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Internet Resources for the Philatelist

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Introduction

Gone (mostly) are the days when philatelists waited around mail boxes (Figure 1) or made a commute to the neighbourhood stamp shop, to add to their collection. Indeed, the internet has revolutionised all aspects of human well being, including the pursuit of stamps and other collectibles. At present, more philatelists prefer to purchase stamps online than via any other route, and a variety of outlets are available, ranging from governmental bodies, such as postal agencies that produce and distribute stamps to independent vendors, databases, auction houses, online catalogues and others.

Governmental and Intergovernmental Sources

National Postal Agencies are often the first port of call for most online philatelists, bookmarking the postal agencies of countries they collect. For Malaysia, it is Pos Malaysia Berhad (<http://www.pos.com.my/post-offices/stamp-philately>), one of the earliest online sources of information for new stamps, typically through the publication of their yearly stamp issue programme (albeit, typically, with many changes). Some postal agencies offer prepaid accounts, permitting paid-up members to acquire stamps and other philatelic products via post, as they are released. The scheme from Pos Malaysia is called SODA (Standing Order Deposit Account; <http://www.pos.com.my/post-offices/stamp-philately/?soda>). Select Pos Malaysia outlets in the country also offer a service called ‘SetemKu’ (<https://www.posonline.com.my/setemku/index.asp>), permitting individuals and organisations to produce personalised stamps to commemorate special events, such as birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, and also, conferences and other special events (Figure 2).

The proliferation of stamps mean it is difficult to keep track of the products of philatelic agencies of the world. Printed stamp catalogues are produced annually, and stamp magazines, monthly, but even these cannot cope with the sheer volume of stamps being produced all the time. Not least of the problem is the issuance of fake stamps by certain agencies and individuals.

The World Association for the Development of Philately (WADP) and the Universal Postal Union (UPU) jointly maintain an online database of stamps, using the dedicated WADP Numbering System. It was launched on 1 January 2002, using the WADP Numbering System (WNS: <http://www.wnsstamps.post/en>). Currently, 170 countries and territories are members of WADP and the website lists 82,724 registered stamps, a tiny proportion of the world’s stamps, but covering all new issues from the start of the system. For each stamp are separate data fields that include date of issue, primary theme, subject, width, height, denomination, number in set, layout/format, perforations, stamp issuing authority and printer, besides a high resolution image of the stamp.

Private Blogs

Private blogs compliment these more official sources, and numerous great blogs serve the philatelic community. One of our favourite is the Commonwealth Stamp Opinion (<http://commonwealthstampsopinion.blogspot.my>) that goes back to 2010. The by-line of the blog is “Travel down the highways and bye-ways of Commonwealth stamp collecting for news and views about Commonwealth stamps”. As of 14 November 2016, the blogger, who goes by the moniker “White Knight”, wrote 862 entries, each with a number of illustrated new releases from “GB and Commonwealth”. Each release is annotated with a personal star rating (between 1–5), based on the appeal of the design.

Another, covering Malaysian issues, is myfdc (<https://myfdc.me/>), whose goal is “Sharing some of the hardest to find First Day Covers in Malaysia!”. With 301,422 hits (as of 14 November 2016), this is arguably the most important portal for Malaysian philately that we are aware of. Collectors of current Malaysian issues need to bookmark this website as the very latest news of stamp release, along with early designs, appear here, ahead of all other sources that we know.

Stamp Catalogues

Most of the famous stamp catalogues are now available on the web, albeit with a hefty annual subscription. These include Scott’s, for North American collectors (<http://www.scottonline.com>), Stanley-Gibbons for collectors from Great Britain and its colonies (<http://mycollection.stanleygibbons.com>), Michel for Germany and German-speaking collectors (<http://www.briefmarken.de/michelshop/de/online-kataloge>), Domfil for Spain and Spanish-speaking collectors (<http://www.phildom.com/catalogo.php>) and Yvert & Tellier for France and for Frankophone collectors (<http://www.yvert.com/CT-1257-catalogues-yvert-et-tellier.aspx>). Some of the catalogues are also available as Apps, such as the Scott’s Catalogue (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/scott-catalogue/id484086693?mt=8>), available for iPad, iPhone and iPod touch devices, as well as on the Android platform (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.amospublishing.scottscatalogue>).

Additionally, free online catalogues are available, the most extensive being Postbeeld, also known as Freestampcatalogue (<https://www.postbeeld.com>: in English, German, French, Spanish and Dutch) that covers all issues since 1920 (referencing Michel, Scott, Stanley Gibbons and Yvert catalogue numbers), and for many countries and postal agencies, even pre-1920 stamps. Finally, two Wiki-based catalogues are worthy of mention: Colnect (<http://colnect.com/en/stamps>: available in many languages, allowing users to customise the preferred language), that databases over 426,000 stamps and Catawiki (<https://auction.catawiki.com/categories/stamps>: in English, German, Dutch and French), also an online auction house.

Finally, the self-professed “most complete stamp catalogue in the world”, can be found at StampWorld (www.stampworld.com). It comes close to its stated claim, providing information on over 700,000 stamps, for most of which are details of issue (including date of issue, name of theme, watermark and perforation types, quantity printed and face value), in addition to a high resolution image. Additional information available at this free site include buying and selling stamps, news of stamp issues, an online newsletter, articles on philately, regional and

international events related to the hobby, a Facebook interface, a members' forum, affiliated clubs from around the world (representing 14 nations), listing of (home pages of) international philatelic organisations (listing 10 such organisations), a list of dealers and another of auction sites, postal services, links to a number of websites and blogs on the subject, and finally, a short video on how to use the vast resources available at StampWorld.

Online Shops

Online shops have become the major market for buying and selling stamps, while physical stores are on the decline. Perhaps the most visited is Ebay (<http://www.ebay.com>), with national versions in most major countries (such as the one for Malaysia; <http://www.ebay.com.my>). A comparable site is the Belgium-based Delcampe (https://www.delcampe.net/en_GB/collections/stamps), which has a greater variety of stamps on sale, as well as more knowledgeable sellers. A third most often used portal for stamps (and other collectibles) is Bidorbuy (<http://www.bidorbuy.co.za/>), based in South Africa. Most sellers accept online payment (via Paypal and/or Skrill and major credit cards) and help and mediation services are offered, making the acquiring of stamps from far-flung sources from the comforts of your couch, a pleasurable activity.

For rare or high-grade stamps, online purchases are risky, as items cannot be physically examined by the buyer, besides risk of damage or loss in postal transit. The large retailers (such as Stanley Gibbons: <https://www.stanleygibbons.com/auctions>) and the more established auction houses (including that of Sotheby's: <http://www.sothebys.com/en.html>) offer guarantees on items sold, often producing superb colour printed catalogues of forthcoming auctions (Figure 3).

Finally, we need to mention the latest major arrival in the online philatelic world, the World Online Philatelic Agency, WOPA (<http://www.wopa-stamps.com>), a division of the Gibraltar Philatelic Bureau Ltd., incorporated in Gibraltar in 1994. As of 14 November 2016, 40 countries, in addition to the United Nations Post Office, are members of WOPA (Figure 4). The public can buy all new issues as they become available from their secure website, but shipping is done by the respective participating postal administration. Every year, new countries join WOPA, although it remains primarily a Europe-centric agency. Nonetheless, it is a good deal for customers, offering a variety of philatelic items, all at face value.

Conclusion

We have enumerated a few of the websites, online stores and blogs we are familiar with. Many others offer equivalent services, some for free, others at a cost. In online purchase/sale of philatelic products, it is always important to examine dealer/buyer feedbacks even in the most well-known portal before placing an order.



Figure 1. An advertisement from the United States Postal Service from 1975.



Figure 2. Personalised stamps produced from 2013–2016, commemorating the Bornean Frog Race, under Pos Malaysia’s SetemKu Programme.

PLATE 26



ex 428



ex 429



ex 433



ex 435

Figure 3. Sample illustrated page from an auction catalogue of Stanley Gibbons (Sale No. 5886) for 26 May 2016.



Figure 4. Image from the World Online Philatelic Agency website, showing the 40 member countries, in addition to the United Nations Post Office.