

Urban Oasis

From savvy urban conveniences to overwhelming greenery, Singapore has it all. Add in the rich culinary scene, and this city of the future is an unmissable treat for all your senses.

Text Anne Pinto Rodrigues

Singapore's award-winning Changi Airport is a beehive of activity. The flight from Perth has just landed with my 20-year-old niece Mila on board. She walks out in no time, thanks to Changi's exceptional ease of navigation. Mila is an Environmental Engineering student, on an assignment to study the best practices of a successful 21st-century city like Singapore.

Singapore's compact size (719km²) has inspired the city state to be creative in its urban planning as well as in managing its resources. As one of the most liveable cities in the world, Singapore provides its 5.6 million residents with a first-class standard of living.

Having called Singapore my home for the past six years, I am delighted to show Mila how this exhilarating mega-city balances its ambitions with environmental responsibilities. She is full of questions about the city-state's public transportation systems, green lifestyle and of course, the unparalleled food scene.

Transporting a nation

Singapore has been consistently ranked as one of leading global economies in the field of communications and information technology. This leadership is clearly visible in the city's emergence as a key financial technology hub, as well as in the technologies that power the city; from public transportation initiatives to a plethora of mobile apps. Having read about advancements like driverless cars on the horizon for Singapore, Mila is curious to know more about its high-tech transportation.

During one of our taxi rides across town, I point to a digital gantry and explain the concept of Electronic Road Pricing (ERP), the ingenious traffic management initiative. During peak hours, the ERP gantries placed along arterial roads and urban motorways, charge the stored value card affixed on every vehicle. These charges are meant to dissuade vehicle owners from taking popular routes,

“I feel so spoilt by all the comforts this city offers”

thus decreasing the traffic and congestion on those key stretches. Singapore is the first city in the world to implement this very clever technology for road traffic management and it has inspired several other cities to follow suit.

The allure of technology also permeates down to the individual level here. Locals rely heavily on their favourite mobile apps to access services like booking a cab, or to make decisions about the best way to get to a particular destination. Real time apps allow me to map out my entire journey even before I leave home.

Wanting to experience Singapore's super-efficient public transport system, we take the train (known as Mass Rapid Transit, or simply MRT) from Bedok station – the MRT stop closest to my home – and head to our final destination, Gardens by the Bay, a sprawling garden created out of approximately one square kilometre of reclaimed land.

At Bedok station, I buy Mila her very own EZ-Link card. That's a stored value card, which will allow her to access all modes of public transport, without having to worry about buying a ticket each time. And since we are commuting after 9 a.m. on a weekday, we pay even less than during peak hours. This differential pricing is one of the clever ways the MRT authorities manage peak-hour crowds. The authorities have gone one step further by >



Rich Stapleton (previous page right), Scott A. Woodward (below left, previous page left), Getty Images (above left), Jurriaan Teulings (above right)

Previous pages:
Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay (1 Esplanade Drive), Singapore's national performing arts centre (left); view from Henderson Wave Bridge on Keppel Bay, a modern residential complex (right).

This page (clockwise from top left):
Supertree Grove (18 Marina Gardens Drive); Gillman Barracks (9 Lock Road), which houses several art galleries and the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art; Boat Quay, a historical quay in Singapore.

Singapore



“Integrating wild places creates a more meaningful urban experience”



Places to eat

Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle & Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice & Noodle
In July 2016, these two hawkers became the world's first street food vendors to be awarded a Michelin star. At their stalls, you can savour the world's cheapest Michelin-starred meals.
Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle: 466 Crawford Lane, 01-12
Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice & Noodle: 335 Smith Street

Blue Ginger Restaurant
Get a taste of flavourful, Peranakan cuisine at this elegant restaurant, located in the historic neighbourhood of Tanjong Pagar.
theblueginger.com
97 Tanjong Pagar Road

Jiang-Nan Chun
Xiang Le Zhu Yi or 'the principle of enjoyment and happiness' is best experienced at this award-winning Cantonese restaurant, at the Four Seasons hotel.
fourseasons.com/singapore
190 Orchard Boulevard

Street carts
Delight in the local sweet treat, the ice-cream sandwich. It's a block of ice cream wrapped in a large slice of multi-coloured bread or placed between two crispy wafers.
Along Orchard Road

Places to drink

1-Altitude
Enjoy stunning 360-degree views at the world's highest al-fresco bar.
1-altitude.com
1 Raffles Place

Red Dot Brewhouse
Drink away the tropical heat at Singapore's first locally-owned, independent commercial microbrewery.
reddotbrewhouse.com.sg
25A Dempsey Road 01-01

Killiney Kopitiam
Learn how to order the various versions of coffee (*kopi*) and tea (*teh*), and test your ordering skills.
killiney-kopitiam.com
67 Killiney Road

Places to stay

Park Royal
Located in the historic Chinatown district, this award-winning place boasts the avant-garde 'hotel in the garden' concept and has many environmentally friendly features.
parkroyalhotels.com
3 Upper Pickering Street

Wanderlust Hotel
This quirky hotel in the Little India heritage precinct offers an unconventional stay experience with cool hipster vibes. A school building in the early 20th century, it now boasts 29 eclectically-designed rooms spread over four floors.
wanderlusthotel.com
2 Dickson Road

Hotel Indigo Singapore Katong
Each of the 131 rooms at this Peranakan-themed place is styled like a Peranakan home with traditional motifs and colourful touches. It's located in the heart of the vibrant Katong area and is a short 15-minute ride from Changi Airport
ihg.com/hotelindigo
86 East Coast Road

introducing 'free pre-peak hour' travel whereby train travellers ending their journey before 7:45 a.m. on weekdays at 18 designated MRT stations in the city centre, are charged absolutely nothing for their commute.

Rolling her eyes, Mila retorts: "Who doesn't like free stuff?!" The reduction in the number of peak-hour commuters – thanks to this novel scheme – is well documented.

Discussing the upcoming transportation technologies, we tap our EZ-Link cards on the scanner. Three of the five existing MRT lines are fully automated and operate driverless trains. We board the MRT to Bayfront in the downtown area. Noticing how clean the train is, Mila cheekily exclaims: "I could eat off these floors!"

A green haven

With 300 parks and four nature reserves, Singapore's near 50% green cover creates a harmonious and liveable urban environment. Public and private initiatives, such as vertical gardens, rooftop farming and the mobile Repair Kopitiam (modelled after the European Repair Café), all add to the growing sustainable vibe in the city. The design of newer residential and recreational projects reflect the focus on green architecture and renewable resources. Public interest in preserving the last nature hotspots in Singapore, like the Sungei Buloh Wetlands Reserve and the MacRitchie Reservoir Park, helps keep the city's wild core alive.

Continuing our journey to Gardens by the Bay, Mila and I alight the MRT at Bayfront station, and walk to the gardens. The setting looks vaguely familiar, as the urban oasis was the inspiration behind planet Xandar in the film *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). The surreal landscape – which houses rare and unique tropical plants from around the world – is a key part of the government's strategy to transform Singapore into a 'City in a Garden'. >

Rich Stapleton (above right, below left, previous page left), Scott A. Woodward (top left, previous page right)



Previous pages:
the walkways inside the cloud forest at Gardens by the Bay (left); Chinatown (right).

This page (clockwise from top left):
a delicious treat created at Swissôtel The Stamford's Michelin-starred restaurant JAAN (2 Stamford Road, Level 70, Equinox Complex); the Singapore Flyer (30 Raffles Avenue), a 165m-tall Ferris wheel, viewed from outside Gardens by the Bay; fashion stores at Haji Lane.



This page (clockwise from top left):
Group Therapy, for freshly-brewed coffee and brunch favourites (30 East Coast Road and 49 Duxton Road); silk *cheongsams* at Atelier Ong Shunmugam (43 Jalan Merah Saga 01-76); Buddha Tooth Relic Temple and Museum (288 South Bridge Road) in Chinatown.

Places to see

Singapore Botanic Gardens

Leave the hustle and bustle of the city behind and relax in the verdant Botanic Gardens, Singapore's first UNESCO World Heritage Site. Step into the Orchid Garden to admire the 200+ exotic orchid species, all named after international dignitaries.

sbg.org.sg
1 Cluny Road

National Gallery

Appreciate the world's largest display of modern Southeast Asian art at this newest landmark on the scene.

nationalgallery.sg
1 Saint Andrew's Road

Tiong Bahru

Walk around the oldest housing estate in Singapore, and soak in the Art Deco architecture.

Afterwards, grab some freshly-made coffee and baked goods at one of the many hipster cafés in the neighbourhood.

Joo Chiat

Enjoy the colourful Peranakan shophouses in the Joo Chiat area, designated as Singapore's first Heritage Town in 2011.

Then, visit one of the stores selling intricately embroidered Peranakan ladies' clothes and beaded slippers.

We meet our guide Kevin and proceed to the imposing Supertree Grove. Craning our necks to look up at the cluster of 12 Supertrees, we admire the artificial tree-like structures, between 25m to 50m tall. The external steel framework of the Supertrees supports thousands of ferns and flowering plants. The knowledgeable Kevin tells us more. "These multi-functional vertical gardens harvest rainwater to be used for irrigation, while photovoltaic cells embedded in the canopy of some of the Supertrees capture solar energy to power the evening light show." We are thrilled to observe such a remarkable example of green design. "This will make a great case study for my Urban Design class," Mila says.

The next morning, we meet up with Ria Tan, a local biodiversity champion and creator of the online resource 'Wild Singapore'. Ria animatedly remarks: "Singapore is probably the only place in the world where one can visit a rainforest, a mangrove and a coral reef, all within half an hour from the central business district." Emphasising the importance of a 21st-century city to retain its green heart, Ria adds: "Integrating wild places into our city landscape creates a more meaningful urban experience."

A taste of culture

All this data gathering for Mila's class assignment calls for plenty of indulgences along the way. I decide to introduce her to some of the culinary delights Singapore has to offer. From fancy Michelin-starred restaurants to traditional hawker stalls, and everything in between, Singapore is a gastronomic paradise.

The hawker centres, symbolic of the true Singapore food experience, offer an eclectic array of cuisines. The Hainanese chicken rice (poached chicken served with chicken stock-flavoured rice), Malay *nasi lemak* (rice cooked in coconut milk), Peranakan *laksa* (spicy

It's a gastronomic paradise, from Michelin-starred restaurants to hawker stalls

noodle soup) and an Indian-influenced fish head curry are all reflective of the many ethnic groups that form a part of Singapore's society. Just as popular are upscale, fine-dining restaurants run by international celebrity chefs like Joël Robuchon and Wolfgang Puck, as well as those by Asian master chefs like André Chiang, who is credited with having the best restaurant in Singapore, the two-Michelin-starred Restaurant André.

For Mila's last breakfast in Singapore, we head to one of the local coffee shops, Killiney Kopitiam. Olivia Choong, a local environment advocate and friend, joins us. Over *Kaya* toast (a delicious coconut and egg jam spread over toast), soft-boiled eggs and *Teh C* (hot tea with sweetened condensed milk), we ask her about the latest trends in the Singapore food scene. Olivia tells us about farm-to-table dining, which is gaining momentum in Singapore. "Urban farming enables restaurants like Artichoke and Open Farm Community to provide fresh, locally-grown produce. These restaurants grow their own herbs, vegetables and even flowers for food and beverages. Their food gardens are definitely drawing a lot of interest." How wonderful that diners can have such a direct connection with their food.

No trip to Singapore is complete without a taste of Peranakan cuisine, a delightful

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The divine aroma
of the spicy coconut
broth overwhelms
our senses



Scott A. Woodward

Left page:
Shangri-La Hotel
Singapore's restaurant
Shang Palace (Lobby
Level, Tower Wing,
22 Orange Grove Road).

Singapore

- 1 Changi Airport Singapore
- 2 Gardens by the Bay
- 3 Open Farm Community
- 4 Tai Hwa Pork Noodle
- 5 1-Altitude bar
- 6 Wanderlust Hotel
- 7 National Gallery
- 8 Joo Chiat area
- 9 ION Orchard shopping mall
- 10 Botanic Gardens
- 11 Tiong Bahru neighbourhood



Jaemijn Evans/Art Associates

fusion of Chinese and Malay influences. For lunch, we agree to sample a dish that is the hallmark of Peranakan cuisine, the aromatic *laksa*. We head to the charming Katong area, once an enclave of the affluent Peranakan community, and queue at the famous 328 Katong Laksa eatery.

When our bowl of the aromatic *Katong Laksa* arrives, the divine aroma of the spicy coconut broth overwhelms our senses and we eagerly slurp down the luscious curry-soaked noodles. Between mouthfuls of *laksa*, we almost miss the photographs of the many celebrities who have dined at this humble eatery.

We end our gastronomic journey of Singapore with a scrumptious dinner at the East Coast Lagoon Food Village (1220 East Coast Parkway). The prime beachside location of this hawker centre makes it a popular haunt for locals and tourists alike. We order a medley of dishes from various stalls, namely *rojak* (a sweet savory local salad), freshly-grilled satay, fried carrot cake (not to be confused with the western carrot cake – this is a savoury flour and egg pancake with bits of white radish in it) and *char kway teow* (stir-fried flat rice noodles).

We dig into the food with gusto, the flavour of the delicacies enhanced by the cool sea breeze and the buzz at the food village.”

Post dinner, a very satiated Mila gushes excitedly: “Singapore has it all figured out! The island-wide public transportation, the handy apps, a park at every corner and the endless food options. I feel so spoilt by all the comforts this city offers!” I’m pretty sure most visitors to the city echo her sentiment. If you are looking to visit a city that pampers you with its urban conveniences, come to Singapore. You won’t want to leave. ■

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this
story**
✈

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non-stop flight to Changi
Airport Singapore from
Amsterdam Airport Schiphol.

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