

Around Town

Discovery channels

It might be a young nation, but Singapore is crawling with history. **Michael Franco** follows four very different tourist trails through town and jungle, river and sea

So you think you know Singapore? Can you name the site where the first aeroplane landed here? Know which local tree is called the 'blind-your-eye' tree? Have you seen the 'cursed' island off our coast where, legend has it, so much blood was shed in pirate battles that the soil turned crimson?

Didn't think so. But after taking these tours, you'll know a lot more about our little red dot...

Desire Paths

You'll hear seductive whispers, a galloping horse and clanking cowbells as you wander the streets of Little India on this tour, thanks to this professionally produced audio programme that leads you down alleyways and past Peranakan shophouses you might never have noticed before.

Desire Paths, created by the spell#7 Theatre Company, creates an unforgettable afternoon in Little India by melding the sights around you with the sounds on a specially produced CD. According to company director Paul Rae, you need to be careful as you wander around: 'Sometimes you won't know if what you're hearing is in your head or about to run into you.'

In addition to learning interesting trivia about the area, you'll also enjoy a story about an infatuated young couple who always seem to just miss each other in doorways and around bends. This narrative weaves itself through your walk like golden threads in a silken sari. Rich voices and moody music bring out even more of this enclave's allure. While we won't ruin the experience by telling you exactly what you'll hear, this comment from the tour's guestbook should be endorsement enough: 'I live in Singapore and am Indian, so this is eye-opening... definitely not a dull, usual tour!'

Start at: 65 Kerbau Rd (www.spell7.net/desirepaths). MRT: Little India.

Tour information: Self-guided walks (approximately 40 minutes) on Wednesdays & Saturdays between 10am-1pm, and other times on request. Pre-booking is essential; email desirepaths@spell7.net. \$10.

The Tipple Exchange

As this somewhat academic tour begins you might wonder when you get to drink. Don't worry: at the end, when

you're belting out the Irish folk song 'Molly Malone' with your new friends from around the world, you'll have no more queries about tipple time.

Along the way, you'll learn such things as how to smoke an opium pipe, why there were no pockets in the pants worn by coolie workers on the Singapore River, and why you should shout 'yam-seng!' as long and loud as you can before tipping back a pint. The tour begins by taking in the People of the River exhibit at the Asian Civilisations Museum (where the opium pipe is stored safely behind glass) before heading outside and winding its way through Boat Quay.

To quench the thirst that will build up from listening so intently to your tour guide (well, you need some excuse, don't you?), you can indulge at such fine establishments as The Penny Black, Archipelago Brewery and Molly Malone's – the three pubs visited on the walk. Drink coupons sold before the tour for \$6 each are a smart investment and increase the chance that you won't remember much of the interesting info doled out by your guide. But at least you'll be in perfect form for singing about those cockles and mussels at Malone's, Singapore's first official Irish pub.

Start at: Entrance to Asian Civilisations Museum, 1 Empress Pl (www.singaporewalks.com). MRT: Raffles Pl.

Tour information: Walks (approx three hours) run regardless of attendance or weather on Thursdays at 5.30pm. No pre-booking needed. \$25.

'Sometimes you won't know if what you're hearing is in your head or about to run into you.'

Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve

This city can be a real jungle – especially when you're at Sungei Buloh surrounded by wetlands and staring into the cold, black eyes of a Malayan water monitor lizard.

You can take a stroll through this sanctuary any day of the week. But if you head up on Saturdays, and are one of the first 15 people to request it, you'll be treated to a guided walk through the mangroves. As you stroll along the boardwalks, your volunteer guide will help you see things your computer-screen-fixated eyes can't. You'll discover which roots act as a



Pleasure island Ride the Imperial Cheng Ho (above), or explore Sungei Buloh

natural laxative, which branches were used by ethnic Malaysians to ward off evil spirits, and which trees produce a substance fishermen used to stun their prey in rivers. You'll learn about mud lobsters that are pounded into an aphrodisiacal powder, and observe mudskipper fish that can breathe air as they flipper-walk across land.

After a morning or afternoon marvelling at brackish water, beasts and blooms, you're sure to work up an appetite, so take advantage of the pond-side cafeteria that serves decent grub – the fish and chips are surprisingly good. Just don't dangle your hands too far over the dining deck – those monitor lizards look hungry.

Start at: Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve Visitor Centre, 301 Neo Tiew Crescent (www.sbur.org.sg). MRT: Kranji, then Kranji Express or bus 925. **Tour information:** Guided tours (approximately one hour) on Saturdays, 9.30am & 3.30pm. The best tours are during low tide, so check app.nea.gov.sg first. FREE.

Imperial Cheng Ho Harbour Cruise

After getting to hear about a different side of Singapore on the first three tours, it's time to actually see a different side of our island by taking to the waters that surround it. And there's

only one tour that lets you do so on a reproduction Ming-era ship.

Departing from Marina South Pier, the Cheng Ho III – named after a famed Chinese imperial fleet commander – takes you on a 2½-hour cruise past Sentosa and south to Kusu Island. During the morning and afternoon high-tea tours, a half-hour stopover at Kusu gives you just enough time to see the Chinese temple and climb the 152 steps to the Malay shrine. On your way up, if you are a young couple hoping to have a baby, tie a rock to a tree branch if you'd like a boy, or a paper fan for a girl.

This tour is truly more for relaxation than stimulation, so if you're feeling a bit overwhelmed, just take a look around the ship – it's the true star of the journey, with ornate carvings of lions (the symbol of the emperor), phoenixes (the symbol of the empress) and plenty of golden dragons.

Start at: Marina South Pier (www.watertours.com.sg). MRT: Marina Bay, then taxi.

Tour information: 10.30am Morning Glory cruise (\$27 adult/\$14 child), includes coffee and tea. 3pm High Tea cruise (\$32/\$16), includes high-tea sweets and savouries. 6.30pm Imperial dinner cruise (\$55/\$29), includes international buffet dinner. Duration: approximately 2½ hours.

Preview

Singapore Garden Festival



Blooming marvellous Be wowed by the *Floral Windows to the World* exhibit

Suntec Convention Centre

25 July to 1 August

Spending the weekend lounging in your artistically designed backyard? Maybe swaying in a shaded hammock? Wait – you don't have a garden? Just a front stoop? Considering that the closest most of us come to green-fingered pursuits in Singapore is keeping a couple of potted plants in the common room, that's no surprise. So what's a nature-starved city-dweller to do?

Make like a bee and go pollinate the Singapore Garden Festival, where the **Landscape and Fantasy Garden** exhibit will let you wander through 'mini-yards' created by top garden designers from Singapore and around the world. They're the perfect places to pretend you've spent the day in an English country garden or chilling in a sleek Thai courtyard.

The best part of these gardens is that you don't have to do any work in them, so when you're done lazing, carelessly flit over to the **Floral Windows to the World** (pictured) exhibit to take in an array of cut-flower displays that will make it hard for a guy ever to impress a girl with a bouquet again.

Next comes the **Orchid Show**, where you can *ooh* and *ah* over the stunning colours – or giggle childishly about how the blooms resemble certain parts of the human anatomy. After that, you're sure to be inspired, so why not visit the **Vibrant Marketplace** to pick up a plant or two to take home, where you can create your very own garden... windowsill. *MF Daily 10am-10pm. \$6 weekdays, \$12 weekend. Discounts for children. Family packs available for \$18 weekdays, \$36 weekend. MRT: City Hall. Go to www.singaporegardenfestival.com for more information.*

Singapore Food Festival



Take the stick Dip that satay

Even though every day feels like a food festival in Singapore, July will boast even more sizzling, sautéing and steaming than usual with the annual Singapore Food Festival kicking off on 4 July. Foodies across the island (we have one or two of those, right?) will be able to satisfy their need to feed by taking part in any these events:

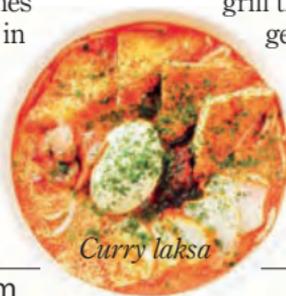
Opening Celebration 4-6 Jul. Lau Pa Sat, 18 Raffles Quay. The Lau Pa Sat market has been moved, torn down and rebuilt more times than there are ingredients in a good nasi lemak. Now, it's the largest Victorian filigree cast-iron structure in South-East Asia and will serve as the home of the Festival's

opening ceremonies, which will focus on the hawker scene of the '50s and '60s.

Heritage Food Trails 12-13 Jul. Chinatown, Little India, Joo Chiat & Kampong Glam. Make like Hansel and Gretel and follow a food trail of dumplings and curries through four of Singapore's main ethnic enclaves.

Uniquely Singapore Seafood Event 18-20 Jul. East Coast Park. What would a food festival on an island be without boatloads of seafood? Here's your chance to indulge by the shore while enjoying all the chilli and black pepper crab you can handle.

The Great Sentosa BBQ 26-27 Jul. Siloso Beach, Sentosa. It might be the closing event of the festival, but things should just start heating up as you choose your own marinated meats and grill them yourself. Live music will get you shaking your booty, which might – just might – be a little bigger after a month of munching. *MF Go to www.singaporefoodfestival.com for more information.*



Curry laksa

Review

US Doggie Bakery



A seat at the table It's every puppy's dream at US Doggie Bakery

Braised minced beef with stewed pear. Grilled chicken with pumpkin sauce. Tuscan lamb stew. While these delicious-sounding dishes might get your mouth watering, they're sure to get your dog drooling because, believe it or not, that's whose bowl they'll end up in.

Recipes like these are the creation of Sharon Ho, the owner of three US Doggie Bakery outlets in Singapore. Approaching its fourth year in operation here, USDB has been successful in satisfying salivating pups and their owners. According to Ho, her recipes are created specifically for dogs that, she claims, 'can eat human-grade food, but not necessarily everything humans eat'. Her canine-friendly meals and treats are made with all-natural ingredients and no sugar or salt (although the occasional drop or two of honey is used to satisfy the sweet tooth).

As part of USDB's catering programme, dog owners can sign up to have five meals created each week for a total of \$16.50. The dishes consist of an entrée – like roast lamb with potatoes – and can be customised to suit various needs, including sensitive stomachs, food allergies, even the religious requirements of owners. The menu changes each week, and meals can be picked up at any of the USDB sites or delivered to owners' homes free of charge. When your pampered pooch's birthday approaches, you can arrange a birthday cake to be delivered or, if the gathering is small enough, you can have a party on the premises at either the East Coast or Bukit Timah locations. Just be sure to remove the candles before letting your beloved beast dive in.

If your dog's tastes run more towards cookies than cakes, then



Bear-shaped biscuits will make any tail wag

USDB has plenty to indulge that animal urge with two types of biscuits: regular and premium. The difference is that the premium snacks contain extra supplements – like those found in cranberry bones, lambies and blueberry barks – to help with general health and coat. But there's nothing wrong with the regular cookies, especially the mintie lips, which are the perfect thing to freshen Fido's breath after all of this gourmet indulgence. Treat prices range from \$7 per 200g for regular cookies to \$8.50 for the same amount of premium biscuits.

Puppy prefers pizza? No problem. You can pick up five-inch tomato-and-cheese pies topped with either lamb or chicken for just \$6.30 (less for the chicken). And if none of that is enough to make your picky Pekingese happy, there's always Hainanese chicken rice – a steal at \$3.80 – plus shepherd's pie and a selection of quiches and muffins, all developed specifically for canine consumption.

The only issue with all of this is that after tending to your dog's culinary needs, you'll only have enough time left to microwave yourself a TV dinner – though that is the perfect meal to accompany the latest special on Animal Planet. *MF*

The US Doggie Bakery is open daily and operates at three locations: next to the Caltex Station at 355 East Coast Rd (11am-8pm, 6346 7168); inside Cold Storage at CompassPoint, 1 Sengkang Sq (9.30am-9.30pm, 6384 3520); and at Bukit Timah, just outside Turf City at 110 Turf Club Rd (10am-7pm, 6219 7308). Dogs are welcome at the East Coast and Bukit Timah locations. Delivery orders can also be made online at www.usdb.com.sg