

# TRAVEL

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## Singapore sling

Restorations breathe soul back into city

By Simon Egan  
New York Times Syndicate

SOME YEARS ago officials at Singapore's Tourist Promotion Board noticed that most visitors found little to keep them on the island for longer than three days.

One of the main problems was that rapid development coupled with an almost fanatic preoccupation with cleanliness and order had leeched the city of the exotic atmosphere that tourists flew to Asia to find.

Large parts of the city looked like a tropical version of any one of the indistinguishable midsize cities spread across North America and Europe.

Pragmatic as ever, the island nation's planners decided to do what ever was necessary to increase the length of the average visitor's stay.

The fruits of that decision are just beginning to blossom. Visitors will find not only a whole range of new attractions that take much from the designers of the various Disneyworlds, but also clusters of turn-of-the-century or older buildings that have been restored, giving a breath of historical soul back to this sometimes spiritless city.

One of the finest examples of the time and money lavished on the city's architectural heritage is the

126-year-old neoclassical Empress Palace Museum, at the southern end of the Cavenagh Bridge in the heart of Singapore's colonial center. It reopened as a museum in 1989.

The museum is showing, through October, a dazzling display of artifacts from Tang Dynasty China and the Silk Road trade route through Central Asia that connected China to the West. It is open from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Admission is \$3.65. For more information call 3367633.

Just a short walk from the museum are the other main remnants of the colonial administration, which

lasted from the early 19th century until 1959: the Supreme Court, the General Post Office, the Victoria Memorial Hall, the Cricket Club and City Hall, all built around the central padang — the cricket and rugby field that was the invariable centerpiece of British colonial town planning.

Two other preservation areas, at Emerald Hill just off the Orchard Road shopping district, and at Tanjong Pagar, adjacent to Chinatown, feature row upon row of restored pastel shop-houses — two- or three-story structures with living quarters

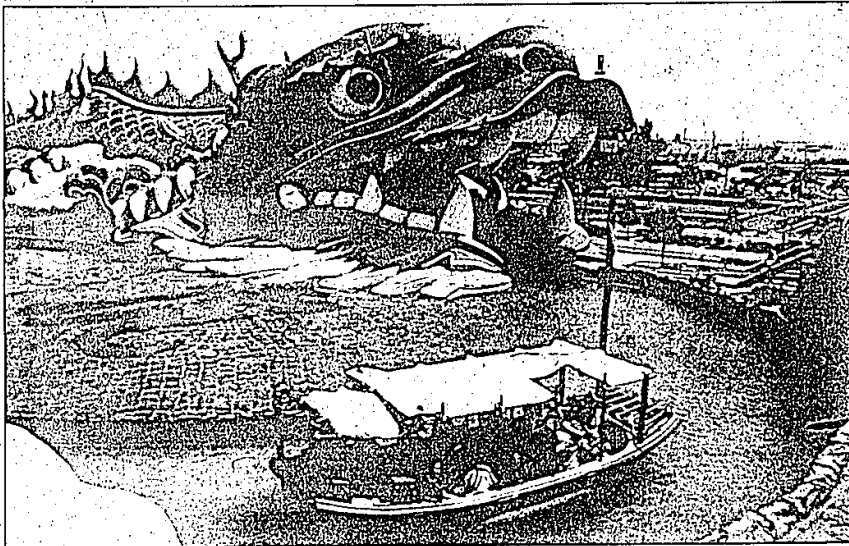
above and shops at ground level that were the chief feature of old Singapore's architecture.

A stroll through the narrow alleys of Chinatown and into Tanjong Pagar — Temple Street, Pagoda Street, Smith Street, Sago Lane and Neil Road — past the Chinese medical halls with their sacks of spices and dried roots walling out heavy, unidentified smells, past the riot of characters scrawled over every surface in bright red and green paint, cannot help but conjure up the spirit of Singapore's colorful past.

### WHAT TO DO

Though some three-quarters of Singapore's population is of Chinese descent, substantial minorities of Malays and Indians contribute to the richness of the city's festivals.

Later, on June 5, is the Chinese dragon boat festival, which commemorates Qu Yuan, an ancient poet and official who drowned himself to protest political corruption. A spectacular and noisy international dragon boat racing competition is held in the city's Marina Bay.



Photos courtesy of Singapore Tourist Board

A 60-meter-long dragon is one of the giant statues at Haw Par Villa, an amusement park in Singapore, with multimedia theater shows based on ancient myths and legends.

### SIGHTSEEING

Tang Dynasty City, at 2 Yuan Ching Road, is a combination historical re-creation and movie studio in which copies of Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618 to 907) buildings are occupied by actors playing the parts of artisans, travelers, warriors, judges and the like.

Though only 40 percent complete, the complex is still worth a visit for its presentation of life during China's most glorious dynasty. The complex is open from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Admission is \$9. For more information call 2611116.

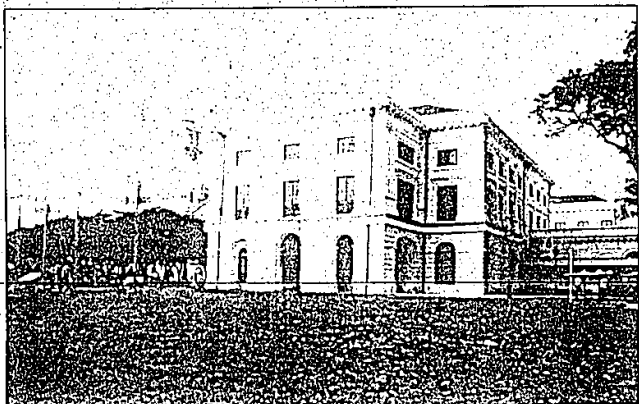
A similar idea is at work in the recently refurbished Haw Par Villa, at 262 Pasir Panjang Road. It is a kind of Chinese Disneyland, though on a smaller scale.

Haw Par Villa is open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is \$3.75. For more information call 7740300.

Sentosa Underwater World, on Siloso Road, Sentosa Island, opened its doors last spring. It centers around a huge tank containing many of the bizarre inhabitants of tropical reef — angelfish, stingrays, sharks, moray eels, the comical clown fish, the huge grouper.

An acrylic tunnel that winds around the bottom of the tank allows visitors a view that comes as close as possible to duplicating the experience of scuba diving without getting one's feet wet. It is open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Admission is \$5.65. For more information call 2750030.

Another natural attraction is the Jurong Bird Park, on Jurong Hill. The park houses an astonishing variety of birds from all over the world, some 5,000 altogether, and puts on a bird show several times a day. The park is open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Admission is \$3.75.



The Empress Palace, by the Singapore River, was built in the 1860s to house the legislative assembly.

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