

Museum tours... in French

French expatriate wives sign up as museum guides to satiate their fascination with local history and culture, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

LIKE most Malaysians, you've probably visited the National Museum twice in your life — as a child with your parents and as an adult with your children.

"I've heard many Malaysians say that," says 60-year-old Dany Pico, a French-speaking volunteer at the museum.

While Dany leads the way to Gallery A, another volunteer, Marie-Clarisse Le Heron, 35, says: "When I first arrived, I thought there was no history in this country. I couldn't see it. In Europe, you see it immediately. We have castles and buildings. In France, we have Versailles, of course. Here, when you get off the plane, buildings are new. Roads are new. Even the palace is new. Everything is new."

The mother of two rolls her eyes and adds: "And everyone in Malaysia is interested in *makan* and shopping."

According to 44-year-old Nathalie Moulin, another problem for French-speaking visitors is that many of the books on Malaysian history are in English. Reading in English can be painful for the French.

She says the scarcity of French books on Malaysian history is partly because the country was never a French colony. "We know more about Vietnam than we do about Malaysia," she says.

Despite the challenges, all three expatriate wives were determined to find out something about local history. With time on their hands, they became members of a non-profit, non-political and non-religious group of volunteers at the museum.

Laurence Maille, who joins the group at the entrance of the first gallery, explains that volunteers come under the auspices of the Department Of Museums. They aim to promote public awareness of museums, thereby, building an understanding of the history and culture of the country.

"We undergo training, you know," says Dany. After about six months, new "graduates" become volunteer guides at the museum. "If you look in *Lonely Planet*, you'll see this service is listed there," she adds.

For French-speaking families and visitors, this group of volunteers conducts free one-hour guided tours every Tuesday and Thursday, at 10am.



(From left) Nathalie, Marie-Clarisse and Dany have their personal favourite exhibit at the National Museum.

PICTURE BY SYAHARIM ABIDIN



The National Museum is the guardian of the nation's history.

RELATING TO HISTORY

Once the tour of the museum is underway, it soon becomes obvious that each one's favourite exhibit somehow relates to their personal histories. For instance, Nathalie, a former banker, says her favourite section is the spice trade, the emergence of Malacca as a leading entrepot and the commentary about the commercial value of spices such as cinnamon, cardamom and turmeric.

Having studied anthropology, it is no surprise that Marie-Clarisse has a penchant for the star of the museum, Perak Man. Believed to be more than 10,000 years old, this exhibit is the intact remains of a man, discovered

in Perak. Dany explains: "I think he was an old man. Scientists have also discovered that he was crippled. Still, he was well looked after and that tells me that, even then, people cared for their elders."

She hurries along and points to a jar that contains ash. "I love this," she says. "Can you believe this is ash from a volcano?"

The volcano she speaks of is Toba in Sumatra, which last erupted some 70,000-75,000 years ago. The ash fell as far as the Lenggong Valley.

All four women are drawn to the Baba Nyonya exhibits and show enormous interest in the history of the Peranakan people. "I believe that

the period of the Baba Nyonya was the highest point of expansion when everyone was open-minded," says Laurence. "There was inter-marriage without religious restrictions. It was probably after the English arrived, when they needed to carry out a census, that the people were put into various groups."

Another of Dany's favourites is a bronze statue of Avalokitesvara. A National Heritage artefact, it weighs 63kg. "It was found in a tin mine in Perak," she says. "People ask why it has so many hands. I used to say that

Tours

The following events are being run by the French museum volunteers at the National Museum for French Language Week.

March 18-21: Guided tours from 9am to 12.30pm. Each tour lasts an hour and is conducted in French.

March 21: A Night at the Museum — An evening of cocktails, silat demonstration, talk by Marie Tseng (cross-cultural consultant from Cultural Impact) and more. Details at www.flwmalaysia.com

it was because Avalokitesvara had so much work to do."

Now, however, she understands that each hand represents a *mudra*, a gesture from Buddha. "I learnt this from one of the visitors. See the one with the hand pointing down?" That, she says, depicts Buddha seeking the grace of Mother Earth to bear witness to the truth of his words and the moment of his enlightenment.

Marie Clarisse adds: "Yes, I used to think that everyone wore the *terengkolok*. But, someone told me it's worn maybe just at weddings."

One practice that fascinates Dany is that some Malaysians still chew betelnut, which is why she loves the collection of betelnut boxes in the museum.

As the tour ends, Laurence points out two exhibits on agriculture which brings the tour a full circle to the locals' passion for food — an enormous depiction of a farmer planting paddy and a gigantic coconut tree. Smiling, she says: "With rice and coconut, you can make a basic *nasi lemak*."