

Surprising Singapore

by Suzanne Wright



Clockwise from top left: The boat quay, dining at night, the Singapore Visitor's Centre.

If all you know about Singapore is that there's no spitting, gum or porn, or that a mischievous American was once famously caned, you are not alone. That is about all I knew before I went there. But after four days in this country, I learned that this English-speaking nation island has a number of surprises waiting to be uncovered.

Founded in 1819 by Sir Stamford Raffles as a British trading station, Singapore is a leading financial hub. A bridge between East and West, it is the smallest country in Asia. At just 250 square miles, Singapore is a third of the size of Rhode Island, but it is the most densely populated country in the world.

Still, with a population of nearly four and half million, it doesn't feel hectic. Singapore is orderly, compact and spotless, a real plus for a jet-lagged visitor. A compelling blend of East and West, you'll find exotic pockets of Old Singapore amidst the gleaming skyscrapers of New Singapore. With the air-conditioned comfort of the MRT, the city's immaculate, air-conditioned subway, transportation is made easy as well.

In addition to this, the Swissôtel Stamford, features sweeping views of not-so-distant Indonesia and Malaysia. Be sure to ask for a room on the concierge level, which includes a full breakfast and nightly happy hour.

A multicultural melting pot with large Chinese, Malay and Indian populations, there is no better place to experience diverse food. Ask a Singaporean to name her favorite restaurant and she is invariably stumped. "We are spoiled for choice," is a common reply to this pressing question. And when I wasn't noshing on all of these local delights, I was shopping at Takashimaya Department Store or one of the many other malls along Orchard Road, a turbocharged version of Rodeo Drive. In Singapore these two championship activities are often linked.

During my visit, preparations for Chinese New Year were also underway. Some of my favorite nibbles included pineapple tarts topped with cheese, and the delicious Hainese chicken rice, sautéed baby bok choy and at Maxwell Hawker Center, one of several government-created "malls." For a more upscale experience, try the phenomenal buffet lunch at The Grand Hyatt's Straits Kitchen, a meal that replicates a market place with show kitchens that prepare Indian, Chinese and Malay specialties. And at the family-run True Blue, a Peranakan (Straits

Chinese) restaurant in the Katong neighborhood, the black nut chicken is a luscious delicacy.

Following this, no visitor to Singapore should miss a Singapore Sling and peanuts at the world-famous Long Bar in the Raffles Hotel. Stay for dinner at the formal, French-inspired Raffles Grill and you might dine on salmon fillet with bilinis, pan seared scallops, dover sole and rum raisin parfait. Long Beach Seafood is a must-stop as well. Famed for their black pepper crabs smothered in soy sauce, this is good messy eating.

Beyond the table, there are plenty of other diversions in Singapore including the Asian Civilizations Museum. Here, a broad scope of pan-Asian civilizations is presented in 11 interactive galleries.

Strolling Clarke Quay along the Singapore River, you can check out the city's symbol, a giant spouting merlion, (or a lion's head atop a fish's body). Chinatown is another fun place to shop for souvenirs, with its original shophouses dating back to the 1840s and traditional herbalists. Also check out Rameh Bebe. Located in Katong, this "national treasure" preserves the unique embroidered blouses and hand-beaded shoes of the Peranakan people. It is a delight for anyone who wants to play dress-up in a gorgeous showroom.

Among the beautiful blooms at The Botanic Gardens, visitors can admire a number of "VIP" orchids named for world figures including the Princess Diana and Nelson Mandela. At dusk, board the tram for The Night Safari—the only open-air, nocturnal zoo in the world—to view hippos, giraffes, elephants, tigers and other night creatures. Guests can also visit Sentosa Island, a former British military hub that is now the city's nearest weekend getaway.

At Spa Botanica where peacocks roam the grounds, I indulged in the three-hour signature spa ritual, then ate a multi-course feast at The Cliff that included seared foie gras and spring rolls, tuna tartare, clam risotto, artichoke and chocolate gateau with black rice ice cream and melon soup. A girl has got to fortify herself, right?

As a frequent traveler to Asia, I plan on taking even more excursions to the region. A few days in this cosmopolitan city is the perfect transition back to the U.S.

Americans traveling to Singapore don't need a visa, just a passport. The Singapore Tourism Board's website, www.visitsingapore.com, has everything you need to begin planning your trip. For reservations at the Swissôtel Stamford, log onto www.singapore-stamford.swissotel.com.