

TRAVEL

It's a magical place where you hope your flight will be delayed or canceled. Welcome to the happiest airport on earth.

A seven-story indoor waterfall, butterfly garden, climbing wall, and crystal garden are among the highlights at Singapore Changi Airport

By [Christopher Muther](#) Globe Staff, Updated October 25, 2024, [1 hour ago](#)



The Rain Vortex, the world's tallest indoor waterfall, is seven stories high. It's part of the Jewel at Singapore Changi Airport. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

SINGAPORE — There's danger in romanticizing a vacation destination. Be it a city, quiet country hamlet, or palm-lined beach. Where expectations run unrealistically high, travel disappointment is sure to follow.

That was my fear as I landed at Singapore's Changi Airport. Does anyone get excited about going to the airport? This guy does, and my expectations were higher than the nimbostratus clouds gathering at the horizon. I had dreamt of the day I would finally see the airport consistently named the best in the world, and I booked an extended layover there to see what all the hullabaloo was about. Singapore Changi has collected more accolades than [Meryl Streep](#). At last count, Changi racked up nearly 700 awards, superlatives, and honors.

I was so jazzed to see Singapore Changi that I even added it to my official [Where to Go in 2023](#) list. A year later, I was finally here. But would it live up to my dreams? Pinning your hopes on the perfect beach is one thing; expecting an airport to make you happy is quite another.

The airport's first terminal opened in 1981, and three others followed. A fifth terminal is currently under construction. But what makes Changi unique is a structure called the Jewel that connects three of the four terminals at the airport. Calling the Jewel a structure is actually an insult. It is more like a piece of art that is [toroid-shaped](#). The Jewel was designed by [Boston-based architect Moshe Safdie](#) and is made up of 9,000 pieces of specially-made glass and held together by 24,000 pieces of steel beams and nodes. It's the size of 25 football fields and was constructed for \$1.2 billion.



An aerial rendering of the Jewel at Singapore Changi Airport shows the unique Moshe Safdie-designed glass and steel building. SINGAPORE CHANGI AIRPORT

The building is 10 stories, five above ground and five below. The centerpiece of this architectural wonder is the [Rain Vortex](#), the world's tallest waterfall, rising 130 feet in the center of the Jewel. I booked a room at the Yotel, part of the Jewel's 280 shops and

restaurants, and a two-minute walk to the waterfall and surrounding forest. Yes, you read that correctly. The Jewel has a total of 2,000 trees and 100,000 shrubs, plus a canopy park on the fifth level, which is chockablock with family activities. Perhaps now you can understand my excitement. I had a lot of ground to cover and a scant 36 hours to conquer it.

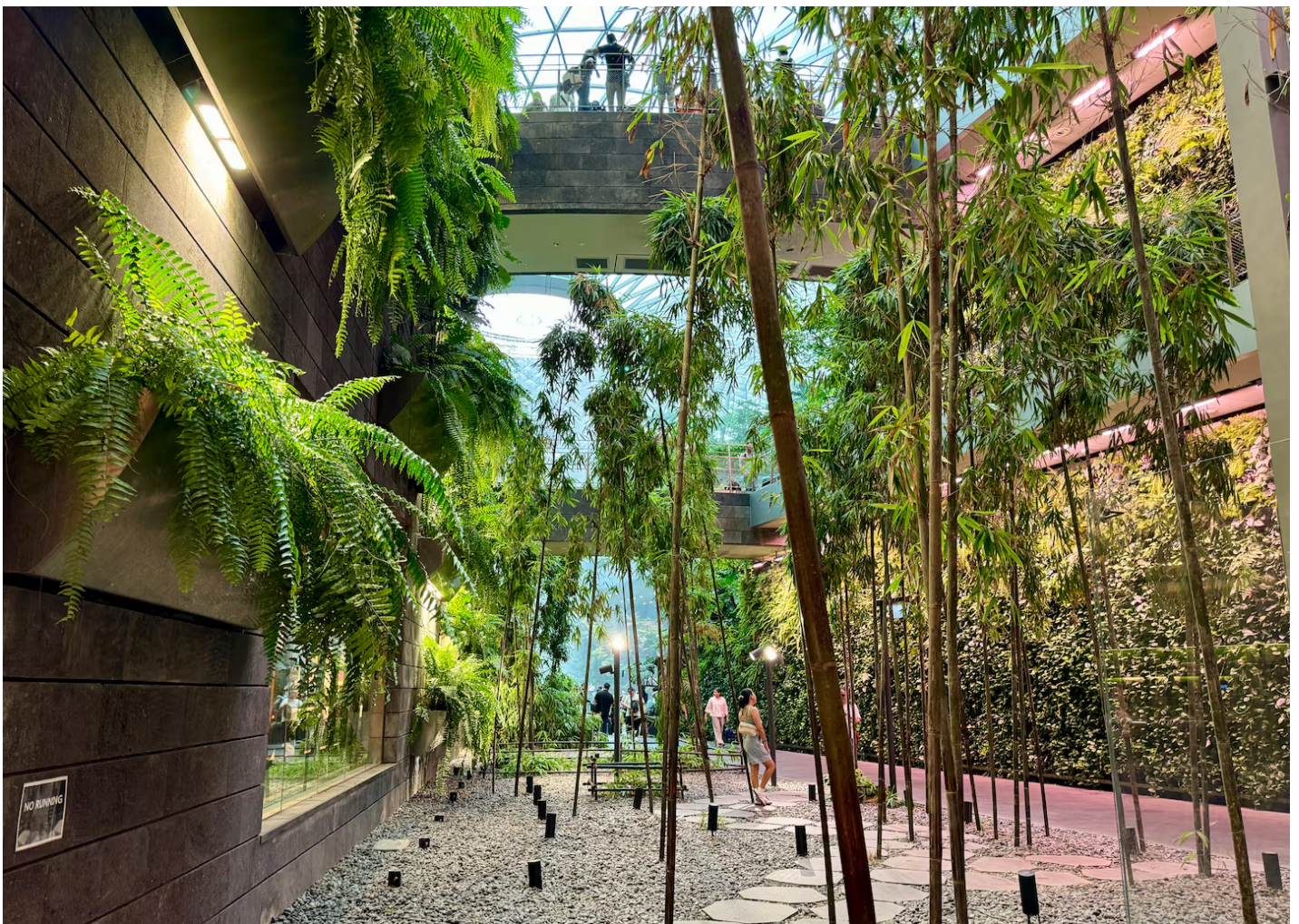
“Deep breaths, Chris. Deep breaths,” I chanted like a mantra as I checked into my micro Yotel room, itching to get started. Go ahead and dismiss the mega-mall surrounding the rain vortex and forest. Still, I was drooling, literally and figuratively, over the massive Fuji store, along with shops selling Asian brands I had never heard of but was desperate to explore, plus more restaurants than I could shake an Apom Berkuah at.

I think it’s important to mention the immigration process for entering the country. It includes filling out a questionnaire in an app, scanning a QR code, and walking through an automatic gate that uses biometrics to confirm your identity. There was no standing behind a line as immigration officials probed you about the purpose of your trip. My

entrance into the country took approximately a minute. Singapore Changi was near and dear to my heart, and I had barely entered the country.

First impressions are essential, and my first impression of this airport was that I should have booked another day or two to cover all 10 floors plus tour the city.

There was no question that I would begin my exploration of the Jewel by hanging out near the Rain Vortex and surrounding forest. I arrived early on a Saturday morning before the crowds took over, sat down, and listened to the waterfall's roar as it dropped from the large oculus in the ceiling. I breathed deeply as the water and plants refreshed the air. I was pretty confident this was the first time I slowed down and breathed deeply at an airport.



A quiet bamboo forest in the Jewel at Singapore Changi Airport. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

Food and shopping were essential parts of the experience, so for my first round of breakfast, I went to Dunkin' (of *course*, there was a Dunkin') for a mochi donut. Then, I decided on a quick round of Kaya balls (dome-shaped buns filled with Kaya — a coconut egg jam) and butter sugar crackers from Ya Kun Kaya Toast.

Onward! Next, I pre-booked a cooking class at [ABC Cooking Studio](#), a stylish demonstration kitchen where instructors walk you through a dish you can create. The two-hour class was about \$26, and I made gâteau au matcha. I wasn't thinking that tea-flavored cake would rock my world, but when I tasted it, I was a believer.



Students learn to make Chocolat Knot and Sausage Fleur at the ABC Cooking Studio in Singapore's Changi Airport. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

It was time for shopping, so I headed to Muji, a two-story shop called Hands, which sells everything from beauty products to stationery, and a local chain called the Shirt Bar. As the day wore on, it was evident that the Jewel was not just for travelers but also locals who wanted to take advantage of the shops, various restaurants, and movie theaters. Speaking of restaurants, I stopped at a cafe overlooking the Vortex for lunch and tried the

smoked duck carbonara. It was a significant improvement over my Logan fare of [Wahlburgers](#). Sorry, fellas. No hard feelings, OK?

I noticed a line at Birds of Paradise, a boutique gelato shop, and assumed it was either exceedingly excellent or big on TikTok. I ordered their most popular flavor, white chrysanthemum, which they describe as a “floral infusion of chrysanthemum florets sprinkled with cacao nibs.” At first, I thought the floral was a bit overwhelming, but as I kept going and my palate adjusted, it was delicious.



A server scoops up gelato at Birds of Paradise in Singapore Changi Airport. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

I could have spent the rest of the day eating and shopping and may or may not have returned to those pursuits (Shhh!), but I needed to turn my attention to the Canopy Park that circles the top of the glass structure. Here, you’ll find a hedge maze that includes

flowers with motion sensors. There are also nets suspended over the park where kids can bounce and another net for walking five stories over the Jewel. Although it looks innocent, walking on it is terrifying if you fear heights. There's a topiary garden and an area called Foggy Bowls. It's a playground and relaxation area where occasional puffs of mist rise out of the bowls, giving the impression that you are up in the clouds.



Children play in the Foggy Bowls at Singapore Changi Airport. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

Back in the mall portion of the building, there's an IMAX theater, a full supermarket, and another recreation area called the Studio Experience. Participants can take part in a virtual bike race along the runway and learn about airplanes.

If you're itching to explore outside the airport, you can ride the super-efficient Singapore public transit into the city to see popular destinations. I ducked out to visit the Gardens by the Bay. Even if you're not staying over the way I did, the airport offers several free

sightseeing tours of the city for passengers with long layovers who are not passing through Singapore immigration. I can think of no other airport that offers free, easy trips to local destinations for passengers who would otherwise spend hours eating Cinnabon and Chik-fil-A on uncomfortable seats with people talking loudly on their phones nearby.



A bluebird topiary welcomes visitors to the Canopy Park at Singapore Changi Airport. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

The next day, I reluctantly dragged a suitcase to my boarding gate, sadly departing this aviation oasis to make the long flight home. I thought the fun was over, but wait! I spotted a sign for a butterfly garden. Is there anything more calming than watching butterflies at the airport? The answer is no, except when one lands on you, then it's calming and fun. I ducked into the space, home to 1,000 butterflies, a koi pond, and a five-story waterfall. When I thought this place couldn't get more magical, I walked into a

rain forest. I also noticed a movie theater that's open 24 hours a day and shows free films 24 hours a day.



A butterfly enjoys a slice of pineapple in the Changi Airport Butterfly Garden in Singapore. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

I made the rounds at the airport gift shop, which sold local ointments and liniments such as bee venom and crocodile oil. I reluctantly boarded with sweet memories of Basque burnt cheesecake [soubombes](#), Michelin-starred [Imperial Treasure Super Peking Duck](#), and a Singapore Sling at [Harry's Bar](#). I will recall it all fondly the next time I'm scarfing down an order of spicy cheese and bacon tots at Wahlburgers in Logan and wondering why we can't have a Rain Vortex of our own.

Christopher Muther can be reached at christopher.muther@globe.com. Follow him [@Chris_Muther](#) and Instagram [@chris_muther](#).