

FINANCIAL TIMES

Postcard from ... Singapore

By Peter Hughes

Raffles celebrates its 125th birthday, still standing for fabled memories with the splendour of colonial architecture



When the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge began their tour of southeast Asia in Singapore last month, there was only one place they could stay: Room 244, the Presidential Suite, at Raffles, one of the few accommodations in the world to which one doesn't need to append the word hotel. If they had stayed a couple of days longer, they could have joined the celebrations for Raffles' 125th birthday.

Somerset Maugham said Raffles stood for “all the fables of the exotic east”. It certainly still stands for fabled memories. Its pillared halls of snowy stucco, louvred shutters, long verandas and fans spinning from high ceilings; the jade green balustrades, floors of dark hardwoods and courtyard gardens represent all the dash, space and splendour of colonial architecture at its most self-assured.



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The hotel opened on Beach Road in 1887 as a 10-room guest house in a bungalow acquired by the Sarkies, four enterprising Armenian brothers. They named it, like much else in the city, after Singapore’s founder, Sir Stamford Raffles. The property quickly expanded with the addition of two wings and the famous billiard room. The story goes that the last wild tiger in Singapore was shot beneath it in 1902 (in those days the building was raised on pillars).

In 1899 Raffles gained its noble portico but the wing with the suite in which I stayed was completed six years earlier. Raffles has suites, not rooms, and there

are only 103 of them. They manage to combine the era of chaises longues with the world of air-conditioning and (free) WiFi. Quaintly, the dining-cum-sitting rooms are called parlours.

The birthday was celebrated with a dinner of Brittany turbot and Mayura beef tenderloin cooked by a Michelin two-star chef in Raffles Grill, one of 15 bars and restaurants. It’s a room that only 20 years ago had its fireplace removed as being somewhat superfluous in a climate where the daytime temperature seldom drops much below 30C.

These days the hotel also offers to arrange VIP airport treatment for its guests. I was met at the aircraft door by a petite airport employee in tailored brown uniform, and hustled on to an electric golf cart. I felt as if I had been gathered into the charge of one of those corps of brisk Asiatic girls from a James Bond movie.

“Excuse me. Coming through,” called the Bond girl to anyone oblivious of our approach as the buggy sped through 3km of Changi’s termini. Every known brand of watch, pen, camera and luggage flickered through my consciousness. It was as if I was being fast-forwarded into some shiny new consumer universe. No wonder Raffles, and the hushed interior of the hotel Bentley complete with flagstaff, seemed like sanctuaries.

I had forgotten how big the Raffles building is. I was shown the Presidential Suite, which is so spacious it contains a dining table to seat 12, as well as two bedrooms, a drawing room and a library. Among the Dickens and books on Asian art was a paperback entitled *The Queen's Fool*. Perhaps the duchess left it.

Customs persist: the antique grandfather clock in the foyer is wound every morning; the silver dinner wagon, buried for safety during the second world war, is still used for roasts in the Grill, and peanut shells are still chucked on the floor in the Long Bar, where the Singapore Sling was invented.



A butler on the veranda of the Raffles Hotel

But Singapore has little sentiment for tradition. Land reclamation, for instance, has left Beach Road almost 2km from the sea. Raffles' cleverest trick has been to retain its antiquity while still keeping up with its arriviste competitors. Twenty years ago it closed for 18 months for renovation, and another bout of modernisation is about to be announced.

What would the Sarkies brothers build today? The £3.6bn Marina Bay Sands, perhaps. Its 2,561 rooms certainly trump a 10-room guest house. Balanced across the tops of three 57-floor towers, with concave faces, sits what appears to be the hull of a huge boat, an ark come to rest upon a man-made Ararat. In fact this is Sky Park, an extraordinary city garden high above the thrumming financial district.

I asked how big it is and got a gnomic Singaporean answer. “It’s the length of four and a half Airbus A380s,” said my guide. Translated, that equals 340m – enough room for almost 4,000 people, two restaurants, woodland and a pool. Immediately below is Gardens by the Bay, a 101-hectare park on the same expanse of reclaimed land as the hotel. Singapore, which used to call itself a garden city, is now proclaiming itself as a city in a garden.

As I waited for a taxi back to the hotel, a man in the queue next to me beamed. “Singapore’s latest new project,” he said, gazing proudly at the park. “What’s next?” I asked. He pondered for a moment before saying: “I don’t know, but there is always something.”

In a place where new means already ageing, and the present is just a turnstile to the future, how does Raffles survive? Only, I suspect, because old is now such a novelty that it counts as new. Raffles will be 250 years old in 2137. By then it may be 8km from the sea and encased in a biodome, but it will still be there.

Peter Hughes was a guest of Singapore Airlines (www.singaporeair.com) and Wexas Travel (www.wexas.com) which offers four nights at Raffles, flights from London and private transfers, from £1,770