



Becoming a veteran 'Waffler'

I had stumbled on *Waffles* - the best backpacker's in Singapore - and after a few weeks graduated to a room with a view. It was a comfort zone after a hot day's work, and the long-stay inmates became my family. They belonged to one of two clans: teachers or deep-sea divers. Each night teachers told stories of classroom mayhem, while divers weighed in with their underwater escapades.



The post I landed at *Central Training College* was based at headquarters on the thirteenth floor of a mall on Orchard Road: Singapore's shopper's paradise. At times I would teach at a sister college (a short sweaty walk away), or further afield in other complexes, living by my wits, and learning - unbeknown to my employers - on the job.

The assigned work ranged from kindergarten, through school groups, to mature - and often very bored - wives of itinerant Asian businessmen. The time I loved most was a twice-weekly excursion to the twenty-first floor of a sharp-edged skyscraper, where I taught two Japanese office workers, after their countryfolk had left for the day. After two weeks closeted in the boardroom, I discovered they were married. This came as a shock, because I knew that Japanese companies didn't allow employees to fraternise, let alone

marry! It was even more unusual as the man was much younger than the woman. Nobody else knew, thus – while tussling with the tenses - they swore me to secrecy.



Waffles was set above a 24-hour Indian eatery, and from our balcony-style dining area above, we had a bird's eye view of the endless commotion and clattering of metal dishes from below. At times various assorted *Wafflers*, including me, would look on with glee, as the tempo of argument between cooks and bottle-washers rose to a

crescendo. As far as we knew no-one was ever murdered, but we waited in anticipation for the day when it might come to pass.

In the early evenings I liked nothing better after work than to sit at a table under the streetside veranda, with my favourite *Roti-Canai*: a scrumptious yet inexpensive little feast of curried chicken soup and golden chappati. After a hard day battling with pronouns and prepositions this was my relaxation time: watching and listening as people rushed home from the office, while the big red London-esque double-deckers pulled up, then roared away with commuters.

At regular intervals the *Waffles* inmates would arrange an evening out at one of the many hawker centres around town. At these events the cost of beer overshadowed payments for food, even though we ate the finest of hawker-fare. Our favourite outdoor



eatery was Newton Circus, a few stations away on the metro. It was one massive food-fest of Chinese, Malay and Indian cuisine, especially atmospheric in the evening light.

Singapore proved to me that any destination is what you make it; place and circumstance a potent mix. That sterile westernised city, which others often see (and despise), was for me an enthralling place, displaying a host of different characters and moods. Maybe this positive attitude stemmed from the fact I was working there, with *Waffles* my hide-away, where friendships flourished and the outgoing attitude of both long and short stayers was so incredibly supportive.

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