TRAVEL

BEAUTIFULLY MODERN SINGAPORE

By Doug Hanson
The San Diego Union-Tribune

A 30-foot-long, red and yellow cloth dragon with daggerlike white teeth blocked our way as my wife, Shirin, and I strolled down Singapore's famed Orchard Road, a tree-lined boulevard known for its upscale stores and hotels. Drums beat rhythmically as a dozen men maneuvered the undulating dragon along the broad sidewalk. This symbol of strength, power and good luck in Chinese culture was part of the lingering festivities following the Chinese New Year 10 days earlier. As we paused to watch the colorful show, I thought to myself, "You have to expect the unexpected in Singapore."

Our five days in Singapore were meant to be a warmup for our six-week Southeast Asia tour, but I discovered belatedly that Singapore should have been the grand finale, since it proved to be one of the highlights of our five-country trip. In fact, Singapore has become my favorite major, modern city in the world.

There is much to like about Singapore, but I'll start by getting out of the way the only two drawbacks I can think of. First, Singapore is consistently ranked among the most expensive cities in the world, along with Paris and Hong Kong. Second, due to its proximity to the equator, Singapore's average temperature hovers around a daily high of 88 degrees and a low of 75 degrees, with 84% average humidity and rain showers possible on most days. The all-time low temperature is 66.9 degrees.

Modern Singapore was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 as a trading post for the British East India Company. The island city state (just 279 square miles) blossomed in just six decades from a place of strife and relative poverty to a global powerhouse for entertainment, education, finance, health care, manufacturing, technology, tourism and transportation.

During our visit to the National Museum, we were struck by the magnitude of the country's accomplishments, displayed in what could be called "the bragging rights room": Singapore is consistently rated as one of the world's safest and cleanest countries. It has the world's top rated airport and airline; its students year after year rank No. 1 in the world for science, reading and math; it is the world's second busiest container port, third largest global foreign exchange market and third largest oil and refining center; and Singapore ranks as the eighth healthiest country.

As we toured various parts of the city, invariably we found the Singaporeans to be kind and helpful. Fortunately for us, English is their main official language, followed by Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. We never perceived any tension as people from Malaysia, China, Indonesia, Philippines, India and Europe mixed freely everywhere.

"Even though we have a very mixed population," explained a local man, "we all get along well because from the earliest days our country focused on policies that ensured that people from different countries and cultures could live and work together peacefully. That's why every year on

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ABOVE: Singapore now carefully preserves its remaining historic buildings such as these scattered throughout the city. LEFT: One of many images of Buddha found inside the Buddha Tooth Temple.
Photos by Doug Hanson

The bay in front of the Marina Bay Sands hotel nicely reflects the towering skyline at sunset.

Should I be compensated for canceled flight?

CHRIS ELLIOTT
Travel

Q: Last year, I was scheduled to fly from Barcelona to Banjul, Gambia, on Vueling Airlines. The flight was initially delayed, then delayed further, and then delayed again. We finally boarded the aircraft about eight hours late, then sat in the plane for 40 minutes, and then were told to disembark. Vueling representatives didn't say why.

A crew member told me that since the flight was delayed so long, the crew was no longer permitted to fly and a replacement crew would need to be found. Hours passed. Finally, Vueling canceled the flight. I ended up spending the night on the floor in Vueling's "VIP" lounge.

Worse things have happened and I'm not a whiner, but the level of disorganization and crappy communication made things pretty uncomfortable. Passengers from other flights that had been canceled told me this kind of treatment is par for the course with Vueling.

A Vueling representative told me they would compensate me 250 euros for the cancellations. It's been several months, but I haven't received anything yet. Can you help me? — David Levine, Banjul, Gambia.

A: Vueling shouldn't have delayed you overnight. But if it did, then at least it should have kept its promise to send you 250 euros in compensation.

By the way, that compensation wasn't an act of generosity by Vueling. It's required under a European law called EC 261. However, one problem with EC 261 is that it doesn't require a timely payment of compensation; an airline can sit on a refund request for months — or even years. Seriously. I've seen some that have taken more than a year.

Here's a little good news. Vueling was wrong about owing you 250 euros. The regulation requires that it pay you 600 euros.

You experienced what's known as a creeping delay with a crew timeout. Vueling had an unknown mechanical problem with the aircraft. It probably thought it could fix it, which is why the airline boarded you. The repairs took longer than expected, and then the crew couldn't work the flight because of the government's strict work rules. By the way, you want those strict work rules, because who wants a tired crew operating a $99 million aircraft?

One other problem with your case: You didn't keep a paper trail. And there's a good reason for that. You're a doctor on a medical mission to Africa with limited access to email. But if you'd had email, you could have filed a claim and started a paper trail, escalating your case to the Vueling executives or to Spanish regulators, who are in charge of enforcing EC 261. I list the names, numbers and email addresses of Vueling's customer service managers on my consumer advocacy site.

I contacted Vueling on your behalf, and a week later, you also sent a complaint to Agencia Estatal de Seguridad Aerea (AESA), the Spanish airline regulators. Vueling sent you 600 euros, as it was required to do.

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