

NEIGHBOURHOODS

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An ancient parable, so old its origins are lost in the mists of time, tells of a group of blind men who, after touching different parts of an elephant, offer completely different opinions about what an elephant really is. One touches the leg and pronounces the elephant 'like a pillar'. Another touches the tail, and says the animal is 'like a rope'. Another the tusk, another the ear, and so forth.

Modern Singapore is to travellers much as the proverbial elephant was to the blind men: it leaves vastly different images depending on which part one chooses to touch.

Business visitors passing through for a three-day conference will probably spend their time in the central business district (CBD), perhaps carving out a few hours of after-work R&R on the riverfront. 'A modern metropolis of gleaming steel and glass skyscrapers, with just enough surviving colonial splendour to give it a historical feel. Really quite Western!' this visitor may pronounce upon returning home, most likely adding that old chestnut often used to describe the Lion City '...and it's so clean and orderly'.

Other travellers, after choosing to spend time around Orchard Rd, might describe the city as 'A wall-to-wall fashion-junkie's paradise, and an expensive one at that, steeped in a peculiar West-meets-East culture, similar to some of the more fashionable neighbourhoods of Hong Kong, only cleaner and less chaotic'.

Backpackers (doing the obligatory two-day stopover on their way through Southeast Asia, most likely) may find themselves prowling the budget-friendly climes of Little India and Kampong Glam. They'll come away with tales of a cacophonous, curry-and-cumin-scented city of colourful, low-slung buildings and sari-clad women – and sari-clad men if they stray down certain alleys. Other backpackers will head to Geylang, where on some streets they may encounter a row of Buddhist shrines and temples, and on other streets a row of semilegal brothels and a veritable army of sex workers. (Whichever street they choose, their description of it afterwards promises to be colourful!)

And so it goes, from the sterility of Singapore's seemingly endless housing blocks (even these neighbourhoods aren't without surprises for those who take the time to explore) to the tropical lushness of farms, parks and patches of jungle found on the city's outskirts, and in places like the forest island of Pulau Ubin.

So which of these impressions best encompass the true essence of Singapore? Returning to the parable of the elephant, all of the blind men are equally correct and incorrect: the elephant is more than just what they're able to glean through a single experience. So it is with Singapore. Take the time to explore each neighbourhood individually, and you'll agree that the Lion City is far more than just the sum of its parts.

'The Lion City is far more than just the sum of its parts'