

SINGAPORE First Impressions







And with the stroke of midnight, it is now my birthday. I'm celebrating alone in my very cozy business class seat, trying to keep down the three gin and tonics I foolishly chased with a *Grand Marnier* on ice, thinking it would put me to sleep. Instead, I have a pounding headache and my mouth feels as if one of those suction gizmos the dentist uses to remove all your spit is wedged under my tongue. Trying to take my mind off my ailments, I glance out the window. Below are the dimmed lights of India, a jeweled pristine sky twinkles above. It's quiet, peaceful and magnificent. I wonder what's going on down there? Are those pockets of light from a small village or could they be bouncing off the *Taj Mahal*? Or am I looking at the lights of an Ikea and its adjacent parking lots?□

It's hour nineteen of my journey from New York to Singapore and I'm equally excited and anxious. I've been hired to be the showrunner for a reality competition TV show called, *Fit for Fashion*. It's a cross between *Top Model* and *Biggest Loser*, just with smaller people. I'm replacing someone who flamed out, and walking into a show that is already behind schedule

and troubled. From my recent Skype calls to the production team, there is no question this team is stressed and going down fast. My job is to rally the troops, put the train back on the tracks and get the engine stoked to create a new show that will reach 150 million people in the Asian-English speaking market. What could go wrong?□

I've barely had time to pack my panties and blow the dust off my passport. I'm leaving my comfortable bed, the one I share with my surprisingly understanding husband, to go off on an eight-month adventure I actually know very little about. But I need this. Sometimes, opportunities come up that are so out of your comfort zone you have no choice but to go for it. I just spent a good chunk of my life producing food television and it's time to do something more challenging and less fattening. □

The sun is starting to rise from the east like a big fireball inching its way through streaks of magenta clouds. I can see the coastline of the city as an endless stream of tankers head for the harbor. The plane will soon touch down. A new day is dawning in Singapore. It's a new day for me too.

Once I arrive at my flat and settle in, hunger makes itself known, as my stomach growls with anticipation. I take the MRT (Metro) downtown to the Maxwell Road Hawker Centre, one of the more popular open air spots for cheap eats with over 100 different stalls from which to choose. Here, every province of China is represented, along with a mix of Singaporean, Malaysian, Indian and Thai dishes, each one making my mouth water. Names like *Popiah*, *Yong Tau Foo*, and *Bak Kut Tet* are just a few of the dishes I've never heard of, but am willing to try.

As I walk down the lanes, there's a Doppler-like effect of aromas. A whiff of wok-fried seafood rises and then ebbs as the pungent smell of curry takes its place, only to fade as I approach the next stall. The long line for *Hainanese* chicken

rice, Singapore's most popular dish, snakes out onto the sidewalk. Quart sized bowls of noodles with stir-fried pork and vegetables are ladled with piping hot home made broths. As far as the eye can see, people are slurping away enjoying their lunch.

I opt for *Char Kway Teow*, a Singaporean favorite recommended in one of my guidebooks. It actually originates from Malaysia and is made from flat rice noodles coated in pork fat, then stir-fried over high heat with dark soy sauce, chili, whole prawns, beans sprouts, Chinese sausage and blood cockles. I'm not quite sure why they are called blood cockles and perhaps that's best. I don't know if it's because I'm so hungry or if it's because the dish is so good, but I have to force myself not to gobble it down. It is rich and pungent, sweet and salty, and the cockles fall from their shells with ease. The portion is enough for two people, but no matter, I polish it off hoping my cast iron stomach won't fail me. ☐

Just as I take my last bite, a clap of thunder rumbles through the market. It is so loud it rattles some of the stacked plates. Within seconds, the skies open and the rain pours down, quickly creating little rivers around the market perimeter. As the tourists gather to the edges of the market wondering whether to make a run for it, I notice the locals remain seated, unconcerned. Another crack of lightning and the thunder follows, this time even louder.

The winds pick up and some of the garbage from the overflowing bins gets swept onto the streets. The rain continues to pound on the tin roof like a jackhammer breaking open a sidewalk. And still the locals remain unfazed. I overhear an elderly gentleman talking to his frightened grandson.

"It is monsoon season. Each afternoon, almost like clockwork, the skies can no longer take the heat, and they cry out in despair."☐

Ten minutes go by and the storm passes just as quickly as it entered. The sun breaks through and steam rises from the hot streets as the water begins to evaporate. With hopes of keeping my shoes dry, I tiptoe around the edges of the muddy puddles in search of my next adventure.