

Others in this 27-house kampung off Yio Chu Kang Road agree that the stream of nostalgia hunters treat the area like a tourist attraction and forget the houses there are private homes.

More than 200 curious visitors and photographers turn up every week, and the Asia Paranormal Investigators run after-dark "ghost tours" there every other month for 30 to 40 visitors.

Although visitors are free to walk through the kampung or snap pictures of the outside of the houses, some ask to be allowed in. Some pop in and out for a few minutes but others stay for hours.

Since the late 1990s, the villagers have drawn a line at visitors entering their homes and ask to be paid if visitors want to stay long enough to take photos, shoot documentaries or use the interiors as locations for movies.

They have received groups who come to the village for television or movie projects, as well as student groups and individuals with cameras in hand.

The villagers say some visitors add to their electricity bill when they plug in their laptops and lighting equipment.

Most who are asked to pay to enter homes for extended visits do not mind. But recently a student photographer from a polytechnic was appalled when she was asked to pay \$20 to spend three hours in a villager's home, and protested.

The kampung's landlady, Ms Sng Mui Hong, 59, who inherited the land when her father died in 1996, handles all requests to use the kampung for projects.

Defending her tenants, she said: "Would you allow people to just walk into your house to take photographs? Some visitors think they have the right to just walk into our homes."

She said that with visitor numbers growing since the late 1990s, the villagers have had to put up with more intrusions.

Newspaper deliveryman Aslam Jafar, 32, who has lived in the kampung since he was born, said visitors sometimes walk onto their porches without even asking for permission. They also litter.

In June, after visitors entered the kampung mosque without removing their footwear, the villagers decided to lock up the place. It is now open only during prayer times.

Apart from casual visitors and student groups shooting documentaries, the likes of film director Jack Neo have also come by. He shot a portion of his 2009 box office hit *Where Got Ghost?* in Ms Sng's home.

Another director, Chao Ong, who shot part of last year's National Day music video there, said: "Anyone who has ever shot a kampung scene in Singapore would have gone there. The only other options for kampungs are in Pulau Ubin or in Malaysia."

Visitors who go into homes quickly to take a few photos are usually not charged. But if the visits last hours or a day, they would have to pay.

A fee of \$400 to \$600 a day for commercial location filming is not uncommon, they say. Shoots usually take a day or two.

Villagers say it is not a money-making venture, but compensation for the intrusion. And some say they accept whatever is offered by the visitors.

As Mr Aslam said: "Once you enter my house, I definitely have to charge."

Ms Sng said half the homes in the village are willing to host projects; those that do receive one request a month, although the frequency varies.

Almost all the families have a main breadwinner, so what they receive from visitors is a side income.

Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene Tan has urged visitors to respect the villagers' private space.

The assistant professor of law at Singapore Management University added that the situation called for courtesy and respect on the part of the visitors, as well as goodwill on the part of villagers.

Writer Yu-Mei Balasingamchow, 38, who covers heritage issues, said nostalgia for a fast-fading heritage may result in Singaporeans "loving places to death".

She felt that charging people "entrance fees" was the villagers' right. She also said that visitors should see the kampung not as a tourist attraction but as a place where people live.

"Some visitors just go there to take a few nice snapshots on a Sunday afternoon. They're not interested in getting to know the residents and their way of life," she said.



PHOTOS: MARK CHEONG FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Visitors are free to walk through the kampung or take pictures of the outside of houses but residents balk at people barging into private areas like porches (above) or taking photographs or videos without permission, which they say shows a lack of respect for their privacy (top right).



## THE LAST KAMPUNG

Kampung Lorong Buangkok is regarded as Singapore's last surviving kampung or village.

It comprises 27 mostly single-storey, wooden houses along unpaved lanes.

In 1956, Mr Sng Teow Koon bought the land on which it sits on a 999-year lease.

After his death, his daughter Sng Mui Hong, 59, took over as landlady. She charges kampung residents a monthly rental of between \$6.50 and \$30.

Under the Urban Redevelopment Authority's 2008 Master Plan, the land the kampung sits on is earmarked for future residential, school and



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community developments, as well as a major road linking Yio Chu Kang Road and Buangkok Drive.

Further details have yet to be announced.