



Krishnan and Sakuntalai took two epic train journeys last year.

A SECOND WIND

Transitioning into your silver years can be a chance for you to rediscover and pursue interests you didn't have the time for previously.

BY NIRMALA SIVANATHAN

BROADENING HORIZONS

"I think I have to thank the Keratapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) for giving me the travel bug," says Krishnan, a 64 year-old retiree who used to work as a Team Leader for a petrochemical company.

"My father used to be a train driver for KTM, and employees got free train travel passes for their families. So from a young age, my brother and I would take the train alone and travel up north to places such as Perak."

This might explain why Krishnan and his wife, 63 year-old Sakuntalai, a clerical support officer in the civil service, have embarked on not one but two epic train journeys last year. In March 2011, the couple jetted off to Perth, Australia where they boarded the *Indian Pacific* for a 4,352km railway journey that takes travellers from Perth to Sydney. The train is named after the two great oceans it joins.

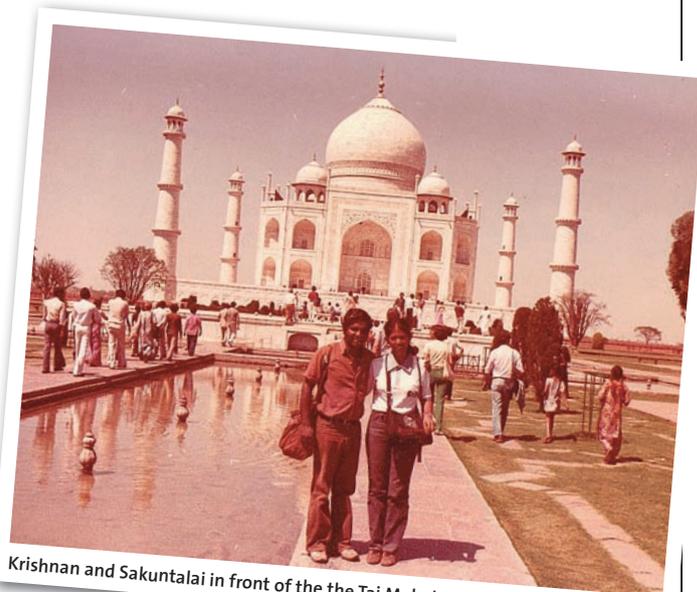
Later in the year, the couple took another train journey — this time on the Trans-Siberian Railway from Beijing to Moscow via Mongolia and Siberia.

"I love to travel because I believe that travel broadens the mind. You get to see new places, meet new people and discover how they live," says Sakuntalai. "Each culture has a different way of doing things. For example, in Mongolia, we saw how families go about living in a *ger*, a portable dwelling structure used by Mongolian nomads."

The couple used to travel at least once every two years but since Krishnan's retirement, they've had more time for it. In addition to the two rail trips he took with his wife last year, Krishnan also set out on a trekking trip up Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest point. He went with his 26 year-old son.

For this trip, Krishnan undertook a gruelling training regime. He practiced yoga and cycled frequently at a nearby park and up till now, continues with the exercise routine to keep fit.

Sakuntalai says that her husband and her are lucky to be free from any chronic medical conditions to date, but because they have grown older, they are more mindful about keeping healthy through exercise. Other



Krishnan and Sakuntalai in front of the the Taj Mahal in 1982.

than yoga and cycling, the couple swims and goes for walks regularly.

One lifestyle choice that Sakuntalai undertook when she turned 55 was to become a vegetarian for religious and health reasons. But she was surprised by the unexpected mental health benefits. "Once I cut meat out from my diet, I felt much calmer and less irritated by small matters," she says.

Last year also saw them going back to India for the first time since their honeymoon in 1982. Back then, they had gone to see the Taj Mahal and also visited Kashmir where they stayed on a houseboat on the famed Dal Lake.

One of the most vivid memories of the honeymoon was seeing the Taj Mahal under the light of the full moon. Sakuntalai recalls that the marble of the Taj Mahal seemed to glow in the dark.

When asked if it was a different experience seeing the Taj Mahal again after 29 years, she laughingly replies, "Well, the Taj Mahal hasn't changed...but we have!" ❖

Lifelong learning keeps James young-at-heart.

LEARNING FOR LIFE

Sixty four-year-old James Kwok says that his wife is always commenting that it doesn't feel like he has retired. "She thinks I'm actually busier now than before but I don't feel the pressure because I feel like whatever I do is a hobby," he states.

The father of two daughters — the elder, 36, works in the civil service and the younger, 31, is a teacher — used to be a school teacher before he made the switch to sales and marketing in 1973. James worked his way up to a regional business manager position for an American multinational corporation specialising in biomedical products before he retired in 2003.

A few months into his retirement, he decided to go back to teaching — but by some twist of fate, he ended up pursuing a Masters in Social Sciences instead.

"By 2003, both my daughters had stable jobs so I thought it was time for me to go back to teaching — something I had always loved doing. I almost signed up to teach at a local junior college.

"Before I started, however, a close family friend told me about this counselling course he was helping to bring into Singapore," says James. "And since I had always been interested in psychology, I thought why not?" He signed up for the programme and three years later graduated with a Masters in Social Sciences (Professional Counselling) from Australia's Swinburne University.

Armed with his new degree, James then embarked on his second career. Today, he provides counselling services to secondary school students and patients at family service centres. He gives advice to students and parents as well as adults with marriage and family issues. He also conducts workshops on parenting and mental health issues at various organisations including the Council for Third Age.



He has come across elderly folk who become lonely when their grown children leave home. James says that if you make an effort to keep yourself busy, then there is something to look forward to in life. "If one feels lonely after the children have grown up, the best way is to surround yourself with people who you can relate to," he says.

James feels that he is unlikely to harbour feelings of sadness as he ages. He keeps busy with his volunteer work and is currently kept busy with his PhD course on generational bonding to reduce juvenile delinquency with Australia's Southern Cross University — something which he says he is doing "for fun".

Beside staying mentally active, James has also taken steps to stay physically active. He's done this by trading in his Nissan for a "BMW" — an acronym he jokingly uses to refer to "Bus, MRT and Walking." As for his diet, he consciously consumes less salt and sugar, and has converted to a Mediterranean-style diet that is rich in vegetables and fish.

"You can say that I am doing all this for selfish reasons," James says. "Looking at the average lifespan nowadays, I still have about 20 years ahead of me, and dementia is one of the top worries as you age. There's not much you can do about dementia, but you can certainly try to delay it by staying active." +



According to Ms Oh Wai Ching, Principal Medical Social Worker at the Institute of Mental Health, 'empty nest' syndrome refers to what parents feel when their children leave home for university or move out when they get married. She explains, "Many parents feel sad and there is a need for them to deal with the sense of loss as their homes become quieter. Often, they also feel that they are not needed as much as they previously were." On how to deal with this, Ms Oh advises that it is normal to feel sad and cry in grieving for their loss. However, she adds that if you start to withdraw from social interactions or begin to doubt the purpose of living, you should seek professional help.