

Letter From Singapore

Tom Benner

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キャプション

Singapore: The Little Red Dot

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Maybe you missed Singapore's recent birthday. The tiny island-nation celebrated 50 years of independence on Aug. 9.

You're not alone if don't know much about Singapore. It was barely on the map 50 years ago — in fact, it takes its nickname from an old insult that it's only a "little red dot," located between its much larger neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia.

I didn't know much about Singapore either when I moved here three years ago. But I'm glad to live here now. It's worth knowing about, and worth visiting.

People come to Singapore for all sorts of reasons — two of them are eating and shopping, the two national obsessions.

Quite a lot of people come for work — with its bustling economy and towering skyscrapers, Singapore is arguably Asia's top financial center. Since everyone speaks English, it's easy for English speakers like me to get along.

Some come to work in Singapore's top-rated schools — like

my wife, a college educator, who wanted to participate in the explosive growth of higher education in what many call the Asian Century. That's why we moved here.

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Singapore wasn't always a success story. For centuries it was an out-of-the-way fishing island. A visiting Indonesian prince named it Singapura — or Lion City — although lions probably never lived on the island; the animal he saw was, in all, probability, a Malayan tiger.

Modern Singapore was founded in 1819 by Sir Stamford Raffles as a trading post of the British East India Company. Raffles realized its strategic location would make a great port, halfway between China and India.

He was correct. Singapore became a world trade center and a major British military base; Winston Churchill called it the "Gibraltar of the East."

Before independence in 1965, it had a short-lived merger with Malaysia. But the marriage fell

apart, and Singapore was forced to go it alone. With no natural resources of its own — such as fresh water — but plenty of poverty, malaria, and a poorly educated population, Singapore seemed destined for failure.

Instead, it thrived. Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who died at age 91 in March, is widely credited as the author of Singapore's success story.

Singapore's mix of Chinese, Malays, and Indians created a multiethnic food culture that made the island-nation a global food mecca. There is much to say about Singapore's thriving food scene, from traditional street fare to Michelin-starred restaurants.

One concern is that as elderly food hawkers retire, not enough younger people will want to replace them. So what happens to the inexpensive but delicious food that Singapore is famous for?

"No one knows what will happen," said Brendon Yip, a 27-



year-old who prefers his corporate job to taking over his parents' food stall, which specializes in Cantonese-style porridge.

We'll look at other aspects of Singapore as well. Such as the trendy shopping, and the wealthy lifestyles — Singaporeans are stereotypically focused on the "five C's" — cash, car, credit card, condo and country club.

But material success isn't everything. Now that Singapore has turned 50, its younger generation wants to see the country mature.

"I hope society becomes more gracious," said 21-year-old college student Yew Siang Tang. "A lot of us focus on ourselves and the rat race. You don't see enough people wanting to help others."

Tom Benner is a freelance journalist who moved to Singapore from Boston, U.S., in fall 2012. His recent journalism has appeared in Al Jazeera English, Global Post and Nikkei Asian Review.

KEYWORDS

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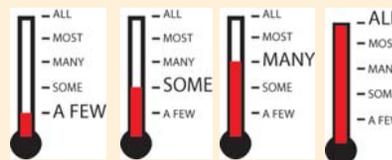
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米アイオワ州出身。イリノイ州オーガスタナ大学で英文学士号取得。1989年から日本在住。現在はスカイプでマンツーマンの英語レッスンをするほか、高校でのALT(外国人英語指導助手)やポッドキャストの製作など幅広く活躍。Twitter (@machigai) でもつぶやき中。



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