

THE GARAJ MAHAL

BY MELINDA MURPHY PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL BERNABE

The Pickers is a TV show about two antique dealers who drive across the US looking for cool stuff for their store. Their next stop should be Singapore and “The Garaj Mahal”, an amazing collection of carefully curated antiques, vehicles, signs and “junk”, right here in the Little Red Dot.

“I’m not really a collector, just a bad seller,” says KEVIN WHITE. “People ask if things are for sale and I say ‘Nah’; I hate putting a price on anything for fear of seeing it walk out the door.”

When Kevin first arrived in Singapore back in 1988, he was disturbed to see so much of the nation’s old heritage meeting the wrecking ball. He set out to save artefacts that reminded him of old Singapore – and so he bought his first enamel sign. His wife told him, “Okay, hang it in the bathroom.”





Signs of the times

Within six months, he had about ten old signs covering the walls. The collection started to grow, so much so that three garage ports were built, then two more, and yet one more again. Now? All six of them are bulging with stuff from yesteryear, things that make Kevin smile. And yes, he has saved bits of old Singapore like he first set out to do. He estimates about 40 percent of what he has comes from "old Malaya".

"The signs remind me of a bygone era that I kind of wish I'd grown up in, the 30s to 70s. I specialise in mechanical things that don't work, and signs that have multiple local languages. I love signs with grammatical or spelling mistakes. If my antique friends or 'runners' find a sign like that, they always bring it to me first. I like looking at the signs, imagining people at a café, drinking tea around them."

Kevin's signs have come from all over Asia. He used to travel to Burma where there were a few junk shops that specialised in enamel signs – shops which have since disappeared. Among his favourites are a couple with interesting twists on English: "Please do not sit in the shop idealizing" and "Special Maker of Fancy Coffins".



The collection has gone beyond the signs – way beyond. The Garaj Mahal, as he wryly calls it, is loaded with items from the past. There are a couple of old pinball machines (one with another misspelling: "Singopare"), a jukebox and an old 1940s dentistry set that he picked up on Serangoon Road, complete with a wooden footboard with heel marks in it. Kevin jokes, "I've saved a lot of money with a big family doing a bit of home dentistry."

Lucky for Kevin, his wife Hilary embraces his passion. "Hilary says she's an old car widow, but at least I'm at home, not out playing golf or poker. I'm always tinkering with something. All she needs to do is yell out."

Vintage vehicles

Aussie Kevin met his Canadian wife Hilary in Sri Lanka while backpacking. The two ran out of money in Singapore and settled here. Within three and a half years, they had four children. The growing family needed a car, and buying a beat-up old jalopy was much cheaper than a new car. This was in the days before Certificates of Entitlement (COE), so Kevin imported an old car from Indonesia and fixed it up. Then they moved to less-expensive Bali to raise their kids for 12 years before returning to Singapore. Old cars were easily accessible in Bali – and so his passion for restoring engines kicked into high gear.

"Everything that I've got here has a story, especially the cars. Each has a personality. Each has lived a life. They all come from a unique era when things were made with craftsmanship and care. Things lasted. Every year, the design was different. Each has a certain smell, personality and feel on the road." Kevin's eyes dance when he talks; it's pure love.



“I can get amongst my junk, poke around and feel real satisfaction and enjoyment”

Vintage cars can be imported into Singapore through a complicated system where you don't have to buy a full COE; however, you can only drive each one for 45 days a year. "Old car guy math" suggests that you need six cars to drive the full year – and that's just what Kevin has: six beautiful and very different cars.

There's the 1933 Ford hot-rod, bought in California, complete with suicide doors and a powerful flathead V8 engine. He added some dials from a WWII jet bomber on the dash. This is Kevin's daily driver!

The 1965 Barracuda was their Bali family car for years. His big worry? That a coconut falls and breaks the rear window, as they're nearly impossible to replace. "I'd have to buy another car." Then there are his two 1960s rides: the ridiculously large and finned Dodge Matador Coupe and the very sexy Corvette Roadster.

The very original Beetle Green 1939 Lincoln Zephyr Coupe with its curved lines is a rare Art Deco beauty, and one he'd never sell. The original Motorola radio antenna is still on top, resembling something from an old Buck Rogers movie. The V12 engine is tip-top, but thirsty. "The Zephyr passes everything on the road except a petrol station. It gets three kilometres to the litre."



His is not a hobby for the faint of heart, as finding all the parts isn't straightforward. It's not like he can pop down to the automotive store and find what he needs. To get car parts long ago, Kevin used to travel to car shows all over the globe. He loved meeting other people who shared his passion, and he travelled to places he never would have gone otherwise. Now, there are vintage collector groups here in Singapore on Facebook, and the internet has also made finding parts much easier.

Repair and restoration

Of course, it helps that Kevin has always been good at fixing things. "As a kid growing up in Australia," says Kevin, "I always collected road signs and licence plates. I have older brothers who littered the backyard with broken-down lemons that I'd mess with. I'd pull apart my old man's lawnmower and, much to his joy, never quite manage to get it back together working again."

That inclination for tinkering has grown into a full-blown passion for restoring anything mechanical. If something is broken, Kevin, a mechanical engineer by trade (he has worked at the same company since he was 17), is determined to take it apart and figure it out, whether it's an old car engine, a ceiling fan or a radio.

Unfortunately, here in Singapore, getting the motors working is sometimes easier than keeping them working. Battling rust is never-ending – the humidity isn't good for the moving parts or chrome. Kevin invites neighbourhood kids to come over and play with the pinball machines to keep them working.





Past to future

Kevin has bought cars, fixed them up and sold them, putting the profits back into the collection. "I've hardly ever sold a car for a loss. An old car is worth whatever the next guy is willing to pay for it. I like buying cars in crappy condition, then putting the time and money into getting them the way I like them, which is mechanically in great condition, but still rough on the outside – a bit like me!"

And then there are the motorcycles, all of them British: Triumphs, Nortons, BSAs. Kevin loves how they sound and feel on the road. That sound? Loud and rumbling! His favourite is an incredibly rare 1954 Vincent, the Rolls Royce of motorcycles. They only made a thousand of them a year for 20 years, each an example of fine engineering.

What's it all worth, this collection of his? It's hard to say, but the Garaj Mahal is how Kevin has chosen to invest for retirement. "Who goes out to their garage and looks at their stock portfolio and has a good time? I can get amongst my junk, poke around and feel real satisfaction and enjoyment".

Who knows? Maybe that's the trick to old age. There's a Kickapoo Joy Juice blackboard in the collection, scribbled in chalk; it reads, "You don't stop playing because you grow old, you grow old because you stop playing." *El*

Kevin's Recommendations

Good Pickings

C K Collection | 37 Kallang Pudding Road

Sunday Flea Market | Fook Hai Building

Keng's | 51 Craig Road

Michael Poh's | Fook Hai Building

Junkie's Corner (Charlie's) | 2 Turf Club Road

Wings | 2 Havelock Road

Old Cars & Bikes

Malaysia & Singapore Vintage

Car Register (MSVCR)

msvcr.com

Barn Finds | barnfinds.com

Local Advertising Collectibles

Advertising Collectibles Playground (Facebook)

And one general recommendation...

Do 100 push-ups a day!