

# ALL THAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Singapore's modern buildings and developments wouldn't be out of place in a sci-fi movie. But the city-state is also one of Asia's most forward-thinking destinations in terms of its cultural preservation.

Words RON GLUCKMAN Photography SCOTT A WOODWARD



**FROM LEFT** Raffles Hotel, an icon of colonial Singapore; the waterfront Esplanade includes a theatre and concert hall and is one of many futuristic buildings starting to dominate the cityscape.

**S**IR STAMFORD RAFFLES could barely contain his excitement. The British statesman had been exploring Malaya, enticed by the tales of a magnificent city that became a powerhouse of trade nearly eight centuries earlier. Anchoring off Saint John's Island in the Singapore Strait in 1819, the boats were lowered and his crew rowed towards what he hoped was the lost city of Singapura. On shore, he found a stone monument inscribed in ancient script, confirming he'd rediscovered the fabled 'City of the Lion'. And so, Raffles raised the British flag and restored the forgotten outpost to life.

A fort was built on the site to defend against attacks and, although it's long gone now, people can still follow in Raffles' footsteps and savour Singapore's rich history and colonial-era past. Standing in its place is The Fullerton Hotel (named, like the fort, for Robert Fullerton, the first governor of the Straits Settlements in the 1820s), one of Singapore's six dozen National Monuments. The neo-classical gem, with fluted Doric columns and massive portico, opened as Singapore's stately post office in 1928, before being converted into the opulent — and famous — 400-room hotel in 2001.

"This is Mile Zero, where Singapore started. We are the custodians of history," says Cavaliere Giovanni Viterale, general manager of The Fullerton Hotel. The property has prized views at every angle, from the museum in the lobby to the former lighthouse, which once guided ships to the prosperous port, on the roof. The structure has since been converted into the aptly named Lighthouse Restaurant, complete with a sweeping terrace. Beyond the thickets of mechanical Supertrees in nearby Gardens by the Bay, Marina Bay Sands looks like a rocket ship landing on a trio of enormous towers. Below, not far from the Singapore River, are numerous heritage buildings that are deeply rooted in the past. These include the National Museum of Singapore, which began as a library and museum in 1887, and the domed Supreme Court and City Hall, renovated and reopened in 2015 as the wonderful National Gallery.

"Singapore cherishes its history," explains the CEO of the Housing & Development Board, Dr Koon Hean Cheong, who has had a hand in much of the city's planning. "We have taken a long-term view," he adds. In fact, over the years, 7000 buildings were earmarked for conservation, resulting in the preservation of not only monuments, but also entire districts. This is especially true of Chinatown, which was rescued from red-light status, and also the colourful Little India. Buildings here have been carefully restored and many now operate as charming restaurants, bars



and boutique hotels, including Hotel Vagabond, a former 1950s bordello and gambling den swathed in red fabrics and filled with whimsical artworks and antiques. Last year, meanwhile, saw the opening of the gorgeous 37-room Warehouse Hotel following the exquisite renovation of a 19th-century 'godown' (traditional dockside warehouse).

#### LANDMARK DECISIONS

The National Heritage Board is dedicated to preserving the city's cultural past, while heritage tours can be organised through Roots, its educational arm. Of course, you simply can't talk about old Singapore without mentioning one of Asia's most famous landmarks — Raffles Hotel. Favoured by writers from Ernest Hemingway to Somerset Maugham, it was declared a National Monument in 1987 and last year celebrated its 130th birthday. (It is currently closed for an upgrade, and will reopen mid-2018.)

Gretchen Liu has literally written the book on the island nation's history, authoring *Singapore: A Pictorial History, 1819-2000*. She says the ever-expanding index of preserved and conserved buildings is a credit to the foresight of various local heritage bodies and the government — as well as an almost perfect storm of timing and conditions.

"You have to look back at the history to understand what happened," Liu says. "As Singapore began self-rule in the 1960s, the focus was on nation-building, but modernisation of housing was always an important consideration."

Parts of Singapore, particularly in the downtown area, were hugely crowded, with residents packed into often sub-standard housing, so the government ➤



#### CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Brightly coloured shutters on Amoy Street; Hotel Vagabond has had a swish upgrade; a uniformed doorman at Raffles Hotel; The Warehouse Hotel's Po Restaurant; lanterns adorn the streets of Chinatown.



**THIS PAGE**  
A former military complex, Gillman Barracks has been reinvented as a contemporary art space. Installations include this work, *Constellation of One*, by Kirsten Berg. →

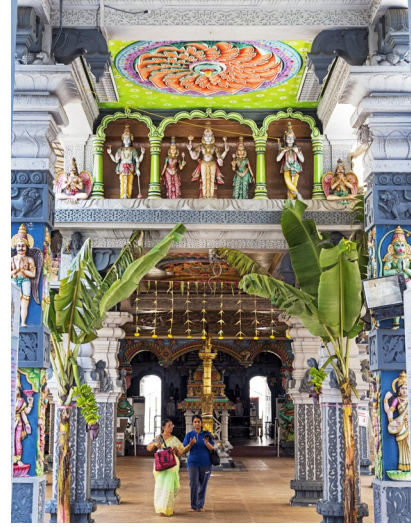


responded by building public accommodation. Derelict houses were razed and the land reclaimed — all while retaining most of the historic architecture in the old city. The end result has been some of the best urban planning in the region — with traditional shophouses and neighbourhoods of unique character escaping the wrecking balls that levelled districts in other Asian cities such as Beijing and Hong Kong.

“In the early 1990s, people were becoming more interested in conservation. The government had some property in Chinatown,” Liu says. A pilot project by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) restored several dozen shophouses. “Younger Singaporeans, many of them educated or travelling overseas, saw how cities around the world had saved old buildings, and saw the beauty in a mix of old and new.”

As the URA released property, entrepreneurs began to renovate shophouses in peripheral neighbourhoods like old Chinatown, where values were more affordable than in newer districts. Peng Loh, a lawyer with a passion for design, was among the first to move in. His debut project was Hotel 1929, named for the original opening date of what had once been a den of iniquity. Guests were charmed by the mix of traditional Chinese and colonial features. Loh kitted out his hotel with antiques and quirky fixtures such as barbershop chairs and junkyard lights. Buoyed by immediate success, he followed with the now-shuttered New Majestic Hotel, connecting four Chinese shophouses of similar vintage. Soon, the district was hopping with other new bars and restaurants, including several by Loh. One of his most recent Chinatown openings is Nouri, where menu items include wagyu and kimchi *nduja* and a nasturtium marshmallow with candied orange. His Unlisted Collection has properties from London to Shanghai and Sydney, where he renovated the old Carlton & United Breweries Administration Building and The Clare Hotel pub into The Old Clare Hotel.

“Singapore is well ahead of its neighbours in terms of thinking about the urban landscape and geography — and that includes heritage and long-term planning for the city,” Loh says. Conservation can often involve battles over direction, but Loh praises the Singaporean government for establishing clear guidelines and for its desire to actually work with the private sector. “They’re progressive and forward-thinking. And the conservation guidelines for Singapore, while strict, are not that onerous. They take into account modern uses and adaptation,” he says, adding that while conservation is not compromised, the process is flexible and geared towards finding a protection strategy that works for all parties. “We only have a small and compact area where these heritage buildings exist, so preserving them is high



on the agenda. I give credit to the planners for recognising this quite early on before it was all torn down.”

One of those areas is Dempsey Hill. Named in honour of General Sir Miles Christopher Dempsey, and used by the military in the 19th century, the area was vacated in 1989 and now abounds with cafes and pubs. Elsewhere, the former Gillman Barracks naval base has been relaunched as an arts complex housing the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore and a dozen other galleries, as well as hosting regular open-house events and pop-ups.

The drive to preserve keeps rolling with the participation of big firms such as Sino Land. The company manages multiple properties within the historical district, including The Fullerton Hotel, the modern Fullerton Bay Hotel and also The Fullerton Pavilion shopping and dining centre. Then there’s the 1919 Waterboat House (now a fine-dining venue), Customs House (restored with a mix of eateries), and The Clifford Pier, once a processing site for immigrants, today transformed into a glamorous restaurant with sweeping views.

“We like to say this is where history meets the future,” says Jeanne Ng, director of The Fullerton Heritage precinct, which strives to increase the visibility of heritage via exhibitions and tours. “The whole area is so well planned by the government. This is where our forefathers founded Singapore. And we are proud to be here.”

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**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Little India's Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple, one of the oldest in Singapore; the neoclassical Asian Civilisations Museum has had a recent revamp; the Presidential Suite at The Fullerton Hotel; Marina Bay Sands hotel has become a much-loved city landmark; the elegant Anderson Bridge is more than 100 years old.

## STAY

**Hotel 1929** 50 Keong Saik Rd; [www.hotel1929.com](http://www.hotel1929.com).  
**Hotel Vagabond** 39 Syed Alwi Rd; [www.hotelvagabondsingapore.com](http://www.hotelvagabondsingapore.com).  
**Raffles Hotel** 1 Beach Rd; [www.affles.com/singapore](http://www.affles.com/singapore).  
**The Fullerton Bay Hotel** 80 Collyer Quay; [www.fullertonhotels.com/the-fullerton-bay-hotel](http://www.fullertonhotels.com/the-fullerton-bay-hotel).  
**The Fullerton Hotel** 1 Fullerton Sq; [www.fullertonhotels.com](http://www.fullertonhotels.com).  
**The Warehouse Hotel** 320 Havelock Rd; [www.thewarehousehotel.com](http://www.thewarehousehotel.com).



## DO

**National Heritage Board** [www.nhb.gov.sg](http://www.nhb.gov.sg).  
**National Museum of Singapore** 93 Stamford Rd; [www.nationalmuseum.sg](http://www.nationalmuseum.sg).  
**Nouri** 72 Amoy St; [www.nouri.com.sg](http://www.nouri.com.sg).  
**NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore** 43 Malan Rd; [www.ntu.ccasingapore.org](http://www.ntu.ccasingapore.org).  
**Roots Heritage Tours** [www.roots.sg](http://www.roots.sg).  
**Waterboat House** 3 Fullerton Rd; [www.1919.com.sg](http://www.1919.com.sg).

