By DERRICK HO

EVEN though Mr Harry Tong has visited the Istana countless times, he arrived at the presidential gates an hour before they opened to the public yesterday.

This time, he was eager to be on the first-ever guided tour of the 144-year-old palace.

“When my children were younger, I used to bring them here,” the 55-year-old associate lecturer at SIM University said. “But we don’t even really know the history of the building.”

Mr Tong joined 15 others – some as far as the United States and Germany – on a 45-minute tour of the Istana yesterday. Fifteen such tours were conducted with 320 people signing up for them while more than 15,400 visitors thronged the Istana grounds.

Led by volunteer guides from the Preservation of Monuments Board, the 15 groups were given an explanation of the building’s history and architecture.

Inside, they were given insights into art pieces on display including ceramic works by home-grown master potter Iskandar Jalil.

As they made their way into the Banquet Hall, participants were treated to a showcase of gifts the Republic has received from foreign dignitaries.

A pair of Delft porcelain vases from Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, who made her first state visit to Singapore last month, drew the most attention.

“I like very much the works of the local artists... they are very delicate,” said Mrs Arlette Pittet, 64, a retiree from Switzerland who was visiting the Istana for the first time.

As for Mr Tong, it was the collection of state gifts that he found most fascinating though he was disappointed not to see the upper floors. “I’m sure there are a lot more interesting stories and history behind it,” he said.

derrickh@sph.com.sg

Veteran Istana visitor Harry Tong chatting with Mrs Arlette Pittet and her husband Pierre, 64, from Switzerland, before the start of the guided tour of the Istana yesterday.

ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

320 enjoy first Istana guided tour