



• Short and sweet Singapore

With a weekend to spare, you'll have plenty of time to explore the amazingly kid-friendly green oases of Singapore, writes *Kate Farr*.

It's no secret that the Lion City is well set up for kids; in fact, the sheer family-friendliness of the place is a major draw for those relocating from Hong Kong to Singapore. A recent long-weekend trip saw our family road-testing the city's great outdoors with an active three-year-old in tow. This is how we fared...

Day one

Catching an 11am flight from Hong Kong, we landed at Changi Airport, surely one of the most kid-friendly airports in Asia (more on that later), and were in a cab en route to the city by 3:15pm. Dropping off our bags at our hotel at Robertson Quay, it was time for a quick change before hitting the streets in search of an early dinner. My husband regularly travels to Singapore on business, but my knowledge of the city is a little sketchier, mostly consisting of eateries no longer in existence, thanks to my backpacker-era points of reference, now more than ten years out of date. Fortunately, I recalled that Chinatown was probably an easy starting point for our family exploration, and so we hopped in a cab to Maxwell Road Food Centre.

This is one of Singapore's many fabulous food courts, dishing up affordable, authentic and well-prepared food to the masses in a no-frills setting. Predominantly a

Chinese food centre, Maxwell Road is a cavernous space of Formica tables, cooled by ceiling fans and lined with food stalls, many of which offer the same dishes. We stopped at the famous Tian Tian Hainanese chicken rice concession, where my son and I split a wonderfully fragrant plate of shredded chicken and a side order of veggies for just S\$5.50 (around HK\$34). Savoury cravings sated, we hit the fried sweet potato dumpling stand for dessert, and weren't disappointed with these flavoursome doughnut-like treats. This is definitely not a diet option, but is worth every calorie.

After dinner, we had just enough time to work off some of our meal with a short stroll along South Bridge Road to the Buddha's Tooth Relic Temple. This modern Buddhist shrine is said to house a piece of dentistry of the Lord Buddha himself, originally discovered in Myanmar, and is a fascinating place to wander for half an hour or so.

Another place of worship a little further up South Bridge Road is the striking Sri Mariamman Temple. Singapore's oldest Hindu temple is notable for its incredibly ornate tower, depicting hundreds of individual deities, figures and other colourful decoration. It is well worth a visit, and my three-year-old was fascinated by the "faces" for long enough for me to snap some pictures.

There was just time for a cool drink in the bar of the newly refurbished

Scarlet Hotel on nearby Erskine Road before heading back for bedtime. This 1920s building is a prime example of old colonial Singaporean architecture, and exudes understated glamour.

Day two

Refreshed after a good night's sleep, it was time for a spot of breakfast al fresco. The small neighbourhood Kith Café benefits from a lovely riverfront location at Robertson Quay, but also from plenty of outside space for the kids to let loose on scooters and skates while Mum and Dad enjoy their lattes in peace. With giant primary-coloured animals to clamber on while you wait for your toast, this is a great breakfast spot that is popular with both locals and tourists alike.

Suitably sated, we hopped in a taxi bound for Gardens By The Bay, a vast green space that occupies more than 100 hectares of prime Singapore waterfront. General admission to these stunning tropical gardens is absolutely free, with entry fees payable for a small selection of specialist domes and pavilions on site, as well as a S\$2 shuttle bus to ferry you around the massive expanse. A friend had tipped us off to the fact that the Far East Organisation Children's Garden was well worth a visit, and so we headed straight there. Comprising rainforest tree houses, two playgrounds, a café and, most exciting of all, a huge outdoor splash pad play area, complete with motion-activated sprinklers, fountains and – thankfully – a shaded amphitheatre for parents to sit and supervise the action, this is a must-do on any family itinerary.

It took several hours and the promise of ice cream to pry our happy, sodden and exhausted little boy away from the splashy fun, so seizing our chance we strolled along the park's waterfront promenade to Satay By The Bay, another typical Singaporean food court that specialises in authentic, not to mention spicy, satay sticks. Fortunately, there are also plenty of



alternatives if, like ours, your little one isn't keen on fiery food, and we found the fresh juice stall to be a major hit with our boy, who thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to create his own lunchtime "cocktail".

That evening, we visited one of Singapore's most popular animal attractions. The Night Safari was the world's first nocturnal zoo, and the clever design of the park allows you to get up close and personal with the inhabitants, without a cage to obstruct your view. Visitors can choose to walk the safari along designated trails that wind their way amongst the animal enclosures, but, as it was already half-past bedtime, we opted instead for the 40-minute Tram Safari. This guided tour takes you around the world by native animal species, from equatorial Africa's zebra herds to Nepalese valley rhinos. We also spotted hyenas, bears, leopards and even rare tigers, all seemingly unaware of the crowds of visitors there to catch a glimpse of them. The Night Safari is a highly educational experience, and the park's message is one of conservation and preservation, with visitors strictly prohibited from dropping litter, using flash photography or behaving in any way that might disturb the animals.

Day three

After a slow start to our morning, we decided to once again test Singapore's reputation as an outdoorsy city by heading over to the Botanic Gardens. Stopping off for breakfast at Food For Thought, a sustainable café situated just within the park's Tanglin Gate, our boy inhaled his pancakes, enjoyed

the outdoor playground and made a few new friends before we all set off to explore this historic space. Originally founded in the 1850s, and still a green hub for Singaporeans to enjoy, the gardens span three separate city districts and offer unparalleled space for visitors of all ages to walk, run, scoot and cycle. There are few of the restrictions that Hong Kong park-goers might be used to and plenty of lush green lawns to enjoy. Meandering along the shady pathways for most of the morning, we eventually stumbled across the Jacob Ballas Children's Garden. This outdoor education centre within an organic garden also incorporates a sandy playground and another lovely water play area.

For lunch, we popped back across the gardens to the former British army barracks at Dempsey Hill, now a shopping and dining hub and home to the lovely Tree Lizard restaurant. This casual eatery boasts yet another outdoor play area set in extensive green grounds, and has a pleasant and breezy terrace from which to supervise the exploration.

As our time in Singapore was drawing to a close, we decided to end our trip with a peaceful meander through the heart of the city by River Taxi. This relaxed boat ride is a bargain alternative to the many organised Singapore River cruises, at just S\$3 per person, as opposed to the usual S\$20, when paying by EZ Link card (Singapore's Octopus equivalent). Docking at Marina Bay, we strolled the riverside promenade, enjoying the skyline view as we planned our next visit. 🇸🇬