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Pico Iyer

THIS COULD BE HOME



RAFFLES HOTEL AND THE CITY OF TOMORROW

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In writing about home, I have to offer lifelong thanks to the two families that took such loving care of me when I was young, the Campbells (who taught me constancy) and the Hunts (who taught me global mobility). And I owe forever thanks to the irresistibly kind and spirited Singaporeans who've given me a lasting home online, David Tang and Jeff Cheong and all their friends at the Pico Creative Centre.

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“I went, looking for beauty and romance and glad to put a great ocean between me and the trouble that harassed me. I found beauty and romance, but I found also something I had never expected. I found a new self.”

—Somerset Maugham, on travelling across the Pacific

THE LEGEND COMES TO LIFE AGAIN

“An iconic Grand Dame will remain grand only if it keeps up with the standards expected by customers in this day and age.”

—Lee Kuan Yew, on Raffles Hotel as
the twenty-first century dawned

OF COURSE IT has to be my first stop on my first day back, after the seventeen-hour flight from San Francisco. But when I arrive at the low-level jewel-case tucked amidst the skyscrapers, it's to find a line already snaking around the white verandah. There's been no official notice of the event—no advertisement—but word has clearly crackled around all of Singapore: after nine months

of being shuttered, the first public space of the new Raffles Hotel has opened again, three hours ago.

I step out of the blinding sunlight, into the cool and the dark. I might be stepping into my life from thirty-four years ago, on the day of my first visit here. Peanut shells are scattered across the hardwood floor. Gunny sacks and rattan chairs sit under the undulating hula-sway of gossamer-thin fans fluttering from the ceiling. In one corner Elizabeth Taylor, in a large, framed black-and-white photo, appears to be helping herself to a piece of history; in another, Somerset Maugham is taking silent measure of the storied bar in its latest incarnation.

At the far end of the new Long Bar an elegant young woman in a grey suit and high ponytail is shaking up something zesty and strong, here at the very site where the Singapore Sling was invented, one hundred and three years ago. The Sikh doorman, commemorated in photographs on every continent, is seated at the bar, impeccable as ever in his starched white uniform and turban, gold epaulettes gleaming as strangers quiz him about his twenty-eight years of guiding eminences into and out of their chariots. An elderly couple in new-millennium sola topis—floppy white bonnets—sit red-faced from the sun as they take relieved sips of their tall pink elixirs. The sounds of Nagoya and Madrid and Somerset crisscross in the air around me.

A calm sense of festivity prevails—a bottle of Pimm’s beckons just behind the polished bar—and yet, I think, it’s something subtler that offers a sense of release here. To get to the three-storey structure this morning, I’ve had to walk along underpasses leading to passageways, up moving staircases and in and out of shopping malls, through many-storey towers and past convention centres. Everywhere crowds are surging along these linear networks, like pieces of data being transmitted to London or Beijing. When I step out at last into the street, I count twenty-one high-rises poking into the heavens, and just this one intimate sanctuary at their heart.

Within the bar, there’s no sound of traffic at all. I can almost smell the frangipani, the heliconia and bird’s-nest ferns from the four named gardens all around. Through the windows I see green on every side, and the wedding-dress walls of other parts of the hotel, commanding an entire city block. It’s not just the nostalgic furnishings and familiar libations here that take one back; it’s the sense of leisure and rocking-chair ease. In a city that’s all business and movement, here I can feel I’m human again, freed from to-do lists to do anything—or nothing—at all.

A couple of blocks away, temporary stands have been erected for the Formula One Grand Prix. Drivers will be roaring through the old civic heart at speeds approaching

three hundred and fifty kilometres per hour. The whole city seems to be moving at a similar velocity, a kind of pace car for the new century, as it races towards its two hundredth anniversary as a global settlement.

But here at Raffles, I'm brought back to something emotional that hasn't changed in decades, and speaks for what connects us more deeply than anything in Starbucks or Uniqlo. A pop-up shop around the corner is selling the hotel's coveted Champagne Truffle Snow-Skin Mooncakes, for Mid-Autumn Festival, as famous as the Christmas carolers who gather around the tree in the lobby in December. A temporary gift-shop down the road is ensuring that visitors can return to their other homes, in Bristol or Fukuoka, with Raffles-encrusted tea towels and sugar bowls. Members of the Raffles staff have been showing me photos of the twenty-second-century spaces that are being built only metres away to give the hotel a new dynamism and brightness. Any legend that's been around for one hundred and thirty-two years knows: it can honour the past only by changing with the times.



IS THERE ANY hotel anywhere so inseparably linked with the city around it as Raffles? I've been orbiting the globe for

forty-five years now, and I have yet to find one. The peace and civility of the hotel offer a respite from the busy city exploding all around it, but the fact remains that you can't really say you've been to Singapore until you've stepped through the columned corridors of Raffles. My wife feels she's done justice to New York even though she's never set foot inside the Plaza; I've been haunting London for six decades, and have never had cause to enter the Connaught. Raffles, however, is something different, the rare hotel that's not just a base for sightseeing but an indispensable sight in itself. Often, I suspect, people come to Singapore to visit Raffles as much as they come to Raffles to enjoy Singapore.

Even the antic natural historian Redmond O'Hanlon, on his way to confronting head-hunters in the jungle, took pains to specify that it was in Raffles that he opened Smythies' *Birds of Borneo*. And the repeat residents who form such a large part of the hotel's family think no more of stepping out of the place than they would if visiting cousins for the weekend.

The Singapore that's celebrating its bicentennial as a trading hub for the West as well as the East is more restless, more youthful, more outward-looking than ever; its people earn on average fifty times more than they did when I was a boy. But both city and hotel are keenly aware that, when I was a boy, the first question you'd ask of someone was

“Where do you come from?” Now the more relevant enquiry is, “Where are you going?”

Outside, more than six hundred workers have been labouring for four hundred days to bring the institution into a new century. The entire façade has been stripped back by hand, through thirty and even forty layers of paint. “For a building that’s white,” Raffles’ director of marketing Jesmine Hall confesses to me over lunch, with a laugh, “there’s a lot of paint.” Salt that has been encrusted in the building’s pillars since the days when it stood along the sea has been painstakingly removed, a process that takes three weeks. Every one of Raffles’ 886,000 items—antiques, beds, chandeliers, a \$120,000 Persian carpet—has been meticulously catalogued and placed into storage, to be taken out again soon.

Since this is a historic monument, not a nail can be removed without the approval of the National Heritage Board. After the hotel reopens, the grandfather clock that stands as steady as the lobby around it (and is perhaps even older) will still be tolling the hours as it has done for decades, and when it strikes eight every evening, you may still hear Noël Coward’s “I’ll See You Again”. The cast-iron verandah and balustrades and cornices—and everything such terms evoke—will still mark out the property as unique. But as the hotel advances boldly into

a new millennium, seventeenth-century vases have been auctioned off to make room for a fresher sense of luxury.

The new Raffles is not your grandmother’s Raffles, in short, any more than the city around it is your father’s Singapore. As I look around the Long Bar, I can imagine I’m keeping company with an elegant great-aunt, who’s seated quietly in one corner of a cocktail party, while smooth young executives in expensive suits push themselves forwards to dazzle one another with talk about their futures. The beauty of her presence is that she radiates poise and style and wisdom even when she’s doing nothing. The deeper beauty is that she’ll never be young or old.



A RUSH OF hot air had assaulted me the instant I stepped out of the plane, on my first night ever in Singapore. The tarmac was still black from a recent downpour. I’d never seen an airport so sleek or spotless as Changi, so perfectly a home for visitors from everywhere. But what hit me no less was the presence of tropical darkness inches away from the air-conditioning. As I stepped out into the humid night—bougainvillea all around the perfectly manicured highway—I knew only one name to give the taxi driver as we sped through the night to 1 Beach Road.

I was twenty-seven at the time, a writer on world affairs for *Time* magazine. Just one night before getting onto the plane, I'd closed a long article on Iran for my bosses, while also completing a cover story for an alternative weekly on the English writer Cyril Connolly. Clearly, I was halfway out the door already. And just five months earlier, I'd made my first trip to Southeast Asia—Thailand and Burma—and fallen under the spell of its spiced ambiguities.

It was 1984, and the first Macintosh computer had appeared on a few desks, with the first TED conference not many months away. But I was being pulled in the opposite direction, towards the night and everything I couldn't put a name to. On my way to Singapore I stopped in Bali. My first full evening there, a woman I later recognised to be a witch led me out into the unlit lanes, eyes blazing. Everywhere was the smell of clove cigarettes, the dissonant jangle of gamelan orchestras between the trees. The urchins selling scarves along the road had angel faces, but from the monkey forest down the street came a ceaseless demonic chatter.

I needed to ground myself somewhere that felt solid and changeless, even familiar, and when we pulled up at the three-storey palazzo I'd been hearing about since boyhood, something in me quickened at the sight of the famous fan-shaped traveller's palms at its entrance. But I also felt as if I

were entering several pasts at once, and that somehow they all came together to make the outlines of a future. Here were aspects of my earliest days, among the brisk bedrooms and impeccable lawns of Oxford, mixed with spaces that reminded me of my fifteenth-century boarding-school near London, where the white busts that surrounded us as we delivered speeches in Latin had names that chimed with the Draycotts and Balmorals and Connaughts remembered in 380 Singapore street names.

But here, too, was the world of my parents, growing up in a British India that would not have seemed far at all from the Singapore of the day. I could see my father getting off the train at Victoria Terminus and walking across what looked like a padang—white-flannel cricketers everywhere—as he proceeded to the library near the bell tower at Elphinstone College in Bombay. I could see my mother, meeting with Gandhi as she and her family worked to win their country's independence. I could picture both of them moving from their tropical home to Oxbridge just as Lee Kuan Yew had done fewer than six years before. And rising up all around me were skyscrapers that evoked the city to which I'd be returning in a few days, and my twenty-fifth-floor office in Rockefeller Center at a company that people took to be the public voice of the American Empire.

This could be home, I thought, as I looked around. Here was India and Southeast Asia and England and New York all at once. Here was something that brought my past, my present and the future I dreamed of (in Japan) together. I lugged my heavy suitcase to the modest check-in desk, under a huge mural, and found myself looking at the other powerful element in the equation—China—as members of the front desk staff painstakingly inscribed entries in large, handwritten registers.

It was shocking to find that I could stay in Raffles Hotel then for barely one hundred Singapore dollars a night. But Raffles in 1984 was an aromatic attic of fourteen-foot ceilings and slow-turning fans. I wandered to the Tiger's Tavern bar, where a tiger skin remembered the huge cat who'd strolled into the property in 1902, only to be silenced by a slightly sozzled principal from Raffles Institution across the street. I went out to the Palm Court, where songbirds in cages serenaded me as I took toast and tea for breakfast. The outlines of a charming, but rather antiquated, England reminded me of the time I visited my best friend's grandmother in Cheltenham: a woman of immense wisdom and wit, but one I could more easily associate with the past than with any future.

The city all around was shooting up as quickly as a studious kid who'd been acing his exams. Singapore as a

sovereign republic was only nineteen years old then, and it pulsed with energy and ambition. Around its edges, though, were still delectable traces of a raffish past. I made my way to Killiney Road and came upon a decaying mansion made for sailors and the locals who were more than happy to take care of all their needs; I took a bus around the tree-lined streets of Tanglin and boarded a cable car for Sentosa.

As a boy continuing at school in England after my parents had moved to California, I'd been obliged to have a guardian to serve *in loco parentis*; my official guardian was a deeply English banker who'd been brought up in what he called "the Argentine", but had moved in the 1970s to Stevens Road in Singapore.

My first full day in the city, I followed my honorary godfather's footsteps around the suburbs, and remembered his stories of the places in Chinatown that sold grasshoppers and of the dying souls tucked above the coffin shops of Sago Lane not many years before. These parts of Singapore seemed themselves about to breathe their last.

The room I returned to in Raffles was huge, though bare; it might have been just vacated by a lieutenant-colonel, his memsahib and three officers. And as I watched a mynah swoop down upon a room-service tray, I felt I was in a Botanic Gardens, a British Club, a National Museum and a stately home all at once. I looked out across the lawn to

Room 102, where Maugham had sat in the sun and taken notes for the stories that went into *The Casuarina Tree*. Then I headed out again into the dark, where much of the bustle of six centuries still hung around the port, and men in ill-lit shops swapped numbers as boats came and went in the night.

It hit me instantly that there was so much of everybody's home here, amidst so much that I couldn't begin to read. I couldn't tell how much I was in Bali, how much down the road from Windsor Castle. A writer thrives on what he cannot fathom—what beckons him deeper into the dark—and as I looked across the Palm Court, I felt myself being drawn away from my office on the Avenue of the Americas and towards everything that was less boxed and knowable.

In retrospect, perhaps it was Singapore that helped make me think I should try to become a real writer of books, even if, at first, only an unofficial writer-in-residence in this place of formal façades and rich interiors.

Four years later, I was living in Kyoto, bringing out my first published book—on the distinctly Singaporean theme of how the East and West blur in a slow dance of projections—and, in the same breath, I was losing my heart to a young woman from the suburbs of Japan's ancient capital. Asia had come to feel like my home, and for an Indian who'd barely been to India—who lived, in fact,

in the passageways between places—I felt a real sense of belonging in a city, Singapore, that belonged to many cultures all at once, but wasn't entirely hostage to any one of them.

Eleven months after I met her, in a thirteenth-century Kyoto Zen temple, I led Hiroko onto her first flight out of East Asia, and we touched down in Singapore. Where better for a woman determined to carve out a new destiny for herself and claim some independence? It was dark when we pulled up at our first stop, and as a tall man in a turban opened the car door for her, Hiroko stepped out into a dream.

"Little movie feeling," she murmured to herself as I led her into the princely expansiveness of our high white room with its porch and verandah. We went out again and got into a horse-drawn carriage, and clopped down to the port, where there were few lights to relieve the darkness and we could imagine fishermen still working by oil lamps. To this day Hiroko recalls a man in one of the hotel's public spaces coaxing a cobra out of a basket.

What she was gaining, I began to see, was a sense of everything that lay beyond the world she knew, just as I had, four years earlier. But all presented within an elegance and comfort that could suggest some Platonic ideal of home. More than that, she was seeing a door swing open

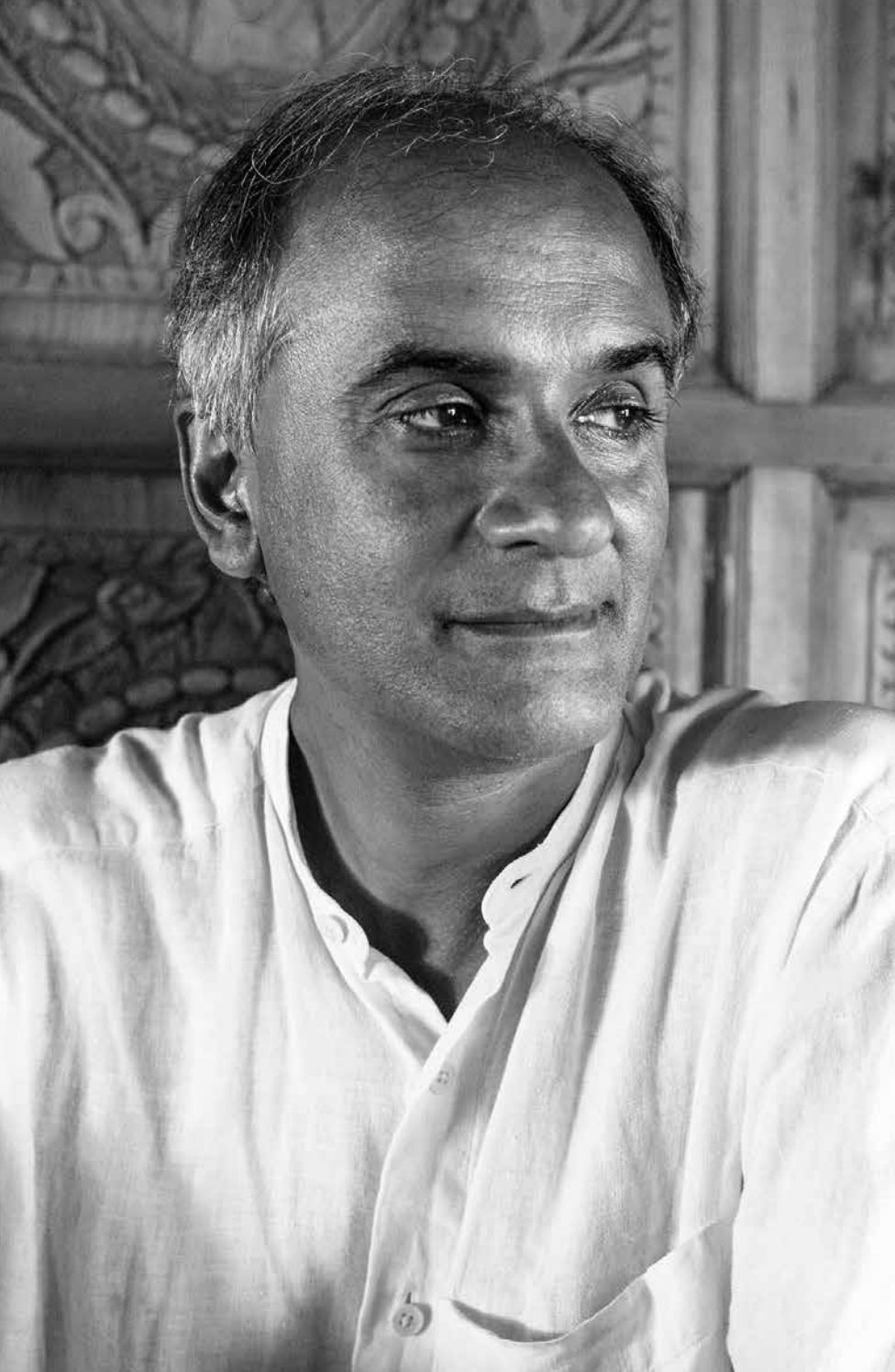
on her husband-to-be: here was something of the television programme she'd loved about a little Indian boy called Raji and his elephant. And here were all the boyhood memories from England she'd begun to hear about: the clink of spoon on china cup, the thwack of cricket ball near greensward, the thud of ball being hit through small white hoop.

She took her first sip of a Singapore Sling and instantly declared that this would be her cocktail of choice ever after (as so far it has proved to be). A cocktail made for ladies that looks to be mild and inoffensive, but—no coincidence—packs a potent punch.

LIGHTS ACROSS THE WATER

“Goods from all over the East are found here; goods from all over the West are sold here... It is at the end of the monsoons, where you find what you want, and sometimes more than you are looking for.”

—Tomé Pires, a Portuguese apothecary,
on Malacca in 1515



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PICO IYER IS the author of more than a dozen books, translated into twenty-three languages, including such long-running readers' favourites as *Video Night in Kathmandu*, *The Lady and the Monk* and *The Global Soul*. For more than a quarter-century, he has been a frequent contributor to *Time*, *The New York Times*, *Financial Times* and more than two hundred other periodicals worldwide. In recent years, he has also given four talks for TED, which have received more than eight million views so far. Born in Oxford, England, he graduated from Eton, Oxford and Harvard, and in 2019 was Ferris Professor of Journalism at Princeton. He lives in Japan and the United States.

ABOUT THE RAFFLES SINGAPORE WRITER'S RESIDENCY

AS FAR BACK as 1887, men of letters such as Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad have inaugurated Raffles' legendary literary tradition, which continues today. Raffles Singapore has long played muse to renowned writers whose creativity was sparked by the glamorous setting, intriguing guests and timeless destination. As the hotel writes the next chapter of its literary heritage, the Raffles Writer's Residency programme was launched with Pico Iyer as the first Writer-in-Residence and the objectives to create and nurture a pipeline of creative writing talents as well as engage writers with a record of creative excellence, inspiring and stimulating them to create new literary works.

HOME IS NOT SOMETHING YOU'RE BORN WITH.

“One of the great travel writers of our time, a superb collector of tales...searches always for our common humanity.”

Meira Chand, author of *Sacred Waters*

“We are in the trusted hands of a seasoned guide; Iyer’s homage makes us see with new eyes a familiar colonial icon.”

Boey Kim Cheng, author of *Between Stations* and *Gull Between Heaven and Earth*

Acclaimed travel writer Pico Iyer draws upon his numerous stays at the iconic Raffles Hotel for a discovery of not just yesterday, but tomorrow. As the hotel’s first Writer-in-Residence, he explores the restored grounds and reveals a rich literary legacy with cameos by Maugham, Kipling, Didion and many other writers.

This compact volume is a personal, thoughtful and surprising look at a Singapore we too often take for granted.

TRAVEL

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