



Singapore: my mid-life interlude

I lay in bed on that first night, consumed by thoughts. Could I cope? Out of my comfort zone: a middle-aged back-packer diving into a fresh career in a strange and challenging city. With long-distance vision It had seemed a great idea. Now in close-up I was not so sure. At least I had my own room; no windows admittedly, but my own space. I tracked back to arrival, earlier that evening.



A tousle-haired, distinctly Italian looking guy had come to rescue me from the overcrowded sweat-box I found myself contemplating.

“Welcome to Singapore,” he said with a smile, offering a firm handshake.

We walked along the brightly-lit street; neon glitter and commotion from everywhere; heavy bags weighing me down.

“Is it much further?” I asked; sweat dripping into my eyes.

“No mate,” He replied, pointing ahead. “just ‘round that next corner.”

We turned into a tiny lane, stopping in front of a green door. He fumbled with the keys. Inside, he began clambering up a narrow, green-painted, spiral staircase. I followed.

The guy looked down, offering a hand. *“Give me one of your packs. It’s pretty tight”*.

I followed, through a small kitchen-cum-eatery to a reception area. After dropping the bag, my host flicked the tube light on in an adjoining room. *“Yours for as long as you like.”*

I peered into the room. My spirits sagged - no window; a box with bunk beds, all done out in the same shade of green. Obviously someone knew a paint bargain!

With time things improved. Life at the hostel grew on me: mixing with mostly younger travellers; coffee and toast with cross-talk; the constant clamour from the kitchen below, which serviced a 24/7 Indian restaurant; studying the monsoon rain. I’d stumbled on a new world!

The next day I scored a job teaching kindergarten through to corporate wives, at venues ranging from three city-based colleges to other rather unique classrooms. It was hard, sweaty work, but invigorating too. I pinched myself. Living in downtown Singapore; walking to work with the morning rush; teaching above a shopping mall; catching the *MRT* across town for a class with a corporate couple in the board room on the 31st floor.

Intoxicating!



Newton Circus: a large hawker centre.

The hostel had two factions of long-term residents: English teachers and deep-sea divers. We’d party at local hawker centres (where beer

cost more than food); weekends might bring a picnic in *Fort Canning* central park, an evening perhaps quaffing *Singapore Slings* at the iconic *Raffles Long Bar*.



*Singapore Sling
at Raffles Long Bar*



The window I graduated to and my streetside table

I soon graduated to a room with a view, and became accustomed to relaxing after-work with my favourite *roti canai* (chicken curry soup) and *chai*, at a streetside table outside the Indian. Others would join to chat about the day. It was a life I grew to enjoy.

Looking back, my 3-month stay is an indelible memory filled with new experience. Many rate Singapore as a poor excuse for an Asian city, but I viewed it as a tropical and dynamic island metropolis that was going places: an exciting urban setting to feel a part of ...if only for a while.

Duncan Gregory

www.whittlingourniche.com