



Eating and Reminiscing in Chinatown

By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

“Scarlet” is not just a colour, but the name of a slick boutique hotel straddling the Central Business District and Chinatown. I confess I was extremely sceptical as “boutique” is often a euphemism for “small”, and for me, Chinatown represented intimidating crowds, loud (very loud) scenes and horrifyingly long queues for last minute Chinese New Year goodies. Hence, the little staycation I had at The Scarlet (33 Erskine Road) turned out to be a very pleasant surprise that I would recommend to any jaded, weary Singapore doctor who wants a couple of days off with no preparation and no fuss.

The Scarlet

A part of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World™ brand, The Scarlet is Singapore’s first luxury boutique hotel and opened its doors in 2004, following a \$45 million refurbishment of an Art Deco building dating back to 1924. The brainchild of Indonesian owner Geeson Lawadinata and first-time designer Michael Tan, The Scarlet was their first foray into the hotel business, and it shows in the avant garde nature of decor and atypical offerings.

The splash of predominantly red, gold and black makes a bold statement, as do the very tastefully, individually designed and decorated rooms. It was interesting to examine the furniture in the rooms and reflect on how cleverly the designer wove





Tian Tian Hainanese Chicken Rice



Oyster omelette from Beng Hiang Restaurant



Traditional Chinese pastries from Tong Heng Confectionery (285 South Bridge Road)



Cake from Le Chocolat Cafe

stylishness and seeming deliberate cosiness together, which in truth is intended to overcome the very real constraints in space and awkward corners that are a reality of a conserved building.

Decorated in bold, sensual colours described by some as “audacious”, The Scarlet’s lobby is stunning with a dazzling chandelier. The two-bedroom suite “Splendour” is palatial, adorned in rich aubergine and mauve, and sought after for hen parties, cosy corporate functions and surprisingly, families.

The “Lavish” suite is similarly fitted, but comes with the famed Hastens bed, a \$30,000 exquisitely handmade bed stuffed with horsehair.

Food, food, food!

Food is one of Singapore’s most pleasurable offerings and Chinatown is right up there with the best. Forget the \$100 meals along Orchard Road, the real action is in hawker centres and shophouses. Chomping through Chinatown was a delight. Stylish new cafes, like Le Chocolat Cafe (28 Ann Siang Hill), were places to see and be seen, and while a lovely, lazy respite from the afternoon heat, didn’t evoke the same gustatory pleasures of the old-timers.

The classics still dominate. At Maxwell Food Centre, Tian Tian Hainanese Chicken Rice and Lao Ban Soya Beancurd enjoy long queues right from morning, and Hainanese Curry Rice is equally popular. Other old favourites like Beng Hiang Restaurant (Hokkien cuisine, 112 Amoy Street) did not disappoint either.

Shopping

Nothing to shout about for homegrown Singaporeans but the sheer variety of trinkets and traditional goods are worth a prolonged browse. Everything for sale for use in this life and the next!

Harking back to a bygone era

Chinatown is a veritable gallery of street art and wonderfully restored buildings, including remarkably temples, churches and mosques all in close proximity.

The Chinatown Heritage Centre (<http://www.chinatownheritagecentre.sg>) comprising three beautifully restored shophouses along Pagoda Street was a gem of a find. We spent an entire afternoon poring through relics of the past, sharing with the children childhood memories of a messier, but perhaps more charming Chinatown with a unique appeal somewhat diminished today. A video poignantly captured a remark from a longtime resident that Chinatown stopped being Chinatown when the second and third floors of shophouses stopped being homes and were converted to offices. People living and working in a community give a very different character compared to people merely working...

Don’t confine staycations to beach resorts and downtown all-day and all-night shopping excursions. Singapore has a remarkable heritage captured in its food, buildings and memories, and Chinatown can offer them all. **SMA**



Dr Jeremy Lim’s stay at The Scarlet was made possible by Small Luxury Hotels of the World. SMA has partnered Small Luxury Hotels of the World to offer a special rate exclusive to all SMA members. Visit <http://www.slh.com/sma> to find out how you can indulge in an unforgettable experience!