

HEIDI SARNA AND JEROME LIM



SECRET SINGAPORE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

SINGAPORE CITY GALLERY

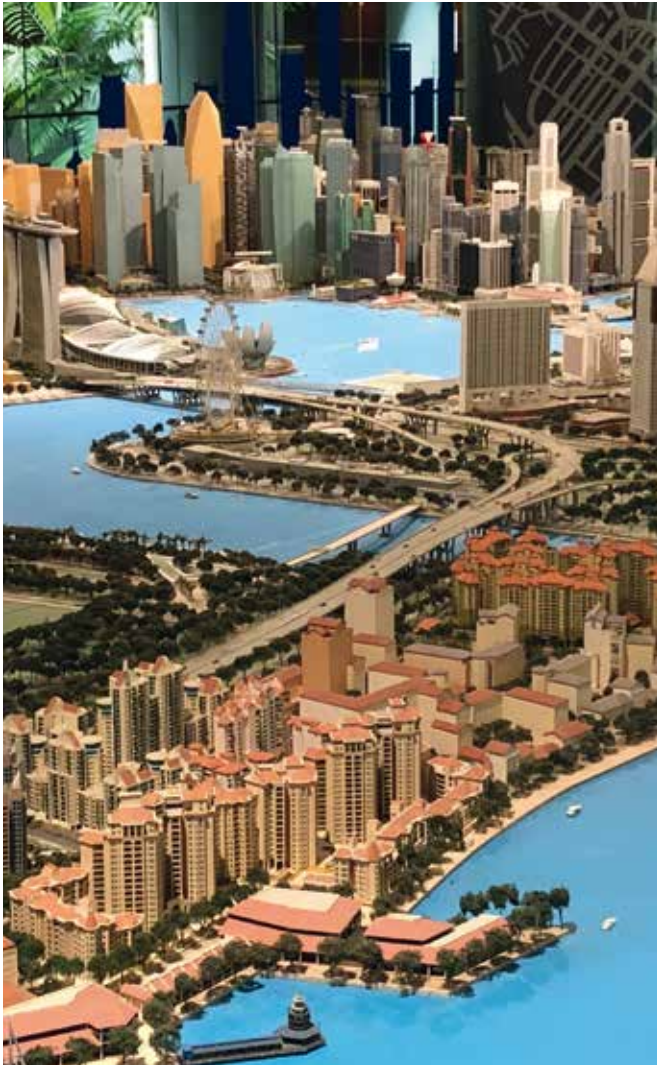
④

Where Singapore can be seen in miniature

45 Maxwell Rd

Monday–Saturday 9am–5pm

MRT: Chinatown or Tanjong Pagar



To the visitor, Singapore must seem to have had every square inch of its built landscape meticulously planned. While urban planning efforts do not go into such fine detail, a conscious and continuous effort does go into laying out much of Singapore.

The work is undertaken by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) which has captured its efforts in a wonderful 1:400 scale architectural model of Central Singapore inside the rather non-descript looking URA Centre Building, in its Singapore City Gallery.

Found right at the end of the suggested route through the gallery, the model, which represents less than 3 percent of the island, is one of the world's largest. It is also one of the gallery's oldest exhibits, predating its opening, with parts of it built as far back as the early years of Singapore's independence in the late 1960s.

The model is the subject of an hourly light and sound show.

You'll also want to check out the Singapore City Gallery's Islandwide Model, which provides a 1:1000 representation of the whole island of Singapore. It's on the first floor and captures a macro-perspective of Singapore and is constructed of plain balsa wood.



Urban Planning in Singapore involves a long term and integrated approach due to its limited land area. The URA, an agency under the Ministry of National Development, takes the lead in this and involves other government agencies in the Concept Plan that is reviewed every 10 years. The Concept Plan charts land use and transportation over a 40- to 50-year period. A more detailed plan is the Master Plan, which guides development over a 10- to 15-year period. This is reviewed every five years.

THE PIER AT LIM CHU KANG

①

A weekend escape for a wealthy family

Lim Chu Kang Road end

MRT: Choa Chu Kang to Bus 975 to the Police Coast Guard (34009)



The Pier is a century-old seaside pavilion built on a jetty that extends out over the mudflats in remote northwest Singapore at the edge of a mangrove forest. Best viewed from the end of Lim Chu Kang Road, it was an escape like none other for the wealthy Cashin family and was one of several residences the family owned.

While the sea pavilion dates to the 1920s, the structure on which it rests goes back further to 1906. As its name would suggest, its original purpose was that of a boat landing point, intended to allow rubber to be moved by sea from Alexander William Cashin's estate to Kranji, also along Singapore's northern coast. From Kranji, the goods could be moved by road to the port in Singapore's south. Rubber cultivation, introduced to Singapore in the late 1880s, dominated much of Singapore's rural landscape by the turn of the century and this included the isolated northwest.

When the pier became obsolete with the establishment of land transport links, Cashin built a pavilion on the end of it as a seaside getaway. It became the home of Cashin's son, Howard, in the 1960s, when the younger Cashin moved in with his wife, living in it until his passing in 2009. It was then transferred to the State and, after being vacant for several years, it is now being made into a visitor center for a new western entrance into the bird-rich grounds of the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve.

Not occupying a particularly scenic spot, its attraction is found perhaps in its isolation, and in the views it provides over and across the narrow western Johor Strait separating Singapore from Malaysia. The Pier's most distinguished visitor, Sultan Ismail of Johor, would boat over from Malaysia. The grandfather of the current sultan, he would often come to have tea with the Cashins. These visits recall times when borders meant little and when the Orang Seletar, a tribe of boat-dwelling people who inhabited the strait, crossed at will on their houseboats.

The beginning of the end

It was also from across the waterway that the first invading troops of the Japanese Imperial Army's 5th Division during World War II came on a dark and fateful February night in 1942. A valiant but vain effort was mounted by the Australian 22nd Brigade in defense of the grounds of The Pier. Some 360 troops are estimated to have fallen in a prelude to Britain's "greatest capitulation" just a week later.

LITTLE GUILIN

8

A rare survivor of Singapore's former natural hillocks

Bukit Batok Town Park
Bukit Batok East Ave 5
MRT: Bukit Gombak



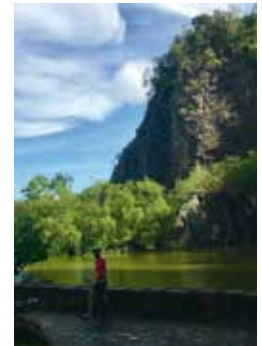
Singapore is a pretty flat place. Most of the natural hillocks it once had have been flattened over the decades and pushed to the edges of the country to extend the shoreline. Since the government started its land reclamation push about a half century ago, Singapore is about a quarter larger and mostly bereft of its original ridges, cliffs and dramatic rock formations (see page 22).

With a few exceptions.

In the 104-acre Bukit Batok Town Park in northwestern Singapore, a serene lake is framed by some pretty burly rocks. Called “Little Guilin” because of its resemblance to a similarly scenic place in Guilin, China, the tranquil lake is actually a flooded quarry, the former Gammon Quarry on the slopes of Bukit Gombak. Mining of granite, and similar norite and gabbro rocks, started in the 19th century, as they were essential ingredients in the production of concrete. Between the 1950s and 1970s the quarrying business was booming thanks to Singapore’s frenzied post-war building craze and the creation of Housing Development Board flats.

In Malay, *bukit* means “hill” and *batok* means “coughing”, a name that stuck to the area because of the blasting noises that once came from the busy quarries. Several dotted the hilly areas around the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve – Bukit Batok, Bukit Gombak, Bukit Panjang – including the Singapore, Dairy Farm and Hindehede quarries. At 133 meters tall, Bukit Gombak is Singapore’s second highest hill after Bukit Timah (see page 166). It’s believed to be a part of Singapore’s oldest rock formations dating back more than 250 million years to the Paleozoic age.

As the population and development of Singapore grew, operating quarries were approaching their maximum depths and also became problematic due to safety concerns from the blasting, both to humans and the environment. Singapore looked to neighboring countries for the rock chips it needed, and by the 1980s and 90s, all of the quarries dotting northwestern Singapore were abandoned. Some were filled in and paved over with roads and covered by apartment towers, while others collected rainwater and were swallowed up by the jungle and hidden from view or tidied up and incorporated into parks, like Lake Guilin.



THE TOWERS OF LIGHTS SEEN FROM GHOST ISLAND

23

A wonderful escape from the urban world

Pulau Hantu (Ghost Island)

Chartered boat from West Coast Pier, 60 West Coast Ferry Road



For those brave enough to visit an isolated place with a sinister name, Pulau Hantu, or “Ghost Island,” provides a wonderful escape from the urban world. Located several miles off the southwestern coast of Singapore, it has long been a destination for camping and picnics for those with the means to charter a boat to get there. An overnight camping trip – possible with a permit from the Singapore Land Authority – brings out a side of the island that few people know about: the sight of magical towers of light emanating from nearby Pulau Bukom Besar.

Pulau Bukom Besar was the first of Singapore’s islands to be industrialized – as quite a few in the southwest have. Shell, which operates a refinery and petrochemical processing complex there, was first associated with it in 1891. That was when the company purchased the island for kerosene storage. The company established Singapore’s first refinery on the island in 1961. Since then, Bukom has been joined to two of its neighboring islands, Pulau Busing and Pulau Ular to its west. The expanded petrochemical complex developed on the enlarged land mass. At night it’s quite an amazing sight when the lights of the industrial stacks are lit and reflect off the water.

Pulau Hantu is actually made up of two islets, Pulau Hantu Besar (“Greater Ghost Island”) and Pulau Hantu Kecil (“Lesser Ghost Island”), connected across a tidal flat visible at low tide. The flat is said to vanish, like a ghost, with the rising tide and this offers one possible explanation of the island’s rather curious name. With land reclamation in the 1970s, Pulau Hantu was expanded and swimming lagoons lined by palm-fringed beaches became a part of the topography. Reefs surrounding the island also draw divers and fishermen. Visibility can be quite poor, between about 1 and 3 meters, though from time to time there are good days when divers can see colorful tropical fish and interesting little sea creatures. At one point there were plans to turn Pulau Hantu into a holiday destination, but nothing came of it and now the island serves as an escape for the few who know about it.

There is no regular boat service to the island, but it is possible to make the half-hour journey there with a boat chartered from West Coast Pier. Besides a camping permit, some food, drinking water, mosquito repellent and camping gear is recommended for an overnight stay. Comfort facilities are available on the island.

THE BLACK AND WHITE HOUSES ② AT MOUNT PLEASANT ROAD

Not as black and white as it seems

159 Mount Pleasant Road

Buses 54, 141, 162, 166, 167, 851 and 980 from MRT: Novena – Old Police Academy Stop (51021)



Quiet and well shaded, Mount Pleasant Road seems everything its name hints. The road, lined with generously proportioned “black and white” residences, looks typical of one given to house Singapore’s colonial administrators, except that the ample lawns of its houses hide the clues to an event that took place in the final moments of Singapore’s darkest days.

One house that has given up some of its secrets is No. 159. Positioned near the top of the elevation that gives the road its name, No. 159 displays the distinctive features of the “black and white” or mock-Tudor style, a style most commonly employed by the Public Works Department in putting up the residences for the most senior of municipal officers between the 1920s and 1930s. Characteristics of the design include pitched roofs, wide verandahs and a large frontage of windows to maximize insulation and ventilation.

The grounds of No. 159 were where spent bullet cases fired in one of the last battles fought before Singapore’s inglorious fall were uncovered. A long-buried cache of unused ammunition was also found, evidence of an unhurried surrender and an indication where the final line of battle had been drawn (photos of the excavated ammunition can be found on www.adamparkproject.com).

Further evidence, from interviews previously conducted with survivors of the battle on both sides, help complete the picture of a battle for which the events of February 14, 1942, provided a stage. It was the day before the fall that the invading Japanese force broke through Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery, which lies across a valley on the northwest of Mount Pleasant. The desperate defenders, remnants of several British army units, retreated and took up positions in the houses along Mount Pleasant Road. One of the houses, No. 160 – just across the road from No. 159 – was captured during the night and this prompted an attempt to retake it on the morning of February 15, mounted from No. 159.

No. 160 was retaken with help from artillery positioned nearby. A dozen anti-tank rounds were blasted into the house, flushing the invaders out, but causing a fire. This outcome was to help in No. 160’s identification as the house in question. Aerial photos some time after the war’s end show 160 as the only house with a new roof, indicating it was newly rebuilt after the fire. While the battle may have been one of little consequence, it was significant in that it may have been one of the last, if not the last, successes on the British side. Just hours after the battle, on the afternoon of February 15, a ceasefire would be ordered not long after which Singapore fell to the Japanese victors.

BUKIT BROWN PEACOCK TILES ④

Symbols of Beauty & Grace for the Departed

Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery
MRT: Botanic Gardens

While decorative tiles are fairly common on tombs scattered around the sprawling nearly-century-old Bukit Brown Cemetery, those depicting peacocks are rare birds. Nestled in the foliage of the cemetery's block 2 are ornamental peacock tiles in single-, twin- and four-tile panels on a number of graves, including the Hokkien-Peranakan great-grandparents of Jennifer Lim, author of *Singapore Heritage Tiles: An International Mosaic of Love* (2021).

The twin tombs from 1936 are flanked by two peacock panels facing each other. Not too far away, in block 1, there are more peacock-themed tiles on the spectacular tomb of teenager Eddie Chan Sin Chuan, which was erected in the early days of the Japanese occupation of Singapore in the 1940s.

When Lim discovered Eddie Chan's tomb, it was nearly swallowed up by the jungle. Lim felt compelled to tidy it up out of respect, a temporary reprieve before the fast-growing foliage of Bukit Brown took back the tomb once again.

As decorative elements, peacocks, called kongquè (孔雀) in



Mandarin, can be seen on Chinese textiles as far back as 2,000 years, says Lim. In the Ming dynasty, peacocks adorned the clothing of high-ranking officers. Further status might also have been granted them due to their association with the phoenix, a mythical bird that represented supreme beauty and grace in Chinese culture, which would explain the bird's popularity on a site as sacred as a final resting place.

In Singapore's early days, peacock motif tiles like these would have been made in England, where an obsession with Eastern decorative elements was all the rage from the mid-18th century. In India, where the peacock is the national bird, it appears in many ancient artforms.

By the 1920s, however, peacock tiles would not have had to travel so far, as Japanese tile makers had entered the Southeast Asian and Indian markets with their own fine examples, supplying tiles for temples, tombs and lavish homes.



A Dutch Windmill on a Chinese Grave

Outside of the main gates of Bukit Brown cemetery, in the adjacent Seh Ong Hill cemetery, semi-circular tombs dot the grassy slopes along both sides of Kheam Hock Road. One grave from the 1960s features a series of six beautiful colorful tile panels, likely made in Japan, incorporating European and Asian landscapes. One tile panel reveals a Dutch windmill, one a European mountain scene, and another depicts a Japanese landscape with windswept pine trees, a fishing boat and Mt. Fuji.

The peaceful images are said to help surround the departed with the all-important elements of mountains and water for good feng shui, vital principles for many Chinese.

RETRO TV TEST PATTERN MURALS

13

Murals of a TV test pattern on public housing blocks

*Public Housing Blocks
Tampines Street 41
MRT: Tampines*



Some of Singapore's HDB apartment complexes are painted in bright colors and have funky metal window shades or the giant numbers of their address emblazoned on their facades, but few are covered with giant murals that mean something. If you passed by and happened to look up from your phone, or craned your neck from your seat in a car, taxi or bus, you might notice the retro images stretched across the facades of 15 housing blocks on Tampines Street 41 are more than just abstract decoration.

They're six-story-high images of an old television broadcast test pattern, the very same ones that helped TV stations and viewers fine-tune television reception for focus and color correction, with a variety of different test patterns around the world.

The specific one that appears in these murals, with a set of shapes, lines and colors that formed a circle in a square pattern, was the test pattern employed in Singapore. Older Singaporeans will recognize this pattern instantly from the days before 24-hour programming and digital television. During the early morning and daytime hours, when local TV stations weren't broadcasting shows, they would point a camera at this test pattern and transmit the image.

The murals were added to the blocks in 2015, during routine redevelopment and rejuvenation works, as a way to use social memories to add not only some character to the buildings but as a means to give residents a sense of belonging. At the start of renovations, Tampines Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng, who had an eye for design, saw a number of proposed color schemes for exterior repainting and remarked that one of the schemes resembled the colors of the old familiar TV test pattern. Eventually, Tampines residents voted for this one and the beloved pattern was painted on the buildings that could structurally accommodate the murals.



OLD CHANGI PRISON GATES

14

A symbol of suffering and of the strength of the human spirit during the war

Upper Changi Road

Bus No. 2 from MRT: Tanah Merah or Bus No. 29 from MRT: Tampines



Today, Changi Prison is a modern 21st-century facility, nothing like the 1936-built correctional facility in which tens of thousands of sick and starving Prisoners of War suffered during the Japanese occupation of Singapore in World War II.

While much of that old prison was demolished in 2004, a careful observer will notice that one section of the old gaol's walls, its famous steel entrance gate and two of its wall-mounted watchtowers remain.

Named as Singapore's 72nd National Monument, the preservation of the 650-foot stretch of Changi Prison's walls and turrets did not come easy. The decision was taken only after intense pressure was mounted by Australian politicians in 2003 when the intention to demolish the old complex was announced. Some 15,000 of Changi's POWs had been Australian, and while the sight of the prison may have evoked painful memories of their time there, it was felt that it was important to keep it as a symbol of the sacrifice and suffering of those who survived and perished, as well as a symbol of the strength of the human spirit. The gate especially has meaning as it was made famous by the many photographs published of it with freed POWs streaming out.

So while only a small portion of the original complex has been kept, it resulted in some level of acceptance and closure among those who lobbied for its retention.

The original Changi Gaol's construction came at the tail end of a huge effort to transform the security forces in Singapore in the face of rapid urbanization and rising crime levels. The effort, which took place in the 1920s to the 1930s, also included the construction of a training facility, new police stations and barracks. The prison, built to house 600, started operations in January 1937, five years before Singapore fell to the Japanese.



KAMPONG LORONG BUANGKOK 20

A hidden kampung dwarfed by residential towers

Off Sengkang East Avenue

MRT: Buangkok

Nestled in a small patch of forest no larger than three football fields, Kampong Lorong Buangkok is a rural village (*kampung* in Malay) dwarfed by surrounding residential towers and modern developments. Unless told the whereabouts of this hidden place, one could breeze right past it. But it's worth the time to seek out, as it is earmarked for redevelopment. Soon it will disappear, taking with it Singapore's last mainland *kampung* and a link to the city-state's humble past.

A must-go for nostalgia buffs, the *kampung* is almost unchanged since its establishment in the mid-1950s. Dirt paths link simple single-family homes with timber walls and corrugated zinc roofs. Roosters crow and chickens cluck while cats pick their way freely among gardens shadowed by tropical foliage and fruit trees. An old *surau* (Muslim place of worship) is managed by a village headman. Even the rents on these

homes have changed little, with residents, virtually all of whom have lived here for decades, paying a mere US\$5 to \$22 each per month. If they're short of cash, payment in rice or fruit also is accepted.

Their landlady is Sng Mui Hong, the *toukay*, or boss, of the village. Her father Sng, a seller of traditional Chinese medicine, purchased the slightly over three acres of swampy land here in 1956. At the time, it was home to only a handful of families, but soon the swamps were filled in, the houses were built, and up to 40 families called the place home. Despite improvements, the village is still prone to flooding, thus its nickname Kampong Selak Kain, translated as "hitching up the sarong." The father passed away in 1997, leaving the land to Sng and her three siblings. Though they've moved out, she remains to manage the place for the 28 or so remaining Chinese and Malay families.

Estimates place the value of this land at about US\$24.5 million. In 2009, Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) announced that the land would be acquired by the state to make way for a major roadway linking Buangkok Drive. The plan has met with some protest, as many Singaporeans don't want to lose this precious connection to their past.





KAYAKING ON SUNGEI KHATIB BONGSU

21

One of Singapore's last large mangrove forests

*Sungei Khatib Bongsu
Off Yishun Avenue 8
kayakasia.org/destinations/*



Sungei Khatib Bongsu in Singapore's north is one of the last rivers without a dam built across its mouth: most of Singapore's rivers are dammed as reservoirs for fresh water. It is also one of a handful left with a naturally occurring watery forest that holds one of Singapore's largest concentrations of mangrove trees. An excellent way to see the river and its mangrove forest is by kayak. Trips in groups can be arranged through a water adventure company.

The mangroves feature a collection of trees with long water roots that play host to an amazing collection of fauna. Birds are in abundance, attracted to rich pickings from the mangroves' aquatic nurseries. More than 180 species (half of all bird species found in Singapore) have been recorded. A paddle through the area can often be rewarded with the sighting of a rare or endangered bird such as a great-billed heron or a grey-headed fish eagle.

A maze of channels is found along the river's right bank, a remnant of the once-thriving prawn farming industry that the estuary and several others were home to. Enclosed by manmade bunds of mud, the former prawn pools are interconnected through concrete-lined openings in the bunds that sluice gates had once kept shut. It is possible to kayak through these openings, which are evidence of Singapore's forgotten agricultural past.

Mangrove forests such as Sungei Khatib Bongsu's lined a fair bit of Singapore's coast and around its tidal estuaries, making up as much as 13% of the total land area at modern Singapore's founding in 1819. Many of these salt and brackish water marshes were to be filled and drained over time, starting with those in central Singapore in the area where Boat Quay is now. Today mangrove forests account for only 1% of Singapore's land area.

Ecologically, these forests were important as nurseries for aquatic and marine life, and protected the coastline from erosion. They would have provided both food and safe haven for the native communities of boat dwelling *Orang Laut* (Sea Gypsies), who hung out in the mangroves of the northern coast including Sungei Khatib Bongsu, where the Orang Seletar tribe of Sea Gypsies had lived. The name Seletar was thought to have been derived from the word *selat*, or "strait." While the Sea Gypsy communities of Singapore have largely assimilated into the wider Malay community, there are still small communities of Orang Seletar found just across the strait in Malaysia.

BEAULIEU HOUSE

23

Last patch of natural beach

117 Beaulieu Road
Sembawang Park
MRT: Admiral

With a lovely view overlooking the Straits of Johor, the Neoclassical Beaulieu House was built in the 1910s during a time when seaside retreats were all the rage. Because land reclamation over the decades has transformed so much of Singapore's coastline, it is believed the stretch of beach at Beaulieu House may be the last remaining patch of natural beach.

A century ago, the most favorable sites for waterfront mansions were the beaches that lined Katong and Pasir Panjang. However, massive land

reclamation projects in each of those areas has rendered Beaulieu House the only retreat still located at the seaside.

In front of the house, the jetty and a rare stretch of natural sand beach are part of Sembawang Park. Here, birdwatchers have spotted eagles, kites, kingfishers and orioles. The pathways around the park have been restored from their creation during the British military days.

With its distinctive sloping roof topped by a patio surrounded by decorative cast-iron balustrades, the Beaulieu bungalow is believed to have been built by a Jewish family named David, the head of which ran mines in Malaya and was involved in horse racing and real estate ventures in Singapore. A decade after the house was built, the British Royal Navy began building its naval base nearby, and subsequently purchased the house and around 1,730 acres of land surrounding it for US\$77,600. It became the residence for senior engineers during the construction of the base, and later housed officers.

Beaulieu House was granted conservation status in 2005, and today houses a restaurant that takes advantage of the mansion's high ceilings and vintage decorative elements such as patterned tile floors and ornate wall plaster.

In French, *beau lieu* means "beautiful place."



HEIDI SARNA AND JEROME LIM



SECRET

SINGAPORE

A lighthouse on the top of a 25-storey apartment block, a unique rocky area that looks like Guilin in China, the remains of a Shinto shrine built in the jungle by prisoners of war, houses from the Ming and Qing periods donated by Jackie Chan, the bottoms of soya-sauce bottles used to decorate the Sultan Mosque, the “leaning tower” of Singapore, the last remaining stretch of natural beach, a forgotten bomb shelter under a national monument, the beautiful modernist door of a former biscuit factory, a hidden *kampong* (rural village) dwarfed by residential towers, the splendidly preserved old Changi prison gates, the stately Masons Hall inside the Freemasons’ headquarters ...

Far from the crowds and the usual clichés, Singapore still has a number of hidden treasures for people who know how to wander off the beaten track.

This is an indispensable guide for those who think they know Singapore ... or who want to discover another side to the city-state.

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