

when the lion roars

Surrounded by skyscrapers, mega malls and CCTV, Singapore is revelling in 50 years of highly productive independence

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS **TESS PATERSON** ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS **ISTOCK**



‘You only need one of these,’ says our Chinese taxi driver, pulling at the collar of his shirt. ‘One shirt, no jersey – all year round!’ Beyond the air-conditioned capsule of the Lexus it’s an eye-popping 34 degrees, with humidity hovering at around 90 per cent. It reminds me of Durban in February but with the volume turned way, way up. On the equator’s cusp, covered in extraordinarily lush vegetation and riddled with skyscrapers, there’s something distinctly schizophrenic about this island state. One minute you’re in the serene lobby of the Shangri-La, having spent a night beneath a duck-down duvet fending off the blast-chiller air-con. Seconds later you’re in a twilight zone of stifling clamminess, Ray-Bans all fogged up and your camera lens stubbornly refusing to focus. ‘Singapore one temperature,’ beams the cabbie. ‘Hot and hot!’

This year is a significant one for the Lion City: its Golden Jubilee in August marks 50 years since it broke ties with Malaysia. In 1965, though, this was seen more as a crisis than a celebration. With no natural resources and an immigrant population without a shared national identity, the pint-sized state faced a host of challenges. We know now that it took just one generation to progress from an emerging nation to the first-world wunderkind of Southeast Asia. Today, what this sovereign state lacks in space it makes up for in its stunning verticality – an NYC on steroids, minus the winter and the hooting. It’s a skyline that represents banking and shopping and petrochemical profits. But behind all the flash it’s an established meritocracy, with high levels of service

and religious tolerance. You will also find some of the best food on the planet here.

The skyline is what you notice first, and its varied architecture is an intriguing part of Singapore’s dichotomy. Amid flashes of older, more human-scale areas, such as Chinatown or Kampong Glam, the buildings of the past decade have given the city a completely new identity. Architect Moshe Safdie’s Marina Bay Sands is a gravity-defying mixed-use marvel, which at first glance looks as though a submarine landed on the Joburg Gen. Rather than the standard cluster of towers over a mall, the architect wanted ‘a building that is extrovert and connected to the city around it’. A stone’s throw away, his bold design for the ArtScience Museum resembles a lotus-shaped spaceship about to take off.

In a dramatic declaration of green cred, the Supertrees at Gardens by the Bay bring to mind a futuristic fairground attraction. Soaring up to 50 metres high, the metal structures are cocooned in vegetation, functioning as rainwater harvesters and solar-power generators. Check out the twice-nightly self-powered light shows when the whole mad, wondrous forest comes alive.

Singapore is a city that works. Getting around is a cinch, with some 28 000 taxis swooping in and out of designated ranks in orderly rows. Underground, untainted by graffiti, their MRT system is a hub of exacting, Swiss-like efficiency. Each station connects to entire worlds of subterranean shopping – a seductive series of malls so awash with Vuitton, Vivier and Gucci that,

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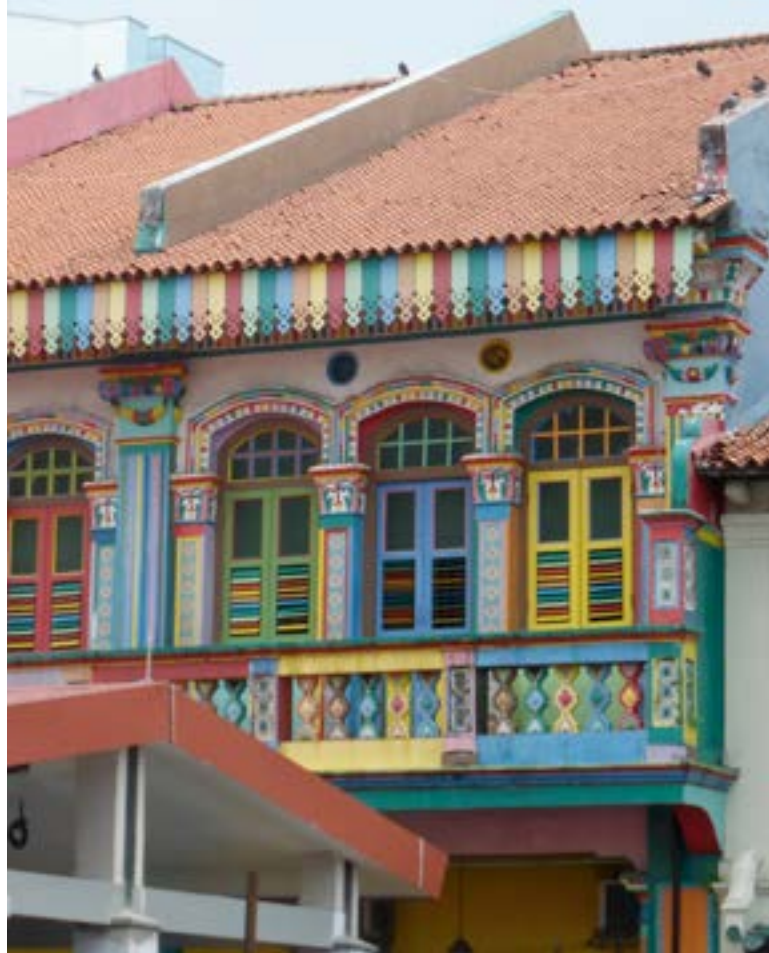
quite frankly, it all becomes a bit of a blur. Above ground it feels as though someone lined up 10 Sandton Cities in a row and said, ‘There you go, knock yourselves out.’ Orchard Road is still the home of high-end luxury and, though resolutely anti-mall, I’ll admit to being a little taken by the Takashimaya centre. Less ostentatious, it whispers in the way of serious wealth. For the avidly acquisitive, the Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands boast the city’s largest collection of luxury jewellery and watches under a single roof.

Eating, of course, is one of the chief reasons we’re here. ‘Three words,’ said an air-hostess friend who knows Singapore intimately, ‘Satays, peanut sauce.’ These prove to be outrageously delicious, especially with an icy Tiger beer. But then so does the Japanese rice-flour porridge that I stumble across one breakfast. Silky as a crème caramel, this cool white bit of heaven is topped with a palm-sugar reduction. In truth though, breakfast could

ABOVE, FROM FAR LEFT Ion Orchard is the home of high-end luxury; one of Chinatown’s several pedestrian streets; Lotus flowers for sale in Little India; bikes for hire at Tiong Bahru; the Marina Bay Sands overlooks the lotus-inspired ArtScience Museum, both designed by Moshe Safdie; a Hindu shrine in Little India; deep-fried spinach leaves and bean curd with a Tiger beer. PREVIOUS PAGE Set on 100 hectares of reclaimed land, Singapore’s Gardens by the Bay features a grove of Supertrees that mimic the functions of mature forest trees. A 128m-long walkway connects the structures.

also be miso soup, kaya toast or noodles. Or waffles or Nasi Goreng. The multi-cultural mix, which includes Malay, Indian and Chinese, has created an extraordinary food culture.

If costly high-end dining is your thing, you could try the hay-roasted Bresse pigeon at Jaan – the city’s top spot for contemporary French cuisine. At the other end of the scale, for around R50 a plate, there’s superb food to be found at the indoor markets. Lau Pa Sat becomes our favourite haunt, mostly for the braised beef-ball noodles, but also for the finest naan this side of Durban. And somewhere in between there are countless small, personal eateries with fabulous food and service. Tess Bar & Kitchen was a happy find on Seah Street – with beautiful tapas and friendly neighbours who happily and inexplicably shared their Japanese whisky with us. When I told the maitre d’ my name (so I could legitimately nick a few coasters), a delicious cocktail promptly arrived out of the blue.▷



IT'S A HEADY CULTURE CLASH, FROM THE VIBRANT BUSTLE AND COLOUR OF LITTLE INDIA, TO THE 1930S HOUSING ESTATE OF TIONG BAHRU.

Visiting a roof-top bar is a must, not only to see the entire city unfold as you catch a rare wafting breeze, but to people-watch among the cool set. A frosty Tsingtao at the Lighthouse bar atop The Fullerton Hotel is a good start. Feeling just a little gangsta as though we hang here often sipping R200 beers we watch the late light turning peachy over the esplanade.

Later, strolling through a city of 5.5 million inhabitants, it's as though we're in a play land – a gleaming high-end metropolis where harsh realities such as mugging and dereliction barely exist. With zero-tolerance policies on littering and crime – fines for littering start at S\$300 (around R2 800) to a session of street-sweeping around Orchard Road – it's uber clean and safe. But on the other side of the orderly coin, there's an unshakeable sense of being watched. 'Singaporeans have no privacy,' one taxi driver said in exasperation, 'CCTV is everywhere.' And that's the contradiction – Big Brother is the necessary payoff for living without crime.

Skyscrapers aside, the older, smaller areas drew me right in. It's a heady culture clash, from the vibrant bustle and colour of Little India (don't miss the gaudily beautiful temple), to the 1930s housing estate of Tiong Bahru. The latter has become quite

sought-after – a hip mix of conservation shop-houses, government flats and condos. It's a bit like Umhlanga Rocks in the 1970s – low-rise, tropical and safe. Turns out it features some great indie shops, including the sublime Books Actually with an impressively eclectic range and resident cat.

On the last day I head to the city's botanical gardens, my favourite haunt of all. It's almost impossible to convey – a green, humid wonder filled with the most beautiful towering trees. I would go back just to stare at the orchids. The other thing I'd love to see is the National Gallery, which opens in October.

A combination of two iconic buildings – the former supreme court and the city hall, it promises to be a remarkable backdrop for the finest Southeast Asian and Singaporean art. Here's to the tropics and to the next 50 years. ☐

ABOVE, FROM LEFT Singapore has around 40 Hindu temples; some of the vividly painted shop-houses in Little India.

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GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines has daily flights from Cape Town and Johannesburg to Singapore. Singaporeair.com
South Africans don't need a visa.

SHOP LOCAL

Keepers: The Singapore Designer Collective showcases fashion and accessories. keepers.com.sg
Zhai Eco Collection in Haji Lane is a cool store for bamboo-fibre basics. Zhai.com.sg
Kapak at the National Design Centre has good coffee and edgy finds by emerging designers. Ka-pok.com

MUST-SEE MUSEUM

Don't miss 'After Utopia' at the Singapore Art Museum – a stunning display of contemporary Asian art on until 18 October. singaporeartmuseum.sg

WEEKEND ESCAPE

Just 50 minutes by ferry, The Banyan Tree on Bintan Island is an idyllic weekend retreat.

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Heliconia flowers in the botanic gardens; orchid decoration; a colourful wall in Little India; a Valentino window display and Tod's metallic leather sneakers at Takashimaya shopping centre; the entrance to the orchid display at the botanic gardens.