

Lion's share of shops

Singapore's true shopping gems can be well hidden, writes Rachael Oakes-Ash

singapore PUT your credit cards away when entering Singapore because much of what you'll find you will already have, and much of what they have won't go around Anglo-Saxon thighs. Sure, there are still some gems to be found on Orchard Rd, and the markets of Little India, Chinatown and the Malay quarters are colourful, but the whole experience is so . . . perfect.

Singaporeans present a united front as the cleanest, smartest city in Asia. Spitting, chewing gum and littering are tantamount to treason.

Visitors are told how "Singapore is the best in Asia", how "Singapore has the most culture of all Asian cities", and that "Singapore beats Hong Kong for shopping". Best not to argue, but some advice: don't mention arch-rival Kuala Lumpur.

That said, there are some hidden retail havens worth foraging through, should you find yourself with 24 hours to spare in the Lion City.

Orchard Rd is shopping mall after endless shopping mall filled with the usual Gucci, Prada and LV so loved by the Asian shopper.

If you are into franchise fashion, stick within Paragon's airconditioned walls. Nearby, the Takashimaya Japanese department store is good for a squander.

Heeren is the local designers' mall on Orchard Rd, but don't bother entering if you're bigger than a size 10.

Mu turned out to be a secret treasure from designer Alfie Leong: groovy bags, shoes and streetwear at bargain prices.

The Balcony Bar in Heeren is worth a look just for the jacuzzi, where clientele recline in bling bikinis and sip bubbly.

Wheelock Place Mall is the home of Borders, but head past there to the Argent on the third floor for risque lingerie, then to Strip, the Ministry of Brazilian Waxing, for all your hair-removal needs.

Tanglin Shopping Centre at the end of Orchard Rd is old-world shopping — no glitzy glass and brass here.

This is Singapore shopping pre-mall era. Think antiques, galleries, jewellers and a fab shop that sells recycled designer handbags at a third of their original cost.

Singapore is 70 per cent Chinese. The rest of the population is made up of Malays and Indians.

The city's Chinatown provides the standard Chinese herbs and medicines as well as a plethora of teas said to rid one's body of toxins.

The Whatever Cafe is all spiritual harmony, where yoga and white witch goddess workshops are served with organic meals.

In Little India, tea and pastry houses offer ginger tea and cakes from footpath cafes. Bollywood-style earrings are cheap at \$5 a pair.



Shopaholic's paradise: Orchard Rd is still the main shopping strip in Singapore with its huge malls, but try to get off the beaten track for more unusual items.

traveller's checks

Getting there: daily flights to Singapore start at about \$700 plus taxes.

Staying: for high-end, the Fullerton, a post office converted to a five-star hotel with Hollywood-style pool. www.fullertonhotel.com

For something groovier, the Scarlet, a boutique hotel with rooftop bar and sexy Desire restaurant. www.luxehotels.com

Shopping: if short of time, take a Luxe shopping trip. www.luxecityguides.com



Get in for your chop: most Singaporeans are Chinese, so Chinese food is in demand and vendors do a roaring trade.

Floral offerings, fish markets and Hindu temples provide plenty of photographic fodder.

You can get lost in Mustafa, a 24-hour Indian department store that sells everything from aisle-loads of bangles to mountains of fabric, electrical goods, luggage and watches. An entire department is dedicated to incense.

Twenty-four hours in Singapore and this shopper bought one faux leather tote bag in deep green, \$40; one elephant-shaped tea cosy in Indian silk, \$32; two pairs of gold Bollywood-style earrings, \$10; and two pearl gemstone rings, \$30.

I redeemed myself as a serious shopper at Changi Airport, at the Charles & Keith shoe boutique. Hundreds of fashionable numbers at an average \$25 a pair meant major carry-on baggage for this shoeaholic.

Now that's the kind of bargain I came here for.



Long drink: tea cures all ills.



Exotic: Little India is enthralling.



So clean: even alleys are spotless.