

24 Hours in Singapore

By RUBY BOUKABOU

After getting to know Singapore airport way too well during transits, on my last trip from Australia to Paris I decided it was time to make a date with the Lion City. I discovered a smooth, cosmopolitan city. The 24-hour stopover rewarded me with tasty noodles, calming temples, beachside coconuts, an unlikely local tour guide and a tap dance.

I touch down in Singapore at midnight, after an eight hour flight from Sydney. Hit with the tropical island's humidity, I'm glad I have taken a friend's advice and pre-booked a boutique hotel. A small part of me was tempted by the idea of spending 24 hours out and about, plunging into Singapore life; I even conjured a fantastical image of being wooed back in time, solving an exotic mystery in an opium den. But I have things to do when I get to France, and no time to recover from midnight adventures in the underworld, imagined or not. This trip is about getting a taste of the city at a leisurely pace, and easing my jet lag at the other end. No missions or bucket lists, just a small pit stop to

discover Singapore at my own pace.

When I check into The Scarlet Hotel, a renovated 1920s Art Deco delight in the heart of Chinatown, it's too late to try the pool, bar or beauty spa. I'm tired from the flight anyway, so happy to head to my comfortable, cosy-chic room, take a shower and get some sleep.

Six hours later, I'm up and out, recalling my Singapore-savvy friend's tip: "You have to start your day with a *kopi-C* and a sugarcane juice at a Chinatown hawker's market near your hotel." I spy temples and markets, feel the excitement of being in a foreign city and, having a bad sense of direction, particularly before coffee, soon get lost.

I arrive at Maxwell Food Centre, a food court that, by the no-frills look about it, seems a good local spot. I can't wait any longer for caffeine, so order my kopi-C (coffee with sweetened condensed milk) and sugarcane juice and sit at a common table. I ask the two guys opposite what I should eat with these exotic drinks. >>



IMAGE:

Buddha Tooth Relic Temple



One of them walks me over to a food stall and points. “This one, and this,” he says. I buy both deep-fried pastries – a *you tiao* and a butterfly bun – and eat while striking up a conversation. I tell the men that I’m here just for the day and, pulling out my map, ask where I should go for lunch. “We were just actually discussing the possibility of crossing town for the best noodles in Singapore,” they say. My eyes light up, both out of interest and because the double dose of sugar has just kicked in. They invite me to join them. Perfect! We plan to meet at my hotel in 45 minutes, and I take off to explore the temple I’d seen on the way.

Built in 2005, the large and dramatic Tang dynasty-style Buddha Tooth Relic Temple (btrts.org.sg) is filled with incense smoke and abuzz with locals praying and tourists snapping photos. I’ve missed the free guided tour but happily wander through the ornate temple as a ceremony takes place – without realising at the time that it really does house what is, apparently, that precious relic, Buddha’s tooth.

If not for the spontaneous lunch date, I would have also visited the Chinatown Heritage Centre (chinatownheritagecentre.com.sg), where you can take a guided tour of this museum that recreates the original interiors of the district’s 1950s shophouses. The former tenants left their villages in China due to famine and flood, and tried their luck on the island of Singapore when it was far from the financial and cultural hub that it is today.

Soon I’m in a car heading through the wide, clean streets. “Singapore is a fine, fine city,” jokes Lee, a trader whose office is in fact his phone. He is alluding to the strict laws that forbid

anything from spitting gum to smoking outside in non-authorised places, but as Kenny says with a wink, “You can do anything you want if you don’t get caught.”

As we wait for a bowl of famous noodles at the huge food market on the other side of town, Kenny remarks, to my delight, that I’m the only non-local. He knows the chef so we are soon slurping and chatting about Singapore. Kenny has Chinese heritage but there are also people of Malay and Indian descent in the city-state that has, since independence in 1965, moved from a developing nation to First World status. Being recognised as a financial hub doesn’t mean there are no social problems such as unemployment and housing, but the peaceful cultural mix does mean that you can eat well around the clock and from around the region, from curries and pickles to these cheap, delicious noodles





with prawns and vegetables. Lee goes to see his baby daughter and work. Kenny, who made his millions as a trader then lost them, and is currently enjoying a stint as a self-pronounced bum, leads me to the metro. We go a few stops on the fast, modern train and jump off to visit a temple where he likes to pray occasionally.

On entering the courtyard of the Palelai Buddhist Temple (watpalelai.org), founded in 1963, a calmness descends and I follow Kenny, lighting and offering incense. We then slip off our shoes and enter the sombre interior of the temple. As Kenny prays, I think how fortunate it is that I've met a local who can be making millions one second, swigging beer and downing noodles as a bum the next, happy as a spontaneous guide.

It's mid-afternoon and the heavy humidity has set in, so I wholeheartedly agree to Kenny's suggestion of heading to the beach, this time via an air-conditioned taxi.

Our destination is behind yet another food court, East Coast Lagoon Food Village. As late lunchers chill at the outdoor tables, Kenny introduces me to some food-stall owners as they prepare for the dinner rush. We peek over their buckets of live crabs, fresh, bright red chillies and duck soups, buy beer (for Kenny) and a coconut (for me) and head to the sand. I pull off my shoes and run to dip my feet in

the water, expecting refreshment. But the water is hot. So instead of a dip, I plonk down on the sand and gaze over at the oil rigs; the scene suddenly looks and feels surreal as the jet lag swoops in. While I know I still have a few hours in front of me and could be hitting the Orchard Road retail hub, visiting the National Gallery to take in the world's largest collection of South-East Asian art (nationalgallery.sg), spotting white tigers at the rainforest zoo (zoo.com.sg), taking pictures at the futuristic super park Gardens by the Bay (gardensbythebay.com.sg), getting a foot massage (Tomi Food Reflexology, Lucky Plaza #B1-114, 304 Orchard Road,) or mani-pedi (thenailmpir.com or thenailsocial.co), trying curries in Little India or even taking a dip in the swish Marina Bay Sands' sublime infinity pool ... I'm quite happy to lie here on the sand and chat to my new friend.

There's one thing I do want to do though, and that's catch up with a Singaporean tap dancer/singer called Alex. She had invited me to a swing-dance event at The Arts House, a multi-disciplinary arts venue in the old Parliament House (theartshouse.sg). Time doesn't quite permit, so Kenny and I meet her at Holland Village for a quick hello and a Shim Sham – a classic tap-dance routine – on the now darkening streets lit by colourful neon from the dozens of busy food establishments. >>



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP TOP LEFT TO BOTTOM RIGHT:

 View of CBD skyline at Marina Bay Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, Chicken rice, A chicken rice food stall, View of Marina Bay Sands and ArtScience Museum

Lee arrives for a final meal: delicious chicken rice and oyster omelette. He offers to drive me to the airport so there's just enough time to pick up my suitcase and stop with him, Kenny and Alex for a quick cocktail at Flight Bar of the Marina Bay Sands SkyPark, overlooking Singapore's iconic skyline. It's the perfect way to end the day. ♣

Hotel tip

The Scarlet Hotel (thescarlethotels.com/singapore) was around S\$204 when I booked, as was the neighbouring, also recommended, Hotel 1929 (hotel1929.com). If ready to splash out for sensational city views and an exquisite rooftop infinity pool, book the glamorous Marina Bay Sands (marinabaysands.com).

