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I love the heartland

Eat laksa, visit an HDB flat and the wet market. Heartland tours enable tourists to see, taste and smell the real Singapore

By Teo Cheng Wee

IT'S hard to imagine, but bamboo laundry poles, urine sensors in lifts and the sight of porridge in your rice cooker make up snippets of heartlander life that can be a draw for tourists.

Forget the major sights of Orchard Road and Sentosa, sometimes seasoned travellers just want to see the 'real' side of a country, at a person-to-person level.

That's according to tourism experts and bosses on the corporate scene here, who reckon showing visitors what's truly uniquely Singaporean - the HDB heartlands - appeals to those seeking to do something different during their stay.



YIN-YANG TOUR: Tour East's Joisse Chin (right) shows tourists around a Chinese medicine shop at Toa Payoh Hub. -- ST PHOTO: LIN SIN THAI

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The idea of taking tourists to the heartlands received a new fillip following a Business Times report recently which polled CEOs about what the tourism industry can do to accommodate the flood of tourists here in the coming years.

It turns out that amid the glitz and glamour of upcoming attractions like the Integrated Resorts (IRs) and Formula One racing, a few of the bosses could see opportunity closer to home, literally, in the form of Housing Board flats.

The founder of network operator AXS Infocomm, Mr Joey Chang, thought this could be the Singaporean version of the Australian farmstay. 'It would provide a more authentic atmosphere for visitors,' he said, adding: 'HDB estates are a success story to be shared.'

The CEOs were eyeing the heartlands to provide much-needed accommodation to promote cultural exchange and relieve the squeeze on hotels in the city, but HDB estates' potential as a tourist attraction is already on the map.

Some tour operators have been taking small numbers of tourists - many of whom are above 40 - on such tours, and the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) recently presented heartland tours as part of its visitor promotion during the Great Singapore Sale this year.

The positive sentiment is echoed by tourism experts like Dr Judy Siguaw, who agrees that the heartlands are a good way to showcase 'exotic Asia'.

She says skyscrapers, sophisticated restaurants and shopping malls mask the 'Asian-ness' of Singapore, making it similar to other large global urban areas.

But 'wet markets, heartland food courts, retail shops and grocery stores are a novelty for Western visitors', notes the dean of the Cornell-Nanyang Institute of Hospitality Management at Nanyang Technological University.

The American, who has lived here for over two years, says she has taken visitors from

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her home country to the heartlands - and their response has generally been positive.

Associate Professor Chang Tou Chuang from the National University of Singapore (NUS) points out that as the world becomes more accessible, cities start looking alike and so tourists seek something different.

'Furthermore, with better education, their understanding of culture is deeper. They want to go 'behind the scenes' of a country,' says Prof Chang, who teaches tourism geography in NUS.

To that end, the STB's recent tours were intended to give visitors an insight into the Singapore way of life and a taste of local culture, with three itineraries - 'The Quaint and Quirky', 'Eastern Escapade' and 'Journey West' - designed to showcase the best in enclaves such as Chinatown, Katong, Marine Parade, Little India and Hong Kah.

Australian tourist Ray Flanagan, who joined his first heartland tour last Friday, is one such happy tourist. He has been to Singapore more than 10 times but has visited only 'usual' tourist destinations like Sentosa and the Singapore Zoo in the past.

'It's good to visit the heartlands to see how some Singaporeans live. It makes me realise how densely populated the country is,' he says.

Turtle soup in Chinatown

BUT heartland tours have had a bumpy road at times.

At least two local agencies offer heartland tours on a regular basis: World Express has one of Toa Payoh and Bishan, while Tour East runs one to Toa Payoh and Holland Village.

But others have failed. For instance, SH Tours, which has been in the inbound tourism business for more than 20 years, ventured into the heartlands twice but found little success.

Its first attempt was in 2001, when it tried to kickstart a tour of Tiong Bahru. Customers had breakfast at Tiong Bahru Market, then visited the wet market. They then proceeded to Chinatown to visit another market and try turtle soup.

It started off on a daily basis, but after poor demand, the tour was cut to three times a week before being scrapped a year later. The Tiong Bahru tour is now run only on an ad hoc basis, which averages about once a month.

The agency tried another heartland tour - this time of Toa Payoh - in 2005, taking the tourists to shop at the town centre, visit the Shuang Lin temple and try nasi lemak at a hawker centre. But this, too, stopped after a year.

SH Tours manager Catherine Khng says the company, which sells more than 200,000 tour packages yearly, went into heartland tours because of the potential. After all, while it is easy to visit the major sights by public transport, venturing to the heartlands is more challenging - and hence tourists would sign up for a tour package.

But the agency discovered that most visitors still prefer the tried-and-tested.

Furthermore, while established attractions like the zoo can embark on their own marketing blitz, there is no one to drum up publicity for, say, Toa Payoh or Marine Parade.

The prices were a deterrent, too. Due to smaller group sizes, it cost each tourist \$39 to go on a tour of Tiong Bahru, compared to \$31 for a regular city tour.

Still a niche market

INDEED, even for those who have made it, the ride hasn't always been smooth. Tour East's first dabble in heartland tours around 1992 met with little success.

The programme included a trip to Toa Payoh to visit its temples, sports complexes and the Chung Hwa Free Clinic.

But the tours lasted for just a year because of the poor response, says Tour East's group vice-president for sales and marketing Judy Lum.

'When we told them that HDB flats were subsidised housing, they got worried, because in their countries subsidised housing meant crime-infested places,' she recalls.

'We had to explain to them that it was safe, clean and doesn't have graffiti all over. Even then, some were suspicious that the HDB tour was a propaganda tool showing them 'what the Government wants them to see'.'

Similarly, although World Express has been running its 'The Way We Live' tours for a decade now, managing director Darren Tan admits that it remains a niche market which makes up less than 5 per cent of the company's total sales.

The tour takes tourists for walks around Toa Payoh and Bishan to show the difference between an old town and a new one. They take public transport, sip coffee at a hawker centre and even visit the home of an HDB dweller.

He says the agency has continued running the tour because customer satisfaction levels were reported to be 'much higher than the regular tours'.

He is also modest about the potential growth of this market.

'The reality is that Singapore isn't a seven-day destination. Within a finite time-frame, tours here tend to be a 'best-of' that won't include the heartlands,' notes Mr Tan, who says that heartland tours tend to attract more repeat, rather than first-time, visitors.

Ms Lum agrees: 'The perception of Singapore as a stopover city is very strong and not easy to change. Most people still see us as a three-day, two-night destination. If they have more time, they may go off the beaten path, but first they must do what everyone who has been here talks about.'

However, she is quietly optimistic of the growth potential for heartland tours. The agency re-entered this market in 2004 with a 'Shop and Eat Heartland Trail', which has met with 'moderate' success.

She feels that the opening of the IRs will push Singapore to 'make its mark as a holiday destination and convince people to stay longer'.

'Hopefully the heartland tours will really take off then,' she says. 'And that will allow more tourists to experience the real heart and soul of Singapore.'

Additional reporting by Boon Chan and Erin Baker

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What do you think will make a good heartland tour? Tell us at
stlife@sph.com.sg

EXPATS' FAVORITES #1



ST PHOTO: DOMINIC WONG

Malls, parks and beaches so close by

SWATI CHAUGULE MURLIDHAR, 26

Nationality: Indian

Occupation: Accountant

Years in Singapore: Two

Living in: Private apartment in Kembangan

Top attractions of the heartlands:

- Tiong Bahru wet market, because you can get very fresh vegetables, meat and fish. The vendors are friendly and have a good attitude.
- The neighbourhood playgrounds are great places for the kids to have fun.
- Heartland malls such as Tiong Bahru Plaza, which has a wide range of shops that offer everything from music to clothing to food.
- Beaches in Singapore, such as the one at East Coast Parkway near Marine Parade estate, are clean and nice places to relax at. Parks are also close by in all neighbourhoods and good places to go for a stroll.

EXPATS' FAVORITES #2



ST PHOTO: ALAN LIM

Sip kopi and do taichi**P.J. ROBERTS, 33**

Nationality: Australian

Occupation: Vice-president of ipac Financial Planning Singapore and an ESPN Star Sports football analyst

Years in Singapore: Five

Living in: Condominium in Serangoon

Top attractions of the heartlands:

- Coffee shops and hawker centres, such as Serangoon Gardens' Chomp Chomp food centre, where the variety of food is tremendous, from Chinese to Muslim to Indian cuisine.

The banter and atmosphere of the wet market in Serangoon Avenue 3. It's interesting to see people buying and selling things.

- The neighbourhood pubs and karaoke joints near Serangoon Stadium are great for having a quiet beer and a laugh and to watch football. Happy Daze in Serangoon Gardens has an easygoing, cosy retro decor and plays laidback tunes. It is very casual and has a friendly vibe.

- Exploring Toa Payoh Town Centre with its little nooks and crannies offering everything from mobile phones to clothing.

- Early morning exercise classes, in particular taichi, at the Serangoon and Bedok sports stadiums, in which hundreds of people take part.

EXPATS' FAVORUITES #3

ST PHOTO: LAU FOOK KONG

Danish delights in Singapore's wet markets**IBEN WAN, 33**

Nationality: Danish

Occupation: Sales and marketing manager

Years in Singapore: Six

Living in: HDB flat in Hougang

Top attractions of the heartlands:

- The gatherings of elderly men with their birds in their cages in places such as Ang Mo Kio. We don't have this kind of practice in Denmark.
- Going to Geylang for food such as the famous frog porridge, where you get to see a more unpolished and perhaps more authentic side of Singapore.
- Sembawang Park offers many different things including a small beach. It is also a venue for bird-watching.
- A lot of places in Europe don't have wet markets like the ones here. They are good for trying all kinds of exotic fruits like durian, pomelo and mango.

EXPATS' FAVORUITES #4



ST PHOTO: ALAN LIM

Line-dance in the Lion City, anyone?

KAZE TEFFO ETIENNE.GISCARD, 20

Nationality: Cameroonian

Occupation: Footballer with Balestier Khalsa Football Club

Years in Singapore: Two

Living in: Semi-detached house in Potong Pasir

Top attractions of the heartland:

- The Toa Payoh Town Park has many flowers and it's quiet so I like to go there for long walks and jogs and to relax.
- The shops in Toa Payoh Central as they sell many interesting things. Goods are cheap and there is room for bargaining. There is great local flavour in the products, for example, the clothing.
- Eateries such as food courts, coffee shops and hawker centres. My favourite dishes include Hainanese chicken rice, nasi goreng and roti prata.
- The Toa Payoh swimming pool because it's great for doing laps when I train as well as a good way to meet Singaporeans.
- Line-dancing at the HDB Hub which takes place about once a month. It's very nice to watch what's going on because the dancing is nicely choreographed.

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