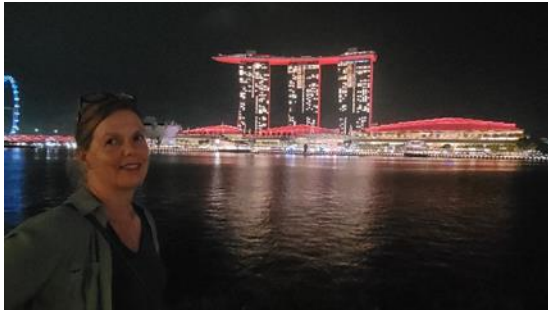


SINGAPORE SWING

(18 DAYS IN HONG KONG, SINGAPORE AND A CRUISE SHIP TO PHUKET AND BACK)

JAN-FEB 2025



Steps. And food. Steps and food. Lots of steps and lots of food. Chinese food (dim sum on multiple occasions), Indian/Tamil food (curry puffs and more), Malay food (chicken rice), Turkish food (beyti, pide, borek), Spanish tapas (Padrón peppers and some very good patatas bravas), Thai food better than at home (basil chicken for example), Portuguese (custard tarts of course), we ate it all. Japanese, Mexican too. We could have even had Canadian food. YES! There were several Timmies in Singapore malls so we could have ordered a cruller to add to our ethnic culinary diversity! But we didn't. We had eaten plenty by any culinary standard and then snacked on the leftovers when no one was watching.

Vacationing in this foodlandwonderland and I had not gained weight. How?

Steps.

In 18 days in Hong Kong, Singapore, Penang and Phuket I walked about 550,000 of them, one at a time, one after the (painful at times) other. That's about 390km according to Google but I question Google. I think it was 391.

That's how.

But when I boarded a boat my belly grew.

Now this was not my first cruise and I have beheld buffets that reach distant horizons, but on my first trip to the buffet behemoth I fear that I said out loud to no one in particular, "you mean I can eat ANYTHING???"

That's how.

So when you see me and my belly is larger than before, please direct your comment to how relaxed I look, and could it be that I was on a wonderful cruise up the strait of Singapore, and not my goodness Andy! those extra helpings of bread pudding and vanilla sauce have really added the pounds for you.

I took the stairs at every opportunity, honest.

But back to the steps and where they transported us.

We left cold Ottawa on a Saturday and arrived 27 hours later in Hong Kong. The 15 hours from San Francisco to Hong Kong was the longest flight that I have taken in my life but despite only getting a few short naps, it wasn't that bad. The first thing we noticed was that the walking escalators in the airport were on the left, as were the cars on the road. We cleared customs by 7am on a Monday (the equivalent of 6pm Sunday at home) and the last overnight sleep had been Friday night. So sleep-deprived as we were, we kept it simple. The airport is on Lantau Island and one of the things recommended there is to take a cable car up the mountain to the village of Ngong Ping. So we stored our bags and that's what we did. The views were awesome and at the top was the biggest Buddha I have ever seen. It is called, in fact, the Big Buddha. It was pretty cool, with lots of other statues and adornments surrounding it at respectful distances. We could walk around all around the huge monument, some 4 stories high, and once behind I spelled out where we were. At baggadabooda. Despite how hilarious I can be on such little sleep, Arran rolled her eyes. More importantly, our legs were holding out.

Back at sea level and with our luggage, we rode the MTR for 40 minutes through Kowloon to HK Island and checked into our hotel. The Ramada Wyndham HK Grand view is on a street with a wet market. The door literally right next door had troughs of fish heads and shark guts. This Ramada was nothing fancy but a solid hotel, 120 CAD a night all in, no breakfast included so we ate fruit and granola bars in the room and looked to eat more adventurously when we went out.

We unpacked and headed out to meet the North Point area of Hong Kong, and spent a couple of hours waiting to say hello to my nephew Jon, his wife Maggie and daughters Zora and Lyra. Jon and Maggie live and teach here and we have come for a visit. They would meet us at 4pm.

After walking to familiarize ourselves with the neighbourhood and scouting some restaurants, we became aware of our legs not listening to us. They had gone automatic. Muscle memory and muscle memory alone put one foot in front of the other. My brain was not connected, it was no longer involved in the process. It was excluded, thinking it was the middle of the night (technically it was) and refusing to engage in the decisions involving feet being placed on the ground once they had been raised and thrust forward. I watched my robot feet in amazement. They weren't listening to me because my brain had nothing to say, except maybe, "you're on your own guys". Crossing a busy street became a question of whether my legs would agree to shut it down before becoming a HK visitor statistic.

A rest in the hotel lobby gave us just enough energy to say hello to Jon and Maggie, who had Zora with them, and plan stuff the rest of the week in evenings after they finished teaching each day. Then we went to a nearby hole in the wall to slurp bowls of noodles with (and like) the locals. Then we slept soundly for 10 hours.

Day 2 was Samantha Brown's Day. We like her PBS travel show 'Places To Love' and we copied some of her Hong Kong episode highlights by going by the central market and riding the escalators to the mid-levels, touring craft booths in the old PMQ buildings where Arran got some great looking earrings, and

taking the tram up to Victoria Peak and walking around there. All worth doing. One piece of advice though. Take the tram down as well. Don't be tempted to walk the Old Peak Road down as we did. It's steep. Most of the way I expected my sole to separate from the rest of the shoe. Those 30 minutes of theoretically easy downhill walking awakened and aggravated leg muscles that would have preferred to stay silent in the background. They grumbled and ached for days after. Take the tram. You're welcome.

BTW getting around Hong Kong is super easy by subway, the MTR, and all you do is tap your Octopus card at the entrance and exit. We also used the card to pay for meals, snacks, small gifts, and if we took one, a taxi or ride sharing service. You top up your card at various places such as the subway, and then it basically replaces any need for cash or credit. What an awesome idea. Ya, we probably have something similar in Canada but I'm old so I'm over the moon with delight for any technology that doesn't baffle me. This didn't.

We met Jon and Maggie along with Zora, Lyra and their helper Auntie Ruby and took the MTR to their apartment in East Hong Kong. We had dinner, read to the girls who, at soon to be 7 and 5, were attentive listeners, then rambunctious kids again. The apartment tour was short due to its compact size but the view across the water to the mainland from the 17th floor window was a highlight. It was fun spending time with them, much of the conversation centering around the house in Malpeque PEI that they bought from my mom, which we all agree is one of the best places on earth.

Day 3 was market day in Kowloon. Not for the locals, but it was for us. The MTR delivered us to Jordan station where we started with the flower market. With Lunar New Year just a week away, the floral display was impressive. We wandered past stalls with mandarin trees and jade trees, persimmons, bamboo and cow's udder plants. Where the flower market ended, the Yuen Po Street bird market began. It was not very busy, less than half the stalls were open but those that were had rows and stacks of birds in cages for sale, and others had bags small, medium and quite large of very active crickets. But the attraction for me was the older gentlemen who had brought their prized bird in their prized bird cage to be hung from one of the many hooks along the row to socialize with their friends. And the men socialized as well.

As we strolled Kowloon, we made our way south through the Fa Yuen street market, which was less interesting. But we spotted a place called Dim Dim Sum and the pork buns, pan fried pork and radish cakes, rice rolls with beef and coriander, and Sichuan style spicy pork wonton all hit the spot, downed with some iron Buddha tea, and all for about 30 CAD. My belly and wallet were equally joyous.

The ladies market followed (again, just okay) followed by a 60-minute walk down Nathan Road to the waterfront.

Now I must stop. I must talk about the waterfront. From the Kowloon side you see Hong Kong Island, the city Skyline and Victoria Peak as the backdrop. A view is realized in a moment and presses itself into your mind and unconsciously it is compared to all other views still in existence in your memory. This is one of the great views in life. It is. One of the best. Jon told us that those that live on the island have a saying which is that the only thing wrong with their view from their side is that they can't see themselves. They can't see their own skyline. What vanity! What truth!!!

Before I leave you with the impression that that was our best view of the Hong Kong visit, I'll quickly tell you that later we topped it. The stunning view across the water at 3pm was suddenly and shockingly 100

times greater at 7pm when darkness had fallen, and every building lit up in a mesmerizing wave of competing lasers and flashing lights and colors and patterns and waves and lord knows what else. We took the Star Ferry across the water from the island to Kowloon and at one point an old junk, now a boat for tourists, rode past with flaming red lights, riding into the backdrop of the bright and breathtaking Hong Kong Island Skyline and for a moment I thought, this is the best I will ever see. This is the best. I've seen the best.

Jon and Maggie treated us to drinks (treated is the right word, as they were \$35 each on average) on the 30th floor of the Peninsula hotel where we gazed at the Hong Kong view and the nightly laser show. Then we took the ferry back across the water all reflecting the glory of where we were, and I slept happy that night in my hotel beside the fish heads.



Our last day in Hong Kong was mostly focused on the Central Market area again. We wanted to find a good restaurant and the wonder that is Google (as in: I wonder if it will give me accurate information this time?!!) suggested a place near the central market so off we went. We decided that if we saw something we liked along the way we would do that instead, but nothing appealed. Maybe our expectations had been raised after the noodle meal, the dinner at Jon and Maggie's and two dim sum feasts that were minor epics. So we passed on a few before getting to a corner where Shing Heung Yuen restaurant should be, but we couldn't see it. Google maps said to go down a rough looking alley and based on past experiences I expected that once again Google was taking the mickey out of me. But no! At the end of the alley was a street-side collection of outdoor tables, somewhat covered by battered awnings, a kitchen busily preparing meals right there on the outdoor pavement, and communal seating that looked like every one of the 40 or 50 wobbly chairs were filled with bums attached to slurping, sipping, chomping diners. A handful of ladies were serving the area and one smiling lady found us 2 available seats, same side of a table, tightly squeezed shoulder to elbow with our table neighbours. We had soups (egg and tomato for Arran, pork, picked veg and tomato for me), tea, a hot chocolate with a distinct hint

of coffee and toast with condensed milk. The food was excellent, chopsticks and spoon assisted, and the atmosphere was fun with the bustle around the tables and people passing on the street and food orders being called out and dishes arriving at big tables and being handed to whoever was willing to claim them. A lack of English (except, fortunately, on the menu) was not an issue. It was a good find!

The afternoon was more escalator riding, shop browsing and waterfront strolling. We saw Jon one more time for dinner, at Sick Burger for some good old smash burgers and shakes. I love my sweet potato fries and these were very different than in Canada and just as tasty.

Bidding goodbye to Jon we also bid Hong Kong goodbye the next morning and took an easy 4-hour flight to Singapore.

Ah, Singapore. I'd been anticipating this visit for months. Reading about it. Studying maps. Planning sites to see. Watching videos. Reading reviews. I was ready to be wowed. I was so ready!!!

No I wasn't. I thought I was but I wasn't.

The grandeur of the buildings, the size and scope of the architecture, the inventiveness of every constructed material on every corner? It was CRAZY!

I had not been nearly prepared for this.

This is how I picture a meeting at the city planning department: "It's been reported that we don't have anything grand and stunning at such and such a downtown street corner. How did we miss that? Which avant garde artist do we have ready to go? Commission something awesome and spare no expense! And on another matter, we need to put in a new abutment. What shall we do with this one? Continuously overflowing water? Laser lights? Chiseled faces? Come on people, this has to be over-the-top and memorable, we don't want boring abutments in our city!!!"

Or buildings, or fountains, or bridges, or street corners. Nothing is boring.

And they do that because they can. I don't believe the authorities have to worry about sticking their neck out and still get re-elected like our local politicians do, so they do stuff that will be memorable. Try to find any street corner downtown or in some of the trendy or historic neighbourhoods that doesn't have an eye-catching piece that makes you stop, study, think, and probably pull out your phone for a pic. I dare you. You can't.

If you live in Singapore then the most awesome place is probably wherever you live. But for visitors, it is everything downtown by the water. The city of lions has their Merlion, a large, half mermaid half lion statue spouting water into the inner harbour. Also on the water are theatres, museums like the one shaped like a lotus flower, the Helix pedestrian bridge fashioned after a DNA strand, and the Marina Bay Sands Hotel that has a "boat" rooftop situated 636 feet in the air on top of 3 towers. It is a spectacle. All of this across the water from a downtown with monster buildings that are fashioned unlike any other downtown that I can recall. Unabashedly modern and aggressively innovative, terraces and neat forests built on open floors mid-way up buildings, others with open gaps in the building or jogs in the design that seem to defy gravity and the principles of physics. And on the other side of the Marina Bay Sands is Gardens By the Bay which is gardens yes, beautiful ones at that, there are thousands of plants, but also

two biodomes including one called the cloud forest where with entrance you can do a Skywalk all around the 115 foot indoor waterfall. Breathtaking and a little scary. Also in the park are the Supertrees reaching into the sky. If trees ever became extinct and you turned to visionary artists to replace them, this is what you get. And *of course* there were walkways up in the tallest "branches" for the adventurous. Oh, and a light show every night with the Marina Bay Sands as a backdrop.

But for me it all comes back to the Marina Bay Sands Hotel. It sits largely alone at the end of the bay and is so profoundly individual that I couldn't take my eyes off it. I wanted to see it every chance I could. It became my beacon, my centre of orientation. I didn't tire of it. And then when it and the waterfront and all of downtown lit up after dark in brilliant shades reflecting on the water and each other while all else around it sparkled and glittered in a multitude of colours and intensity. My God. Spectacular.

We paid \$35 each to go up the 57 stories of the Marina Bay Sands (but then had a \$70 credit for drinks/food so the price wasn't unreasonable) and had a view that made my head woozy but my heart cheer. Spectacular again. From there we looked down at the Supertrees like they were distant dandelions. It's all in the perspective.



We didn't think we could top that but as it happens, our final 2 nights were in the CapitaSpring building that is tied with several others as the 2nd highest in Singapore at 919 feet. Taller than Marina Bay Sands.

Its impressiveness was different, such as the 4-5 storey beams at several points on its great height that looked like Superman had taken prison bars and bent them this way and that. And where they were bent there were trees and greenery growing, at the 9th floor where our swimming pool was, and at 17th to 20th floor observatory with terraces and ramps that straddled the edge, and then again at the ROOFTOP gardens and bar where we were looking down at the city. DOWN at other skyscrapers! DOWN at the Marina Bay Sands. It was eery and odd and another kick at what I think of as normal. This was not normal. Thankfully and wonderfully not normal.

On the chest high glass which prevents you from going over the nearly 1000-foot ledge, there is a helpful sign affixed which reads "WARNING: for your safety, please do not climb over railing". Really? I was okay with not even approaching the railing, but thanks for the advice anyway!

Elsewhere in the city we loved walking the river and stopped for drinks and meals at Boat, Clarke and Robertson Quays. The strolls were really enjoyable, particularly in the evening, joining many others who were out with families, or happy couples, or joggers and cyclists, scooters too, all sharing the paths between the water and the patios of a wide diversity of bars and restaurants. The ethnic makeup of the crowd was equally diverse.

Our first hotel was right at Robertson Quay. It was also right across the road from Fort Canning MRT and we tapped in and out by credit card and enjoyed fast, efficient, convenient subway transport all over town which also included the Botanic Gardens, the Arab and Muslim Quarter, Little India, the East Coast road area too. We also took it to Sentosa Island for a day at the beach and another time for an evening to see the many elaborate decorative art pieces lit up after nightfall. And to Chinatown on multiple occasions, the most memorable being Lunar New Year's Eve celebrations where we were packed in so tight we hit pedestrian gridlock a couple of times.

Singapore was simple awesome. Six days before the cruise and three days after was enough to do it all but not enough to do and see some things again and again which would have been my preference.

There is less to say about the cruise, possibly because there is less to do. The food was of course plentiful, which is an understatement. But it was good and not great. There is a certain blandness to what they serve which is required to appease so many travelers. And there were many to please as we shared the boat with 4,800 other passengers.

But I commend them on at least being good. It beats lousy by a lot. I was taken aback with the seeming insecurity they had as we were asked constantly if we were enjoying ourselves and if the food was to our liking. Constantly. We even had our meals interrupted for this question. On the way out of the dining room we were nabbed for a survey and our interviewer was aghast that I only gave the food an 8 out of 10. So great was their concern that I was afraid they might make the chef walk the plank for underachieving so badly and apparently ruining our vacation. My insistence that 8 was an awfully good score and some room was needed for the truly spectacular was apparently spoken in a language they did not comprehend and we left the fine fellow as he began to self-immolate himself with the lash.

We had two ports. The first was Penang Malaysia. It was okay. A chance to get off the ship and walk about, but we didn't see anything that stood out. Some artwork on street walls was interesting. Perhaps 4 days in Hong Kong and 6 in Singapore had jaded us. We racked up the steps and checked out the shops and snacked a bit and returned to the boat after 4 or 5 hours. It was a short port stay anyway, just 7 hours. Next was Phuket and as part of the Lunar New Year cruise we had an overnight stay, so we were in anchored off Patong Beach from 8am one day to 8pm the next.

On our first trip in (tendered by boats that could hold a couple hundred people at a time) we caught a cab across the peninsula to Old Phuket Town, checked out a nice temple complex and wandered about the streets. We wanted to eat at an authentic Thai restaurant as we often enjoy Thai food back home and after reading a number of menus, we settled on a small restaurant with all of 4 tables. I've recently taken to making Tom Kha Gai soup at home because Sukkothai and other Ottawa places make it so well, and I want to eat it more often, so we ordered it here and it was fantastic. Then we had our mains, a pork lemongrass for Arran and a green curry and potatoes for me. The flavours were awesome, but for one minor qualm. Spice. TOO MUCH HEAT! Arran was okay with it but I'm a spice wimp to be sure and these were a challenge to finish. So good, then so much burn after. I'm not saying my lips were actually on fire but I think I could have toasted a marshmallow on them. A true love-and-hate meal. Sure, I'd do it again.

We finished up our old town excursion with a foot massage that for 30 minutes redefined the meaning of bliss. Massages are readily available and are very inexpensive. A foot massage that covers the knees to the toes was 10 CAD for 30 to 60 minutes. 20 CAD for full body. And they are generally good though the 60-minute foot massage I had the next day was an exercise in waiting to see what sore muscle in my arch / heel / calf my masseuse could aggravate next and make me wince and wimper until she let up and looked at her colleague working Arran's feet and roll her eyes at my low pain threshold.

Also on the second day we took a taxi to the Karon lookout for some superb views, followed by swimming and hanging out at Karon beach. This beach is just south of Patong which is the major strip on the west side of Phuket peninsula, and at another beach just north is a memorial commemorating the damage and many casualties from the 2004 tsunami. The Thailand government has since put in some very comprehensive tsunami warning systems.

Phuket is largely a tourist area, and at night really livens up with restaurants and bars competing for business, and what feels like a buzz of nightlife is actually a level of noise from traffic, people and bar music that you have to be looking for to enjoy. It was fun for a short time but the peace and quiet and gentle rock of the cruise ship was preferred and that's where we headed around 10pm when Patong itself was seemingly just getting going.

Our cruise also had one day at sea as it made its way back to Singapore and it was a chance to sit and do little. There was a trip to the gym, and even a bypass of the bread pudding as I focused on not adding pounds. Plus some kicking back by the adult pool and feeling the love of a lounge. All the better to prepare us for the final 3 days and 2 nights back in Singapore.



With travel you often enjoy the sights and experiences in isolation, just with whoever you are sharing the adventure with, so the occasional greeting with locals or fellow travelers is welcome. Arran knows that I need to say hello when I hear a familiar English accent. But descending the old peak road we encountered a man and woman a little older than us who were going up. As I said earlier, it was tough going down. So why they were going up, well, I can't say. They stopped to greet us, partly, I think, from exhaustion. He said good morning and then it was he who asked us where we were from. Within a few moments, on a peak trail halfway around the world, we established that we lived in Ottawa (we in Kanata and they not far away by Dow's Lake). We'd probably passed each other on much flatter streets back home. Cool.

On the rooftop of the Marina Bay Sands Hotel we met multiple German couples. There was a German cruise ship in port. First there was the couple from Cologne who had no table, so we invited them to join us and we had a pleasant 30 minute chat. Then before we returned 57 floors by elevator to the safety of ground level, we asked someone to take our photo by the rooftop edge. He was from Berlin and he asked if we were Americans. I feigned being offended (that really wasn't difficult!) and said we are Canadians, not Americans! He raised his voice in a sly ominous way and said "not for long!" This is just a couple weeks after Trump had begun taunting us about becoming the 51st state. Then we both did an exaggerated OH-OH-OH! and enjoyed a laugh. It was funny. His timing was excellent.

There were other nice but less interesting exchanges: Luke from Southampton, William from Binghamton (Bingo Willie?! No, I didn't tell him the nickname I came up with), Kaurich from Calcutta, the partying retirees from Australia, the ladies from Scotland who were traveling for the 50th birthdays about 12 years late and were looking forward to the new season of Shetland like we were. There was also a British couple who managed to complain about everything and we did all we could not to engage with them at all, though we listened to everything they wined about and it gave us something to talk and laugh about later.

But perhaps the best interaction had with someone on the trip was not actually me or Arran, but one involving Jon that I was fortunate enough to witness. After our drinks high on the Peninsula overlooking the bright lights of Hong Kong, it was necessary to use the washroom. Jon strolled into the men's room, I followed. Now, I must get you to picture what we saw, it is very important if I am successful in conveying

this interaction. Past the sinks on one side and the stalls on the other was a window, a very very large window. It was mostly floor to ceiling and wall to wall. Remember we are on the 37th floor, so this window gives an entire wall's view looking north over Kowloon. It was impressive. And on the floor, facing the window, were 3 urinals. They were usual urinal width apart which is to say, not alot. They were perhaps 2 feet wide but they came up from the floor high enough, perhaps stomach height, so that you could stand there relieving yourself in privacy while also looking out this GIANT window at all of south Kowloon! It was crazy.



Back to the interaction side of the story. I said there were 3 urinals. One on the left. One on the right. One in the middle. And as it happens, the one in the middle was occupied by a snappily attired middle-aged gentleman. Jon walked up and took his place at the urinal on the right, closely proximated to the snappily dressed gentleman in the middle, slightly farther from the urinal on the left which was clearly my only option. As Jon took his place and prepared himself, being the friendly fellow that he is, he turned slightly to the man beside him and said, wow, that's quite a view! Surprisingly the gentleman did not engage with Jon over whatever view he might be referring to and left moments later. Jon and I continued the necessity of the moment, taking in the great expanse we beheld from such great heights, and then had a good laugh. I didn't know what else to say Jon said! But in retrospect Jon, it was perfect. It was very admirable of you to show how friendly Canadians can be, and complimentary too!

Much of the trip was indeed as perfect as that moment. It was epic in many ways. The farthest I'd traveled, the longest flight, and in Hong Kong and Singapore two cities that are surely among the most stunning and interesting on earth, a cruise to shake it up, and a jetlag upon my return like I'd never had before. Epic. If it was half the distance I'd want to do it every year. But it isn't, though give it a little more time and I will gladly do it again.