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TRADITION AND INNOVATION



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The old and the new flourish
in Myanmar and Singapore

Myanmar and Singapore are the tortoise and hare of Southeast Asia. Myanmar lingers in the past, in no hurry; Singapore boldly charges into the future, willing to embrace anything new.

But just as in the old fable, Myanmar is slowly but surely catching up, especially in the realm of tourism.

World-famous attractions like golden Shwedagon Pagoda and the sprawling ruins of Bagan have been popular for years. But during the military junta, much of the country was closed to foreigners. All of that began to change with the release of Noble

Prize-winner Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and the general election of 2015 during which her pro-democracy party assumed control of the government.

Since then Myanmar (or Burma, to use its previous name) has become the region's hottest tourism ticket. Daily flights from Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong and elsewhere are now packed with travelers eager to visit Asia's equivalent of Cuba — a nation left behind by the march of time as well as a place where locals still view tourists as a welcome curiosity rather than something to be endured for profit.

Yangon (Rangoon) already is far different from even five years ago, its high-rise buildings reaching skyward in the city center, streets chockablock

with traffic, new restaurants and shops sprouting along the avenues.

Myanmar's Indian Ocean coast, largely offlimits to foreigners until the past year, is also coming into its own as a tourist destination. Ngapali and Ngwe Saung beaches are already spangled with backpacker hostels and trendy little boutique hotels. But the southern coast is virgin territory, a blend of old British colonial towns and most uninhabited islands that so far can only be explored via bareboat yacht trips from Kawthoung or aboard the Coral Discoverer, an Australian-operated cruise ship that plies a two-week route between Yangon and Singapore.

Speaking of Singapore, the island nation continues to reinvent and reinvigorate its tourism offers. Gardens by the Bay, a 250-acre botanical wonderland at a cost of \$1 billion is built on land reclaimed from the sea. Two giant, air-conditioned, glass-enclosed



A Chinatown street scene in Singapore

conservatories nourish plants from around the world as well as host the planet's highest man-made waterfall. If that's not enough to impress you, a grove of metallic, vine-shrouded Supertrees is like something straight out of "Avatar." With more than 6 million

visitors each year, the Gardens is now Singapore's No. 1 domestic and foreign tourist attraction.

Singapore is also developing high-rise "garden hotels." The massive Marine Bay Sands hotel-casino-convention complex set the pace with its jaw-

dropping SkyPark — a pool, garden and restaurant area on a huge, surfboard-shaped cantilever platform perched 57 stories in the air.

The garden-in-the-sky concept is even more developed in newer hotels like the Oasia. Wrapped in a red steel frame that will eventually support a veritable jungle of vegetation, the chic downtown hotel features a 12th-floor lobby with lawn and full-grown trees and two rooftop pools shaded by vines, creepers and orchids, as well as a 21st level sky garden with infinity pool.

Singapore has always been a world-class food destination. But even the culinary scene continues to evolve in wonderful and sometimes unexpected ways.

Taking a page from the hawker-stall book, some restaurants are now serving just a single dish — like the delicious nasi lemak at the new Coconut Club. "Mod Sin" restaurants like Wild Rocket offer the latest take on

EastWest fusion, while garden restaurants (there's that green theme again) design menus around ingredients from farms in nearby Malaysia and Indonesia.

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