

Singapore: Shop, not stop

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LAST week, I became part of the 15 to 18 million tourists who visited the city state of Singapore. My purchases may not have been that much but still contributed to the more than S\$27 billion spent by shoppers – not stoppers.

The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) reported that 2018 was a record year not because of Crazy Rich Asians or the Trump-Kim summit, but visitors from all over the world.

The STB's optimism mainly stems from the fact that Changi Airport has added a "jewel" to its tourism attractions. Terminal 1 is adjacent to the Jewel, a world-class mall that features a waterfall at the multi-level center, which officially opened on April 12, 2019.

Our Grab driver informed us that the government also has started construction to consolidate the Jurong Bird Park, the Safari by Night, Singapore Zoo in one location to encourage tourists to stay longer in one location. Instead of taking time to move from one attraction to another, tourists might as well be spending money, not time.

Singapore relies on tourism for about 4 percent of its economic output, according to official Singapore stats, but permanent residents ensure the health and wealth of Singapore citizens, especially the elderly.

Permanent residents, which include those with long-term resident status (with employment passes as well as spouses of Singaporean citizens or permanent residents), contribute to the fund that the government dispenses for social services to its citizenry.

In May 1999, there were 558,554 visitors to Singapore, including 48,918 from the Philippines. In December of that year, the monthly total increased to 726,391. Even Filipino visitors rose to 52,571.

Christmas is gift-giving time so shopping dollars inevitably increase.

Ten years later, the monthly total of visitors in May was 726,39: the Philippine share of visitors was 54,995 which increased in December of 2009 to 110,760.

As a shopper's paradise for those who can afford the airfare and hotel stays, Singapore has no equal in Southeast Asia. Closer than the US, Canada or even Australia and New Zealand, Singapore attracts tourists who put a premium on safety, security and value.

You may shop till you drop, but at the end of the day – or your stay – you cannot stop or stay in Singapore on a long-term basis, not as a tourist.

In 2011, Singapore decided the city state had enough foreign workers and permanent residents. With competition in the job market getting stiff and those whose provident funds were running out needing to become part of the labor force again, Singapore made it more difficult for foreign workers to apply for and be granted permanent residency.

To qualify for residency, the foreigner/applicant must be either of the following:

Spouse of a Singapore citizen (SC) or Singapore permanent resident (PR);

Unmarried child aged below 21 born within the context of a legal marriage to, or have been legally adopted by, a SC or PR;

Aged parent of a SC;

Holder of an employment pass or S pass;

Student studying in Singapore; or

Foreign investor in Singapore.

Spouses of Singaporean citizens are even finding it difficult to get residency. During my visit, I read a letter to the editor of the South China Morning Post (“Don’t separate foreigner-Singaporean couples”). Lim Wen Ting lamented the fact that there seems to be a lack of “a clear criteria” for a long-term visit pass – LTVP) for the spouse of a Singaporean citizen who wants to stay and pursue a life together in the country with the Singaporean spouse.

Without the LTVP, the spouse or any other applicant cannot stay and work in Singapore.

The result apparently would force the couple to live separately (thus straining the marriage).

To apply for the LTVP as a pre-marriage condition or requirement, the foreign spouse or non-resident spouse (NRS) is warned by the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) that “marriage to a Singapore citizen (SC) does not guarantee the non-resident (NR) spouse automatic right of entry into Singapore or approval for a long-term immigration facilities.”

In fairness, the ICA is simply advising the SC and NR to accurately and efficiently plan their future together.

Not bad, but not easy either.

The SC and NR must check the requirements and determine if the foreign spouse is likely to be granted the LTVP if already in Singapore as a tourist.

Otherwise, the NR may apply for PR outside Singapore.

In a September 2018 survey, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) reported that “nearly one in five Singaporeans between the ages of 19 and 30 in the Republic wish to emigrate, while almost a third will consider the possibility of doing so within the next five years.”

The IPS survey also shows that “almost half – 42.6 percent – of respondents” consider emigration as a “backup plan” in case Singapore fails.

This attitude reflected an increased concern about being competitive in Singapore from 32.8 percent of respondents during a similar survey in 2010.

Further, IPS reported that “nearly 60 percent of respondents agreed that a rise in emigration is inevitable as Singapore becomes more stressful and competitive,” up from 40 percent in 2010.

The first country of choice for Singaporeans to migrate to? Australia.

The most commonly cited reason to go Down Under is the fact that with the same income from the same occupation, one could look forward to having his or her own home. As a vast continent, Australia has huge land areas available for settlement, whereas in Singapore, everything reverts to the government.

Singaporeans are merely users or custodians. They cannot finally and fully own the land or house they currently occupy. Singaporean citizens and/or permanent residents may acquire private property, including houses or homes for their family.

To be able to acquire private property the Housing and Development Board (HDB) requires the future purchase to meet the minimum occupancy period (MOP) – of a flat, for example – which can be from 5 to 7 years.

The MOP starts from the date the applicant takes possession of the flat (including subsequent changes to flat ownership through outright transfer) to the following dates, whichever is earlier:

Date on which the option to purchase (OTP) the private property is exercised;

Date of the sale and purchase agreement of the private property, regardless of whether it is still under construction or ready for possession.

The computation excludes “the period of renting out or non-occupation of the flat and any infringement of the lease of the flat by the owner.”

After meeting the MOP requirement, the Singaporean citizen/resident (and spouse if needed) may exercise the option to purchase (OTP) the Singaporean dream of having his or her own private home.

But wait! To exercise the OTP for your property, the applicant (if he or she is the flat owner) will need to meet certain requirements:

Notify the HDB of the local private residential property acquisition before exercising the option to purchase (OTP) for the property;

Sell the flat within six months of acquiring the completed/uncompleted local private residential property; and

Approach the HDB branch managing your flat to notify them of your intention to acquire private residential properties.

The ease by which a Singaporean (and spouse) can acquire and privately own a home in Australia, is cited as the most common reason why Australia is the most favored emigration destination, not to mention proximity to Singapore, when compared to New Zealand, the US, the UK or Canada, the next countries of choice to migrate.

Interestingly, all these countries allow the spouses of the citizens or permanent residents to stay, work and be with the citizen/resident spouse while the application for adjustment of status is pending. This policy is the reverse of what ICA requires.

The ICA's warning of the tenuous position that the foreign spouse of a Singaporean citizen/resident is understandable given the prevailing mood of the country to limit the foreign population.

As of June 2018, Singapore had a total population of 5.64 million. Of this number, 3.99 million were permanent residents, including those with various passes, including the LTVP.

An interesting note is the ratio of residents/citizens needed to support elderly Singaporeans. The same report shows that to ensure a Singapore elderly gets the social services and benefits, there must be five permanent residents contributing to the system.

With the restrictions and difficulties arising from the national mood to limit foreign workers (and even spouses of Singaporean citizens or permanent residents), the elderly may have to face a cut in benefits.

Should that happen, the government would have to rely on other revenue streams such as tourism income.

Then Singapore might have to impose or require tourists to spend more, to shop more till you literally drop.

But stopping for an extended period is still a no-go.