

# Singapore on song

The Lion City has undergone the mother of all makeovers with new hotel complexes, resorts, casinos, theme parks and celebrity chef restaurants jostling for the traveller's attention. Not to mention this month's F1 Singapore Grand Prix.

WORDS CHRIS WRIGHT

SINGAPORE

Past & present:  
Marina Bay Sands  
sparkles opposite  
the Merlion

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY MARINA BAY SANDS



## SINGAPORE

**V**ISITORS RETURNING TO Singapore after several years may struggle to recognise the place. A transformation of its waterfront, years in the making, is nearing completion and the city state abounds with new attractions. At the heart of the Singapore makeover is the Marina Bay Sands – one of two new so-called integrated resorts, or IRs. They are underpinned by Singapore's first casinos, but also bring together a host of hotel, shopping, entertainment and conference facilities in impressive new buildings.

Designed by architect Moshe Safdie, Marina Bay Sands is likely to become one of Asia's most recognisable and photogenic structures. Its hotel comprises three 55-storey towers topped by the SkyPark, a vast, sweeping, streamlined rooftop linking the three in a silver arc. An engineering feat as much as an artistic one, including a daring cantilever built with strand-jack construction methods more commonly applied to bridges, this roof section is 12,400sq m in size. That, the developers are fond of pointing out, is longer than the Eiffel Tower is tall; big enough to park four-and-a-half A380 aircraft; and is proving the most talked-about section of the entire development.

The SkyPark is open to the public (\$16 adult/\$11 child) and affords wonderful views over Singapore's business and historic districts as well as the hundreds of ships moored, awaiting berths, to the south of the island. But the real highlight of the roof, a 150m infinity pool overlooking the city, is open only to hotel guests.

The casino, which one would expect to be the centrepiece of anything backed by the Las Vegas Sands gaming group, is actually a fairly modest chunk of the site, but nevertheless brings to Singapore four floors of gaming machines, tables, high-roller facilities and a clutch of celebrity chef restaurants (see box page 76).

With the opening of the Sands and a new bridge, Singaporeans are able to walk the whole way around the circuit of the city's waterfront promenade for the first time. Ducking around a few building sites along the way, the walk – hot, but flat – takes in some of the city's most



Marina Bay Sands: SkyPark takes the idea of an infinity pool to new heights; the casino footbridge (below left)



striking features: the Fullerton hotel, a grand and stocky building of columns and porticos in the classical style, completed in 1928; the Merlion, a water-gushing statue of Singapore's mascot; the Esplanade, two spiky concert and theatre halls known locally as the Durians and designed as Singapore's answer to the Sydney Opera House; the Singapore Flyer (\$24 adult/\$17 child) at 165m tall the world's largest observation wheel until Beijing pinches the title in the next year or so; and the striking new footbridge to the casino development, a twirl of helix beams reminiscent of DNA.

It will get better, too. From the SkyPark, if you look towards the sea, you can see the development of a new botanical garden, the centrepiece of a green redevelopment of other areas of waterfront. At the mouth, where the river used to meet the sea, another recent attraction is in place: the barrage. It is part of an initiative to turn Singapore's bay and inland waterways into fresh water, partly as a reservoir, partly for flood control and partly for recreation.

The other focus of Singapore's rejuvenation is Sentosa Island, which lies to the city's south and has long been used as a recreational hub ➤

POOL PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS WRIGHT; MARINA BAY SANDS: GETTY IMAGES





SINGAPORE

of beaches and attractions. The second integrated resort, called Resorts World, is being developed there and much of it is now open.

While it, too, is anchored by a casino, this resort has much more of a family feel than Sands and its signature attraction is Universal Studios (\$53 adult/\$38 child weekdays, \$58/\$42 weekends). Like its counterparts in California, Florida and Osaka, the park combines rides with movie themes and live shows such as a special effects spectacular based on the movie *Waterworld*.

It has its share of impressive white-knuckle rides, but what sets Universal Studios apart is the little things: the stubby wagging tail of a baby stegosaurus in the outstanding *Jurassic Park* rapids ride; the airport-themed posters and signboards while queuing for a *Shrek* roller-coaster ("Destinations: Duloc. Dragon's Lair. Worcestershire".) The queuing lanes for the *Revenge Of The Mummy* roller-coaster, set up as an Egyptian tomb, are a sight in themselves; while you wait for the *Shrek* 4D show inside a huge castle building every bit as grand as a Disney one, there is a clever multimedia show to pass the time. And if you're wondering what the 4th dimension is, it involves being sneezed on by an onscreen donkey, among other things. Children tend to rate this as the highlight of the whole park.

Book your tickets online as it frequently sells out on weekends, and be aware that although new, Universal can get very busy: queues for key attractions can top an hour and the food hall can get jammed. You can pay an extra \$24 (\$55 on weekends) for a ticket that allows you to jump the queue; everyone will glare at you.

Something else that sets Sentosa apart is the accommodation. Marina Bay is dominated by one huge hotel, Marina Bay Sands, with 2561 rooms and suites, from the ordinary, functional business traveller room with tiny balconies barely wide enough to stand on, to the extraordinary 629sq m chairman's suite (gym, pool table, media >



## CHARGE OF THE IRON CHEFS

With the new resorts comes an influx of new restaurants helmed by some big international names. Resorts World Sentosa's roster includes Joël Robuchon, the world's most Michelin star-decorated chef, who is opening three French haute cuisine restaurants in Singapore; four-star Kunio Tokuoka, whose new Kunio restaurant is said to be Singapore's most expensive; Scott Webster, who has launched a version of his London restaurant Osia; and Susur Lee, with *Chinois* by Susur Lee.

Marina Bay Sands weighs in with more than 50 dining choices from cafes to the heavyweights. At the top end are restaurants from New York's Mario Batali and Daniel Boulud, Barcelona's Santi Santamaria, Paris' Guy Savoy, Sydney's Tetsuya Wakuda and Singapore's Justin Quek.

With so many choices on offer it's tough to focus on one, but Waku Ghin – Tetsuya's first outside Australia – indicates how high these eateries are reaching. It offers a 10-course degustation menu and, despite its more than 743sq m area, seats only 25 people.

At Sands, Santamaria, Savoy and Tetsuya's restaurants were open; Quek's was said to be within weeks of opening; and Puck, Batali and Boulud should open by the end of the year. Most of the Sentosa restaurants were open.



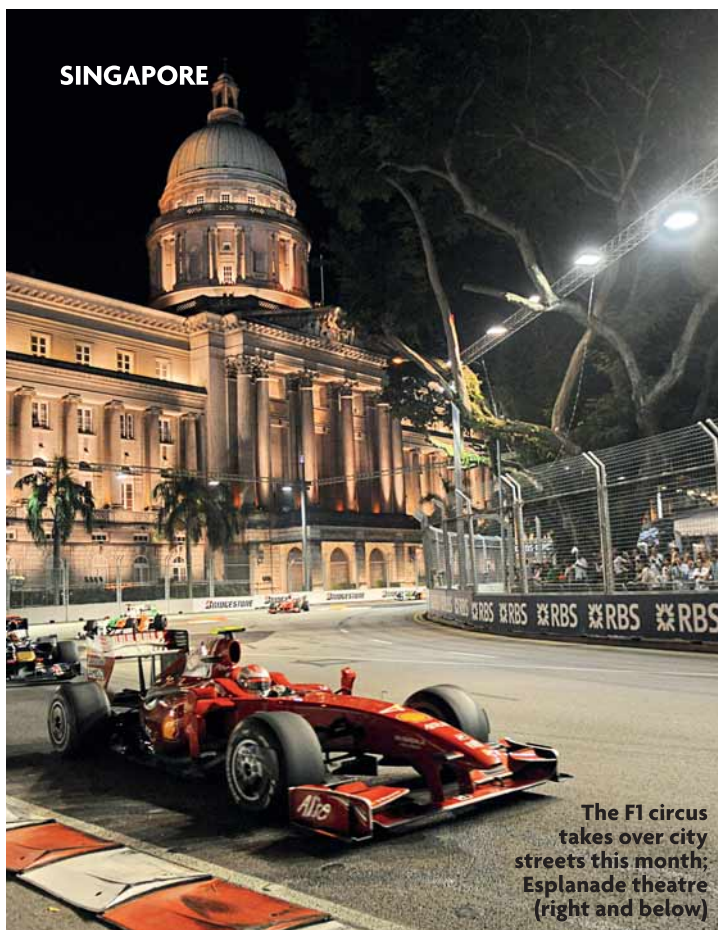
From top: Marina Bay Sands casino gaming hall; Tetsuya's Waku Ghin bar; Chinois by Susur Lee



CASINO PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; WAKU GHIN CHRIS WRIGHT; CHINOIS: COURTESY RESORTS WORLD SENTOSA







The F1 circus takes over city streets this month; Esplanade theatre (right and below)



room, baby grand piano). Resorts World in Sentosa, in contrast, already has four hotels open with two more to come. Common folk can only peer into the lobby of the Crockfords Tower, an all-suite hotel that is by invitation only for celebrities, royalty and casino high-rollers. They must instead choose between the business-focused Hotel Michael, the funky and gym-to-the-fore Hard Rock Hotel Singapore (which has the best pools) and the Festive Hotel. The last of these is family-themed with a number of good ideas: separate loft beds for kids, accessed by agreeably vertiginous ladders; a free book-reading service; and separate check-in area for children.

Add all of this to the Formula 1 road race, which zips around the business and colonial districts of the city and starts just metres from the Singapore Flyer, and it's clear the effort Singapore has made to attract tourism with its revamp. It deserves to succeed, but still, there are a couple of issues that give pause for thought. For one thing, Singapore does seem to have developed a habit of opening things before they are entirely ready. Both resorts are phased openings and will not be absolutely complete until next year. By then, a new theatre (hosting a *Lion King* show), two offshore Crystal Pavilion islands (Louis Vuitton has taken one in its entirety and the other will host nightclubs) and a fabulous, lotus flower-shaped museum will have opened in Marina Bay Sands; and in Sentosa, two more hotels, a maritime museum and an oceanarium will complete the picture.

That's not really a problem, but in the supposedly completed areas there was still much to do at the time of writing. Visitors to the SkyPark should be warned that the restaurant is still being built, as is the rooftop



restaurant of the hotel. Universal Studios is still in what it calls a soft-opening phase while it streamlines its processes; visitors receive merchandise and food vouchers as compensation for this, but in the meantime two of the key rides in the complex – the *Madagascar*-themed log flume ride and the signature attraction, a weaving, interlocking roller-coaster called *Battlestar Galactica* – are still closed.

It's also worth noting that the casinos have not been without local controversy. Concerned about the impact on the local population, Singapore lobbies an \$80 levy per day on any of its citizens using the casino: an active attempt to discourage them from doing so. Apart from raising questions about the business model of trying to block your immediate audience, there is a vexing moral issue of why it is OK to encourage foreigners to gamble while trying to bar your own people for fear they will be damaged by the experience. Nevertheless, that's unlikely to trouble visitors, who will have much to occupy them even if they skip the casinos. Singapore has spent big to coax former visitors back and, particularly for those considering breaking an Australia to Europe trip for a few days, it is well worth seeing what's on the menu of diversions.

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