

## 2 Singapore--Island Melting Pot

Sydney, Australia, to Singapore, capital of Singapore  
Monday, February 23, 1976

What a day to begin a trip! The air was comfortably warm with a gentle ocean breeze, perfect for the sundress I was wearing. Evelyn insisted on helping me with my luggage as I left the hostel. We walked to a busy intersection where we flagged a cab. I kissed Evelyn goodbye and got in. Perhaps we would meet in England at a later time. I didn't have a chance to say goodbye to Mandy for she had already taken off on a motorcycle trip to the mountains.

After telling the Italian cab driver where I wanted to go, we became engaged in conversation. A nice looking man in his early thirties, he told me of his recent marriage to a beautiful Indian girl whose father was a wealthy maharaja. He now faced the probability of relocating in India. This intriguing tale ended as we reached busy Kingsford Smith International Airport and located Thai International Airways (TIA).

It was relatively easy to find my group as there must have

been a hundred excited relatives and friends surrounding them. A holiday spirit pervaded the group. Short haircuts, new clothes, and radiant health prevailed.

For a brief moment, I wanted my family there too. But then I spied Jen on the fringe of this jovial crowd. Earlier that morning she had taken a flight from Melbourne. Making eye contact, we moved away from the noise to a place where we could talk. Wearing new jeans and a jazzy T-shirt, Jen appeared fit for the trip. Her cropped curly hair would undoubtedly be a full Afro upon our arrival in London. The urgency of locating Maree who had my moneybelt and the need to exchange my remaining Australian dollars for American dollars and English pounds cut short our conversation.

Finding Maree, she presented me with the white cotton pouch and directed me down a flight of stairs to the restrooms. Here I transferred the necessary items to it from my purse and, under my sundress, I buttoned it around my waist.

In baggy jeans and sweat shirt, with shoulder bag and huge camera dangling from her large frame, in walked Eileen, the only other American besides me to be taking this trip. She was one of the few girls who had left her long hair untouched by scissors. She had finished her teaching contract near Sydney and was excited about the overland and going home to Anaheim, California. We left the restroom together to exchange our money and return to the group.

The time for roll call finally came, and, as our names

were called by the CYTA agents, we were each handed a yellow T-shirt bearing the brown letters CYTA. Our group of five fellows and twenty-seven girls, ranging in age from eighteen to thirty years, was then ushered through "the gates of no return." We teachers, nurses, students, secretaries, clerks, printers, musicians and salesmen were to experience together at least 18,000 air, land and sea miles through fifteen countries. The trip had begun!

Not long after finding my seat in the center section of the 747, a lovely Thai flight attendant presented me an orchid corsage and checked to see that my seat belt was fastened securely. My attention was soon drawn to a commotion several rows behind me where a short dark handsome fellow was having trouble locating his seat. Most of the group, knowing Nino well, were giving him a hard time. Eventually, good-natured Nino found his seat to the accompaniment of cheers and applause from all. Like the rest of the group, I found him instantly likeable. (I later learned that Nino's parents had immigrated to Australia from Sicily when he was a baby. Now he was twenty.)

The overhead signs of "No Smoking" and "Fasten Seat Belts" began to blink as the plane moved down the tarmac. The flight attendants took their seats just before the wheels left the ground.

During the seven hour flight to Singapore, I met Tanya who was seated beside Jen. Twenty-six, diminutive, with short light brown hair and blue eyes, she had been born in China of Russian

parents. With the Chinese communist takeover, her family applied for immigration to both America and Australia and was first accepted by Australia. Tanya was a disciplined Christian and an apt clerical worker. On the side, she sang Christian music for Voice of America broadcasts which were transmitted ~~be~~ behind the iron curtain.

Our CYTA leader, Robert, introduced himself to me and explained that he would be our courier until we reached Katmandu where the Sundowners' courier and driver would take charge. Until then, this short stocky young man sporting a bushy blond beard would oversee our worldly as well as spiritual needs. His enthusiasm and authoritarian nature made him well suited for the job ahead. He had worked for CYTA on various domestic trips, but, like the rest of us, this was his first overland.

In addition to meeting and visiting members of the group, we enjoyed a fine continental meal with complimentary wine, a movie and snacks. Before we knew it, the flashing signs were on again and we made our descent into the light studded oriental city of Singapore.

A young Chinese, Sung-Lee, from a tour agency met us at the baggage claim and escorted us to the tour bus. Insuring that we were comfortably seated, he picked up the bus microphone and began expounding facts and statistics about his country as we were driven into the center of the city. I took notes on a TIA napkin.

He explained that this island country was one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Slightly smaller than

New York City, Singapore accommodated about 10,000 people per square mile. Of its 2,280,000 inhabitants, 74 percent were Chinese, 14 percent Malayan and the remainder Indian and Eurasian. He proudly added that an educational program which conducted classes in the country's four official languages of Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English was credited for a seventy-five percent literacy rate which was considered high by Asian standards.

Before long we entered the Chinese District and arrived at the luxurious Miramar Hotel overlooking the Singapore River. We waited in the plush lobby adorned with tropical plants for our room assignments. Jen and I would room together.

We were delighted with our tenth floor room which over-looked a houseboat and sampan filled waterway leading into Keppel Harbor, fourth largest in the world. Sung-Lee had told us that our night tour of the city would begin at 10:30 which allowed us time to rest, shower and dress.

At the appointed time, we congregated in the lobby and were driven to a rather depressing rundown section of Chinatown where Buddhist funeral parlors were located. Inside these small parlors were several closed coffins upon which had been placed flowers, burning incense and a photo of the deceased. Here relatives and friends in oriental dress paid their last respects. Tourists could photograph the coffins for a fee.

As we left one parlor, a pickup truck brimming with paper and cardboard models of houses, cars, televisions, stereos and

radios pulled up in front to be unloaded on the porch. Sung-Lee explained that, due to the Buddhist belief in life after death, the deceased's loved ones make these models and bring them to the parlor in the hope that the real article will be owned by the deceased in the next life. We were also told that in addition to Buddhism, there are many Hindus, Muslims, Christians and followers of lesser known religions in Singapore.

Our tour continued on to the famous Raffles Hotel named for Sir Stamford Raffles, founder of modern Singapore. As an agent for England's East India Company, Sir Raffles secured a treaty with the local rulers of Singapore on February 6, 1819, which gave England a much needed port in Southeast Asia. By 1824, the entire island came under British control which lasted until June 1959 when the State of Singapore was established. Raffles was also responsible for the port's status as a free port, open to every nation.

Following a brief walk through this white stucco colonial hotel, Sung-Lee escorted us to the courtyard where we reclined on cushioned bamboo furniture around the swimming pool. A waiter soon took our drink orders. Some of us ordered the famous Singapore Sling while others preferred soft drinks. Here among the palms in the tropical night air, we leisurely sipped our drinks while discussing the day's events. Then we were off to Bugis Street, one of Singapore's main tourist attractions.

During the day Bugis Street and the surrounding area is an important market center, but by night it is transformed into

sidewalk restaurants noted for their good cuisine. During the late hours the area becomes a popular place for male prostitutes as well.

Sung-Lee found several large tables for our group at one of the crowded restaurants and ordered Pepsis for us. As mid-night approached, the male transvestite parade began. Strutting among the tables, oblivious to their audience, these dolled up Mae West types approached prospective clients, coupled off and left.

Sung-Lee asked Rosa to join our table. Dressed in a short skirt and loose fitting silk blouse, rouge and lipstick highlighting a handsome face, Rosa chatted with us nonchalantly about the transvestite community. The desire for a higher standard of living was her reason for choosing this profession as it was with some of her compatriots.

On our return to the Miramar, Sung-Lee gave additional information about Singapore, but most of us were too groggy to absorb more. Elated but exhausted by the flight and evening's activities, I collapsed into bed wondering if this would be a typical day.

Singapore  
Tuesday, February 24

Our first breakfast was American, part of the Singapore package. It had been my first American breakfast in nearly two years. Jen and I leisurely enjoyed orange juice, fried

eggs, shoestring potatoes, toast and coffee. Returning to our room, we wrote postcards and made our first journal entries before the 9:30 tour began. There was much to write about our last twenty-four hours.

As we wrote, two plump Chinese cleaning ladies, leaving their shoes in the hall, entered our room. They worked quickly and quietly but thoroughly, changing our bedding and linens. They left as quietly as they had entered.

Jen and I soon after went to the hotel lobby to mail our postcards and convert some of our money into Singapore dollars. We then boarded the tourist bus with the others and were off.

Our first stop of the day was atop a hill from which we had a panorama of the busy harbor full of vessels from around the world. Behind us rose dozens of white high-rise flats reminding me of an American city skyline. The balconies of these buildings overflowed with potted trees, plants, flowers and flapping laundry suspended from long jutting poles. Sung-Lee commented on the crowded living conditions and explained that many Chinese, including himself, shared one room with twelve or more relatives. This was possible because they rotated work shifts.

Next we drove to the House of Jade to view a display of priceless jade carvings in greens and pastels. Then we toured a large orchid reserve.

Our last stop was an Asian cultural show featuring beautiful Indian and Chinese women performing classical dances and songs. Lithe figures in jewel studded silks and brocades moved gracefully

and dramatically to the music of crude drums, bells and horns. Indian snake charmers appeared on stage serenading their trained cobras with reed pipes. A man wearing a live python came on stage and asked for volunteers to wear the moving reptile. Our fellows climbed the stairs to the stage to feel the python's weight and movement about their shoulders and neck. The rest of us exuberantly applauded them for their courage.

Our full day ended with a mouth-watering dinner at the hotel's Chinese restaurant. I retired early while Jen went to Tanya's room to visit.

Singapore  
Wednesday, February 25

In the early morning, we were bused to a dock where we caught a small motor driven Chinese junk for a tour of the harbor and the strait of Jahore near the tip of the Malay Peninsula. We moored at one of the many small Malayan fishing villages shaded by leaning coconut palms. Here we disembarked and were met on the rickety pier by a handful of shy friendly women with toddlers waiting to sell us their handicrafts of baskets, beads and other trinkets. The village was quiet, devoid of its men who were at work in Singapore. The older children were in school in a hut a short distance from shore. The open stilt houses and the grounds where dogs and chickens roamed at will were tidy.

The contrast between the westernized skyline of Singapore and the stilt houses of the Malayan villages characterized the

political problems of the region. Sung-Lee told us of Singapore's attempt to join with Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah in September 1963 to form the Federation of Malaysia. But this failed mainly because of the animosity between the Malayan dominated Federation and Chinese dominated Singapore. Thus, by mutual consent, Singapore seceded from the Federation and became an independent republic in 1965.

Soon after our junk left the village, the wind caught the sails and the motor was turned off. The hour's return ride to the city gave us time to relax on the deck in the sun and plan for the afternoon since we were to be on our own.

Six of us girls decided to lunch at the Raffles Hotel. The spacious elegant dining room with a large skylight and a variety of tropical plants was furnished with round, linen covered tables. The atmosphere conjured up visions of handsome uniformed English officers of colonial times wining and dining their ladies.

Lunch over, Jen and I decided to go to a shopping center near our hotel by way of a tri-shaw, a three-wheeled peddled convertible passenger vehicle. There were several tri-shaw cabs in front of the Raffles, and each driver shouted out his price to us. We had been told that we would have to bargain with many of the merchants as this was expected. So we gathered our courage and began to bargain until we agreed on the right price.

We then climbed into our chosen vehicle and were maneuvered out into the flowing traffic of trucks, buses, cars, motorbikes, bicycles, tri-shaws and all manner of pedestrians, including

Buddhist monks in yellow-orange robes carrying brass alms pails and frail Chinese women balancing shoulder poles from which baskets and buckets of produce and cooked foods were suspended. The exhaust fumes from the motorized vehicles made breathing difficult. Buses and trucks with blaring horns literally "breathed down our backs." I resigned myself to the fates, while Jen muttered "Crikey!" at every close call. All the while our Chinese driver, dressed in a white undershirt, khaki shorts and a coolie hat peddled doggedly through the pressing traffic delivering us unscathed to the westernized shopping center.

Due to Singapore's free port status, CYTA had told us to buy the bulk of our film here because it would be considerably cheaper than in Australia. We spent several hours browsing through the various shops containing silk fabrics and clothes, batik, carpets, goods made of reptile skins, handicrafts, gold and silver jewelry as well as western items including electrical appliances, cameras and cosmetics, to mention only a few. There were definitely some very good bargains.

Before walking back to the hotel, we managed to locate a public facility. What a phenomenon! Inside each stall on the floor was a porcelain slab designed with a slightly elevated ridged footrest on either side of the toilet bowl. So this was the toilet of Asia or loo as it was referred to by the Aussies! This odd toilet would eventually replace the comfortable sitting loo of the west, and would require squatting and balance. Undoubtedly, this would do much to tone our thighs. However,

Jen and I were not quite ready for this new experience and decided to return to the modern convenience of the air-conditioned Miramar.

(We were to learn that loo facilities on the overland were of three main types: the standard sitting loo, the porcelain slab squatting loo and the bush loo. Standard loos usually flushed unless clogged. Porcelain slabs or "stomping blocks," as we came to call them, either flushed or, with the use of a water faucet and pitcher or vase, the waste was washed down the bowl. Wastebaskets were near the loos to accommodate toilet tissue, for Asian plumbing could handle very little paper. The bush loo would be used between towns or when public facilities were too wretched.)

On our walk back to the Miramar, we observed human waste arranged in neat rows drying on the sidewalk in the sun. I assumed that this would be collected and used as night soil.

Later that evening, Robert scheduled our first devotions. Jen, like a few of the others could not yet identify with those of us who professed Christianity, so she remained in our room and read. Taking the elevator to Robert's room, I joined the others for Scripture reading, discussion and singing, accompanied by our guitarists, Nino, Tanya and Eileen. Our group harmonized well together. A prayer of praise and thanksgiving ended the twenty minute meeting. Although Robert was in charge of devotions, the rest of us would take turns leading them in the days and weeks ahead.

This happy vivacious group had a very positive outlook on life. I wondered what the impact of the overland would be on each one. Only time would tell.

I left the group, tired from yet another full day. Jen was already asleep. Soon I too was in bed and began thinking about our flight to Bangkok early the following afternoon.