

SPOTLIGHT

Detours: Singapore's Cultural Charm

By Doug Wallace

With its vibrant mix of old and new, Singapore delivers a different multicultural surprise on every corner.

For such a busy port, there's a surprising amount of green space to take advantage of as well. Plan a late-afternoon spin through the bio-domes at Gardens by the Bay and time your visit with nightfall to enjoy the lights of the park's giant tree-like structures. For even more fresh air, head to the Singapore Botanic Gardens, which houses one of the world's largest collections of orchids. The amusement-park resort island of Sentosa at the water's edge delivers a day of family fun.

GO FOR THE GASTRONOMY

Singapore is a big food town with two things informing the culinary landscape: food-court food culture and fine-dining experiences, both anchored to the city's multicultural heritage, i.e. Grandma's home cooking.

"Hawker stalls" line the food courts of neighbourhood markets selling comfort food such as rice dumplings, curried seafood and grilled satay. Each stall has a particular specialty and two even have Michelin stars, including the famous Hawker Chan, whose chicken and rice is legendary.

Other top Singaporean staples can be found at popular casual restaurants like No Signboard Seafood, whose chili crab is one of the best in town, and 328 Katong Laksa, where people line up daily for the laksa, a spicy noodle soup. Mod-Sin cuisine (short for Modern Singaporean) is a contemporary spin on traditional cooking. Restaurants championing this food movement include Wild Rocket at Mount Emily Park and Candlenut on Dempsey Hill, which both give recipes of Chinese-Malay origin a new and delicious twist.



SINGAPORE SKYLINE AT DUSK



SINGAPORE'S CHINATOWN

The opportunity to wrap your head around a different culture is one of the cooler benefits of travelling; and when the destination offers a multitude of cultures to dive into all at once, you're in for a rich holiday experience.

Singapore is such a place, its unique multicultural charm washing over everything. The majority of the city's 5.5 million people are of Chinese descent, with Malay, Indian and Eurasian descendants (and ex-pats) making up the rest. And the fact that there are four official languages – English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil – speaks volumes, not just about the ethnicity but about inclusiveness: everyone has been getting along since the spice-trade days.

The fact that this city-slash-sovereign-state is very much in tune with its multicultural roots is obvious from the minute

you step off the plane – in the architecture, in the food, on the street and in temples.

A MULTITUDE OF MUST-DO'S

More cosmopolitan than it is often given credit, Singapore sports world-class shopping, insanely good restaurants, one of the best transit systems in the world, and boutique hotels sprouting up constantly in all the cool parts of town. Exploring the different neighbourhoods further underlines the culture mix: just drinking in the architecture of the traditional shop houses and Buddhist and Hindu temples is time well spent. Along with the busy Chinatown and Little India, leisurely jaunts through the design-forward concept stores and chic cafés of Tiong Bahru, and the eclectic boutiques, massage parlours and colourful shop houses of the Katong district are on-trend.



KATONG SHOPPING DISTRICT IN SINGAPORE

When to go

The best time to visit Singapore is from February to October, but keep in mind that May and June can get extremely hot. November to January is the green season, when long stretches of rain are common.