

## CHRIS HASSIG | Okepalung Walking Tour



Out of the genteel expanse of Old Common and across Nabi Street, let's pass by these large shabby compounds, the tidiest thing we'll see for a while, and head down West Moat into the heart of Okepalung. West Moat is one of the few relatively uncrooked streets in Okepalung, one of the more obscure inner-city neighborhoods. It's a thousand year old slum, and not unhappily so.

Our first stop is just a block off West Moat. The Shtiftzjiki Market at Lami Square is the best spice market in the city--riotous, sneeze-inducing, and punctuated by the theatrical haggling of the locals, known as 'Keeps. Great produce can be found alongside the universe of herbs and spices, but being outsiders we can be sure we won't get the best deals. Still, we find the trading of jokes is free and the vendor we've met, Mehron, has a great selection. Mehron gives us a taste of his 'mild' leafwrap, and we sweat and holler. The food here is always very, very spicy. The greenhouses you see everywhere are usually chili pepper laboratories. The competition for spiciest varietal is fierce. Okepalung long ignored the inner islands' curious custard obsession, but relatively recently has gotten into the game with a version that starts out mellow and sweet, and, inevitably, builds into blazing agony.

The kids are very friendly and, adrenalized by the kick of monekembro pepper, we are suddenly drawn into a pickup game of parkour-pong. Bounding up the hilly backstreets, the object is to keep the small green ball "alive" as the running volleys bounce it off walls, jump obstacles, and try to play the ever shifting angles of the street to their advantage. The kids' intimate knowledge of their neighborhood, its jumble of ancient tin and brick and char-finished wood, greenhouses, ceramic murals, brightly painted steps, and precarious looking cupolas, means we are thoroughly outmatched, gasping for breath before long.

They take us down into the hollow of Tule Yard, a wild paradise, overgrown with bamboo and arrowwillow, kids, and tame monkeys. Out front of the public kitchen a dance competition of some sort is going on. 'Keeps seem to have about a dozen different styles of music going at one time. The backbeat to this dance is larded with a barrage of what sounds like incredibly cheesy plastic pianos. It's a sort of slippery jivey highly danceable lounge music. In the past 'Keeps have gone crazy for robot-tuned trumpets, yo yo drums, and primal scream freakouts. The thread I can see seems to be an absolute devotion to party music, a taste for hilarity and irony, and a knowing faddishness. In fact, Okepalung seems to go all in pretty regularly for fads. It can be hard to pin down the "culture" here, because it often seems wildly changed from one year to the next.

As we come out onto Faerin Way, heading to Beobiro Hill, we catch a glimpse of the stoic and permanent looking Congresshall over on Government Island. Quite a contrast. Yet, if Okepalung's a chameleon on the surface, it's at root a permanent fixture of the city, longer-tenured than this government. Some people have a certain embarrassment with Okepalung and its messiness. It's a bit like a fart among fine company, sprawling out in ragged pugnacity next door to the soaring self-important monuments of the national seat of government. Yet, for all its wild irreverence, Okepalung ends up offering a valuable lesson in humility and persistence to those in power.