

# 4 HOURS IN SINGAPORE

Alex Féthière enjoys Singapore's cultural diversity, as he explores colorful Hindu temples and peaceful mosques, with stops at hip boutiques, street eateries and a night safari

## 1 ORCHARD ROAD

Conveniently located beside a number of downtown hotels, Orchard Road is a hodgepodge of high-end shopping, restaurants and the requisite snack vendors. Finger foods and ice cream in flavors like durian, mango, peppermint and corn may be savored as you stroll. Chanel, Gucci, Vuitton and the like are piled deep in a row of semi-detached malls. It's such a main drag that your cab or walk to the metro will likely take you through it at some point.

## 2 NEWTON FOOD CENTER

The "cooked food centers" are outdoor malls of food hawker kiosks blessed with sinks and bathrooms. Improvements in hygiene were attained by government supervision, so you can eat here without concern. I stopped at five stalls and felt fit for a marathon afterward, despite one stall having kept the eggs used in my dish crate-stacked at (tropical) room temperature. The hawkers are very competitive, and any visible foreigner will be challenged to read the menus or even grasp the pictures before being accosted by everyone within earshot.

A solid defense is to fixate on one thing and repeat it with increasing volume; many hawkers will help you find it, and the others will let you be. I prevailed by reciting the mantra, "Laksa beehoon," a rice vermicelli coconut-curry soup with cockles, shrimp, and fish sticks. Food in Singapore is a destination item unto itself, and if you don't make it to this cooked food center, make sure you get to another—all have



Orchard Road

different specialties, and you can have a quality feast for less than the cost of one entrée elsewhere. Like other centers in residential areas, it's more active at night. *Clemenceau Avenue (North), near the Newton MRT stop.*

## 3 ARAB STREET/HAJI LANE

Singapore's Muslim area is concentrated around Arab Street, where one can easily walk to the beautiful Masjid Sultan Mosque (Muscat and North Bridge Road), the Malay Heritage Center, and hip Haji Lane in one long afternoon. The Mosque's courtyards are very peaceful and a great place to relax on a bench, but you must be modestly dressed (no shorts, open shoes or exposed shoulders) to go inside. One can hear the prayer call of the *muezzin* while browsing the small souvenir shops along the surrounding streets.

Put one part of Singaporean society in historical context at the Malay Heritage Center (85 Sultan Gate; tel. 65-6391-0450) a museum with pottery and batik (traditional fabric dyeing) programs for visitors, life-size models of 19th-century Malay living quarters, martial arts and dance performances and other exhibits. Haji Lane is one of Singapore's most

happening boutique shop rows, with stores like 3 (fashion labels like Fly London, San Francisco's Upper Playground and Milk Berlin), Salad (home and fashion accessories) and Col:lage (locally-designed jewelry, accessories and clothes—plus a cute bathtub aquarium) showcasing independent design.

## 4 NIGHT SAFARI

Singapore's zoo is impressive in its own right, but for a unique

experience, the Night Safari is hard to beat. Nocturnal animals, usually almost impossible to see, can be observed going about their customary business. If you arrive in time for a show, you may see them conducting more staged business in a theater, like owls flying over the audience to snatch snacks from remote handlers, or enormous snakes being draped over volunteer children.

The safari can be experienced on foot or aboard a golf-cart-train that quietly hums past night-lit pastures, fenced fields, valleys and sculpted hills. I've never been so close to an elephant. The cart train stops at stations where you can disembark to explore winding exhibits of animal areas and lakes at your own pace. Bats may hurtle past your head to home in on fruit bait hung from trees. Some faux-habitats are even more intimate than the cart ride—I could have touched a Malayan Flying Fox as it hung from a branch and tore into a smelly hunk of durian fruit. 80 Mandai Lake Road; tel. 65-6269-3411; open 6 p.m.–midnight daily, ticket sales stop at 11 p.m.

## 5 LITTLE INDIA and MUSTAFA

are worth a visit at any time of the day or night, and I mean any time. The colorful Hindu temples of Little India, like Sri Veeramakaliamman (141 Serangoon Road; tel. 62-954-538) can be admired from the outside or in, and the hulking emporium of Mustafa is open 24 hours. Good thing, because that's about how long you'd need to browse its 150,000+ items. You will start out surprised at all the toiletries and electronics, be awed by the fabrics, spices, packaged foods and souvenirs, and perhaps be worn out by the Western footwear or hardware section. Prices range from average to fire-sale. Though the presentation is crazy-quilt because of the overwhelming volume, the quality of the items runs the gamut from kitschy junk to top brand-name manufacturer. *Mustafa, 145 Syed Alwi Road; tel. 65-6295-5855* ■





More than a city, the experience of Mumbai will astound and reward the patient traveler, **Alex Féthière** discovers



The Gateway of India

**1 GATEWAY OF INDIA**

An enormous colonial monument towering over the edge of South Mumbai, the Gateway is a classic place to start a trip through the hectic and colorful city. This basalt-and-reinforced-concrete portal was built to commemorate the 1911 visit of King George V and Queen Mary. It also loomed over the departure of the last British forces from India in 1948. Standing at an angle to the street leading towards it because of an uncompleted approach road, it faces away from the Taj Hotel Palace & Tower. In fair weather it is the departure point for a ferry to the Elephanta Caves, where visitors can marvel at four mammoth temples hewn out of stone, dating back to 750 A.D.

**2 TAJ HOTEL PALACE & TOWER**

Standing cater-corner to the Gateway, the Palace is a synthesis of Oriental, Moorish and Florentine architectural styles, erected in 1903. It offers sweeping views of the Arabian Sea and the Gateway of India from rooms, restaurant and lounge alike. Stop in for a light lunch of traditional Indian specialties or tasty little toasted sandwiches, like the “Mumbai Mix” of thin-sliced and julienned vegetables, dressed with a bit of chutney.

A spread of pricey designer items occupies the ground floor, but take a look, even if tags aren't your bag. Locally-owned businesses are interspersed throughout, and a patient eye can find items like a beautifully carved rose-quartz Ganesh statuette for \$10.

Though the nearby street bazaar is teeming with aggressive hawkers and pushy panhandlers, shops like Popular Footwear are worth shoving through the crowd. *Chhapals* (thin-soled, toe-holstered ornately punched leather sandals) and other well-wrought

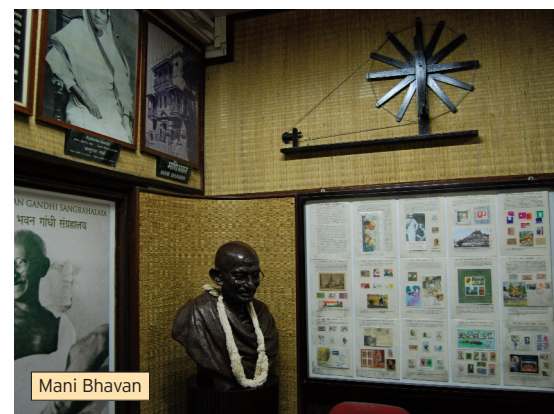
footwear are available there for a song. Many other items, however, can be bought without hustle and haggling at the Central Cottage Industries Emporium. *Apollo Bunder, Mumbai 400 001; tel. 91-22-6665-3366*

**3 CENTRAL COTTAGE INDUSTRIES EMPORIUM**

There's something for everyone at the CCIE, a sort of government outlet chain that's a short stroll from the Taj and the Gateway. Countless types of Indian handicraft can be found here. Prices and quality are state regulated, and the salespeople are refreshingly casual after the hard sell of street merchants. Sandalwood statues, stone and wood carvings with inlay, tapestries, paintings of all sizes, silk ties and brasswork are just a few of the items spread out over its two well-lit floors. Some items, like a carved-wood-and-brass swinging bench the size of a van or a Ganesh as tall as a man, would have to be shipped. Regardless of the space in your suitcase, you'll be hard put not to come out with something. *10 a.m.–7 p.m.; 4 Chhatrapatti Shivaji Maharaj Marg; Mumbai 400 005; tel. 91-22-202-7537/2026564/2844181*

**4 JEHANGIR ART GALLERY**

Gumptious Indian artists defining what's hot in Mumbai are the staple of Jehangir. About 150 artists are shown over a year, selected from some 3,000 entries by a board of trustees and established artists. Paintings, sculpture and drawings were on exhibit when I visited. Bulletin boards were tactfully placed outside



Mani Bhavan



The Taj Hotel Palace interior

the gallery sections in one wing, covered with clippings. A vast, separate gallery was hung with the work of three painters, and it was exciting to feel the buzz humming around so much emerging talent—particularly because all of the artists were present! After a tour of what's happening in Mumbai's art scenes, have a snack at the semi-enclosed Samovar Café, where students from nearby Elphinstone College and artists have been coming for years to

debate ideologies and aesthetics over tea. *11 a.m.–7 p.m.; 151/V M G Road, Kala Ghoda; tel. 91-22-2204-8212*

**5 MANI BHAVAN**

Walk in the footsteps of a nation's father and a godfather of 20th-century activism when you visit the memorial museum for Mahatma Gandhi, converted from a building where he stayed while visiting Mumbai—and where he was arrested. This unassuming edifice befits the man to whom it is dedicated, collecting a number of his photocopied letters (such as those he wrote to Hitler and Roosevelt) and photographs within frames.

Certain artifacts are behind glass, and a dioramic series winds through a darkened room, showing annotated scenes from his life within lighted boxes. It is an inspiring introduction to the eloquent simplicity of this international hero; the stamps issued in tribute to him alone will amaze with their range and iconography. A stamp collection is exhibited in a wall case, and posterboard cards bearing worldwide stamps are for sale, with all proceeds going to the Mani Bhavan organization. *9:30 a.m.–6 p.m.; 19 Laburnum Road, Gamdevi, Mumbai 400 007; tel. 91-22-2380-5864* ■

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