

LOCAL GOES GLOBAL

Chain hotels worldwide are cultivating localized flair to woo modern travelers seeking authentic experiences

BY DELLE CHAN

When I checked into the newly renovated Hotel Jen Tanglin Singapore for a staycation earlier this year, I was pleasantly surprised to find myself delving into a microcosm of local culture. Singaporean motifs are in full force everywhere: Orchid- and shophouse-themed wallpaper adorned the guestrooms, while in the lobby, a “Heart Map” — a hand-drawn map on which staff and guests alike are encouraged to scrawl local recommendations — stood in place of a traditional concierge. This is a far cry from the hotel’s previous incarnation as Traders Hotel Singapore, which bore all the hallmarks of a generic chain hotel.

Indeed, hotels with homogeneous architecture and the same old amenities may soon be things of the past. Chain hotels once based their brands on the premise that you would get the same standardized experience in all their global properties. In this day and age, however, such cookie-cutter offerings are losing their allure, especially among younger



The lobby of Hotel Jen Tanglin in Singapore



travelers hungry for novel experiences. A recent survey conducted by tour operator Topdeck Travel found that 86% of millennials — who represent approximately 22% of international travelers worldwide — believe it is essential to experience a new culture while on vacation.

“Generally, we are seeing a shift towards a more experience-first approach, particularly among millennials — with the millennial traveler being not so much of a demographic as it is a mindset,” observes Zoe Chan, Head of PR, Asia Pacific, at Hotels.com.

The aforementioned millennial mindset, as Bruce Ryde, Head of Luxury & Lifestyle Brand Marketing (Asia, Middle East & Africa) at Intercontinental Hotels Group, explains, craves a genuine connection. “These travelers want to feel more connected to the community, and this drives them to seek out authentic, hyperlocal experiences, far away from the typical tourist spots. We are seeing a growing preference worldwide for destination-centric experiences and memorable accommodation over budget and convenience.” Mariano

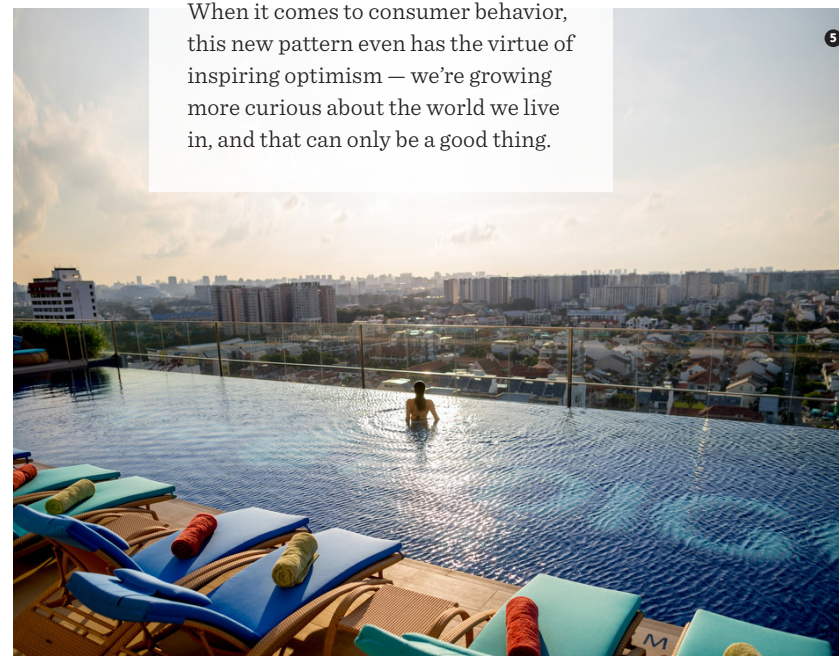
Garchitorena, Director of Public Relations at The Peninsula Manila, agrees: “Travelers today want more from their trips: an education, an immersion in history, an evocative adventure — sensual, intellectual or physical — that enriches the spirit.”

Social media has whetted this appetite for hyperlocal experiences. “With easy access to information via various online channels, people are becoming increasingly exposed to new places and cultures. It’s so easy to get travel ideas simply by searching for hashtags on Instagram, or for mood boards on Pinterest,” Angelina Hue, Director of Brand Marketing Communications at Shangri-La International, points out. In other



words, today’s travelers are attuned to the travel experiences of others, and influenced by peer reviews more than ever before, says Bruce. This may mean keeping each and every customer (especially trigger-happy tweetaholics) satisfied has become an even more pressing imperative. However, Bruce underlines that social media also presents new marketing opportunities for hotels. “We are constantly searching for surprising, inspiring things in each neighborhood, and harnessing social media as a platform to tell these lesser-known stories. Hopefully, this will encourage travelers to look at local neighborhoods as a source of travel inspiration,” he shares.

After all, every destination has its own unique story, and the cost of not telling it well can be considerable. “We are competing for attention in a closely contested, price-sensitive landscape where hospitality basics are no longer a differentiator,” says Angelina. “We hope to win travelers over by offering authentic insights and experiences with a local twist.” When it comes to consumer behavior, this new pattern even has the virtue of inspiring optimism — we’re growing more curious about the world we live in, and that can only be a good thing.



- 1 A deluxe room at Hotel Jen Tanglin
- 2 Chili crab fondue at Hotel Jen Tanglin's Ah Hoi's Kitchen
- 3 The Club Lounge at Hotel Jen Tanglin
- 4 Hotel Indigo Katong's Pavilion features classic Peranakan elements
- 5 The pool at Hotel Indigo Katong
- 6 Enjoy a meal at Baba Chew in Hotel Indigo Katong

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LOCAVORE DELIGHTS

Experiencing new flavors is one of the most reliable pleasures of travel, and Hotel Jen — Shangri-La's latest hospitality brand — is banking on satisfying travelers' culinary curiosity. Last year, the hotel ran the "Hor Jiak!" campaign, a Hokkien term that means "delicious". Chefs across several Hotel Jen properties whipped up inventive dishes inspired by local delicacies in their respective cities. For instance, a Singapore-themed chili crab fondue and a Philippine-inspired *ginataang turon* (a combination of an old-time Filipino favorite and banana in spring roll wrappers) were on offer at Hotel Jen Tanglin and Hotel Jen Orchardgateway in Singapore.

Not straying too far from last year's theme, this month, Hotel Jen Orchardgateway will be offering cocktails fashioned after local snacks and desserts. *Bojio* Banana, which is

rum mixed with banana liqueur, banana chips and banana fruit, was inspired by *goreng pisang* (fried banana). Another drink on offer is the vodka-based *Stylo Milo*, a spiked twist on the local classic, *Milo Dinosaur*. "Our aim is to champion local flavors and homegrown food producers. We also want to pique the curiosity of our guests who have probably never sampled such dishes or drinks before," shares Angelina.

COMMUNAL PURSUITS

Mid-range hotels to five-star properties worldwide are getting into the experiential game. At luxe hotel chain The Peninsula, guests can immerse themselves in the histories, cultures and lifestyles of their destination cities through myriad bespoke, hands-on activities, thanks to The Peninsula Academy — an experiential program conducted in tandem with top-notch tour guides and partners from each of the hotel's nine locations.

For instance, guests can spend an afternoon in the atelier of homegrown designer Lenora Cabili of Filip +

Inna, where they will gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of her handmade designs, all inspired by the traditional weaving, embroidery, beading and patterns of the sprawling archipelago.

Children can join in the fun, too, and learn how to prepare Filipino desserts like *halo-halo* in kids' cooking classes, or accompany the rest of the family in a visit to the Batungbacal family farm, which produces what some consider to be the best mangoes in the country. "Our aim is to bring the city and the country to life, and let our guests experience the Philippines a la The Peninsula!" says Mariano.

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

The strategy of incorporating elements of the neighborhood into a hotel's

7 Hotel Jen Orchardgateway's original *Bojio* Banana, a drink inspired by *goreng pisang* 8 This wall at Hotel Indigo Bangkok Wireless Road features wireless radios and electric guitars 9 The lobby at Hotel Indigo Bangkok Wireless Road 10 Rooms at Hotel Indigo Katong feature chic Peranakan tiles and colorful furniture 11 and 12 The Peninsula Kids Academy Lutong Pinoy program teaches kids how to cook Filipino dishes



design and décor is especially evident in Hotel Indigo properties, where local flavor is vibrantly interwoven into everything, from furniture to wall art.

Take Hotel Indigo Bangkok Wireless Road for example. The walls of this 192-room hotel are adorned with colorful street art-style murals that celebrate the neighborhood's rich history, while an installation art of wireless radios in the lobby further alludes to the area's past as the birthplace of Thai radio. Meanwhile, the vertical gardens here reference the city's iconic Lumpini Park, which is located mere minutes away.

Another notable Hotel Indigo property is Singapore Katong, which boasts an aesthetic inspired by the culture and customs of its Peranakan neighborhood. Upstairs, guestrooms are designed to mirror the flow of a traditional shophouse, with the living area in front and the bathroom at the back. Beds are lined with batik pillows, while old-school fixtures like



Carrom boards have been upcycled into modern coffee tables. "When you visit any Hotel Indigo in the world, you can expect a different and refreshingly local experience each time," declares Bruce. "No two of our properties are alike, as each reflects the unique heritage and personality of its immediate neighborhood." 5



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