

PARIS / NEW YORK / SINGAPORE / SYDNEY

BAGGAGE CLAIM

AT HOME, IN EXILE

>>>>>>

FLIGHT NO 0212-52

There are many terms for it, some more glamorous than others: exile, expatriate, diaspora. Some see this as Filipinos having been scattered to the winds. But what it really means is that, even if you think you've traveled to the farthest reaches of the world, there will always be someone who has made that place—whether temporarily or permanently—their home



To be a resident of Singapore is to be a resident of the new. Cars can only run on the roads for 10 years. There are more mobile phones than people. A 30-year-old apartment is considered old. It's a city of technology. What tech the government implements generally just works. My passage through Changi Airport, short as it is, is shaved further by electronic turnstiles that have replaced actual immigration officers. Scan my passport, recognize my right thumb. When I arrived here over a decade ago, I was certainly grateful for the efficiency, as one is when establishing themselves someplace new. Singapore was riding the wave of the first Internet boom, and being in the midst of it, I felt that I had made the right choice by relocating here. But the bust happened soon after, and there were a few shaky months when I had to decide whether to stay or go. I elected to stick it out—also the right choice—and eventually recovered from that first year's trauma. Singapore took a bit more time, hanging tight

To connect with a Singaporean, you simply need to show that you love their food. Learn to order your preferred variance of local coffee, and you're in.

through an expat exodus, 9/11, and SARS. So one can imagine that it took some time to build an affinity with this city. Three years into living here, it happened. I had been traveling two weeks. Work and laundry awaited. But as the plane made its descent, there was only one thing on my mind, and that was a simple plate of chicken rice with a dollop of that most important trio: dark soy sauce, chili, and ginger dip. I craved the national dish more than any Filipino food then, as I still do now. My Singaporean friends are an articulate, well-traveled lot (the red passport is welcome everywhere), yet they embody the city's down-to-earth personality as much as the national dish. We got to know each other, invariably, over meals that cost less than \$4—cups

of milky *teh tarik* [pulled tea], breakfasts of *chwee kueh* [steamed rice cakes topped with preserved radish], and Fridays spent standing in a queue for *bak chor mee* [a minced meat noodle dish that tastes best with pork liver, trust me]. Everyone speaks “correct” English at work, accents cultivated at private girls’ schools, or at university overseas, but come a relaxed moment and out comes the Singlish. Nothing says “I belong” more than everyone around you chattering away in Singlish, forgetting for a moment that you don’t understand. Eventually, someone stops and explains a choice phrase, and through this tutoring I know when to use *leh* or *loh* over the elementary *lah*. Fluency opens up all kinds of dialogue, particu-

PHOTO BY TONKAM

Throughout the years, different areas have risen and fallen in popularity. These days, the streets around **TANJONG PAGAR** is where many a new restaurateur chooses to establish himself; therefore you can get high quality at reasonable prices in a casual setting.

On Duxton Hill, there's **BROTH AT #21** (who bravely started it all by setting up a modern European bistro when all around him were seedy karaoke joints). Sabio at #6 (who we must thank for putting jamon iberico belota on their counter every night), and Praelum at #4 (thanks to whom we can now drink top-shelf wine by the glass).

BUKO NERO (126 Tanjong Pagar Road) has been serving Italian classics since time immemorial. Fans went

into withdrawal when they closed for renovation a few years ago.

A popular new spot is **NO MENU** (23 Boon Tat St), run by an Italian chef and his family, where you are simply told what's for dinner.

At **PS CAFE**, tucked away in Ann Siang Park (45 Ann Siang Road), you can order elevated comfort food all day while relaxing in deep leather sofas; there is a no-kids policy.

For fresh oysters and a tomahawk of veal, try **LUKE'S OYSTER BAR AND CHOPHOUSE** at 20 Gemmill Lane.

ESQUINA (16 Jiak Chuan Rd) just opened in December, and is the only place in town where you can eat tapas in their natural environment—at the bar, fresh off the plancha.



larly with the uncles and aunties who hold the strongest opinions on everything from how much rent I pay (*Wah, so expensive?*) to the latest *gah-men* [government] policy.

It is these ‘uncles’ and ‘aunties’ that keep this city real. They are the 60-year-old taxi drivers, the ones who lived in *kampongs* [villages] two generations ago. They remember that before a 20-storey condo popped onto the street where I live, it was the site of the \$30-a-night Soo Chew Hotel (air-conditioning and laundry included). The younger cabbies, day-trading on their smartphones, have no clue where anything is.

The auntie who runs a hawker stall in our neighborhood serves humble *wantan mee* [wonton noodle] elevated by her own chili-based sauce. She knows my sister because, at one point, my sister ordered the same fried dumpling noodle dish everyday. One day, auntie says, “I’m going Phuket for holiday, okay? Shop is closed *tomolo* [tomorrow].”

I’m not sure which is more impressive, that a hawker-stall owner can afford holidays abroad, or that we were considered regulars worthy of a heads-up. But the lesson is clear: To connect with a Singaporean, you simply need to show that you love their food. Learn to order your preferred variance of local coffee, and you're in. Make mine *kopi c siew dai* [coffee with evaporated milk and less sugar].

Sometimes the idyllic bubble threatens to burst. Nobody has to hustle for tips, so customer service is worse than it needs to be. Creative thinking still has some way to go, partly because the small domestic market doesn't re-

quire much marketing, and partly because the media is not entirely free. In much the same way that there is no space to grow things, there are few venues to nurture ideas that have no clear commercial value. In other words, Singapore lacks a bit of an edge.

But I have to defend Singapore, because things are always changing, usually for the better. What it lacks in edge, it makes up for with access. It's a place where you can just live a life. A bubble within the bubble of family,

friends, a career, a hobby, a routine. Add on the visiting friends and international acts (these days, it seems everyone comes through town), the latest must-try wine/tapas/whiskey bar, the events so regular they are acronyms (CNY, NPD, F1), the vacation days everyone rushes to use up at the end of the year . . . and there you have it, some kind of life. Then when nothing else inspires, one can zip through those electronic turnstiles, get a fill of edge elsewhere, then return to this reliable constant. □

HERE'S WHERE YOU SHOULD DRINK...

AFTER-WORK DRINKS: On Emerald Hill, behind Orchard Road, you'll find **Number 5**, **Que Pasa**, and **Ice Cold Beer**, a trio of after-work watering holes set amongst heritage shophouses. These bars share the same kitchen where they turn out basket after basket of sambal-battered chicken wings, Singapore's #1 choice for *pulutan*.

FOR COFFEE LOVERS: Baristas are starting to gain respect here. Cafés such as **40 Hands** (78 Yong Saik Road in Tiong Bahru), **Oriole Café** (Ground Floor, Pan Pacific Residences, next to 313 Somerset), and **Papa Palheta** (on Hooper Road, off Newton Circus) built their menus around the bean. More folks also want espresso-on-demand at home, and are flocking to the **Nespresso Store** (Ground Floor, ION Orchard), where you can get

free shots of espresso at the bar before buying a machine.

COCKTAILS: In the olden days (like, four years ago), it was hard to get a properly poured martini in this town. These days, not so. My favorite is **Nektar** (31 Scotts Road, in one of the black and white houses), a small, minimalist place where the bartenders are friendly but all-business in their button-down shirts and vests.

OTHER TIPS: If at MBS, don't bother paying for a SkyPark ticket. Go instead to **Ku De Ta's Sky Bar** for sunset and use your money to buy a drink, looking down at the sweaty, thirsty tourists who didn't know better. For a view of MBS, go to **Lantern Bar** at the Fullerton Bay Hotel.

