

November 2001

Cheryll and I returned yesterday from a week in Singapore. It was a long trip, but the travel deals out there have never been better. It took 13 and 1/2 hours to fly from Detroit to Tokyo, and then 7 and 1/2 hours more to the island/city/nation of Singapore. The customs forms were full of dire warnings that the penalty for bringing more than 15 grams of drugs into Singapore is death, and we started wondering about the strictness of the Singaporean society. We resolved to follow the rules and all would be fine. During the ride in from the airport, we were surprised to see that the street signs were all in English and no other languages. Singapore had been a British colony until it was given independence in 1959. It was settled in 1829 by Stamford Raffles from the British East India Company as a free port and trading post. It grew rapidly and the British influence is profound. There is no tipping and it felt weird to have the bellman take us to our room at 1:00 in the morning and show us around without us giving him something.

Singapore is serious about discipline. It's clean, safe and very orderly. Chewing gum is against the law, and if we had brought any with us to sell, the penalty would have been \$10,000. Begging is a jailable offense, as there is a labor shortage. The standard of living is the highest of any Asian country. Singapore thrives on capitalism, but is incredibly tightly regulated. Individual rights seem secondary to those of the community. There are limited natural resources, but the economy is super-charged by shipping, trade and banking.

The Singapore people were very warm and welcoming. It's a very diverse mix of Chinese, Malaysian, Arabic, Indian and European people who share the common bond of having poor English as their second language. Their peaceful coexistence almost seems extreme. We rode the very efficient subway and it was spotless thanks to the threat of a \$1000 fine for littering. The people feel safe to walk the streets at night and seem almost proud to have a \$1000 fine, which effectively eliminates illegal gun ownership.

The food was good although they do make use of some parts of animals and fish commonly discarded in the US. They take great pains to assure that the food and water supply are healthy. We drank tap water for the most part. The hawker stalls are the ubiquitous food courts found everywhere. Unlike Thailand they all had refrigeration and stainless steel sinks with running water to assure cleanliness. We experienced no ill effects from eating any of the food. Good thing, because the fine for spitting is \$500. There was no turkey to be found on Thanksgiving, but I did get a teriyaki chicken sandwich.

The housing was well constructed and large by Asian standards. Cars are strictly controlled as well. Drivers stop for yellow lights and don't use their cell phones while moving unless they want to pay a \$1000 fine. There are no traffic jams because the number of cars is strictly controlled. To buy a car you must possess a Certificate of Entitlement. COE's are auctioned off by the government to the highest bidder. They only make 2000 available each month and last month it cost about \$15,000 USD to purchase the right to buy a car with a small four-cylinder engine.

The weather was hot and humid and there was a brief shower most afternoons. We were probably the only people wearing socks at many places. They all seem to shuffle around in cheap plastic thongs or trendy shoes purchased from one of the expensive malls on Orchard Road. Orchard Road is a two-mile long symbol of conspicuous consumerism in the extreme. Prices are similar to the US and the malls are populated by young people armed with cell phones on the never-ending quest to see and be seen. The subways are full of young people playing with their cell phones. At first I thought they were playing video games, but I snooped over someone's shoulder and she was frantically keying in sappy text messages in English to her friends. In addition to Orchard Road, there is a cheaper night market and shopping section in Chinatown.

We spent the week seeing many of the sights. We took a boat ride around the harbor. We had a Singapore Sling at the Long Bar at Raffles Hotel where it was first concocted. We toured some museums and old British Forts. The zoo has an interesting concept called Night Safari which helps avoid the worst heat of the day. I played golf one day and was amazed to see that the caddies were provided stand-up carts to ride while the golfers walked. We went for a hike at one of the world's only two rain forests within an urban area at the Bukit Merah Nature Preserve. I resisted the temptation to feed the monkeys lest I face a \$10,000 fine. We enjoyed a day at the amusement park island of Sentosa.

We were warned away from the Islamic Indonesian islands as some Germans are said to have been confused for Americans and beaten up following the assault on Afghanistan. We chose instead to take an organized day tour to the historic city of Malacca in Malaysia. Malaysia has been ruled by the Dutch, Portuguese and British, but also is now an independent Islamic country. We expected it to be another poor run-down third world country, but were surprised to see that the housing and roads were good, and it was very clean. The political power is in the hands of Muslim leaders, but we saw mostly Chinese people and lots of Buddhist temples. The economy is not as good as Singapore's, being based primarily on agriculture. Palm oil and latex rubber are major exports. They also grow a terribly stinky fruit called a durian. Touch one and the smell stays with you for hours. There were signs banning durians on Singapore's subways, but the fine wasn't specified.

Singapore gained unwanted and misunderstood international recognition several years ago when American Michael Fay was jailed and received a caning for spray-painting a car. The Singaporeans don't understand why the international community would stand in the way of them enforcing their laws. They seem quite happy to have their strict fines and penalties, and we felt very comfortable during our visit as a result. We just aren't going to set off firecrackers on the 4th of July and risk a \$500 fine.

The Statistics:

Population of about 4 million

\$24,000 USD per capita income

Island is about 14 miles by 24 miles

One US dollar equals \$1.84 Singapore dollars

\$28,000 to purchase the rights to purchase a car

9000 miles from Detroit

80 miles north of the equator

89 degree average yearly daytime high with 90% humidity and showers most afternoons

Singapore and Malaysia were our 76th and 77th countries visited

\$10 US - cost of a Singapore Sling at the Long Bar at Raffles Hotel

52 McDonalds's franchises; also represented by Burger King, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut and KFC

Population is 77% of Chinese descent, with Arab, Indian and European minorities

3 day wait for a ship to use the container port; hundreds waited anchored outside the harbor

36 multilevel malls on Orchard Road; the prime shopping area where Cheryl inflicted serious damage upon our credit cards

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