


 WORLD BEAT

LURE OF Singapore



*A magnetic mix of the natural
and the manmade*

BY GARY SINGH

We're sitting atop a 150-foot "Supertree" constructed of reinforced concrete, photovoltaic cells and thousands of plants, all designed to harvest solar energy.

In a half-Eastern, half-Western restaurant called **IndoChine** (www.indochine-group.com), popular for private events, we relax 16 stories above Singapore. On one side, the eatery gives us commanding views of the steel-and-glass Singapore cityscape. Looking the opposite way, we see the 250-acre **Gardens by the Bay** (www.gardensbythebay.com.sg), where a huge greenhouse called The Flower Dome offers 13,000 square feet of space for product launches, and where sweeping meadows backdrop numerous outdoor corporate events. The scene is a microcosm of Singapore itself, a blending of the natural environment with the designed environment.

Gardens by the Bay can host everything from weddings to indoor blowouts, from competitive functions to outdoor concerts for 20,000. At IndoChine, Darren Oh, business development director, tells us that having a complex network of sustainable energy and water conservation helps to solicit group business.

"It often becomes a talking point among guests," he says. "They're surprised to know that the conservatories that they're in are cooled by renewable energy. Or the Supertrees that they see before them are lit by solar energy."

Just down the street, the statuesque grand symbol of Singapore, **The Fullerton Hotel** (www.fullertonhotel.com) emerges like a wise old sage at the mouth of the Singapore River. Originally constructed in 1928,

the structure remains one of the country's definitive landmarks, thus immersing us in Singapore history upon our very arrival. We immediately experience a harmonization of opposites: serene history fuses with bullet-proof technology; architectural integrity complements progressive innovation; traditional interior design is accentuated with modern contemporary flourishes. After we explore the opulent nooks and crannies of the property, we perceive a glorious disregard for anything cookie-cutter and homogenous. Each of the sleeping rooms, restaurants and meeting spaces are distinctive in and of themselves.

The same holds true at The Fullerton's sister property down the block, **The Fullerton Bay Hotel** (www.fullertonbayhotel.com). We visit the pier in back of the property, right on the Marina Bay Waterfront—formerly the Ellis Island of Singapore—and contemplate thousands of immigrants who first arrived by coming through this entry point. The property even employs a few people whose grandparents did just that. A more modern business-travel beacon compared to the stately Fullerton, The Fullerton Bay includes three meeting rooms—Silk, Silver and Saffron—named after the commodities traded here 80 years ago. Newly constructed just last year, three floating event pods extend out onto the water, allowing for high-tech board meetings with personalized service inside what looks like trading boats docked at the bay. As with The Fullerton, flawless interior design permeates the entire Fullerton Bay experience. Both hotels are connected via an underground passageway, and both are part of the larger Fullerton Heritage precinct.

If The Fullertons are the grand-scale business bastions of Singapore hospitality, the **Parkroyal on Pickering** (www.parkroyalhotels.com), which opened earlier this year, is a masterpiece of an entirely different sort. A hotel-in-a-garden concept, the Parkroyal features sky gardens four stories high intertwining with reflecting pools, waterfalls, planter terraces, wellness-inspired materials and cascading vertical greenery. We show up to experience a textbook example of what unfolds when

FOOD PLAYGROUND



There are no celebrity chefs, TV cameras, or even food processors at **Food Playground** (www.foodplayground.com.sg). Instead, stay-at-home moms and seniors show up to help out in the kitchen. Thus, the cooking classes offer visiting groups a more local and familial team-building experience. No one learns how to be a gourmet chef. Instead, groups learn to collaborate by cooking Singapore's famous street food.

"We're very different from the typical cooking school you see in Singapore," explains Daniel Tan, managing director of Food Playground. "We see ourselves more as a hands-on cultural exchange venue. We don't attract people interested only in learning how to cook local cuisine. Many of our customers come because they are interested to learn more about Singapore through our food heritage and culture."

Just the physical location—upstairs above preserved colonial storefronts near the colorful chaos of Chinatown—immediately provides an authentic flavor. Once inside, soothing music emanates, tea is consumed and everyone becomes family. Groups get a sense of local history, architecture and food before they even start the class.

"Our location is yet another important differentiating factor," Tan says. "We have specifically chosen to operate inside a pre-war restored shophouse in the Duxton neighborhood to enhance the experience. This gives us lots of talking points to share the interesting history of shophouses as well as the conservation efforts by our government to retain important parts of Singapore's history and heritage."

If anyone on the team harbors resentments, they are given the opportunity to "remove those resentments" via the mortar and pestle. No one puts anything into a food processor. A mortar and pestle can be a "pounding" workout, but the pastes always taste better when made that way. Groups learn that a time-consuming activity can be worth the trouble.

From beginning to end, the whole shebang includes several components. A 30-minute intro on Singapore food heritage and culture opens up the experience, followed by a 10-minute intro on local ingredients. The hands-on cooking class lasts about two hours, after which everyone eats and shares their emotions.

"We want visitors to our cooking school to walk away not only knowing more about Singapore food culture and heritage but also with more motivation and courage to try out local cuisine," Tan says.

—Gary Singh

the architect doubles as the interior designer. That is, for groups, the Parkroyal presents a nonchalant cross-pollination of architectural Zen-chic tranquility and laid-back business buzz unlike any other Singapore property we visit.

Within seconds, Lee Kin

Seng, marketing and communications director, takes us on a meditative journey through the lobby, meeting spaces, pre- and post-function areas and finally into a shining star, Lime Restaurant, where open kitchens and elaborate yet simple design

mingles effortlessly with the architecture and business bustle. At the Parkroyal, every detail is masterfully implemented, from the place settings in the restaurant to the solar windows in the meeting spaces to the faucets in the guest rooms. Everything is connected, design-wise, and the natural environment fluently dovetails with



the built environment. There are no homogenous corridors.

"When business travelers come here, we don't want them to feel like they're in a business hotel," Lee says, as we ease into a table at Lime. "You can roll up your sleeves when doing business here. People are somewhat tired of cookie-cutter properties and we're not like that."

Perhaps no other property exemplifies the Lion City's harmonization of opposites like **Capella Singapore** (www.capellahotels.com/singapore). Although Capella is only a 10-minute drive from the central business district, the 30-acre property on Sentosa Island seems to be in the middle of nowhere. A private driveway takes visitors straight into a movie set of sprawling lawns and old-school British colonial bungalows blending serenely with nouveau-lavish architecture. Some of the largest suites in Singapore exist in these buildings, which used to function as the British Royal Artillery Officers'

Mess in the 1880s. At Capella, every event space opens onto dramatic views of lagoon-style pools, hanging greenery or the South China Sea. Groups that meet here consider themselves among notable company, as some of the city's hugest weddings and most high-level corporate affairs have unfolded at the property. Capella also boasts the city's only circular ballroom, replete with an open skylight and even more views of the natural environment. As with all properties we explore, nature seems to effortlessly fuse with human design.

Even at the **W Singapore Sentosa Cove** (www.who-tels.com/singapore), the

SINGAPORE: OUTTA SITE!



brand's trademark cosmopolitan rock stardom only amplifies the intricacy of how Singapore's natural setting can merge with the business environment. The lush rainforests of Sentosa Island form the backdrop for an urban escape only minutes from the main city. Groups have access to private marina slips, jungle activities and bachelor pad suites. Once it's time to actually work, the W is unique, according to Joshua Greedy, associate director of marketing communications.

"We're able to provide an extraordinary experience for MICE events with our sensory setup, themed recess menus and state-of-the-art AV system," Greedy says. "We can offer bean bags, punching bags, table tennis and even PlayStation corners in meeting venues." *mi*

Sharing part of his name with Singapore, GARY SINGH is half-Eastern and half-Western. He has written about Southeast Asia for numerous trade and consumer publications.



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