

Singapore

Jan-Mar 2012

**ETHNIC
GOES
COUTURE**
MODERN TWISTS
ON TRADITION

**A RED
PACKET
OF LUCK**
A COLLECTOR'S
LUNAR NEW
YEAR ESSENTIAL

LEADING LIGHTS

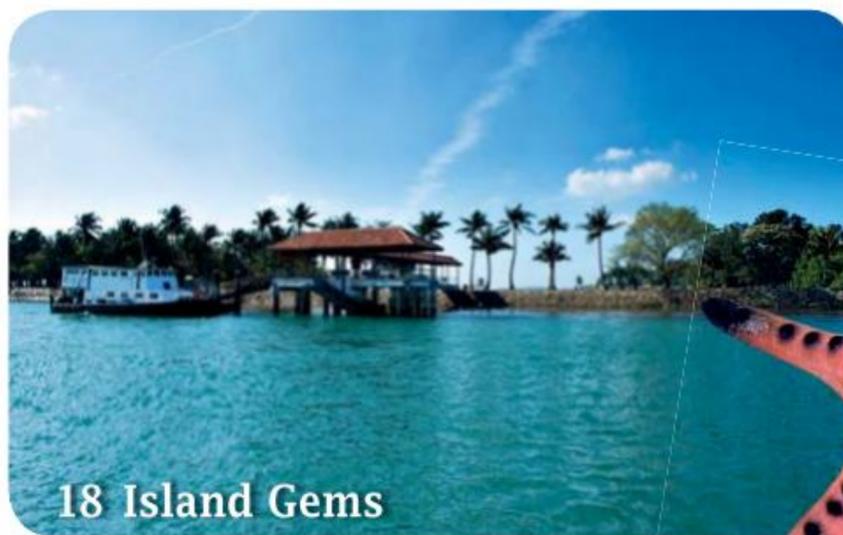
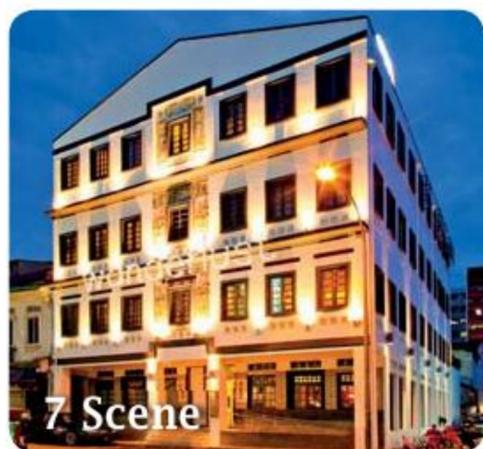
How artist Michael Lee and other
SIF alumni are changing the world



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COVER PHOTO STAN NGO

FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The start of a year is always a time of new beginnings. Whether in our personal or work lives, January is often a time when we consider the year just past and work out how we can make the year ahead even better.

As we at the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) have discovered, one of the best ways to improve one's own life is to improve the lives of those around us, and one of the easiest ways to do that is to be a friend.

In this issue of *Singapore*, we catch up with friends of the SIF whose connection with us has empowered them to take their endeavours to the next level. Whether an ongoing art collaboration, recurring volunteer stints in Laos, a scholarship programme for underprivileged children and youths or a project to fund the purchase of new books for village children in Thailand, the work being done by SIF alumni is enriching lives and effecting positive change.

We also meet the man behind Dignity Kitchen who has been a true friend to Singapore's physically and mentally challenged by providing them skills training to help them land jobs.

Another way to extend the hand of friendship is by embracing each other's cultures. We speak to designers specialising in creating ethnic garments for high-profile events, and find out how these one-of-a-kind pieces help break the ice, as well as learn the history of a Portuguese snack that is now a quintessential Singapore food.

No matter the situation, life is always a little easier with a friend by your side. You never know when your small deeds can make all the difference to those around you. The better world we all seek comes one day at a time, and it begins by changing oneself. From all of us at *Singapore*, may 2012 bring you joy in being a friend to those around you.



Jean Tan
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As part of its efforts to make friends for a better world, the Singapore International Foundation, through *Singapore*, showcases interesting facets and personalities of the island to foster understanding between Singaporeans and world communities.



Singapore International Foundation
for a better world

Find out more at www.sif.org.sg.

Avoid parachutists coming in at the last moment.

Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 59, on the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) search for potential candidates for the next general election. The elections are due to take place by 2016.

When you have so much passion, what can you do?

Local actress Michelle Chong, 34, on plunging straight into working on her next film as soon as her directorial debut, *Already Famous*, was released.

It's that people have become too cleanliness-conscious. We are too critical about little specks of dirt here and there.

Former civil engineer Lee Ek Tieng, 78, on whether Singapore has become too clean. As Singapore's Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Environment, he spearheaded the massive 10-year clean-up of the Singapore River in 1977.

If you are not having fun doing good, you're not doing good the right way.

Aseem Thakur, 25, who set up online philanthropic platform GIVE.sg. In two years, it has helped various Singapore charities raise over \$1m.

The obvious attractions for anyone coming from Australia or a Western culture are the order, the education and safety, and that everything is convenient.

Australian Peter Breitkruetz, 45, on why he became a Singapore Permanent Resident. In 2010, Singapore overtook Hong Kong as the fourth-biggest destination for Australians looking to live and work overseas; Singapore was previously ranked fifth. Almost 20,000 Australians have moved to Singapore in the past three years.

I had a lot of clients who came from my *kampung* [neighbourhood], which was quite rough. They were all involved in criminal matters.

Prominent lawyer Subhas Anandan, 64, on how he became a criminal lawyer "by accident". He is a founding member and the first president of the Association of Criminal Lawyers of Singapore.

If the arts succeed, Singapore succeeds.

Janice Koh, a 37-year-old actress who has put her name up to be considered as a Nominated Member of Parliament.

It's more fun to be high on games than on drugs.

N Varaprasad, chairman of the National Council against Drug Abuse which has launched Singapore's first anti-drug online gaming challenge.

Forward-thinking Singaporeans in fashion are giving ethnic garments an image update, successfully carving a niche for themselves in the process.

TEXT STEPHEN LEE
AND GWEN LIN
PHOTOGRAPHS STEVE ZHU

The *cheongsam* or *qipao*, that figure-hugging Chinese dress for women, has Singaporean designer Goh Lai Chan musing on heritage and identity. "It used to be for the older women, but these days I'm designing *cheongsams* for a younger clientele," says the 20-year veteran in the designer apparel trade.

A leading couturier of this iconic dress, Lai Chan dresses corporate leaders and members of high society in Singapore and the region.

But even icons need tweaking. "The *cheongsam* needs to evolve," says the 49-year-old, who runs his eponymous clothing company. "The modern woman's body no longer fits the traditional cut of the *cheongsam* — her torso is longer, the ribcage and shoulders are broader, the waist size has increased. Even the way women move has changed. In the past, their gestures were more contained and less dramatic."

EVOLUTION

His creations reflect this evolution with subtle changes to form, line and proportion. "These adjustments allow the wearer to sit and move more comfortably and naturally," says Lai Chan. Made with satin, silk and lace, his ready-made cheongsams cost between \$700 and \$980.

Also seeking to recreate tradition for the times is Raymond Wong with the *sarong kebaya*, traditionally worn by Peranakan women.

CULTURAL THREADS



[My aim] is to make the *kebaya* relevant and fun for the young people of today, something they can wear with jeans and modern accessories

Raymond Wong

2.



MAIN PHOTO: Lai Chan designs *cheongsams* for a younger clientele these days. **2.** Raymond Wong started a couture *kebaya* business after his studies in Australia **3.** The *kebaya* is a sheer blouse worn with a *sarong* (a long batik skirt). This is what a *nonya* (Peranakan woman) would traditionally wear, along with the *kasut manek* (hand-beaded slippers)

"The Peranakans brought a unique urban culture to the region," says Raymond. He is a member of the third generation of the family that started Kim Choo, a tailoring business.

The Peranakans are largely descendants of Chinese immigrants to Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula in the late 15th and 16th centuries who married indigenous women, and who melded the Chinese and Malay way of life into one unique culture.

The *sarong kebaya* is a manifestation of this mix. This traditional outfit draws its formal and aesthetic elements from a host of sartorial influences, including Chinese, European, Indonesian and Malay. Comprising a sheer blouse (the *kebaya*) and a colourful long

batik skirt (the *sarong*), variations of which are worn by women across Southeast Asia. Peranakan women adopted the ethnic dress of the Malay culture and incorporated Chinese icons such as the phoenix in its design.

"The '80s saw a revival of interest in Peranakan heritage, led by the same generation that first neglected it," says Raymond who counts himself among this group. He returned from a university education in Australia several years ago to start his *kebaya* couture business. Recently, Raymond even brought his designs →



3.



Vethaya Judy's customers now want a *sari* outfit that can be zippered up instead of wrapped around the body

→ to Russia for Singapore Night in Moscow 2011, as part of the city's Formula 1 race weekend events.

While he designs elaborate pieces for weddings and other special occasions, Raymond's aim is "to make the *kebaya* relevant and fun for the young people of today, something they can wear with jeans and modern accessories". He has even introduced non-traditional patterns such as stripes and polka dots.

Until last year, the 32-year-old worked solo, sending only the more elaborate embroidery projects to expert embroiderers in Indonesia. In late 2011, he hired an embroiderer from Myanmar and a local seamstress. "I still send some pieces to Indonesia for embroidery work, but we also have garments that are made wholly

in Singapore," he says. A ready-made *kebaya* retails for \$238 to \$328; a couture piece is priced between \$680 and \$800.

According to Raymond, 70 per cent of his customers are Singaporeans, with the rest made up of expatriates and foreigners, among them Japanese, Americans, Germans and Dutch.

The creations of Vethaya Judy, a designer with 20 years' experience in Indian and Malay traditional wear, have also evolved. She speaks of the declining appreciation of the *sari* among young Indian women these days.

"The *sari* was originally six metres of fabric that was wound and draped around the body, worn over a petticoat and a tailored blouse. These days, customers want a 'stitched-up' *sari* that

they can put on like a zippered dress, saving them the trouble of having to do the complicated folding and draping."

To keep up with the times, Judy, who runs her business Visalacy Tailor solo, has adapted her skills to produce the more sought after modern designs.

"The younger women come [to me] looking for form-fitting, more fashionable designs such as those with spaghetti straps," reports Judy, 57. "Also, while *sari* colours were traditionally very strong, young people these days prefer pastels."

DRESS GLOBAL

Today, the *sari* is also worn by non-Indian women at weddings, official functions and, of course, Bollywood theme parties. Judy's customers are mostly foreigners and expatriates, including Indian and Chinese nationals and Caucasians.

Other traditional attire that Judy tailors includes the Malay costume, the *baju kurong*, and the Punjabi suit known as *salwar khameez*. A customised *sari* from Judy costs upwards of \$95, excluding material costs.

Customers are willing to fork out the money for made-to-design traditional outfits, if the brisk demand reported by all three couturiers is anything to go by.

"I wanted to wear a *cheongsam* on my wedding day, but I did not want to look too traditional," says Vera Ang, 28. She spent about \$1,000 on a made-to-measure cream outfit. "The modern cut and detailing made my *cheongsam* fun [to wear]. The money spent was worth it as I am still able to wear it as an evening dress."

LAICHAN

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Tel: 6338 4806

KIM CHOO

111 East Coast Road

Tel: 6741 2125

VISALACY TAILOR

Albert Court Hotel

180 Albert Street #01-12

Tel: 6294 6544

St James Power Station has been transformed into a mega entertainment complex

SPACING OUT

Some of Singapore's distinctive old buildings have been transformed into boutique hotels and bustling outlets with concepts that have taken the country's urban landscape to new heights. **BY ARTI MULCHAND**

For all its spanking new star architect projects, Singapore's urban landscape isn't just a monolithic mass of modernity. With much attention paid to the conservation of late-Victorian, Edwardian and Art Deco structures, old is definitely gold when it comes to architecture here. From shophouses to colonial administrative buildings, more than 7,000 of these have been granted heritage status in the past three decades.

But in a country where land is at a premium, many of these buildings

have been put to work once more, often serving purposes that their original occupants could scarcely have imagined. All it's taken is a hearty dose of inspiration and a lot of determination, courtesy of visionary designers and entrepreneurs. *Singapore* takes a look at three buildings that have enjoyed a 21st century makeover.

ST JAMES POWER STATION

St James Power Station, built in 1927, was Singapore's first coal-fired power plant. It once kept nearby shipyards, industries and homes humming. Today, the brainchild of entertainment

veteran Dennis Foo adds serious spark to Singapore's vibrant party scene as a massive entertainment complex, boasting 12 uniquely themed outlets within the building that add a new energy to the area.

The station struggled to cope with Singapore's escalating demand for electricity and was shut down in 1962. Apart from a decade-long stint as a warehouse, it remained largely unused until Dennis came along and fired up the space once more.

Breathing life into St James Power Station was not without its challenges. To preserve the Edwardian

SCENE

redbrick façade, for example, the right bricks had to be specially produced outside Singapore. Authentic-looking alternatives had to be found for the original stained-glass windows, some of which were damaged. The 0.67m steel-reinforced floor slabs to withstand the weight of the coal and turbines also made it difficult to get to underground pipes.

Its massive steel-framed interior needed to be made functional for a megaclub complex that would feature 'live' bands. "The ceilings were so high that if you hit a bass drum, for example, the sound would only come back after a full two seconds. It made it impossible for 'live' music or even a DJ," explains Dennis.

In 2006, the \$43 million entertainment powerhouse was officially launched, and in 2009 it was gazetted as a national monument by Singapore's National Heritage Board.

WANDERLUST

At the hands of lawyer and hotelier Loh Lik Peng, recently named Singapore's

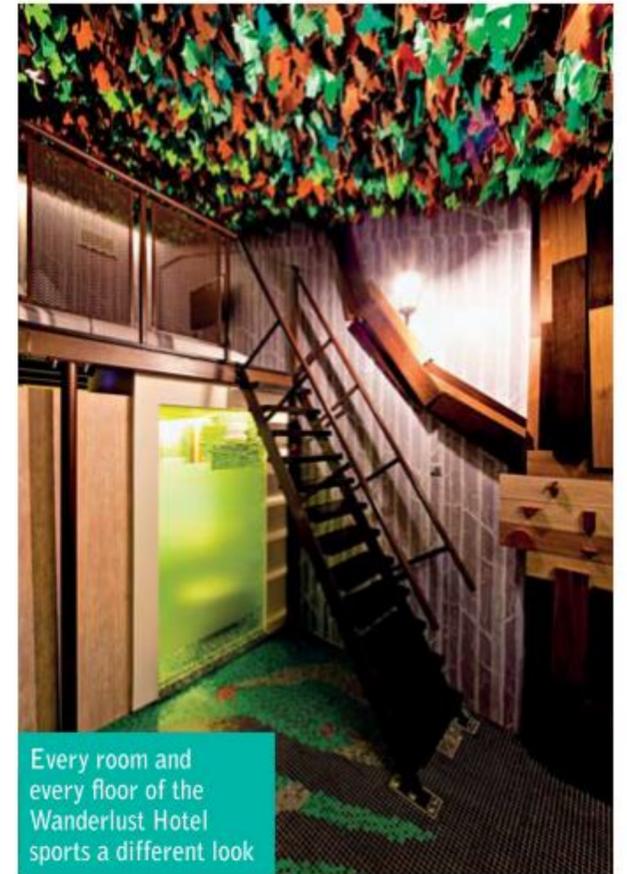
Tourism Entrepreneur of the Year, Singapore's boutique hotel scene has been transformed. Following the successful launches of two of his hotels — both transformed from old buildings — Lik Peng turned a former school in the vibrant ethnic enclave of Little India into the playfully hip hotel, Wanderlust.

Today, it draws not just travellers looking for a unique place to bed down, but the chic and trendy who lust after the flavours dished out at the French bistro Cocotte or want to settle into one of the authentic barber chairs at the lobby bar to soak in the atmosphere.

The four-storey Art Deco building, nestled among the area's backpacker hostels and coffeeshops, was constructed in the 1920s. Its distinctive façade earned it conservation status in 1989 and, given Lik Peng's touch, was one of the winners of the Urban Redevelopment Authority's Architectural Heritage Awards in 2011.

As the hotel was being created, care was taken to retain its architectural charms, and to furnish it while complementing its historical design elements. These include the timber railings on the staircases, green marble flooring and the colourful European *Art Nouveau* ceramic tiles on the ground floor, now a statement art piece.

"It had loads of original features and a lot of natural light. The main challenge was working within the existing structural constraints and making sure that the history of the building was respected," explains Lik Peng.



Every room and every floor of the Wanderlust Hotel sports a different look

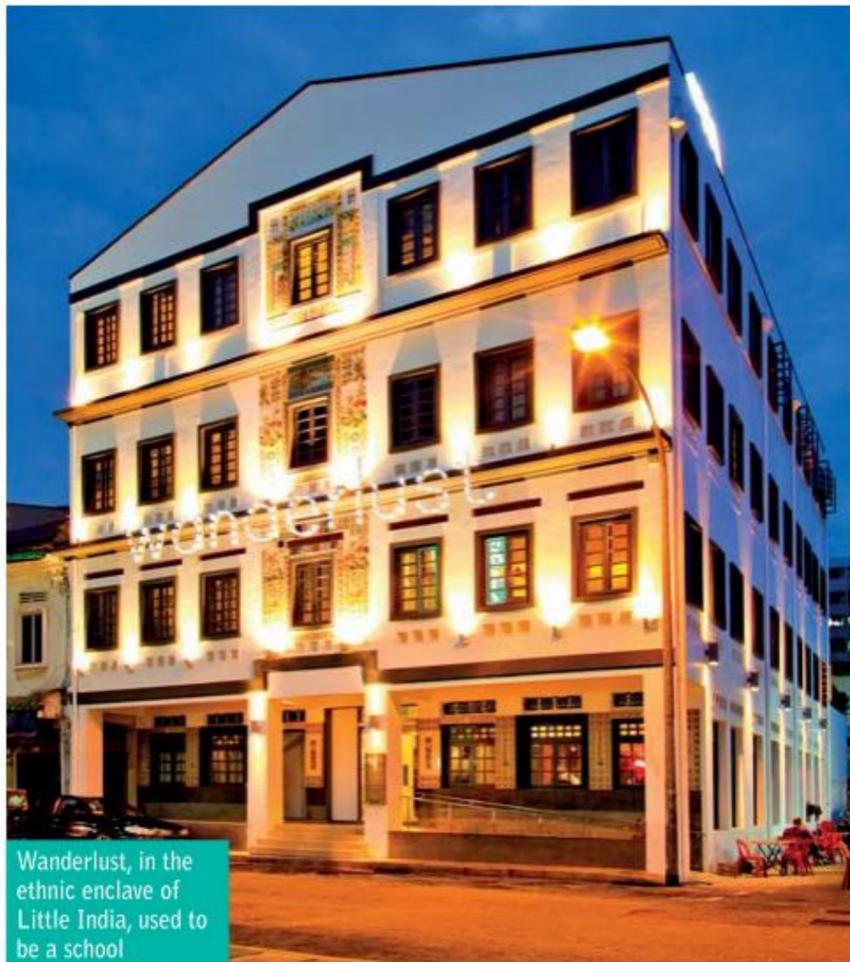
KPO

Sending off a parcel or paying a bill will never be the same, at least at the Killiney Post Office, which, following a dramatic transformation, is now home to KPO, a sleek café and bar. The chic watering hole, which backs onto a park, retains the post-war building's modernist façade. Internally, it borrows

The challenge was making sure that the history of the building was respected

Loh Lik Peng

from that aesthetic in its high ceilings and open spaces, use of exposed steel beams, and raw concrete walls and flooring. Large glass windows and outdoor spaces have been created to afford a near 360-degree view of the bustling Killiney, Penang and Orchard Road junctions, which give the bar its



Wanderlust, in the ethnic enclave of Little India, used to be a school



KPO, a bar and café that shares space with the Killiney Post Office, a post-war building

name. The few historical remnants that remained prior to the building's 2008-2009 makeover, including an old post-box, have been preserved.

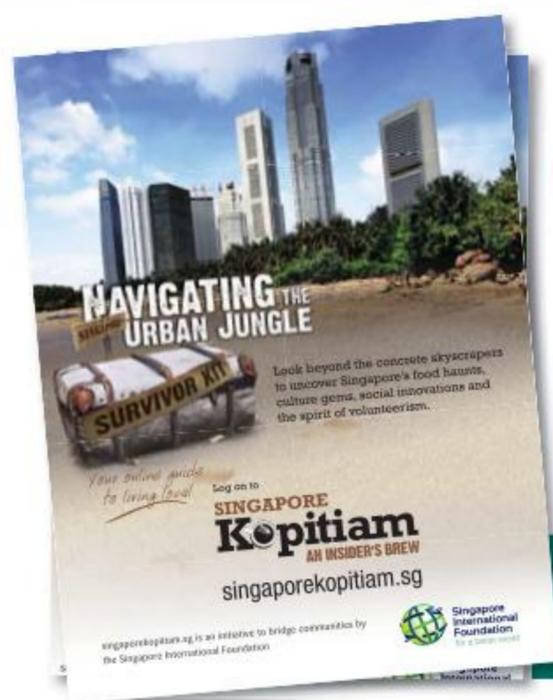
Bernard Ang, marketing manager of Imaginings, which owns KPO, says the key challenge was in trying to retain the building's look and feel while

integrating the café-bar into it. But the extensive internal restructuring has been worth it, given the success KPO has become. As the postal services wind down for the evening, DJs man the decks to create a party atmosphere that continues into the early hours of the morning.

ST JAMES POWER STATION
3 Sentosa Gateway

WANDERLUST HOTEL
2 Dickson Road

KPO
1 Killiney Road



FANCY AN 'INSIDER'S BREW'?

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Dignity Kitchen founder Koh Seng Choon is committed to seeing the disabled reach their full potential

CHAMPIONING DIGNITY

Koh Seng Choon's Dignity Kitchen trains the disabled and empowers them to earn a living. BY THERESA TAN



Far left: Dignity Kitchen provides lunch daily for the underprivileged who are served by the trainees. Left: A little bit of song and dance to go with the food.

Smile, glove, scoop, clean, serve, smile.

These six simple words pasted on a kitchen wall made all the difference to a young man whose memory had been severely impaired after two brain operations.

Using these words as a guide, Koh Seng Choon gave the young man simple repetitive tasks during the first week of his training, starting with the daily opening and closing of a food stall.

After a few weeks, the young man had picked up the skills he needed to gain employment at an operational food outlet. Now working at an eatery, "he gets paid \$800 a month," says Seng Choon, with a tinge of pride.

A smiling, energetic man, 52-year-old Seng Choon runs the social enterprise Dignity Kitchen, a "hawker training school" for a group of people who have difficulty finding employment—the intellectually and physically disabled, the blind and the hearing impaired. These individuals receive on-job training at the seven food stalls that Dignity Kitchen operates, after which they are equipped to seek employment elsewhere.

It took about four years to develop the idea along with a six-figure bank loan to kickstart it. "Dignity Kitchen is based on the concept of teaching you to fish instead of giving you a fish. We want to build and return dignity to the disadvantaged and disabled through vocation with passion," he says.

His supporters include Singapore's President Tony Tan Keng Yam, who said during his election speech on 26 August 2011, "I met the founder of Dignity Kitchen twice. He embodies the 'must try and never give up' spirit. He told me how they struggled to launch this initiative. But they did not give up... With confidence in themselves and for the future, they faced challenges head on."

VOCATION WITH PASSION

Dignity Kitchen began in October 2010, occupying three stalls at Balestier Hawker Centre, a food centre in suburban Singapore. Ten

months later, its landlord announced the centre was ceasing operations and Seng Choon came close to shutting down the enterprise.

"But on that day I was thinking of giving up, a group of parents and their disabled kids came to see me. The parents said, 'Please teach our children.' The children had finished their schooling but with no [employment] opportunities, they stayed home. They were so bored they had started to [physically] hurt themselves."

Seng Choon took that as a sign not to quit. A couple of months later, he received his licence to run the canteen at an industrial estate at Kaki Bukit in the east of Singapore, where Dignity Kitchen now operates.

"It's hard enough training 'normal' people, so working with these guys is not easy," he admits. "But they come in, [get] six to eight weeks' training, and we find them jobs. Today, we have 30 of them trained, and 25 have jobs."

CREATING SOLUTIONS

Seng Choon has devised a Braille system for his cash register, and trained a blind cashier to feel notes to decipher

their denomination. Other ideas for his disabled employees include incorporating a pictorial order system for the hearing impaired and height-adjustable counter tops for the wheelchair-bound.

Dignity Kitchen pays market-rate salaries to its disabled employees who run seven of the 10 stalls in the canteen. Each disabled trainee is paired with an able-bodied project manager, usually a senior citizen. The project manager prepares the food while the trainee serves it.

"I only ask two things of my project managers: patience and compassion," he says.

Dignity Kitchen also provides lunch daily—usually sponsored by corporations—for the underprivileged who are taken by buses to the canteen. "We've fed over 10,000 people in the past year," says Seng Choon, who was an executive director of the Restaurant Association of Singapore.

Surprisingly, his background is in engineering. After attending a polytechnic in Singapore, he went to university in the United Kingdom and earned a first-class honours degree in mechanical engineering. He also met his wife there. Seng Choon worked in the UK for about 10 years but came back to Singapore in 1994 when his wife was pregnant with their second son, now 16. Their elder son is 18.

A management lecturer, he has written three books in a series called *Elements Of Success*. His fourth book will be about Dignity Kitchen.

His parents had always been generous givers, setting him an example, says Seng Choon, who has also been a teacher and mentor to young offenders.

He opened Dignity Kitchen using \$200,000 of his own money. "In the beginning, I was losing \$1,000 a day," he says. "But within six or seven months, I broke even."

We want to build and return dignity to the disadvantaged and the disabled through vocation with passion Koh Seng Choon

It's impossible to do what he does without family support, he says. When he had to raise \$100,000 to relocate to Kaki Bukit, it was his wife who suggested remortgaging one of their properties.

Dignity Kitchen received the Enabling Employers Award from the Singapore National Employers Federation early this year.

Seng Choon is constantly asked why he does what he does. "People ask me if I'm a Christian. I say kindness has no religion. They ask if I have disabled children; no, I don't. They ask me, then why do I do it? I do it to leave a legacy. That is my measure of success."

SOCIETY

Very often, a single incident, experience or realisation is all it takes to trigger a much larger undertaking. Whether it's a trip overseas that results in involvement in a community development project, an encounter with a stranger that inspires a stint as a volunteer, or a piece of art that moves one to improve one's own life, it's the little things that spark the movements that can effect real change. *Singapore* speaks to four alumni of the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) whose experiences with the foundation have helped initiate great endeavours and loftier ideals, and demonstrated that, in their own ways, they can change the world. BY NOELLE PERERA

THE BUDDING POET

Remembering her fondness for books as a child, Nawan Poovarawan is working to ensure Thailand's underprivileged children experience the same joy.

Currently a manager at Google's Southeast Asia office in Singapore, Nawan Poovarawan, or Noom, was happy with her life in Singapore after three years here, but she still felt unfulfilled.

The Thai national, who has been working in Singapore for six years, began recalling what she'd loved as a child: poetry. "I read all the Thai poets as a child, and even won competitions in school for my own poetry," Noom remembers.

The 33-year-old found personal joy when she began writing poetry again, but wanted to do more. It was while she was longing for a connection with her hometown that she came up with My First Book Project.

The project sees funds used to buy new books for underprivileged children in Thai communities, whom she is working with World Vision's Thai office to identify. The funds are generated

through the sale of *A Twist of Thoughts*, a book of poetry written by Noom.

"I wanted to do something tangible for my community, and 'tangible' to me means putting a smile on someone's face," she says. And what made her smile more than anything as a little girl were new books.

"I remember going to bookstores and choosing whatever books I wanted; they'd be new, and they'd be mine," recalls Noom.

But as she laments, underprivileged children don't get to experience that sense of owning a new book. For them, books are luxuries that come second-hand.

Complementing community and mobile libraries, My First Book stipulates that each child gets to choose his or her own book, that the books are new, and that each book belongs to the child, to be shared only if the child chooses.

It was her time working in Singapore, Noom reveals, which was in turn inspired by her time here as a student of Southeast Asian Studies in 1999 under the SIF-ASEAN Student

Michael Lee (right), collaborated with British artist Bob Matthews under the SIF and British Council's Artist-in-Residence programme to develop *The Great Levellers* series. Noom (left), wrote a book of poetry to raise funds for My First Book Project which seeks to give underprivileged Thai children new books of their own



Fellowship programme, that gave her the confidence to write this book.

"Singapore is such a cultural hub, and it's here that I learnt that there is no right or wrong way of making art," she says.

Noom is now looking into producing eBooks, featuring audio accompaniment by Thai children, to reach larger communities. She's also looking to secure funding for a reprint of *A Twist of Thoughts* and the production of a second volume.

She hopes her idea will be picked up by others looking to make a similar impact as what's most important to her is the outcome for Thailand's children.

"They need to feel that feeling I had as a child," says Noom.

THE TRAVELLING ARTIST

Following a collaboration with British artist Bob Matthews as part of a residential exchange, Michael Lee is continuing the partnership to develop more works of art that portray life's small joys.

"It was my gallerist's idea!" says Singaporean visual artist Michael Lee of his participation in the SIF and British Council's Artist-in-Residence

Exchange programme. "She thought it might be exciting to create a platform for travel and exchange, and I thought it was a brilliant idea. I still do."

The programme saw Michael, 39, embark on a three-week art residency in London, while his British counterpart Bob Matthews spent time in Singapore. They spent time researching and developing their artistic practices while engaging with local art communities.

A required outcome of their residencies was the production of a collaborative work; Michael and Bob decided to develop an entire series. Titled *The Great Levellers*, the effort is taking them well beyond their residential exchange.

"The biggest gain of collaboration is the sharing of risks and resources," says Michael. This proved true for him and Bob, as *The Great Levellers* emerged from photographs that each of them had thought were unusable. After sharing these images of their host cities with each other, however, "some of them ended up striking a chord".

Finding in these photographs the "lowest common denominators of human existence", Michael and Bob pursued an investigation of "the small happinesses and personal utopias that keep us alive, such as taking a nap or stretching".

Besides *The Great Levellers*, individual works were developed and premiered at the National Museum of Singapore last December. The exhibition, *Utopias*, will travel to London this year.

The pair are also exploring co-curating an exhibition this year, while Michael takes part in a residency in Berlin.

It's clear that in Michael's collaboration with Bob, a spark has been ignited. "The best collaborations come from deep respect among collaborators... [and] an almost blind faith that the impossible is possible," he says.

A FLASH OF INSPIRATION

SOCIETY

THE PERENNIAL VOLUNTEER

After volunteering as an English language teacher for a year and a half in Laos, Neu Wee Teck decided that wasn't enough.

After six years as a secondary school teacher, Neu Wee Teck wanted a change. Not one to do things by halves, he signed up for a year-long assignment to teach English to government officials in Laos, through the SIF's Singapore International Volunteers programme.

"I've always believed in doing my best to help others... so I literally jumped at the opportunity," recalls Wee Teck, a 34-year-old Singaporean. "I really wanted to get out of my comfort zone." He set off for Vientiane in 2008, where living on an allowance, for example, was a challenge. "This experience really showed me how little I need to survive," he says.

When he returned to fulltime teaching in Singapore in 2009, Wee Teck was eager to share what he had gained during his time in Laos with his teenaged



Secondary school teacher Neu Wee Teck (extreme left) spent one and a half years in Laos teaching English

students — and what better way than by bringing them to Laos?

Since then, he has brought 35 students and colleagues to Laos each year. There, they embark on projects to improve the physical environments of village schools. "By bringing students [to Laos], they will be able to learn and appreciate Singapore more, which will [hopefully] translate to better work and exemplary behaviour," says Wee Teck.

He is certainly an example to his charges. Besides extending his original assignment in Laos by six months, Wee Teck volunteered in other areas, conducting workshops for Lao teachers and carrying out fundraising projects for the refurbishment of local schools.

His proudest achievement is organising the first Lao-Singapore Charity Run. Now in its third year, the annual event raised close to \$20,000 on 12 December 2011. Wee Teck's next project is to publish a book on his experiences in and observations of Laos to fundraise for a Laos-based organisation focused on education.

"I believe education can give people more opportunities in terms of work and advancement, so that they will not need to fall into poverty traps," he explains.

But as much as his heart is with Laos, Wee Teck recognises the important role he can play in shaping Singapore society: "As a teacher, I hope to impact and influence my students so that they may gain from my experience."

THE EDUCATION ENTREPRENEUR

Gaining from his time spent in Singapore under a student fellowship, Moch N Kurniawan saw the value of education and works to ensure Indonesia's youth don't have to go without it.

Moch N Kurniawan, or Iwan, fondly remembers his time in Singapore under the SIF-ASEAN Student Fellowship programme. "I got the impression that Singapore is a very well organised country, and this was shown through the country's education system," recalls Iwan, 35.

His semester-long attachment to the Faculty of Business Administration at the National University of Singapore in 1997 is something Iwan attributes his present self-belief to. And it was this confidence and exposure that led him and a team of his Fellows to set up Yayasan Indonesia Bright, or the

Indonesia Bright Foundation, in 2005.

The organisation, whose focus is a scholarship programme, was set up by Iwan and the 134 Indonesian Fellows who had also taken part in the fellowship programme.

The foundation aims to help finance the education of underprivileged Javanese children and youths, and is currently supporting 60 students from elementary school upwards. The first batch of students to receive support from the organisation will start university this year.

"The students have started to believe that they can have better futures than their parents, and that they can erase the stigma of poor families being a burden to society," explains Iwan, a reporter at *The Jakarta Post*, an English language daily. "At the same time, they're showing their peers that an education is the best way to improve one's life."

Iwan and his Fellows, besides making financial contributions of their own, have organised fundraising events and sought funding from private companies.

Over the next few years, Yayasan Indonesia Bright has plans to further enhance the education experience for the students it supports, including publishing a book about the Fellows' experiences in Singapore as a fundraising project and carrying out an Indonesia-based programme similar to the SIF-ASEAN Student Fellowship.

"The Fellowship opened an important door for me and other Fellows to be successful in our studies and careers. It's right that we now help underprivileged students to study and pursue their dreams, too," says Iwan.

Iwan (right) and a team of Indonesian Fellows who took part in the SIF-ASEAN Student Fellowship programme set up Yayasan Indonesia Bright in 2005



Singapore by numbers

160

Singapore's medal tally from the 26th Southeast Asian Games held in Indonesia in November 2011. Altogether, Singapore athletes brought home 42 gold, 45 silver and 73 bronze medals.

220,000

The number of contributions received as of end-November 2011 that will be preserved for future generations under the Singapore Memory Project. The aim is to collect and store five million stories from members of the public by 2015 — the year Singapore celebrates half a century of independence.

5.18m

Singapore's total population as of June 2011. This is an increase of 107,000 compared to 2010, or an increase of 2.1 per cent. The number of Singapore citizens grew by 0.8 per cent.

2012

The year that long-haul budget carrier Scoot is scheduled to take off. A subsidiary of Singapore Airlines, Scoot plans to offer economy class tickets that are as much as 40 per cent cheaper than full-service carriers.

\$10m

Former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's personal donation to the eponymously-named Fund for Bilingualism which he recently launched.

... AND ON THE WEB

Get a first look at what the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival has in store at www.singaporefringe.com when it returns for its eighth year from 15 to 26 Feb 2012. With the theme 'Art and Faith', the festival will feature works by local and international artists in media ranging from dance and theatre to photography and film.

For local fashion with a passion, check out Test Shoot Gallery at www.testshootgallery.com. This website features galleries of collaborative fashion photo shoots by budding Singaporean stylists, photographers and designers. Interviews give insight into the minds and creative process of veteran designers such as Frederick Lee, Designer of the Year at the Singapore Fashion Awards 2004.

Love sports, and looking for buddies to team up with? Check out playlor.com, an online club that organises sports events and tournaments for sports enthusiasts to come together, play and socialise. Sign up and join a team at one of their many tournaments covering sports including badminton, street basketball and futsal.

SIF NEWS

BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE FOR EVERYONE

"It is important for us to live beyond self and family and help build a kind and gracious society," said Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong at the Singapore International Foundation's (SIF) 20th anniversary partner appreciation dinner.

He believes the overseas projects undertaken by the SIF to help developing communities in the region will make for better Singaporeans.

"They expose Singaporeans to the less fortunate in developing countries, kindle their generous spirit and motivate them to do likewise at home in Singapore."

Mr Goh, the guest-of-honour at the dinner on 21 October 2011 to acknowledge the efforts of the foundation's partners, said the SIF's efforts to strengthen partnerships with various countries have also contributed to the "good image of Singapore as a helpful and trustworthy friend".

He recounted how he, as Prime Minister in 1990, saw the need to encourage Singaporeans to do good outside Singapore. Just as Singapore



had benefited from the assistance of developed countries when it was still a developing nation, Mr Goh had felt it was necessary to pay it forward.

Singaporeans from all walks of life have participated in the SIF's various sustainable development projects in over 17 countries, making key contributions in such diverse fields as public administration, trade and economic development, education and healthcare.

Mr Goh also launched the SIF's commemorative book *Inspirations for a Better World*, a collection of ideas and stories shared by 40 SIF alumni on making the world a better place.

In closing, he applauded the dedication of the SIF staff and volunteers,

and affirmed the continued importance of the SIF's role in building a better future for everyone.

Singapore's new president Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam has also commended the SIF's efforts.

"The SIF has had a strong track record in working with developing communities to improve lives through its Singapore volunteers. More recently, it has expanded its focus to growing networks and empowering Singaporeans and friends of Singapore to do good together," said President Tony Tan, who succeeded former President S R Nathan as the foundation's patron.

As patron, he said it is his hope to encourage more Singaporeans to become responsible global citizens.

COLLABORATIVE CROSS-CULTURAL EXHIBITION

A collaborative cross-cultural exhibition arising from the inaugural Artist-in-Residence Exchange (AiRx) programme created by the SIF and the British Council, Singapore was held at the National Museum of Singapore from 25 November to 18 December 2011.

Titled *Utopias*, it featured new solo works by Singapore artist Michael Lee and his British counterpart Bob Matthews, as well as a collaborative series. The exhibition comprised 28 works including photographs, digital prints and a site-specific installation. It will head to London this year.

The AiRx programme is the first initiative under the memorandum of understanding signed between the SIF and the British Council in May 2011, aimed at strengthening cross-cultural understanding between Singapore and the UK.

STEPPING UP HEALTHCARE FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The partnership between the SIF and Singapore's KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) took a significant step forward with the signing of a memorandum of understanding on 2 December 2011.

The three-year MOU will see the two organisations work closer together on efforts to increase the capacity of overseas health professionals and thereby deliver quality healthcare services to women and children across Southeast Asia. Through specialised skills training and the provision of basic services in women and children's healthcare, the collaboration will facilitate the participation of more KKH staff as volunteers, including medical and allied health professionals, as well as support workers.

Since 1996, the KKH-SIF partnership has embarked on more than 10



international volunteerism projects, including nearly 70 specialist missions. Among these were projects in Cambodia and Laos which has helped to reduce infant mortality rates and raise the quality of maternity care for expectant women.

The SIF and KKH are currently exploring a new project in India to offer better support for children living with HIV.

Bhutanese teachers
at a workshop session.
(Below) Lim Lit San



5 QUESTIONS WITH... LIM LIT SAN

Lim Lit San spent almost 10 months in Bhutan as a volunteer for the Singapore International Foundation's (SIF) Bhutan W.I.R.ED (Weaving Infotech Resources in Education). Spanning three years, the project involves the training of Bhutanese teachers and the setting up of centres of excellence in the use of IT in education. The aim is to help educators in Bhutan integrate IT into learning and teaching in local schools. Lit San, 38, a teacher at Singapore's Raffles Institution was the third SIF volunteer assigned to the project, living in Bhutan from February to November 2011. The project will end in March 2012.

WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER IN BHUTAN AND WHY W.I.R.ED?

It was a combination of fate and curiosity. A friend in the SIF called me some years ago to ask if I would be keen to volunteer in Bhutan [for other projects]. I couldn't at that time, but that call planted the volunteering seed in my mind. As a teacher, I understand the value of education and how it can open up opportunities. [This time] I felt I would be able to make appropriate contributions.

WHAT DID YOUR DUTIES AS A VOLUNTEER INVOLVE?

I planned and designed lessons with the 24 project teachers in the five project schools. I shared, evaluated and reviewed ideas, observed their lessons and arranged for other teachers to sit in to learn as well. This was done gradually in phases throughout the time I was working with the schools. The five project schools are located in five districts (or *dzongkhags*). I would leave for the schools — the furthest being Chukha, which is about four hours away by public bus — on a Monday and return to the capital, Thimphu, on Friday evening or early Saturday, depending on the bus schedules and the work I had at each school. Weekends were spent in the capital to prepare for the following week's trip.

HOW EFFECTIVE HAS THE W.I.R.ED PROJECT BEEN IN BHUTAN?

The feedback collected from surveys, personal emails and messages has been very positive, and helps to validate the effectiveness of the programme. The feedback has added another dimension to the richness and sense of fulfilment in this rewarding experience.

WHAT MORE CAN BE DONE ALONG THESE LINES FOR THE BHUTANESE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS?

Further training and practice is needed, as some project participants still require a guiding hand. When I left the programme, the teachers were still a little new at conducting training and workshops for their colleagues, although many of them really put in a lot of effort. Some of the project schools are limited by their current infrastructure and require more IT equipment.

WHAT WILL YOU MISS MOST ABOUT YOUR TIME IN BHUTAN?

The strongest memories are tied to the friendships forged. I left Bhutan with a heavy heart as some friends who came to see me off had become almost like family. For example, during *Diwali*, a friend applied a *tikka* [a mark made on the forehead by Hindus] on my forehead. As that ritual has to be done by a female sibling, it then made that friend my 'sister'.

I miss the country as well. The mountains are majestic, and the forests pristine and emerald green at the end of summer. And you feel energised just by sitting next to the gushing clear water in the rivers and streams.

The jetty at Pulau Hantu Kecil, one of the two isles that make up Pulau Hantu. The other is Pulau Hantu Besar

HAVENS OF NATURE

Offshore islands rich in marine and wild life and with unspoilt beaches and sleepy lagoons are just a short boat ride away from the Singapore mainland.

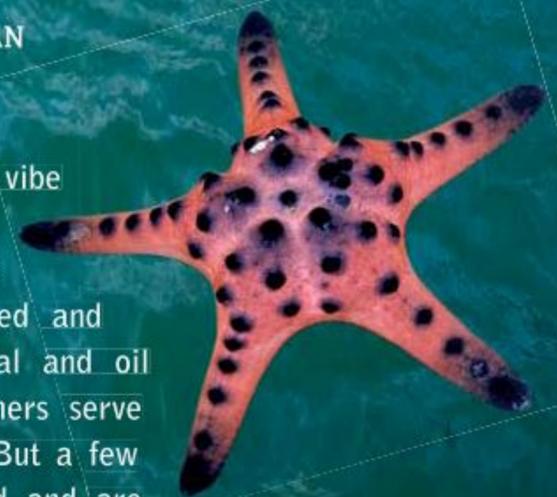
TEXT SURESH NAIR AND GENE KHOR | PHOTOGRAPHS RIA TAN

At slightly over 700 sq km, Singapore may be one of the smallest countries in the world, but it boasts 63 offshore islands of its own.

Without doubt, the best known of these is Sentosa, now a world-class tourist attraction, especially with the opening of Resorts World Sentosa, an integrated resort, in 2010. At the other end of the spectrum there is Pulau Ubin, which attracts local and foreign visitors

alike with its back-to-nature vibe and slow-paced village life.

Some of Singapore's islands have been reclaimed and are now used for industrial and oil refinery projects, while others serve as military training bases. But a few remain relatively untouched and are open to the public. And with their unspoilt beaches and sleepy lagoons, they are perfect for an idyllic sun-sand-sea getaway. Notable among these are



A Knobbly Sea Star that can sometimes be seen on the shores of the Southern Islands



Visitors on a guided walk at Pulau Semakau, home to living reefs teeming with marine life

St John's Island, Kusu Island, Sisters' Islands and Pulau Hantu — all part of the Southern Islands grouping (which also includes Sentosa). Lazarus Island, also part of this grouping, is popular with divers because of its rich marine life and thriving coral reefs.

Besides the Southern Islands, there is also Pulau Semakau where natural mangroves shelter a rich variety of plants and animals, many of which are no longer found on the Singapore mainland. There is also a vast seagrass meadow, possibly the largest in Singapore, as well as a wide zone of coral rubble teeming with amazing marine life. The island is ringed by a coral reef. However, visitors to Pulau Semakau are only allowed access if they are taking part in activities organised by designated interest groups.

WANDER BACK IN TIME

The isles are rich in local history too. St John's Island, previously known as Pulau Sakijang Bendera, was where Sir Stamford Raffles, founder of modern Singapore, dropped anchor in 1819 before making his way to the mainland. It later became a quarantine centre for immigrants suffering from cholera, beriberi and leprosy. Later, the island served as a camp for prisoners of war during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in the 1940s, before becoming a British penal settlement after World War II. One of its most famous internees is the late Devan Nair, who went on to become Singapore's third president.

The others in the Southern Islands grouping are steeped in myth and legend. "Kusu" means turtle in the Hokkien dialect, and legend has →



Top: Favid coral on Pulau Hantu. Bottom: Circular mushroom hard coral seen on many southern shores

ISLAND GEMS



The lagoon at Seringat-Kias on Lazarus Island

The clear sundial snail is listed as endangered in the Red List of threatened animals in Singapore

GETTING THERE: There are regular ferries to Kusu and St John's islands from Marina South Pier. To head to less-popular islands such as Pulau Hantu, you can catch a bumboat or water taxi from West Coast Pier. Overnight camping is only allowed on Sisters' Island and Pulau Hantu. If you want a guided tour, some nature groups, including the Tropical Marine Science Institute, also organise educational walks and expeditions.

Sisters' Island comprises two islands. This is a view of 'Little' Sisters' Island from 'Big' Sisters' Island

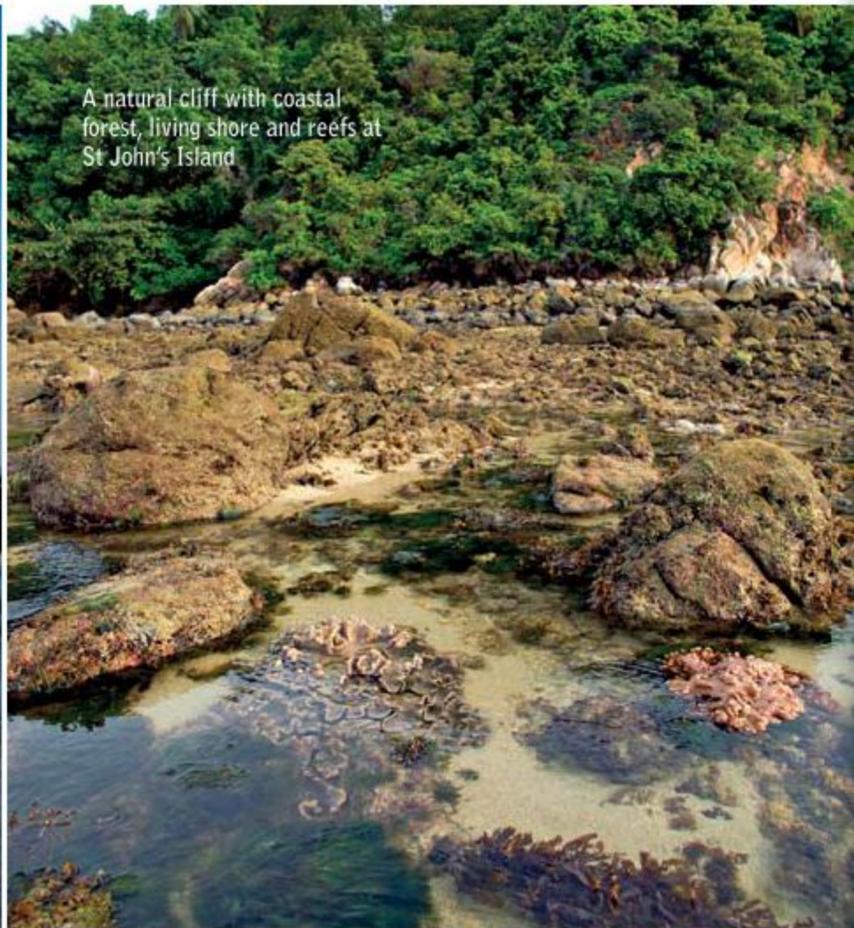
it that after turtles rescued some shipwrecked sailors, they turned themselves into an island as a safe haven for the seafarers.

The tale behind Sisters' Island revolves around a pair of sisters, Minah and Lina, who shared a bond so strong that nothing could separate them. When Lina was abducted by the sea gypsy king, a storm broke out. Minah tried to rescue her sister but was caught in a huge wave, and Lina jumped into the sea to save her. Though the storm subsided, the sisters were never found. The two islands that emerged are known as Subar Laut (Fruitful Sea) and Subar Darat (Fruitful Land), or Sisters' Islands.

"Hantu" means ghost in Malay, but Pulau Hantu's ominous name probably refers to a small sand bar that used to be submerged at high tide. Its disap-



Anemone shrimp can be seen at Kusu Island. They are usually found in pairs



A natural cliff with coastal forest, living shore and reefs at St John's Island



The Tua Pek Kong Chinese temple on Kusu Island

pearance and reappearance earned it the moniker "ghost", though this phenomenon has disappeared since stone and concrete embankments were constructed on the island.

Now, Pulau Hantu has one of Singapore's healthiest and largest coral reefs, and Kusu Island's Tua Pek Kong temple is a turtle sanctuary. Instead of prisoners, St John's Island now houses the Tropical Marine Science Institute and the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore's Marine Aquaculture Centre.

It all goes to prove that these islands are anything but sleepy backwaters. Rather, they are an important part of Singapore's landscape. These repositories of the country's past also serve as shimmering examples of its present progress and custodians of its ecological future.



The Estuarine seahorse can be found among seagrasses. It is listed as vulnerable on the Red List of threatened animals in Singapore



ISLANDS IN THE SUN

Sisters' Islands (above)

Snorkel among the reefs of Sisters' Islands or hang out on the sandy beaches and watch long-tailed macaques. A word of caution: don't swim the deep channel that runs between the islands, as currents are strong and dangerous.

Kusu Island

Taoists make annual pilgrimages to the Tua Pek Kong temple during the ninth month of the lunar calendar and childless Malay couples visit the Kramat Kusu shrine to pray for a child. Kusu Island is also home to rare marine life such as anemone shrimp and giant clams which are seldom seen on other Southern Islands.

St John's Island

There are several beaches for swimming with changing facilities and small patches of mangroves to explore. During low tide, the rock pools in the lagoon are great for spotting rare marine life and if you're lucky, you'll see a dolphin or two offshore.

Pulau Hantu

Pulau Hantu actually comprises two islands. These are connected by a shallow lagoon which reaches a depth of about 2m during high tide, making it great for snorkelling and swimming. Coral reefs have regenerated along the man-made sea walls, and the fringing reefs are home to a rich variety of fish and coral.

Pulau Semakau

Besides sport fishing and birdwatching, you can take part in an intertidal walk to explore the natural mangroves, home to an amazing variety of plants and animals. There is also a vast seagrass meadow and coral reefs. Entry to the island is restricted to participation in activities organised by designated interest groups. Find out who to contact at www.nea.gov.sg

FOR MORE INFORMATION, GO TO

<http://www.sentosa.com.sg/en/nature/southern-islands/>

<http://www.wildsingapore.com>

<http://islandcruise.com.sg>

<http://www.bluewatervolunteers.org/>

GOING LOCAL

FORTUNE FLAVOURS THE BOLD

A leap of faith and belief that variety is the spice of life led Maria Brown to set up the Asian Food Channel in Singapore — and she's had no regrets since. **BY ELISABETH LEE**

If an appreciation of instant noodles is any indication that someone has indeed integrated into the Singapore way of life, then Maria Brown is guilty as charged.

The Singapore-based Briton loves nothing better than fixing up a good Sunday roast at home over the weekend, but admits to an inexplicable passion for instant noodles.

"I have now gotten into the habit of packing noodles with me [when I travel]. It's really embarrassing, but it's true," she says.

She even tops her noodles with pickled green chilli, just as a local would a plate of dumpling noodles. One could say that adopting such eating habits is an occupational necessity, given her role as co-founder and managing director of the Asian Food Channel (AFC). But her love of instant noodles is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Maria's passionate promotion of local and Asian food.

"In Singapore, there's food for all seasons. I love chilli crab; I love the variety of herbal soups; and I love the way meat is prepared here.

"When I first came to Singapore [in 2004], I was such a carnivore because I just ate meat," she says.





"I also love the fact you can get great Thai and Indian food here." And the multicultural mix of cuisines in Singapore is what she and AFC co-founder Hian Goh try to reflect on the channel.

Singapore — at the crossroads of diverse food cultures and as a magnetic hub for culinary talent — is to Maria more than just chilli crab paradise. It is also the birthplace and incubating ground for AFC, the region's first 24-hour food channel. "AFC is a Singaporean company through and through, and our heart is here," she says.

The idea was to become the authority for Asian food-related lifestyle programming while also championing Asia's heritage, which she admires greatly. "It's a celebration of culture," Maria has said of the channel. "Asia is the breadbasket for a lot of the world and Asians ought to be proud of that."

Singapore's "excellent infrastructure from registering a business to industry support and production" was what led the former producer for the British Broadcasting Corporation to set up and base the channel here.

These factors created a "unique place" for herself and Hian Goh to realise the dream that was AFC, Maria had said in an earlier interview.

"We had no precedent, we weren't trying to copy anyone. We wanted to build something and had to overcome enormous odds, and understood the fears of our many platform partners who took a big risk with us," she says.

Launched in 2005, AFC now covers eight territories and has around 45 million viewers. In July 2011, it kicked off a region-wide search for Asia's next celebrity chef through its first-ever fully produced and filmed reality television contest. Auditions were held in five countries — Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Hong Kong.

And there is no reason the next kitchen hotshot — think Jamie Oliver,

Nigella Lawson or Martin Yan — cannot come from a Singapore kitchen, she says.

"I think Singaporeans are at a great advantage because they've got great language skills," she reasons. "I think that's important if you want to be on an international stage with food."

Travelling for work takes up most of her time, but while she has yet to take up permanent residency, Maria, who is single, has no plans to settle down elsewhere for the time being.

"When I board [a Singapore Airlines flight] and [the staff] utter the words 'Welcome back, Miss Brown', I feel like i am safe at home."

And when it comes to showing off her second home's food to her friends from out of town, Maria swears by

Singaporeans are at a great advantage because they've got great language skills. I think that's important if you want to be on an international stage with food

Maria Brown

Straits Kitchen at the Grand Hyatt Singapore. "It allows me to introduce all the great food Singapore has to offer in one convenient place, and I get my hawker food fix simultaneously," she says.

"Also, of course, I take them for chilli crab. I only eat this when I have visitors since it is so addictive and so fattening!"



IN THE SWIM OF THINGS

Ang Peng Siong — once the world's fastest man in the water — has another global challenge: a medal at the London 2012 Olympics for Singapore's swim team.

TEXT GENE KHOR | PHOTOGRAPH STEVE ZHU

Singapore's fastest man in the water badly wants to relinquish that title.

In 1982, Ang Peng Siong clocked 22.69sec for the 50m freestyle at the US National Championships in Indianapolis, becoming the world's fastest swimmer. Although that record has been shattered several times over, it still stands in Singapore.

"When a record goes unbroken for almost 30 years, you have to ask if enough is being done to raise the standard of the sport," he says. "Ideally, the record should be broken every Olympic cycle [or four years]."

It is a statement the 49-year-old makes with full authority. After retiring from competitive swimming in 1993 — Peng Siong has won 20 gold medals at past Southeast Asian (SEA) Games and one at the 1982 Asian Games — he turned to coaching.

"I found the transition natural, and coaching to be a passion, comparable to being an athlete," he says. Since 1996, he has been running his own swim school, now known as the Aquatic Performance Swim Club (APSC). It was there he groomed other SEA Games medal winners and coached swimmers from Singapore's Paralympics team.

In 2009, Peng Siong resigned from the APSC after being tapped to be national head coach for swimming. The first Singaporean to take on this role in a full-time capacity, his task is to steer the national team in its attempt to win the republic's first Olympic swimming medal at the London Olympics in June this year.

Having competed in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and the 1988 Seoul Olympics, he is understandably cautious about a podium finish for Singapore.

"It's still early to talk about our chances. With the Olympics as a pinnacle of anyone's sporting career, you'll be surrounded by the best the world has to offer. If one sets the goal as achieving Olympic success, one has

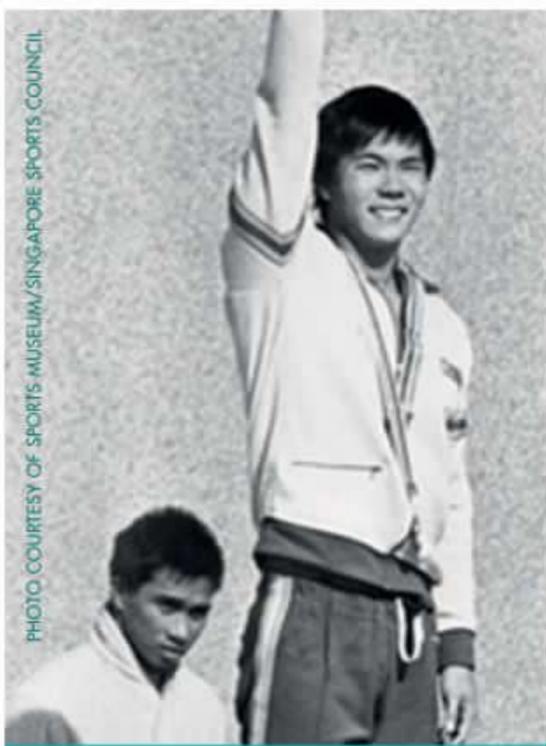
to look at the target and come up with a plan to achieve it. The coach and the athlete have to believe that they can achieve it."

At the same time, he is immensely encouraged by the haul at the recent SEA Games in Indonesia last November. The national team came back with 17 gold, nine silver and 14 bronze medals — the biggest swimming SEA Games tally to date for Singapore.

It is his opinion that to spur the sport forward, coaches and athletes need to move out of their comfort zones. "They'll say, 'This is what I'm comfortable with, it's what I've been doing for the past decade, so I don't see a need to change.'

"Higher goals needs to be set and more intense training implemented for Singapore to make it on the world swimming stage. In any culture, it's about maintaining consistency and building momentum in the athletes and the public at large."

Peng Siong cites the high school swimming culture in the United States as an example of what needs to be cultivated here. There, high schools compete among themselves almost every weekend in an atmosphere he describes as electric.



Ang Peng Siong after receiving his gold medal for the 100m freestyle at the 1982 Asian Games in New Delhi

"Because of such regular competition, you're able to better gauge the level of your performance, and improve from there. But here, the school nationals are only once a year. We need a scenario where there's a stronger and more frequent base of healthy competition."

The good news is that in Singapore, many parents send their children for swimming lessons, mainly for safety.

for the six to eight fastest swimmers after the initial finalists.

It will be Peng Siong's first Olympic games as Singapore's national head coach and also his last; he will step down after the Games. While he will continue to support the Singapore Swimming Association in a volunteer capacity and return to private coaching, retirement will see Peng Siong literally getting back into the swim of things.

I found the transition natural, and coaching to be a passion, comparable to being an athlete

Ang Peng Siong

"Subsequently, when coaches see potential in the kids, they'll try to recruit them for competitive swimming, and there will be a large base of participants," he says.

But when it comes to training, "it all boils down to the coach and the athlete... It's what's called a coach-driven, athlete-centred approach."

Managing expectations is part and parcel of a coach's job. "You have expectations from the stakeholders involved, you have expectations from the ministry that's providing the funding, and also from the parents investing in their child," he explains.

Still, Peng Siong feels that he's more than up to the task. "There are a lot of expectations of me, but I've been through all this before. I've seen enough to try and understand what needs to be done, and keep focused on what matters."

Medal or not, the London Olympics will be poignant for Peng Siong, who was the winner of the B Consolation Finals (100m freestyle) in Los Angeles and a B Consolation Finalist (50m freestyle) in Seoul. B Consolation Finals are held

"I really miss swimming," he admits. "I used to swim three to four times a week before becoming the national head coach but ever since, whatever free time I have is for my [wife] Wendy and [son] Kai Ze."

He is looking forward to getting back to things like watching movies and taking short holidays with them. "Kai Ze is already eight years old; I want to be there for his growing years. I used to go to [flower wholesalers] to pick out flowers and arrange them into a bouquet for Wendy. It'd be nice to have time to do that for her again."

GAME ON! SEA GAMES

A multi-sport event held every two years, it currently has participants from 11 countries in Southeast Asia. Myanmar will host the next SEA Games in 2013, and Singapore will do so, for the third time, in 2015.

ASIAN GAMES

Started in 1951, it is one of the world's largest sporting events, and is held every four years. The next Asian Games in 2014 will be held in the Republic of Korea.

A PACKET OF LUCK

Red packets have gone from traditional Lunar New Year gifts to ornaments to collectors' items. What's the fascination with these *hongbao*? *Singapore* finds out.

BY STACY HSU

Like most young Chinese, Heather Tan's eyes light up at the mention of *hongbao*. *Hongbao* are the red packets containing gifts of money that are given by parents and older relatives to children during the Lunar New Year season.

The colour of the envelope symbolises good luck, so *hongbao* are also given to newlyweds, birthday celebrants and newborns during the infant's first-month celebrations. No matter your age, the Chinese consider you a child as long as you are unmarried and *hongbao* will come your way during the Lunar New Year celebrations. An undergraduate in London, 24-year-old Heather, a Singaporean, still gets *hongbao* money wired to her bank account from her mother in Singapore.

"When I travel, I carry a *hongbao* packet that was given to me by my mother," she says. "It has a rabbit

design on it and in there I've also put souvenirs given by two dear friends."

The practice of giving *hongbao* dates back 1,000 years, when parents in China gave their children 100 coins as a wish for long life on the eve of the New Year. This evolved into the practice of giving *hongbao*.

In Singapore, as in other countries with large Chinese communities, *hongbao* also serve as a good branding tool for businesses such as banks and restaurants, who often issue *hongbao* embossed with their company logo for their customers' use. But these days, the red packets have other uses than just holding money.

Angeline Foong collects *hongbao* packets which she uses to make decorative lanterns. A lot of patience and time is needed to plan, glue, staple and stitch the red packets together to form these lanterns. The mother of

two young boys learnt the craft in primary school over two decades ago, but has come up with her own creations through experimentation.

Angeline gives instructions on how to make the lanterns on her blog (www.AllAboutYourChild.blogspot.com). Hers are made for loved ones, especially her parents-in-law.

"Seeing my hard work hanging in their house gives me a sense of satisfaction beyond words," she says.

THE 'RED' FACTION

Media practitioner Kho Siau Tan collects *hongbao* for their different designs. After more than 10 years, she has lost track of the number of *hongbao* packets she has accumulated. Their numbers run into the high thousands, or millions as she jokingly says.

Siau Tan normally keeps her *hongbao* in clear folders and boxes in her home, but is regularly invited to lend her collection for exhibitions in Singapore.

She has packets collected from Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia. Whenever she has a break from work, Siau Tan travels to collectors' meetings in the region, always with a huge suitcase filled with *hongbao* packets to exchange with other collectors. These meetings are rather intense, says Siau Tan, and can last

Some of Kho Siau Tan's *hongbao* collection



from early morning till past midnight. Such is her passion that she has hurt her knees "through so much walking hunting for *hongbao* packets overseas".

Among her collection are packets featuring political figures such as Taiwanese President Ma Ying Jeou and vintage ones of popular Chinese silver

There is a group of regular buyers who call us as early as four months before Lunar New Year to enquire about the *hongbao*.

Kelvin Hang of Pin Press

screen icons Lin Ching Hsia and Fung Bo Bo. A rare one given by a pilot friend commemorates the first commercial flight between mainland China and Taiwan in 2005.

MAKING FRIENDS

Siauw Tan hasn't given much thought to how much her massive collection is worth. "What matters are the friends I've made over the years as a collector," she says.

She gets some of her supply from companies that print the packets for sale.

One of them is Pin Press, a Singapore

company that since 2006 has annually produced a limited edition print of about 3,500 packets bearing the Chinese zodiac animal for that year. Its dragon designs for 2012 are priced at \$5.90 for a set of 10 packets, and there are plans to have six more designs to complete the 12-year zodiac cycle for collectors.

The response is always good, says the company's creative services head Kelvin Hang. "There is a group of regular buyers who call us as early as four months before Lunar New Year to enquire about the *hongbao*."

But for Angeline, the relationship with *hongbao* goes beyond the designs. Making her lanterns has made her a "more meticulous and patient person", she says. "But even that is nothing compared to seeing big smiles on the faces of the recipients. Their appreciation is the main motivation that keeps me going."



Children are the usual recipients of *hongbao*

Hongbao packets printed for sale



PHOTO OF LANTERN: ANGELINE FOONG; OTHER PHOTOS: ISTOCKPHOTO AND CORBIS



One of Angeline Foong's lanterns fashioned out of *hongbao* packets

ACROSS ASIA...

Similar traditions of giving red packets of money during the New Year exist in other Asian countries. They are given out in Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar, as well as among Chinese Filipinos in the Philippines. In South Korea and Japan, white envelopes are used.

In Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, Muslims hand out money gifts in green packets during *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* or the festival of *Eid*. Green is used for its traditional association with Islam.

WHAT'S COOKING



Tham Niap Tong of Rolina has stuck to the same curry puff recipe for 53 years

PHOTO: TAN KAY HIAN

that is heavier in texture and taste.

Likewise, the filling, which was usually chicken or potato curry or tinned sardines, today comprises savoury beef *rendang* (beef slow-cooked in coconut), black pepper chicken or tuna, as well as sweet concoctions like durian jam and red bean paste.

One can find vegetarian curry puffs with potatoes, carrots and onions as fillings at Indian food stalls, alongside ones stuffed with mutton. These different types of curry puffs are characterised by varying degrees of spice.

Here in Singapore, the curry puff's popularity is so widespread that it's found fans across all levels of society. Cabinet ministers in the island's early government, for instance, would snack on a particular 'brand' of *epok-epok* between parliamentary sessions. Many Singaporeans grew up snacking on curry puffs during recess at school, for breakfast and at parties.

Tradition is good business, as some makers of curry puffs will tell you. Mr Tham Niap Tong of puff-makers Rolina learnt to make curry puffs when he was 19. "I've been using the same recipe for 53 years," says the 72-year-old. The curry puffs sold at his two outlets are all "done by hand".

While both handmade and machine-produced variations are crowd-pleasers, purists will argue that the former is more delicious. Frozen curry puffs are available in supermarkets, and leading manufacturers also export curry puffs to the Middle East, America and Japan.

The humble curry puff was what

CURRY-ING

ON

The curry puff is a ubiquitous snack that has transcended cultural boundaries.

TEXT AND RECIPE BY DAVID YIP

Best described as a small pie with a curried potato filling, the curry puff is available almost everywhere in Singapore. You can find it being sold at hawker centres, snack kiosks in malls and bus interchanges and even a French-themed chain of cafés where it is sold as 'Curry Chicken Feuilleté'.

While the ultimate origins of curry puffs are not clear, they can be traced to Portuguese colonisers who introduced the curry puff's forerunner to the Southeast Asian region in the 16th century. The Malaysian *epok-epok* is derived from the Portuguese *empanada* pastry, whose name originates from the verb *empanar*, meaning to wrap or coat

in bread. *Empanada* is made by folding a piece of dough or bread around stuffing such as meat or cheese.

The snack has since evolved into one that is available in various forms, flavours and even ethnic varieties. The curry puffs made by the Chinese, for example, are different from those made by the Malays, which are again different from those made by the Indians.

Even the puff's crust reflects a transcendence of cultural boundaries. There is the flaky British-style pastry used in many Chinese and Malay versions; the European-influenced filo pastry in the Indian version that resembles a large samosa; and a thick dough, similar to that of *empanada*,



PHOTO: GWEN LIN

The Indian version of the curry puff resembles a samosa in shape

helped local traditional street food purveyors Old Chang Kee Ltd grow from a small coffee shop stall in 1956 to a listed company today. Famous for its buttery pastry crust and generous filling of potato, shredded chicken and signature hard-boiled egg, Old Chang Kee's curry puff has proven a runaway success both in Singapore and abroad. Since 1986, the enterprise has opened 71 outlets in Singapore, China, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Ms T'ea Looi-Tan, General Manager of Tip Top Curry Puff, another well-known local outlet, says her father Looi Saan Cheng, 67, who founded the business, came up with their recipe in 1979. "We haven't changed it since. The curry puffs are still our most popular item."

With hopes of opening a third outlet, Mr Tham says he has no intentions of changing his recipe. "My crust is thinner and crispier than present-day ones," he says, when asked what is unique about his creation. Sounds like a recipe for success to us.

ROLINA

49A Serangoon Garden Way,
#01-32 Serangoon Garden Market
and Food Centre
6 Tanjong Pagar Plaza, #02-16
Tanjong Pagar Food Centre

TIP TOP CURRY PUFF

Blk 722, Ang Mo Kio Ave 3, #01-2843

OLD CHANG KEE

Outlets across Singapore
www.oldchangkee.com/outlets.php

CURRY PUFF

(MAKES 16)

INGREDIENTS

PASTRY

480g all-purpose flour
2 tps baking powder
½ tsp salt
140g shortening
80g butter
350ml cold water
1 egg

FILLING

250g chicken meat, diced
1 tsp salt
2 tbsps oil
2 onions, finely chopped
2 tbsps curry powder
200g potatoes, cubed
120ml water
½ tsp sugar

METHOD

FILLING

1. Season chicken with salt.
2. Heat oil in a pan and sweat onion till it turns slightly transparent. Add curry powder and fry for another 3 minutes.
3. Add potato and fry until slightly browned. Add water and cook potato until soft. Add chicken meat and fry until the meat is cooked and the liquid has dried up.
4. Season with salt and sugar.
5. Let mixture cool completely before using.

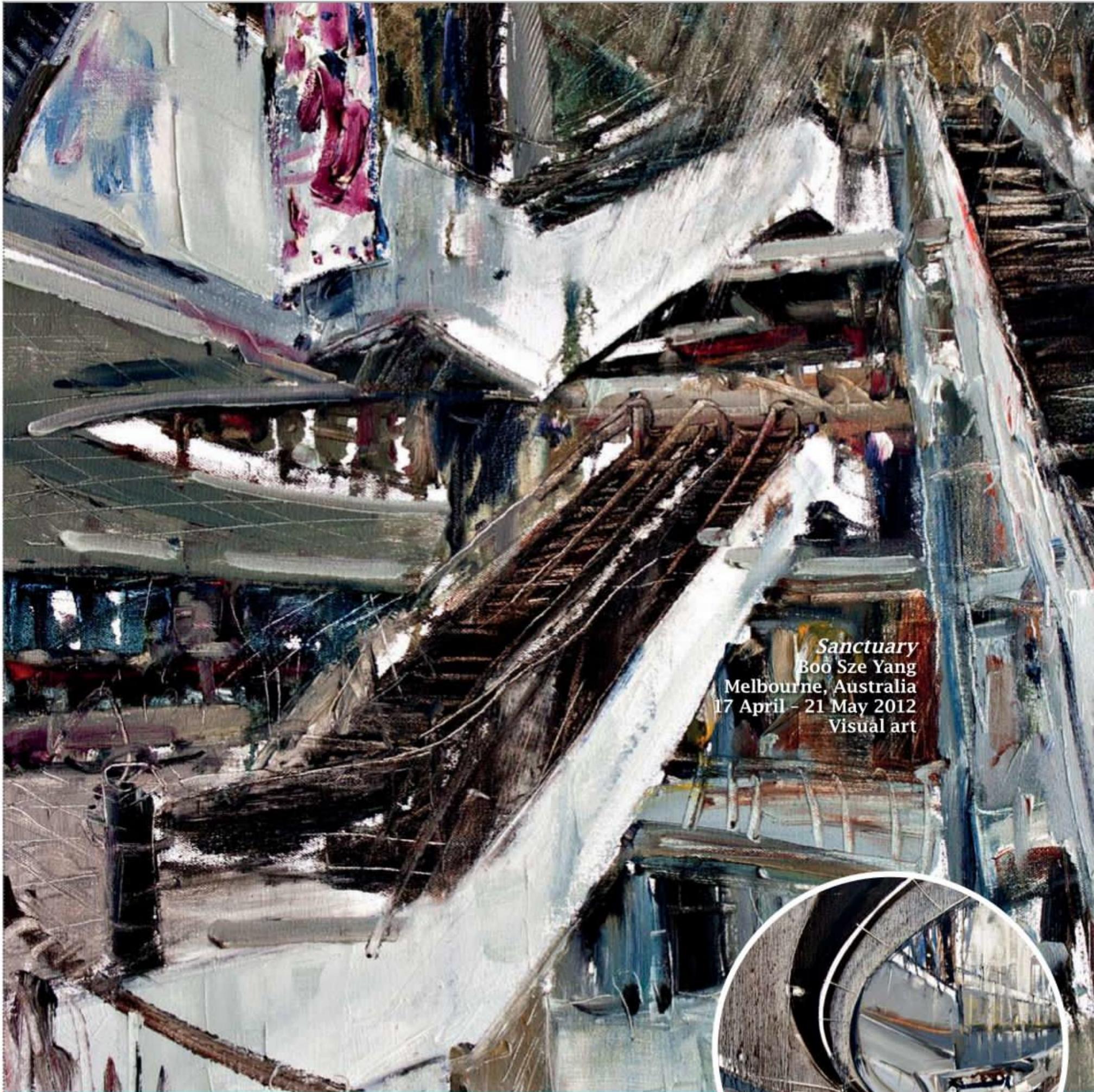
2. Add butter to the mixture. Using your hands, mix everything together. Add cold water gradually while mixing until the mixture forms a soft but not too sticky dough. Cover the dough and leave it to rise for ½ hour.
3. Dust the working surface with flour. Roll out the dough to a 1-cm thick rectangle. Fold it into as many layers as possible and roll it into a log.

CURRY PUFF

1. Cut dough into 1-cm slices. Flatten the slices, maintaining their round shape; place 1 tbsp of filling in the centre. Fold dough into a half-moon shape and seal the edges with water.
2. Deep fry in warm oil (160°C—180°C) until the pastry turns golden yellow. Drain and serve immediately.



PHOTO: DAVID YIP



Sanctuary
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Visual art

BRAVO!

From performing arts to community projects,
the nation's artists bring their creativity overseas.

Applications for Singapore Internationale, the Singapore International Foundation's arts and culture grant, are open from 2 Jan to 24 Feb 2012 for works that will be presented abroad from 15 April 2012. For more information, please write to contactus@sif.org.sg. For a full list of grant recipients, visit www.singaporekopitiam.sg/arts-and-entertainment



*Singapore-ASEAN
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Performance art



Global Dance in Unison
Odyssey Dance Theatre
6th Biennial Xposition 'O'
Contemporary Dance Fiesta,
Seoul, Republic of Korea
22 - 28 November 2011
Dance



Singapore Idols
Jing Quek
Lucca Digital Photo Festival,
Tuscany, Italy
9 November - 11 December 2011
Photography

DiverseCity

A public showcase of 80 local creative works that have been supported by the SIF's Singapore Internationale grant was held recently. Titled *DiverseCity*, it comprised live performances, exhibitions and installations of the works that travelled to 65 cities in 30 countries in the past 12 months. *DiverseCity* was held at the School of the Arts Singapore from 2 to 11 Dec 2011.



Sustaining the future now

This could be planet Earth's "Detox Decade", when we change our mindsets and unlearn unsustainable behaviours, says John Elkington, a world authority on corporate responsibility and sustainable development, and founder of Volans. BY ELAINE QUEK

When the world population goes beyond nine billion, John Elkington believes resource shortages may result in mutual aggression, and even outright warfare, between countries.

He provides a colourful analogy to illustrate the way we are consuming resources. "It may not have been designed that way, but conventional capitalism looks increasingly like a giant Ponzi scheme, where the interests of people alive today are wildly favoured over those of future generations," he says.

John is the founding partner and executive chairman of Volans, a 'future-focused' organisation that works in the areas of sustainability, innovation and entrepreneurship to develop solutions for businesses and governments. He was in Singapore in October 2011 as a keynote speaker at the Singapore International Foundation's (SIF) fifth Ideas for a Better World Forum, where he challenged his audience to break the 'Sustainability Barrier'.

"The Sustainability Barrier is presenting itself in different ways, such as the collapse of oceanic fisheries, climate change and the growing threat of Peak Oil and Peak Water [the points beyond which the supply of these resources will go into decline]," explains the 62-year-old.

"However, like how we broke the Sound Barrier in the late 1940s — when aircrafts started to move at supersonic speed — I believe that the right combination of political will, courage, innovation and entrepreneurship could see us crack the Sustainability Barrier."

John has several ways to explain the concept of 'sustainability', but his most

complete definition describes an economy or business that delivers long-term value across environmental, economic and social lines. Importantly, it does this while making use of the five capitals — natural, human, social, manufactured and financial — and helping us move towards becoming a safe, secure, healthy, equitable world. To

The right combination of political will, innovation and entrepreneurship could see us crack the Sustainability Barrier.

John Elkington

do so, there needs to be a complete relook at current economic and business models, says John.

A key way in which corporations can tackle this challenge is by adopting 'stretch targets', as [multinational firm] Unilever has done with its Sustainable Living Plan. The plan offers 50 concrete targets — such as cutting down on employee travel — that ordinary citizens and consumers can identify with, to take part in the "necessary processes of change".

Described by *BusinessWeek* in 2004 as a "dean of the corporate responsibility movement for three decades", John's first involvement in the field was raising money for the newly-formed World Wildlife Fund in 1961 when he was about 12.

At the SIF forum, he introduced the concept of a "Future Quotient" (FQ), which will also feature in his new book, *The Zeronauts*, scheduled for release this April. FQ is a measure of how effective our long-term innovations are to ensure greater sustainable living.

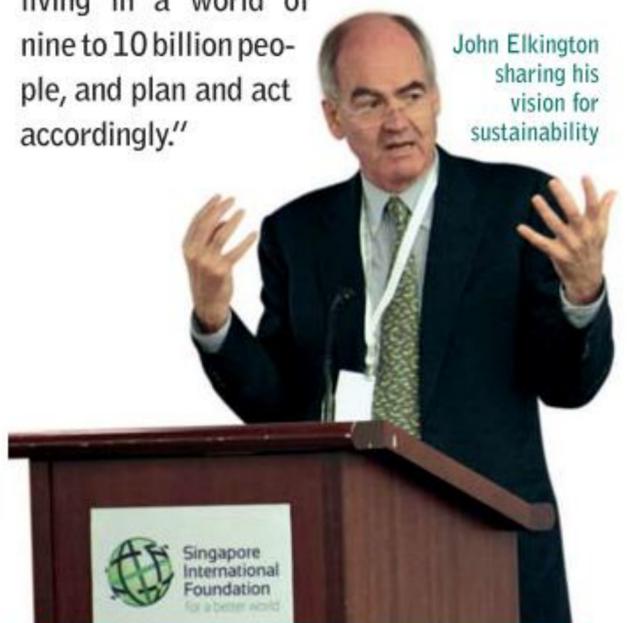
Singapore was highlighted in this FQ report as one of "50 Stars in Seriously Long-term Innovation". Of Singapore, John says, "The island state seems to be determined to develop its collective FQ that sadly remains rare in other parts of the world."

It seems a major problem is that many big corporations believe that they already possess sustainability practices in their business models. According to John, a recent survey for the UN Global Compact showed that out of 766 CEOs surveyed, 81 per cent thought that they had already embedded sustainability.

He begs to differ. "They may have a Chief Sustainability Officer, and annual sustainability reports, but they have not yet taken on board the level of disruptive change their businesses will need to go through to ensure a truly sustainable outcome through the generations."

It is not all gloom and doom for the planet though, as John advocates how this decade could be our "Detox Decade", where we change our mindsets and unlearn unsustainable behaviours.

As to the possibility of aggression between nations in the face of scarce resources, his take is this: "The only way to avoid that is to act as if we were already living in a world of nine to 10 billion people, and plan and act accordingly."



John Elkington sharing his vision for sustainability

John Elkington was a keynote speaker at the Singapore International Foundation's fifth Ideas for a Better World Forum in October 2011. The forum is a platform for global thought leaders to share their ideas to inspire action for good. Key areas explored through the forum include health, education, environment, arts and culture, and livelihood and business.



You Could Be The Reason For Their Smiles

It is estimated that more than 30 percent of Cambodians have no access to improved drinking water sources. The country also has one of the highest infant mortality rates in Asia and the majority of these premature deaths could be attributed to water-borne diseases like diarrhoea, hepatitis A and typhoid.

The SIF is calling for organisations who wish to make a difference to this situation by forming groups of 10-12 individuals to travel from Singapore to Cambodia to volunteer with Water for Life, the foundation's first direct-service project.

By assisting in the assembling and installation of bio-sand water filters, conducting basic hygiene

education and/or refurbishing a rural health centre, you can play a part in helping to improve the quality of life of some 2,000 Cambodian villagers in Siem Reap.

Water for Life is kindly sponsored by Deutsche Bank and Ngee Ann Development Pte Ltd. The project partners are Middletown Rhode Island Rotary Club U.S.A and the Angkor Hospital for Children.

Volunteer today! Visit www.sif.org.sg for more project information and application details.



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