In Singapore, things aren’t always as they appear, and finding something distinctly Singaporean can prove to be a challenge—and a lesson learned. words by vi ho

photography by bryan van der beek
It is said that Singapore's national symbol, the Merlion, was created because Singapore needed a distinct and recognizable emblem. Although the Merlion's historical roots have had variations, the gist of the story is this: In ancient times, the island of Singapore was known as "Temasek" (Javanese for sea town). Legend has it that the island was rediscovered in the 11th century. A visiting prince, thinking he saw a lion in the middle of a rain forest, called the island "Singa Pura," or the "Lion City."

Today a 26-foot Merlion, replete with lion's head and fish's tale, sits at the mouth of the Singapore River to greet visitors. But more than to aim a jet of water at ships that chug upstream, the Merlion represents the city as a whole: Visitors were responsible for its creation.

In Singapore, a native culture is nearly nonexistent; it's the area's mix of outside influences that binds it together. When attempting to discover what is truly Singaporean, the answer is easy, yet deceptive. It's Malay, it's Indian, it's Chinese. It's ancient. It's modern. It's the sum of its parts.

Located off the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula, the country of Singapore is composed of Singapore Island and adjacent smaller islands. Its capital city also is called Singapore.

When the Englishman Sir Stamford Raffles landed there in 1819, he recognized that Singapore's naturally sheltered port was ideal for maritime strategy. Many Europeans saw it as a place with good trading prospects, and with vessels arriving from all over the world, Chinese and Indian immigrants flocked to the promised land in search of work. In 1963, the British declared Singapore, the Malay states and Sabah and Sarawak as one independent nation—Malaysia. But Singapore's membership in this union lasted only two years. In 1965, Singapore achieved independent statehood.

Today, Singapore's population of 4.1 million includes 77 percent
Chinese, the rest are mostly Malay and Indian. And the port still is a crossroads: Singapore is linked by 400 shipping lines to 740 ports worldwide. This, in addition to its history as a confluence of cultures, makes an experience in Singapore a lesson in Asia 101 for visitors.

In this land, the amenities of life are reliably efficient. It’s safe to walk at night; public transportation is available and affordable; modern, underground subway stations are air-conditioned; and there are more than 18,000 taxis on the road. Steep automobile ownership fees largely keep private cars off the highways.

Most important, tap water is drinkable and the food is safe. Travelers who are normally skeptical about food overseas need not fear—strict governmental regulations ensure immaculate food stalls. That’s comforting when confronted with a cage full of live frogs, or while peering at a menu offering fish head soup.

In Chinatown, food is not only celebrated but healing—and etiquette is everything.

The mix of cultures extends into the region’s flora and fauna—the majority of fruit and plant life is imported. Singapore is home to many lush parks and gardens, and 320 different species of birds, of which about 80 percent come from elsewhere.

That distinction even includes Singapore’s national fruit, the durian. The delicacy, which has a prickly rind and soft pulp, is imported from Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. The spiky fruit is banned from many hotels due to its overpowering and unpleasant odor, but to Singaporeans, it’s the “king of fruits.”

Esplanade’s many features include a 1,600-square-foot concert hall with a 4,740-pipe organ, and an outdoor theatre along the Marina Bay waterfront. It hosts a myriad of special music programs, as well as festivals around Chinese New Year and Deepavali holidays.

And what building in Singapore would be complete without a mall? “Singaporeans are very brand conscious,” says Carole Tay, Esplanade director, marketing communications. “Almost every place must have a mall.” The three level Esplanade Mall, which is approximately 90,000 square feet, offers a variety of retail shops and restaurants.

“When it comes to entertaining people who are from overseas, Singaporeans go all out and you will... continued on page 32
The people are passionate and proud of their homeland, but worry how others view them.

Die-hard fans even go on tours in search of it.

Those who are brave enough to try the durian will bite into a creamy, avocado-like substance that tastes a bit like onions and cream cheese. (For those who don't share the same enthusiasm and can't seem to get its taste out of their mouths, residents recommend balancing the onion aftertaste with the refreshing and sweet mangosteen.)

Singapore's kaleidoscope of culture is manifested in another way; its colors are exquisite. Pale pink and violet orchids can be found at the Botanic Gardens; deep oranges and reds permeate the exotic fruits sold on Bugis Street; gold lettering borders the red trim of well-known Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple. In Little India, brightly colored saris are worn throughout, as enticing curry aromas bring visitors to the Banana Leaf Apolo.

As exquisite as its colors are its flavors. In the historic district of Chinatown, food is not only celebrated, but has healing properties—and etiquette is everything. Chinese herb stores offer remedies for nearly every ailment. At the Imperial Herbal restaurant, a traditional herbal doctor prepares a mixture of tonics and powders for use by a master chef concocting therapeutic cuisine. The Ba Si Sha Yu (candied sweet potato) is said to lubricate the inside of the body, but its crisp and sweet layer surrounding a dry center provides instant gratification instead.

Other recipes build blood and improve vision. Locals can

continued from page 31 generally get the full Singaporean feast,” says Selena Tan, who performed at Esplanade last November with her cabaret *A Single Woman*. Tan is one of the many artists to have performed at the Theatre since its opening on October 12, 2002. She’s also one of the many Singaporeans looking forward to welcoming the world to their new arts center—and the city’s presence as a culturally vibrant city.

Since the opening of the Esplanade, featured guests have included American soprano Jessye Norman, who last year strutted onstage with a spiky cape resembling the new Theatre’s design, and The New York Philharmonic. One of the more interesting performances has been Stringraphy, in
choose from an array of hawker stalls, such as in the Old Market, and enjoy frog porridge and quench their thirst with lime juice. Even the oh-so-American Starbucks serves green tea frappucinos.

So just what is “Singaporean” culture? Finding the distinction may prove challenging, but the island’s shared values—society above self; consensus not conflict; racial and religious harmony—remain constant. The people are passionate and proud of their homeland, but worry how others view them.

Yes, the rumors are true: littering could result in a $500 fine, chewing gum can’t be imported for sale in Singapore, and smoking is prohibited in all air-conditioned places. But tough laws constricting both crime and pollution are reasons Singapore is ranked as one of the world’s safest countries, and why residents boast that their city is one of the planet’s cleanest. “When [visitors] come here, they are surprised to see that it’s a vibrant city,” says city guide Gary Koh.

The people of Singapore do not define themselves as “one” entity, but instead, of many shared principles. One does not exist dependently, but interdependently. Mahatma Gandhi said, “no culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive.”

Singapore wouldn’t have it any other way.

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which Japanese composer Kazue Mizushima stretched strings from one end of the room to the other, and performers manipulated the strings to create a resonating harp-like sound.

“Art used to be something for the elite,” says Tay. But Esplanade, Theatres on the Bay is intended to be an art center for everyone. “When the public comes, they will have some experience with the arts. If you can’t attend the performance, you can come in and explore the surface.”

—V.H.