

# TRAVEL

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# Singapore sling

*Beneath the city-state's squeaky-clean surface lies a vibrant metropolis of intriguing museums, colorful heritage streets and a lively design scene*

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Phrases like “sterile,” “boring” and “chewing gum outlawed” might pop into some people’s heads when they think of Singapore. But the city-state boasts a lively design scene, “heritage streets” and museums that celebrate its multiethnic background and proudly bills itself as a shopper’s paradise, with new mega-malls popping up along Orchard Road (there are also plenty of indie boutiques for those who thumb their nose at mainstream fashion). Here are a few places to get a taste of modern life in Singapore — as well as its storied past.

#### SINGAPORE ON DISPLAY

The National Museum of Singapore’s (93 Stamford Road, tel: 65-6332-3659, www.nationalmuseum.sg) stunning 2,800m<sup>2</sup> Singapore History Gallery takes the term “multimedia exhibit” to soaring new heights. A mixture of text, audio, images, film, installations and genuine artifacts tell the story of Singapore from the 14th century to the present day. Visitors can choose to take either the events path or the personal path; each presents the country’s history from different perspectives and occasionally intersect in exhibits like the one that explores the Japanese occupation of Singapore during World War II through the eyes of local teenagers.

The rest of the museum, which was founded in 1887, is also thoughtfully curated. The Singapore Living Galleries look at the social history of the country through informative (and entertaining) exhibitions on food, photography, fashion and film and *wayang* (the Indonesian word for “theater”). One of the spaces, a massive gallery with three separate screens, shows classic Singaporean movies throughout the day. The photography area, which displays hundreds of family photos from the past century, is more intimate.

Make sure to save some time to take in the design of the museum itself. A three-year restoration project completed in 2006 added a sleek and modern extension that preserves, and complements, the building’s original 19th-century facade.

Design connoisseurs will get a kick out of the Red Dot Design Museum (28 Maxwell Rd, tel: 65-6327-4338, www.red-dot.sg), which is housed in the bright-red Red Dot Traffic Building. The museum showcases products and designs that have won the prestigious Red Dot Award. The centerpiece is a display of Tupperware products, which features a soaring canopy made from a rainbow of the American company’s food storage containers. On the first weekend of every



month, the museum hosts MAAD, or the Market of Artists and Designers (www.maad.sg), to showcase (and sell) work by local talent.

The Red Dot Traffic Building is named after its former occupants, Singapore’s traffic police. It is now home to three drinking establishments, including Boulevard (tel: 65-6327-4338, www.boulevard.com.sg), a wine bar that also serves Mediterranean-style food.

Ann Siang Hill, a haven for indie boutique shoppers, is located within walking distance of the Red Dot Traffic Building, as are two hawker centers (the Singapore version of night markets). The Maxwell Food Center, one of the oldest in Singapore, is at the corner of South Bridge and Maxwell Roads, while the Amoy Food Center is at 7 Maxwell Road.

#### THE BIG DURIAN

For performances (including many free shows) and stunning views, head over to the Esplanade (1 Esplanade Drive, tel: 65-6282-8377, www.esplanade.com) on Marina Bay. The expansive performing arts center’s distinct domed silhouette, designed by Singapore’s DP Architects, has earned it the nickname of “the big durian” among locals. The Esplanade has several performance spaces, ranging from intimate club-like venues to the Concert Hall, which seats more than 1,800 and features state-of-the-art acoustics. If you are traveling on a budget, consider taking in a free performance at the Outdoor Theater, which offers a panoramic view of Marina Bay behind the stage. The Esplanade recently hosted the Mosaic Music Festival; my traveling companion and I took in performances by Taiwan’s Kou Chou Ching (拷秋勤), Indonesia’s Ras Muhamad, Thailand’s Apartmentkhunpa and Singaporean indie bands Flybar and the Karl Maka Project.

The Esplanade is also home to several restaurants and cafes, as well as boutiques and



Above: Arab Street in Kampong Glam is lined with stores selling imported fabrics, shawls and rugs  
Above right: Sultan Mosque was built in 1924 and overlooks Bussorah Road in Kampong Glam.  
Below and above far right: The National Museum of Singapore uses innovative exhibitions to explore the city-state’s multi-cultural past.  
Left: Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple’s distinctive gate tower on Serangoon Road in Little India.

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specialty stores. Indulge in the chocolate fondue at the Max Brenner Chocolate Bar, served with banana bread, marshmallows, banana slices and strawberries. Max Brenner’s intensely frilly neighbor is the Cookie Museum, which was once honored for having “the best cookies in Singapore” by local publication *Her World*.

#### SHOP AND EAT YOUR WAY THROUGH THE PAST — AND PRESENT

Singapore is crisscrossed with “heritage streets,” including Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam (an historically Malaysian neighborhood that is now a Muslim cultural center) that pay tribute to the country’s diverse background.

Little India, as its name suggests, is very small, but covered with enough restaurants to hopelessly confuse a hungry traveler. Skip the wandering and head over to Bombay Cafe (79 Syed Alwi Rd, tel: 65-6396-6452, www.bombay-cafe.com.sg) for deliciously piquant vegetarian fare and friendly service. One of the restaurant’s specialties is *sadak chaap*, or Mumbai street food, including *gol gappa*, or crunchily puffed semolina pastry shells served with fillings and sauces. Bombay Cafe’s walls are deep fuchsia and the dining room is lined with flat screen TVs that play a constant rotation of Bollywood dance numbers.

If you can’t get the catchy tunes out of your head, go shopping for DVDs or CDs at Terry Trading Co down the street (120 Syed Alwi Rd, tel: 65-6297-4479). Just around the corner is Serangoon Road, Little India’s main thoroughfare. The highlight of the street is the beautiful Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple (141 Serangoon Rd, tel: 65-6295-4538, www.sriveeramakaliamman.com), a Hindu place of worship founded by Indian immigrants in the late 19th century and dedicated to the goddess Kali. Sri Veeramakaliamman underwent a major renovation in the 1980s, during which its intricate gate tower, with

colorful sculptures depicting different deities, was constructed.

Kampong Glam is located near Little India. Fabric stores line Arab Street; Bussorah Street is one block away and watched over by the golden domes of the Sultan Mosque, which was built in 1924. The section of Bussorah Street in front of the mosque is closed to cars and has the feeling of a small town square (*kampong* means village in Malay), with tables and chairs set in front of cafes and shaded by palm trees. Buildings feature colonial-era architectural details like arches and louver windows. For English-language books on Islam, visit Wardah Books (58 Bussorah St, tel: 65-6297-1232, www.wardahbooks.com). The Children Little Museum (42 Bussorah St, tel: 65-9114-9586) is tiny but filled with vintage toys and antiques from the 1960s to 1970s, ranging from humble wooden “kampong toys” to a mobile cinema (toy aficionados will also want to visit the Mint Museum of Toys at 26 Seah St, tel: 65-6339-6266, www.emint.com).

Haji Road is located just a 10-minute walk from Arab and Bussorah streets and lined with indie boutiques catering to a hipster clientele. Most salespeople are down-to-earth, however, and prices are remarkably reasonable — with a bit of legwork, you can put together a new outfit for less than \$8100 (US\$71). Highlights include Mono+, (64-66 Haji Rd, tel: 65-6299-0830, www.monoplus.ctrlsave.com), a combination coffee store and boutique in a funky purple building; Victoria Jomo (47 Haji Road, tel: 65-6396-4947), which mixes clothing by local designers with carefully selected vintage items from England and Japan; and retro furniture store A Thousand Tales (55 Haji Rd, tel: 65-298-0838, www.athousandtales.com). The latter specializes in mid-century modernist designs.

If browsing Haji Road wears you out, stroll over to North Bridge Road, where local favorite

Singapore Zam Zam (697-699 North Bridge Road, tel: 65-6298-6320) serves up spicy Indian Muslim cuisine.

#### PEERING INTO PERANAKAN HISTORY

Get a glimpse into the way of life of the Peranakan, ethnic Chinese who have assimilated Malaysian, Indonesian, Indian and Thai customs to form a unique culture. Explore Peranakan art at the Peranakan Museum (39 Armenian St, tel: 65-6332-7591, www.peranakanmuseum.sg); for a more intimate look into the culture’s traditions, check out Baba House (157 Neil Rd, tel: 65-6227-5731, www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba). Once the ancestral home of a Straits Chinese family, the structure was built in the early 20th century and reopened as a museum in 2008 following a \$81.4 million restoration project. The interior, decorated with antique furniture, shows how well-to-do Peranakan families lived in the 1920s.

For Peranakan cuisine, try Kim Choo (60 Joo Chiat Place, tel: 65-6741-2125, www.kimchoo.com). Signature dishes include *mini otah*, or seafood cakes cooked in a banana leaf, crispy *ngoh hlong* rolls or the tender vegetables in the *nonya chap chye*. Make sure to save room for dessert, especially the *onde onde*, chewy dumplings made of glutinous rice flour filled with palm and brown sugar and sprinkled with coconut shavings. Kim Choo has five locations throughout the city, including in terminal 3 of Changi Airport. Its main location on Joo Chiat Place features a store filled with vintage and new Peranakan-style clothing and accessories, including *nyonya kebaya*, or cotton blouses with intricate embroidery, hand-beaded slippers and porcelain in traditional colors, such as banana yellow, soft pink and turquoise.

#### SHOP BOP

Singapore Tourism Board bills the republic as a shopper’s paradise. Ion Orchard Mall (2 Orchard Turn, tel: 65-6838-6520, www.ionorchard.com) recently opened on Singapore’s main shopping thoroughfare, Orchard Road, with an impressive 300 stores, including international names like Uniqlo, Topshop and Sephora. The neighboring Takashimaya Shopping Center houses Singapore’s main branch of Kinokuniya (391 Orchard Rd, tel: 65-6737-5021, www.kinokuniya.sg). Large enough to get lost in, the bookstore has an impressive selection of English-language magazines imported from around the world.

For inexpensive eats with air conditioning, the food courts in the malls on and near Orchard Road are worth a look. Nearly every one has at least one stall selling *nasi padang*, an Indonesian dish that features fragrant rice served with side dishes prepared with coconut milk. The food court at Great World City (1 Kim Seng Promenade, tel: 65-6737-3855, www.greatworldcity.com.sg) has a wide pick of Asian cuisine, including dishes from Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Taiwan (which is represented with beef noodles, of course). Visit Da Paolo (tel: 65-6333-6351) in the same shopping center for fresh gelato and meringues the size of your head.



From left to right: Kim Choo sells hand-beaded shoes, an essential element of traditional Peranakan clothing; Chicken satay from Pepes, an Indonesian restaurant in Takashimaya Shopping Center on Orchard Road; Onde onde, or sweet dumplings, at Peranakan restaurant Kim Choo.

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#### IF YOU GO GETTING THERE

Singapore is serviced by mass rapid transit (MRT) with four lines that stop at almost all major tourist destinations (including Changi Airport). A Singapore Tourist Pass can be purchased for \$518 (including a \$510 refundable card deposit and a one-day pass). For more information about the MRT and public buses, check out www.smr.com.sg  
TAXIS  
There are eight taxi companies servicing Singapore and most will send a car

within 4 to 6 minutes after you call. We saw cabs from Comfort Taxi (65-6552-1111, www.cdgtaxi.com.sg/) the most frequently. Fleets charge a pick-up fee (around \$52 to \$53). Fares are reasonable, but passengers are responsible for electronic road pricing (ERP) tolls in the Central Business District and other heavily trafficked areas during peak hours, which can add up quickly. Taxi drivers are also not allowed to drop off or pick up passengers along the Central Business District’s main roads. For more information, visit www.taxisingapore.com