

A steamy, hard-driving world all its own

► SINGAPORE
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Getting accustomed to a population density of 16,417 people per square mile (by comparison, Boston's is about 12,500), and a briskly moving cavalcade of sparkling cars in an ultraclean city where every bit of space has a designated use — well, that takes longer.

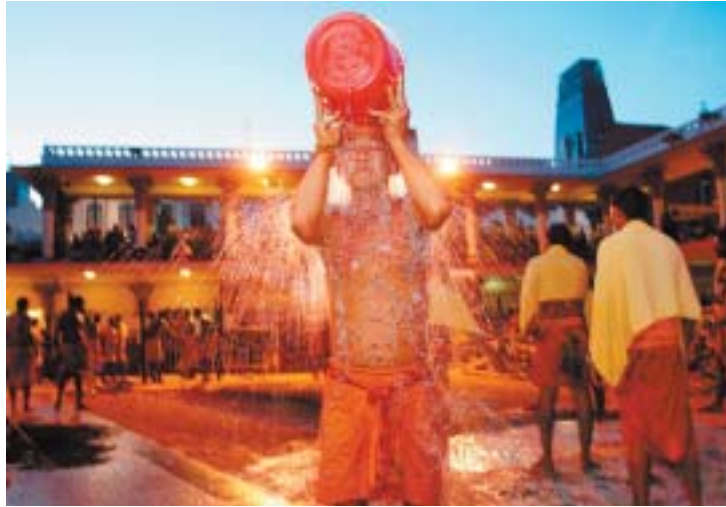
The best place to get a feel for Singapore's beginnings is where the naturally deep harbor of Marina Bay narrows to the winding Singapore River. Life-size bronze statues scattered along the banks of the river show the history of Singapore's trade and culture. Chinese merchants with long braids display their wares, Malay traders are deep in conversation, and muscled workers load carts. Behind them, old wooden boats cruise the gentle river past Boat and Clarke quays, where riverside shophouses have been converted to popular bars and restaurants.

Modern Singapore was born when Stamford Raffles came ashore here with the British East India Company in January 1819. By deft political maneuvering, he claimed the trading outpost island for Britain and broke the Dutch monopoly through the all-important Strait of Malacca, the channel between the Malaysian Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra, connecting the Andaman and South China seas.

"In short," wrote Raffles, "Singapore is everything we could desire, and I may consider myself fortunate in the selection; it will soon rise into importance." So did he. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, who died in 1826, is immortalized at the official riverside Raffles Landing Site with an elegant statue. Singapore remained a British colony until 1959.

Of 4.3 million people who live on the 26-mile-long by 14-mile-wide island, 77 percent are Chinese, 14 percent Malay, and 7 percent Indian, so there are Buddhist temples, Islamic mosques, and Hindu temples.

There's even an old synagogue, the Maghain Aboth, built in 1878 by Jews who emigrated from Iraq. Mr. Daniels, the elderly caretaker, was pleased to show me around the empty house of worship one



HOW HWEE YOUNG/EPA

A Hindu devotee cools down during a fire walking ceremony over hot coals at Sri Mariamman Temple in Singapore last fall.

steamy afternoon.

"We have 600 people in the congregation," he said, "but only about 200 are permanent residents of Singapore. The rest are expatriates." He pointed to the upper balcony. "This is an Orthodox synagogue, so the women sit up there. A mohel [who performs ritual circumcisions] we bring in from Australia or the UK, about once a month."

A bit later, I settled into my first Singapore cab. The driver turned to me and demanded brusquely, "Where you go, lah?"

"Where, where?" he persisted, when I wasn't quick enough with an answer.

Fortunately my friend took over, and gave the cabbie equally rapid directions to her apartment. As I listened to their conversation, I realized they were frequently using English words, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. Then the English disappeared entirely, as they switched to another language.

"What was that?" I asked a few minutes later.

"Singlish," my friend said. "It's the Singaporean mixture of English and Chinese, mostly Hokkien. Everybody speaks it. Most speak standard English, too. But the driver is Chinese, so I switched to Mandarin. Anyway, don't worry. I got you a Singlish-English dictionary. You'll see." We settled back as the cabbie zipped along at a pretty good clip. "Ah, you're so

blur," she added.

Over the next few weeks, I learned many handy words from the Oxford English Dictionary. "Lah" is often added to mark the end of a sentence. "Blur" means to be in a world of one's own, or dazed. Well, duh!

On to the Battle Box at Fort Canning, the British underground command center in World War II. The subterranean rooms and tunnels spring to life with uniformed mannequins animated with blaring voices, and the tumult of wartime shelling. My guide, though, who was as spry as he was outspoken about his childhood under the Japanese occupation during the war, was the real jewel of the Battle Box.

"I was 7 years old when the Japanese besieged Singapore with air bombing," he said. "I remember the sound of bombs, and hiding under the stairs." He paused, then continued, "I sincerely hope there is no more war. It is ugly!"

Changi Criminal Jail was built in 1936 on the northeast tip of the island to hold 600 prisoners. From 1942, when the Japanese drove the British from the area, until the end of the war, some 3,500 Allied troops and civilian men, women, and children were interned here. The food was so meager, it is said to have accounted for 75 percent of prisoners' conversations. Hoping to add protein to their diets, they even created a small snail farm. The nearby Changi Museum

pays homage to these unfortunate souls in moving exhibits with inmates' personal testimonials, artwork, and belongings. One of these is a handmade windup device hidden in a matchbox, used by prisoners to communicate with one another in Morse code.

Between the end of the war and the final departure of the British in 1971 (Singapore moved from colony to self rule to brief membership in the Malay Federation to Commonwealth membership and independence in 1965), Singapore was transformed. Lee Kuan Yew, the country's first prime minister from 1959 until 1990, writes about this in his autobiography, "From Third World to First." Under his paternal leadership, the quiet wooden kampongs, or villages, often with poor sanitation and a fragile economy, morphed into an industrialized urban nation prospering from banking, high tech, and biotechnology.

Government-initiated urban renovation, infrastructure, health, education, and transit were the main catalysts. But Lee's success in turning Singapore into a prosperous country wouldn't have been possible without the powerful Singaporean work ethic.

If "keeping up with the Joneses" is a Western trait, then I'd venture a Singaporean theme could be, "Get there quickly, and more importantly, before the Joneses!"

So the kampongs are gone, replaced by forests of high-rise apartment blocks. More than 86 percent of Singaporeans own their flats, the highest rate of home ownership in the world. From the time Lee took office to the publication of his book in 2000, a span of just over 40 years, the per capita gross domestic product rose from \$400 to \$22,000 per person. The port, one of the world's busiest, continues to thrive.

The drive to be first doesn't stop here. Even the national airline has it. A year ago, Singapore Airlines introduced the world's longest flights (nonstop from both Newark and Los Angeles to Singapore) at slightly more than 18 hours from the East Coast. The airline also offers the longest bed in business class at 6½ feet. This year the airline plans to add the

If you go . . .

How to get there

Singapore Airlines flies 18 hours nonstop from Newark to Singapore from about \$1,772. Visit www.singaporeair.com or call 800-742-3333.

Where to stay

The Fullerton Hotel
1 Fullerton Square
011-65-6733-8388
www.fullertonhotel.com
Grand neoclassical architecture in the former General Post Office. The pool overlooks the Singapore River and Asian Civilisations Museum. Voted top hotel in town in Condé Nast Travelers Gold List 2005. Doubles from \$288.

Raffles Hotel

1 Beach Road
011-65-6337-1886
www.rafleshotel.com
The granddaddy of luxury hotels, now a mixture of refurbished modern and genteel 19th-century styles. The free Raffles Hotel Museum on the third floor is worth a visit. Doubles from \$413.

Where to eat

House of Peranakan Cuisine
Meritus Negara Hotel
10 Claymore Road
011-65-6733-4411
Centuries of intermarriage between Malay and Chinese created the Peranakan culture, with its own cuisine. Uniquely spiced and slow-cooked instead of stir-fried, each dish has distinct mouth-watering flavors. Try the lively fish curry in tamarind. Main dishes \$6, a meal for two from \$25.

Tepak Sireh
73 Sultan Gate



DAVID BUTLER/GLOBE STAFF

011-65-6396-4373
www.tepakisireh.com.sg
Full-on Malay dining in the former residence of the prime minister of Johor. The signature dish is coconut-flavored beef rendang. Lunch buffet on weekends has a wide selection of dishes and desserts fit for a head of state, \$10 per person.

No Signboard Seafood
50 Stadium Blvd.
011-65-6344-9959
www.nosignboardseafood.com
Spicy chilli crab (\$19.50) is messy and may prohibit smooching, but everyone eats it. Succulent scallops with vegetables \$9. For families and romantic couples alike, overlooking the city lights twinkling on the Kallang Basin.

What to do
Singapore Tourism Board
www.visitsingapore.com
Information on festivals, entertainment, and museums.

Airbus A380, a double-decker that is expected to be the world's largest passenger plane.

Sometimes, this drive can be a bit strange.

High above the harbor is Labrador Park, the site of artillery that protected Singapore from 1880 until World War II. Last March, the tunnels underneath the guns were reopened, with some of the wartime damage and rubble left untouched. Lights flicker eerily on fallen beams and blown-away brickwork. While a recorded narrator's voice boomed off the concrete walls and my teeth started to

vibrate, our guide loudly began her own simultaneous spiel. As we left for the next room, I told her that competing with the loud recording made both talks equally incomprehensible.

She replied, "Well, the tape was a bit long so I was summarizing it."

Presumably, we would then be finished with our tour just a bit sooner, and be the first to leave for another attraction.

Contact Lloyd Frost, a freelance writer in Ottawa, at lfrost@mondenet.com.

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