



DESTINATION SINGAPORE

# Bling to boutique

In a city-state known for doing things big, **Craig Tansley** finds tucked-away locales are fast becoming its greatest asset.

It used to be easy being a tour guide in Singapore; people wanted cheap electronics and to go to the big shopping centres on Orchard Road. Then they'd ask me to take them to eat at a hawker centre. When that was done, they'd say 'OK, I can go now, I've seen Singapore.' Whereas now," veteran guide Gary Koh says, pausing to look slowly around him at local haunt, Haji Lane; at shops with names such as Visual Orgasm Tattoo and studios offering cut-price Ohmsmanith Yoga workshops; at graffiti murals commissioned for the walls that surround us (in a city that once famously caned an American teenager for the same crime), "now it's tennier."

But then, things had to change, didn't they?

Every city in China now sells far cheaper electronic goods, and these days Dubai is more famous for its shopping bling – it's got taller buildings, more Versace and Dolce & Gabbana outlets ... even an indoor ski mountain (top that, Singapore).

While Singapore will always attract international shoppers, there has been a development of its more subtle attractions in the past two to three years – small, tucked-away, local hangouts that aren't immediately obvious to international visitors. They're the sorts of places that aren't necessarily in guide books or brochures at the airport.

Or, as Koh puts it, "Singapore used to be about 'look at me' – it was all high rises, all rooftop bars ... everything was big. Now sometimes it's more a case of 'look for me.'"

The changes have given international visitors a new reason to visit. Sandra Leong of the Singapore Tourism Board says international travellers are just beginning to sample off-the-beaten-track destinations within the city that once only locals frequented. "These places have been less known to overseas visitors who mightn't have wandered beyond the familiar establishments," she says. "But they're definitely doing that today."

Perhaps the best example can be found in Haji Lane. Located in Singapore's Arab Quarter (about two kilometres north of

the central business district) among busy streets full of fabric shops and dirt-cheap Middle Eastern food stores, Haji Lane is said to be Singapore's narrowest street. Maybe that's why I walk past it three times before I find it. Once a forgotten street of pre-war shop-houses, it's now home to some of the country's best, and quirkiest, independent fashion boutiques. There's everything here, from tapas bars to art galleries and second-hand jewellery stores. Local hipsters

sit sprawled across flowery cushions outside bright-coloured cafes. Sitar music filters out from moody bars on Bali Lane – which runs adjacent to Haji Lane – and patrons eat international cuisine at tables beneath frangipani trees. Bars such as Blu Jazz and Aura, with their young, hip clientele, have rapidly become the bars to be seen at in Singapore.

Above Haji Lane, towering high-rise apartments provide ever-present shadows on the street, but down here feels more like London's Soho district than inner-city south-east Asia.

However, it's the graffiti murals adorning the sides of many shops of the laneway that surprise me most. It was only 19 years ago the Singaporean Government sentenced 18-year-old American Michael Fay to four lashes with a cane for spray-painting graffiti.

In Haji Lane, the act is no longer a crime; it's officially art. "Haji Lane is] a good indication that we've grown as a city," says Daniel Koh, creative director of Haji Lane's WanderWonder. "There are boutiques here stocked with offbeat labels you won't find in huge conglomerate malls on Orchard Avenue. Tourists have started coming here to soak up the vibe and understand our culture."

Haji Lane is best visited in the late afternoon as the heat subsides and visitors cruise the laneway; in the evenings, live music is played inside and outside bars. Meanwhile, across town, an understated residential district has been undergoing a radical transformation that tour guide Gary Koh tells me I must see. "Everyone's trying to get into Tiong Bahru," he says. "But still, you wouldn't know about it unless someone local told you about it." Just five minutes' drive south of the city centre, the Tiong Bahru precinct is dominated by 30 or so huge art deco-style apartment blocks (the area is home to one of the city's oldest housing estates). We

reach Yong Siak Street, one of Tiong Bahru's main commercial zones, where old apartments give way to urban chic – sushi bars, hair boutiques, fashion stores, vintage bookshops, record stores, art studios, cafes and restaurants dominate the streetscape.

Locals gather at cafes where baristas with elaborate, expensive hairstyles brew only the finest, fair-traded, hand-crafted coffee from Bali, Papua New Guinea, Colombia and Brazil. Art can be bought at many cafes, while some of the city's most innovative designers have retail outlets beside the eateries.

Perth brothers Harry and George Grover own the hippest coffee shop on Yong Siak Street – Forty Hands. "Singapore is changing so rapidly," Harry tells me. "A few years back, Singapore was considered boring and sterile; now it's evolved. There are little pockets of cool everywhere. Businesses, especially those with a more indie vibe, are veering away from built-up commercial areas and instead are opening up in

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previously untouched locations like Tiong Bahru. We were the first to come here and now the landscape's changed. I had to convince my local partners to come here: they wanted to do the shop in a mall but I liked the idea of discovery."

A few streets over, Eng Hoon Street is another hidden gem, full of artisan bakeries, design showrooms, boutique stores and restaurants and cafes that buzz all weekend.

And the list goes on; Ann Siang Hill – deep inside Chinatown – has gone through a radical makeover and is now home to rustic wine bars and cafes, vintage clothing stores, pastry and record shops, toy stores and alfresco restaurants with tables that spill out across the footpath.

Just a short walk away, Keong Saik Road – an area once famous for its brothels – is home to innovative fashion boutiques, design stores and emerging cafes and restaurants. Even Singapore's most notorious red-light district, Geylang, is attracting a different type of international visitor these days – it now offers some of the city's best dining options. And keep an eye out on Little India (a district just north of the city, dominated

by low-income residents and backpacker joints) – boutique stores, indie cafes and restaurants and art galleries are beginning to move in.

Even Singapore's bar owners – responsible for the creation of some of the most extravagant establishments in Asia (famously built on the rooftops of towering high-rises) – are opting instead for subtlety.

Setting up in dark alleys with shabby exteriors far from the noted entertainment areas of Clarke and Boat quays, some of Singapore's best new bars are known almost entirely through word-of-mouth. Its hippest new bar, 28 HongKong Street, has no signage (and at the time of its opening didn't have a website or phone number) and is located in a nondescript thoroughfare connecting the central business district to Chinatown. Voted among the top 50 bars in the world by respected global drinks journal *Drinks International*, I can't find it until I spot two guests lining up outside a dilapidated 1960s shop facade. The bar is dark and intimate inside, with room for just 60 guests.

"Most of the guests who come here have been referred by friends," co-owner Michael Callahan says. "People find us organically, and I think that's where it is going with Singapore in general. There are going to be more and more independent, underground, off-the-wall locals. Singapore's changing."

## BITE-SIZED RESTAURANTS

Some of Singapore's top chefs are offering more casual, intimate dining experiences for guests who make the effort to find them.

### The Rabbit Stash

With seating for only 15, the Rabbit Stash offers no fanfare at all in the far-flung Pandan Valley condominium. On the mezzanine level of a pie shop, the restaurant shares a boutique space with its tiny kitchen. But the seasonally changing five-course degustation menu – which you will eat off a communal table – is worth the journey.

354 Alexandra Road, 01-07 Alexis, +65 9173 0723, [therabbitstash.com.sg](http://therabbitstash.com.sg).

### Esquina

With seating also for just 15, Esquina is located in a narrow strip of space in Chinatown's Jiak Chuan Road area. This

## FAST FACTS

**Getting there** Qantas has a fare to Singapore for about \$729 low-season return from Sydney (8hr 5min) and Melbourne (7hr 30min) including taxes. The flights from both cities are non-stop. Phone 13 13 13, see [qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au).

**Staying there** The Sultan Hotel is a 64-room boutique establishment located in Kampong Glam, a few minutes' walk from Haji Lane. See [thesultan.com.sg](http://thesultan.com.sg). Wangz Hotel is a boutique hotel located beside Tiong Bahru. See [wangzhotel.com](http://wangzhotel.com).

**More information** [yoursingapore.com](http://yoursingapore.com)

Hole-in-the-wall cocktail bars are popping up all over Singapore. Those not to miss include Barkode, in unfashionable (for now) Little India; Mr Punch Winebar, a secret hideout in a toy museum; the Absinthe Artisan, housed in an old shop-house accessed by a shared staircase beside a 24-hour convenience store; and the Good Beer Company, hidden away in the corner of a huge food centre in Chinatown.

Craig Tansley was assisted by Singapore Tourism.



## SPACED OUT: THREE SMALL GALLERIES

To discover the Singapore art scene you need to go small. Immerse yourself in the intimate – often secretive – contemporary galleries dotted around the city.

### FOST Gallery

Tucked away in a quiet row of shop-houses off River Valley in downtown Singapore, FOST doesn't boast big international names but owner Stephanie Fong has big ambitions for home-grown talent. Over the past two years, FOST has built a reputation as the best place to observe local art talent. 1 Lock Road, Gillman Barracks, +65 6694 3080, [fostgallery.com](http://fostgallery.com).

### White Canvas Gallery

Located in Tiong Bahru, White Canvas Gallery epitomises the district's emergence as one of Singapore's true cultural hot

spots. The gallery brings contemporary art from all over south-east Asia through solo, group and thematic exhibits. Every exhibit features a complementary artist's talk, lecture or hosted dinner to make the work more accessible to the public.

78 Guan Chuan Street, Tiong Bahru, [whitecanvas-gallery.com](http://whitecanvas-gallery.com).

### Collectors Contemporary

Collectors Contemporary is another art gallery changing the way art is viewed in Singapore. Its focus is Western contemporary art – a genre that's hard to come by in Singapore. Gallery directors Alvin Koh and Gary Sng began their journey as serious art collectors about 10 years ago and now have more than 500 pieces.

5 Jalan Kilang Barat, 1-3 Petro Centre, +65 6878 103, [collectors.com.sg](http://collectors.com.sg).



**Hidden highlights:** (Clockwise from main) Chinatown; Haji Lane has become a cultural and creative hot spot; Valentine Willie Fine Gallery, works by Manuel Ocampo; a store in Emerald Hill; fashion at the National Museum; shop on Haji Lane. Photos: Corbis, *The New York Times*, Getty Images, Reuters

