

Best of both worlds

CLARKE QUAY... Singapore's first riverside festival village is a definite hotspot with a variety of restaurants and clubs. Gail and Charles cut their wedding cake, below.

By **MEI-YIN TEO**
Special to The Sun

SINGAPORE — Returning to Singapore after eight years away, I was immediately embraced by the familiar heat as I stepped out of Changi airport. I looked forward to being back in my hometown with the intention of seeing Singapore through new eyes.

I was born in Singapore but left with my family in 1970. I have been back four times in the past and each visit has contributed to my collection of fond childhood memories.

Being with relatives made it easy to steer clear of the trodden tourist path so I could quickly immerse myself in my surroundings. Having roti prata (fried flour) for breakfast the first morning initiated a wave of familiar experiences. Walking down a street near my grandfather's house, I saw the back lane where I played rope. Passing street vendors and food stalls, I spotted a roadside shop where I used to buy opera cards.

I came to Singapore this time with a mission in mind — to search for some of the cultural experiences I remembered, such as colorful street festivals or traditional wayang (Chinese opera).

Armed with recollections from previous trips, the city unfolded in front of my eyes, joggling a memory at one turn in the road and surprising me with a new discovery at the next: a beautiful temple laden with intricate sculptures in Little India, a colorful stretch of family homes-turned-shops on Arab St., and narrow, congested walkways weaving

through a bustling bazaar.

Having family in Singapore means I got an inside glimpse into what makes people tick. Singaporeans are brought up with a strong work ethic which begins at school. My cousins do not flinch at the idea of working until 8 or 9 p.m., five and a half to six days a week. They say it's all in the pursuit of the five C's: career, cash, credit card, condo and car. But when locals make up



their minds to have fun, nothing stands in their way. I accompanied my cousins to a trendy nightclub called Zouks and was amazed at the swarms of people clad in cropped tops and platform shoes, smoking and chatting away on cell phones.

The coming together of the traditional and the modern was best seen at the wedding of my cousin, Gail. In the morning, the couple performed a tea ceremony, a tradi-

tional custom of offering cups of tea to senior members of the family. Gail was dressed in a beautiful white cheong sum, a traditional dress with red flowers, and Charles (her new husband) was sporting a tuxedo. In turn, everyone who was served tea gave the couple an hong bao or "red packet" with money.

By contrast, the dinner, held at the Hyatt Regency on the glamorous Orchard Rd., was typically western. Gail changed into a simple wedding gown. A Chinese and western buffet dinner followed with the usual speeches, cutting of the cake and live band.

After visiting family members for the first couple days, I welcomed the opportunity to put on my tourist hat. In the back of my mind, I continuously asked the question: "What is the lure for travellers to Singapore?" The answer: its cleanliness, its safety and its unique culture minus the squalor, filth and hassle dominant in other Asian countries.

Singapore is probably most infamously known for its strict laws which include fines for littering and chewing gum. When speaking with locals, I discovered that these rules are not strictly enforced and serve more as educational campaigns. That said, for the most part, Singapore lives up to its squeaky clean image and litter is almost non-existent in tourist areas like Orchard Rd., and the MRT subway system.

Visitors always remark about how lavishly green Singapore is even amongst its colossal buildings. Nowhere is this more evident

than in Singapore's skyline, which candidly depicts concrete skyscrapers set against a lush, tropical backdrop.

My first "typical" tourist venture was Singapore's Night Safari, the world's only safari where 1,000 nocturnal animals, such as the striped hyena, the African bong and the one-horned jackal, roam a 40-hectare enclosure.

Singapore's Zoological Gardens was created with an open concept, which allows for great views of the animals; the dense vegetation in the gardens also makes for a pleasant walk. By chance, I stumbled upon a chain of feeding sessions which took me from one fascinating animal exhibit to the next.

Hopping on the cable car across to Sentosa Island, Singapore's resort playground which boasts a 3.2-km coastline, I discovered the much-lauded Musical Fountain, Fantasy Island Water Theme Park, VolcanoLand and Underwater World. A host of unusual underwater creatures, like the giant spider crab and the ugly wolf eel, kept me fascinated. As I entered the tunnel tank, an 83-metre-long curved acrylic tunnel with a moving walkway, I was awestruck by the creatures swimming directly overhead. Be sure to visit at feeding time when a diver enters the tank and is quickly swarmed by a multitude of swimmers such as stingrays, black tip sharks and squirrel fish ying for morsels of food.

It has been a long-standing joke that Singapore's favorite pastime is eating. Visitors soon learn that locals take their food seriously; the number and diversity of eating establishments, many open 24-hours a day, boggles the mind. Great Chi-

nese cuisine ranges from S\$3 for a noodle dish in a hawk centre to S\$20 for Black Pepper Crab at Long Beach Seafood Restaurant. My cousins took me to a popular western restaurant in the hip Chijmes area, called The Jump, which served fish and chips for S\$18.

A chic new area, where I wished I could have spent more time, is Clarke Quay, Singapore's first riverside festival village which has become a popular dinner spot because of the abundance of international cuisine. I ate at the Satay Club, a local favorite. On the other side of the bridge is Boat Quay, the pub counterpart. The neon strip rocks with familiar tunes like John Cougar's *Jack & Diane* and the Village People's *YMCA* at establishments like Molly Malone's, an Irish pub; Harry's, a British pub; and Espana, from which the strains of exotic Spanish music can be heard. Such is the world of Singapore.

BOTTOM LINE

GETTING THERE: There are a number of airlines flying to Singapore, including Singapore Airlines, Air Canada and Canadian Airlines.

MORE INFO: Singapore Tourism Board, 121 King St. W., Suite 1000, Toronto, M5H 3T9; phone (416)363-8898, fax (416)363-5752.

MONEY MATTERS: The currency is the Singapore dollar; \$1 Cdn = S\$0.82. Transportation costs: MRT, S\$0.70-\$1.60; air-conditioned bus, S\$0.70-\$1.50; non air-conditioned bus, S\$0.60-\$1.20.