



S.N. VENKAT

“G HAR ki murgi dal barabar” is a well-known Hindi proverb. Essentially it means we do not value what we have. An interesting sequence of unplanned events over a few hours on New Year’s Eve, led me to recall this proverb.

It all started over lunch at home. My teenage son surfed away from a TV drama to TED Talks on the television. Yes, nowadays with a Smart TV, switching between a TV channel and a YouTube channel is as easy as switching between Channel 5 and Vasantham. There was Pico Iyer, the veteran travel writer and longtime contributor to Time magazine, speaking on The Art of Stillness.

Where would the globetrotter Iyer like to go? Nowhere, he said. “It’s only by stepping farther back and standing still that we can begin to see what that canvas (which is our life) really means, and to take in the larger picture,” he elaborated. His point, going nowhere and sitting still leads you “into a place where you’re defined by something larger”.

After lunch my son and I left for Changi beach, in search of our Pico moments of stillness. As we strolled beyond the Changi Sailing Club, we took some pictures with my mobile phone and I quickly shared them on social media with my friends overseas. For fun, I titled them vacation photos. Beyond the club and along the boardwalk, we found our spot and settled down for some quiet reflection.

On the way back when I switched on the phone, there were comments about my pictures like “but where?”, “which travel magazine are these pictures from?”, “where is this secret getaway?”. That was some compliment for some casual photographs taken with a mobile phone. Well, maybe my friend was reminded of Krabi or some other beach. Or maybe she had a point. In our rush to discover the scenic and idyllic spots in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and the rest of ASEAN, which are just an hour or two away from Singapore, are we missing what’s on this island?

Persuaded by ads, are we limiting our Singapore experience to standard tourist attractions? Once we get bored of them, after a customary trip or two, do we withdraw ourselves like tortoisines into our shells – familiar ones like movie theatres, malls or homes?

So what do people who are busy and active in the Indian community here do to relax? For SINDA’s chief operating officer Sarojini Padmanathan, the choice is green and serene.

“I have been to Sungei Buloh and Kranji with my family. We like going there because these places are unspoilt, green and serene and we can enjoy a day of peace and quiet. We did this more often when our children were younger.”

She adds: “These days my husband and I love walking in MacRitchie, Lower Peirce and Seletar reservoir areas on Sunday evenings. We find the flora and fauna inviting. Again it is peaceful; nature has something to offer each time we are there.”

Former Narpani Pearaval chairperson P. Thiurral Karasu, who is a well-known figure in the Indian community, says: “I do go to East Coast Park often with either my family or friends for dinner or to unwind with a drink. Likewise, (I head to) Sentosa beach, from where you can take a boat out to sea.”

In a survey poll I conducted with acquaintances and friends, East Coast, Sentosa, Marina Promenade, Bukit Timah and Botanic Gardens came out

Why holiday overseas?



on top. But that was not only because of their easy accessibility, but also because they have some unique experiences to offer.

Mr Sathya Anbazhagan, director at HRBi.SG, a human resources firm focusing on IT and financial markets, says: “East Coast Park attracts the highest number of health-conscious people of all ages who visit regularly for cycling, jogging, skating, roller blading and so on. Being the longest stretch it attracts a lot of weekend campers too.”

Mr Sriram Krishnaswami, an international trade specialist in Singapore, adds: “Bukit Timah Nature Reserve is as old as Taman Negara in Malaysia. It is an equatorial rainforest like the Amazon.”

One point many professionals, like Mr Balaji Bhakthavatchalam, client services director at CSC, a Fortune 200 IT services company, appreciated was that at walking distance from the financial district of Singapore there is the shorter Marina Promenade and the longer waterfront route around Marina Reservoir, linking Gardens by the Bay, Marina Barrage and the new Sports Hub. Many others also liked that both Southern Ridges and MacRitchie Reservoir were accessible from many office and residential areas in Singapore. Southern Ridges is a favourite of Ms Savita Kashyap, executive director of Journeys, a heritage tour company. (See her recommendations at far right.)

These Ridges connect Mount Faber Park, Telok Blangah Hill Park, HortPark, Kent Ridge Park and Labrador Nature Reserve. It has Henderson Waves, the highest pedestrian bridge in Singapore that connects Mount Faber Park to Telok Blangah Hill Park. MacRitchie is also home to the TreeTop Walk, a 250m-long suspension bridge. While on Henderson Waves or the TreeTop Walk, one can walk with one’s head above the trees.

Mr Theodore Teo, head of corporate social re-

This is Singapore?.. Yup, that’s Changi beach (top) and this scenic view (above) is of Pulau Hantu. (Above right) concert-goers enjoying themselves at the Shaw Foundation Symphony Stage in the Botanic Gardens.



sponsibility at NTUC Income Insurance Co-operative, was previously head of Centre for Social Responsibility at SMU. In that capacity he oversees SMU international volunteers’ projects in India, China and, of course, ASEAN.

An outdoorsy person by nature and an avid biker, Mr Teo recommends “ulu” (out of the way) places like Jalan Mempurong, Jalan Selinang, and Pulau Hantu. Before Sembawang Park, he says, “turn at Andrews Avenue, towards the end of Jalan Mempurong, the Park Connector Network passes a lot called PA Water Ventures and ‘The Handlebar’”. The latter is a “family restaurant with a bike theme, by the edge of the sea. And they play the blues, folk and classic rock ‘n’ roll”, he adds.

Want something more rustic? Mr Teo says: “While you’re at Jalan Mempurong, explore Jalan



Selinang. There’s a mouth of a stream there and it’s another peaceful place to get away to for a self-supported picnic.” But, “there are no toilets. Bring your own water for washing”, he warns.

Want to get away from the main island? Mr Teo recommends chartering a bumboat (and pay on the return leg), and heading to Pulau Hantu. “Take everything you need with you, one luxury item exists amid the few rudimentary shelters – there’s a toilet with tap water! You see lots of sea stars in the lagoon at low tide.”

For those living in the eastern part of Singapore, Mr Teo and many others I spoke to suggest the popular Pulau Ubin. Rent a bike and explore the island with a map. Of course while there, Chek Jawa is not to be missed.

I have been a member of an Indian society of many years’ standing in Singapore, Sri Aurobindo Society, which has been organising morning walks on the first Sunday of every month for the past 350 months without interruption.

Each month, the walk takes you to a different nature reserve, reservoir or park in Singapore. Dr Kiruthika Curic, senior manager of the outreach and promotion group at the Science Centre, has been participating in these walks since her student days. Now a mother of two young daughters, she says: “(As a family) we usually avoid the mainstream attractions and tend to go off the beaten track.” (See her recommendations at top right.)

Many of us who have gone on these walks have discovered quite a few serene spots right here in Singapore. National Parks Board lists over 300 parks and four nature reserves in the country. Find a cosy corner and discover your zen moments, in a park or nature reserve, right here in Singapore.

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Off-the-beaten-track outings

DR KIRUTHIKA Curic, senior manager of the outreach and promotion group at the Science Centre, says she usually avoids the mainstream attractions during weekends and tends to go off the beaten track. Here are a few places she and her family go to:

Offroad biking track at Mandai Road: A dirt mountain-biking trail, from Mandai Road to Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, passing via the beautiful Dairy Farm area. Excellent for biking with the family.

Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve: This is great especially in the September to March period for bird-watching. A coastal trail has recently been constructed with plenty of hidey-holes to watch feathered friends from. The highlight of our trip was a white-bellied sea eagle which took flight right in front of our noses.

Lazarus Island: This island off the coast of Singapore is around 30 minutes by boat. It has a very quiet beach and clear waters for swimming and is a great place to spend a day.

Museums: They’re always great places to get away from the sun! The ArtScience Museum has a number of new exhibitions which are designed and developed by local artists.

Family-friendly concerts: There is always something going on. For instance, at the Shaw Foundation Symphony Stage in the Botanic Gardens.

‘Jeywalk’ around the island

MS SAVITA Kashyap is executive director of Journeys, a heritage tour company, which operates The Original Singapore Walks. It aims to bring people to the city’s best-kept secret places. She is also a member of a walking group called Jeywalkers which is named after its founder, Jeya Ayadurai, a prominent local historian who heads an associate company, Singapore History Consultants. The walking group explores the lesser-known corners of Singapore every Sunday.

“We typically walk an average of 12km every time,” Ms Kashyap says. These are her recommendations:

The Green Corridor: One of my favourite getaways, the old railway tracks of the former Malayan Railway that ran from Tanjong Pagar station all through Malaysia up to southern Thailand. We’ve walked the entire 25km in Singapore up to Woodlands station. The railway line ran through some quiet but beautiful estates. Today, only two old stations are left standing, Bukit Timah and Tanjong Pagar. My children and husband often join the group when we explore such places.

Southern Ridges: Another favourite with the Jeywalkers is the Southern Ridges area around Pasir Panjang and Alexandra. We love walking from Kent Ridge Park, taking the various canopy walks and bridges all the way to Mount Faber. Along the way there are beautiful black and white bungalows dating back to pre-war times in the 1930s. Nearby at Portdown Road is Colbar, a unique colonial-style cafe run by Mr and Mrs Lim since pre-independence days.

Changi area: Yet another place we return to regularly is the Changi area which feels like Singapore in the ‘60s with the small and quaint shops at Changi Village and old chalets.

Haw Par Villa: Lastly, my current favourite is Haw Par Villa which was built in 1936 and opened to the public by Mr Aw Boon Haw, the brilliant businessman behind Tiger Balm. The park has the most unique, even bizarre, sculptures and dioramas reflecting Asian philosophy and culture and Chinese classics. A walk around this park is not only entertaining but extremely educating and I love taking visitors there to learn about Asian culture.