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SINGAPORE: NO CHAOS-NO HUMOR

"To awaken, quite alone, in a strange town is one of the pleasant sensations in the world. You are surrounded by adventure. You have no idea of what is in store for you, but you will, if you are wise and know the art of travel, let yourself go on the stream of the unknown and accept whatever comes in the spirit in which the gods may offer it."

- English Travel Writer Freya Stark

(Singapore) -

I arrived in Singapore the hard way, via, first, San Francisco, and then Tokyo.. I stayed in Japan just as long as I could afford to, about three hours between flights. But I didn't escape before first purchasing a bowl of noodle soup for eight and a half dollars and a Coca Cola that cost as much as a fist of Chivas Regal in Chicago.

I limited today's flying time to eighteen hours by spending last night in San Francisco, the city from which, in my wisdom, I moved to the Midwest. I had several hours to visit with my close friends, John and Ann. The conversation turned immediately, as it always does, to the Midwest thing. Northern Californians are absolutely shocked when one of their own heads for more conservative pastures in the middle of the country.

One always hears about how all things originate on the west coast. My experience is that products develop on the west coast. Ideas seem to flourish in the midwest. Our lousy weather keeps us indoors, giving us more opportunity to ruminate. During my seven years in California, I never heard a conversation that dealt with any subject more serious than the relative merits of Reeboks vs. Nike.

My day in California was, unhappily, perfect, with balmy temperatures in the seventies. We had lunch at the Tadisich Grill, California's oldest restaurant. My calamari steak was tender, the sourdough bread was properly crunchy, and the adjacent tables were filled with that uniquely San Francisco breed, the retired, dapper, urban, suspended, liberalite. In San Francisco, I remembered, one never asked where a friend was going to retire. The farthest anyone ever moved away voluntarily was across the bridge to Marin County. Most just stay on, listening to the sound of the cable cars grinding and clanging up California street with the bellow of fog horns coming off the bay.

I will be in Asia for the next two weeks on a writing assignment that involves a comparison of three cities that, on the surface at least, are very different. The three Asian "tigers", Singapore, Bangkok, and Hong Kong, represent a state that has decided that personal freedom is a secondary consideration, a Buddhist country where 50% of the men are monks and the sex industry flourishes, and the economic miracle of the decade, a city the size of Chicago that manages to operate more Rolls Royce's than any other place on earth.

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In between, I'm, going to spend a few days traveling by train from Singapore up the Malaysian peninsula to Penang and, eventually Bangkok. I am going to bring you along, sharing my observations along the way:

I came to Singapore to try to find the toilet police. This is a special "undercover" branch of the highly organized police force. Their job is to observe whether or not "proper flushing" takes place. If you don't flush you pay, in the amount of \$95 U.S.

My visit verified all that I had heard about this operation but there is more worth knowing about a place and a system that, for whatever it's worth, most Americans would exchange for our system in a heartbeat.

It all starts when you land at Changi International, consistently voted the World's Best Airport. Everything from passport control to luggage handling is totally automated. The interior looks like the atrium at the Mars Grand Hyatt, awash in beige and brown tones with plants clinging to walls that soar several stories high.

It was starting to get dark as I drove into the city and the streetlights were adjusting to the lack of sunlight controlled by tiny sensors and the latest microchip technology. It took my interpreter about seven minutes to start spouting the slinging the Singapore mantra. "Our crime rate is exactly .008%. We have less than 200 people in prison in all of Singapore. No one wants to be in our prisons, so they behave. We have death by hanging". The locals are quite proud of the latter. It was mentioned several times.

Eternal vigilance is the story here. Safety and cleanliness at any price. That's why many of the city's elevators have "urine detectors". Do the unspeakable and the elevator stops between floors, alarms go off, and no one gets out until the toilet police arrive to make arrests.

Throw a wrapper on the sidewalk and you will likely be sentenced to clean a public park - several times. You must wear a green vest with your sins clearly written on the back for all to see.

Women, it is pointed out, can walk freely in Singapore without any fear, "even late at night". Since the city seems to close at 10:00 PM., I'm not sure that this theory has ever been tested.

Singapore is a new nation created out of a framework of British colonialism. It is uniquely multi-racial, its three million inhabitants are Muslim Malay's, Chinese, and Indians. This is the kind of place where you can dine at stalls in the seafood center and put away beef satay, chicken curry, and chilli-fried crab in the same meal. There is an old Chinese section of town, and a colorful Indian neighborhood. The city has world-class shopping malls, a considerable harbor, and a planning commission that is dangerously diligent. I had been careful to leave my chewing gum on the plane.

This morning, I went to see the botanical gardens. They grow orchids here, using only charcoal and brick. It is, I am told, the only botanical

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garden in Asia that does not have a monkey problem. “We solved our monkey problem, the guide says. We got rid of them”.

That’s the real Singapore Sling. Social problems are not problems if you don’t want them to be. “See - no mosquitoes here”, our guide proudly explains. “We got rid of them”. He then explained that they use “very strong insecticide” in Singapore.

I stayed at the Oriental, always mentioned in the world’s top ten. I liked it, but I didn’t love it. Even though I had no room charges, I still had to see the cashier when I checked out. “Everyone has to see the cashier” I was told.

Asian hotels have the highest standards in the world now. Seven of the top ten hotels are located in the cities I will be visiting. There are writing pads in the bathroom, cloth laundry bags, fresh fruit daily, incredible restaurants with dazzling multi-ethnic breakfast buffets, and fleets of limousines to take you anywhere you want to go. And the maid never knocked on my door in the morning yelling “room service” Not once.

They talk a lot about snakes in this part of the world. There are sixteen varieties in Singapore, six of which are quite poisonous. The King Cobra is the most dangerous. “but you won’t run into one in the hotel or at the shopping center” I am assured. No doubt they’ve heard what happened to the monkeys and the mosquitoes.

Lee Kuan Yew was sworn in as head of the People’s Action Party in 1959. He and his party have won every election since then. Everyone votes in Singapore. That’s because it is mandatory. Yew’s party always gets virtually all of the votes. This isn’t too difficult since there are no other political parties.

By the third day in Singapore, all the English-speaking tourists you run into on Orchard Road are all abuzz about the system. “Why can’t we do this” they ask one another.

Everyone assumes that the Americans would never give up their hard-won freedoms. I’d give you wonderful odds that the People’s Action Party would beat Newt/Bill/Phil/Bob and even Colin, in an election without breaking a sweat. Of course, they’d never run against the Republicans or the Democrats. Free elections are untidy.

Of course, not everyone shares my cynicism. George Bush arrived in 1992 and arranged to have the American air base at Subic Bay in the Philippines moved to Singapore. Our planes will be based here beginning in 1998. We can only hope that these airmen decide to take their R and R somewhere else.

It’s my third day in Singapore and, over breakfast, I am told that the government decided “it didn’t want malaria - so it got rid of it”. This was before I had even had my papaya juice. Something about massive injections and limitations on who they let into the country. “And we don’t have so many environmentalists”. It was going to be a long day.

Later this morning I learn that they grow crab grass here and export it to the Middle East.

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Around noon, as I walk through the lobby of Raffles Hotel, I realize that I haven't seen any policemen for three days. Or have I?

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