

# 'Waffles' (Not Raffles)

## Singapore

The story goes that the original owners of this rather inconspicuous little hostel - perched above a 24-hour Indian on North Bridge Road, opposite Bugis Junction - had been taking-the-micky when they named the place 'Raffles'. Then, the power and might of *Raffles* megahotel (a few blocks down the road) came to bear ... and so the name was discretely changed to *Waffles*.

My arms strained under the load of two overweight packs. The muscles rippled on the sturdy young guy, some years my junior, striding out by my side. He looked as if he could carry my bags and a couple besides, while eating a triple ice cream.

*"Is it much further?"* I asked.

*"No mate, just 'round the corner over there."* He replied with a sideways grin.

*"You're Australian!?"* Half statement, half question; my voice tinged with relief at finding a kindred spirit in this brash new, tropical world.

*"Sure am mate. Look, it'll be easier for us to go the back way"* he said, turning into a tiny lane and stopping in front of a green wooden door, set into a high concrete wall. After a little fumbling to find the right key in the dim light, we entered and began clambering up an extremely narrow, green-coloured, spiral staircase.

He turned back, looking down towards me, offering a hand. *"Let me carry one of your packs, otherwise you will never get them up these stairs. It's a pretty tight squeeze"*.

I passed up the smaller of the two bags: I had no intentions of losing face to this Italian-extracted ball of Australian muscle ...and certainly not at this early juncture.

Straining at the top of the spiral (but trying hard not to show it) I followed my guide through a small kitchen-cum-eatery, to a wider space which looked like the reception area. He dumped the smaller of my bags inside the open doorway of an adjoining room.

I dropped the larger bag next to the smaller one and peered into the room, just as he flicked on the fluorescent tube light. My spirits sagged - no window; just a box with bunk beds and like the back door and stairwell, all done out in a bright shade of lime green. Someone obviously new a paint bargain when they saw one!

*"No window?"* Another half statement, half question from me.

*"That's right mate. Most of our rooms are like that"*

He went in and switched on a floor-standing fan. As soon as he did that I began to wonder if this was the air-conditioning that had been mentioned, as we had walked towards the place.

*"And it's air conditioned?"* I enquired, trying to sound as casual as possible.

*"Yeah, yeah, but I've only just switched the main unit on. Itl takes time to cool."*

*"That's OK. How much is the room again?"*

But my question was overshadowed by the appearance of a noticeably tanned lady, with long dark, wavy hair, who appeared from a door behind my newfound Aussie host.

*"This is Kim,"* he declared; then suddenly realising he had forgotten to introduce himself. *"And I'm Conrad by the way."* Then looking down to the comparatively petite woman, now standing with her arm around his waist, he posed the same question that I had just asked: *"Kim my dear, how much is the room?"*

*"You know that Conrad; now we're in high season its twenty-eight dollars."* Another broad Australian voice (and more reprieve for my inbuilt nervousness).

*"Okay. That's good." I responded; adding cautiously: "But it might only be for one night"*

*"No sweat,"* said the dark-haired muscle man; which seemed a funny thing to say in this little hot house, and with me standing in a pool of perspiration! I handed him the money and glanced up at a hand-painted sign above the occupancy board. *Waffles Homestay*, it proclaimed. At that moment in time, I could never have imagined that this was to be my home for the next three months.

As it turned out, I had managed to stumble on what was known by those who frequented the hostels of Singapore, as one of the best around the inner-city precinct. I didn't realise it at the time (and was too uneasy to believe it anyway) but the first-floor establishment that Kim and Conrad managed for a Chinese gentleman (who in turn rented it off a wealthy Singaporean landlord) was as clean and friendly as anyone could hope to get anywhere ... or at least, in this part of South East Asia.

I lay in bed on that first night, wondering how I could cope with such a closeted, cheek-by-jowl living style, for as usual in these places, there were a lot of people packed into a very small space. Just before arriving at Waffles on that first night, I had stopped, very briefly, at another hostel a few blocks away (from where Conrad had actually come to rescue me), which after a cursory glance, appeared to be hosting about ten or fifteen backpackers to each of its small rooms. So after the initial trepidations of that first night, I quickly came to realise that Waffles was something akin to a spacious mansion in a sea of tenanted dwellings ... and that I had indeed, been very fortunate to find it.

The somewhat veiled trauma of relaunching myself as a freewheeling backpacker and hostel-dweller, was complicated by the fact that this time I was much older. When I had previously tramped the byways of Asia I had been in my twenties, but now, well into my forties, I was acutely aware that most of the other Waffles clientele I had happened to notice on that introductory evening looked as though they had only just packed away their school informs.

So musing on all this as I lay on the lower bunk, gazing up at the metal webbing above, it came as a pleasant surprise to feel a cool stream of air blowing from a vent in the corner of my lime-green cubicle. The temperature in the room began to reduce and I in turn began to feel a little easier about the world around me. Conrad had been true to his word about the air-con; maybe things weren't that bad after all.

The next day I was keen to get out and about. Even though I had teed up some possibilities for work in Bangkok, it seemed like a good chance to explore the likelihood - or not - of finding work in Singapore. The books said that English teaching in the island

city was reserved for those with good qualifications and even better experience, who were prepared to sign up for long periods of work. I could not lay claim to any of these required criteria and doubted, from what I had been told, that they held true for many of the itinerant teachers already working there. In addition, on my first evening at Waffles I had received a few hints that more casual, ad-hoc work, could be quite possible, if one was prepared to do the leg work and look around.

This insider knowledge had come from Kate and Damien, two Australian *TEFL* (*Teaching English as a Foreign Language*) teachers staying at waffles. “No problems”, they said- “Just look around, you’ll find something”. They had been in Singapore for a month or two and both were now teaching twenty to thirty hours per week. The pay, according to them, was not bad either: about \$20 to \$25 dollars per hour, which seemed okay compared to work in many other parts of Asia, where \$10 was regarded as a good rate.

On that first morning I struck out to find work, enjoying the feeling of being in the tropical surroundings of Singapore and with a real purpose in life. I was not just a tourist, as I had been on previous occasions. So undaunted, I aimed for the top: no messing about. A No.7 bus took me straight across the city, to the known cream of the TEFL trade: the revered British Council. It was the rainy season and my first day turned on a tropical storm like no other; or that’s what I thought at the time, though it turned out there were many more of similar ferocity to come. This tempest from above coincided exactly with my nine o’clock departure from Waffles.

The red double-decker, shrouded in the deluge, went door to door, but unfortunately, I did not. Unaccustomed to this busy city, I overshot my destination to the tune of one short bus stop, but by the time I had trudged back through the torrential rain, my shoulders, lower legs and left foot (there was a hole in my shoe) had become thoroughly saturated. This was despite the fact I was carrying a reasonably large and serviceable umbrella, albeit the Australian variety. But no umbrella, Asian or Australian, was built to withstand such a downpour.

After depositing an admirable pool of water on the floor of the British Council foyer, I began the process of filling out the usual application forms and attaching my pre-prepared CV. At this stage I thought it all looked very promising and I took time for a morning coffee and English newspaper in the outdoor cafeteria. By that time, as I later found often happens in Singapore, the sun was shining down from a cloudless sky and the balmy day was heading for its usual thirty-plus degrees Celcius.

Midway through the afternoon and many applications later, I began to realise that there was little likelihood of immediate work. At ATT - a branch of the British-based, International House, their straight-talking manager made no bones of this fact:

*“We don’t need teachers.”* He said, looking at me and gesturing rather apologetically. *“The British council are also full up. Things will be better in April or May when student numbers pick up. But try around anyway. You never know.”* Now was January and the guy was talking April or May: it didn’t look good.

He gave me a few names of the better language colleges and I went on my way. After a couple more similar experiences, I took the high-speed MRT commuter train to the mainline railway station and purchased a second-class ticket to Bangkok, leaving at 7.30 p.m. the next day. Thailand was beckoning, loud and clear.

Thus, it came as a big surprise when on arrival back at Waffles I was greeted with a note pinned to my box-room door. It said, simply:

**POSSIBILITY OF WORK AT CTC**

**RING BRIGITTE ON 123456**

**Kate**

I checked with Kim, the suntanned Australian hostess, but she was unable to tell me much more. So I waited to learn more from Kate, while chatting with some of the itinerant guests, over coffee, in the kitchen area.

Eventually, when she returned, after teaching and her habitual squash workout, Kate confirmed that the director of Central Teaching College (the school where she worked)

had asked earlier that day if she knew of a teacher who might be looking for work. CTC had a short-term vacancy and needed someone to fill in quite urgently. Surprised by this twist of fate, she had given my name to her boss, on the spot.

The job that I landed the next day turned out to be an incredible experience; one of those spells in my life which I can never forget. There were several reasons for this. First and foremost, the job was in Singapore; many would say a poor excuse for an Asian city, but as far as I was concerned it was a hot, tropical and adynamic island metropolis that was going places: an exciting urban setting to live and work in. Secondly, the job proved to be so varied, providing me with experience in teaching all ages and many different nationalities. And thirdly, after the trepidations on my first night there, I came to enjoy and love the mix of people and lay-back lifestyle at my new home away from home: *Waffles Homestay*.

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**FOOTNOTE:** This story of life in and about *Waffles Homestay* will be continued in a future article, when we find out more about working as a teacher in the island city and living as a member of the hostelling fraternity.