

February 7 to 12

Singapore

February 7 and 8 Bourne End to Singapore

At 06.30 there were a few flakes of snow on the ground and it was biting cold. The five layers of summer clothes - not to mention the cap to keep the sun away - sufficed to keep most of me pleasantly warm. My fingers, however, were not happy and stayed in my pockets except when required for carrying bags. Photography was not going to be a happening thing until I was somewhere warmer.

The trains were busy and I had a long wait at Maidenhead, but they all ran on time and I reached Heathrow on schedule at 08.05.

From the station to check in was a walk of over ten minutes. Check in took a couple of minutes and security, even allowing for my hip making the buzzer buzz, took little longer. I was through two hours after leaving home.

The walk from there to the lounge took fifteen minutes. There were signs warning of this but it was a long way. It's just as well that I'm fit!



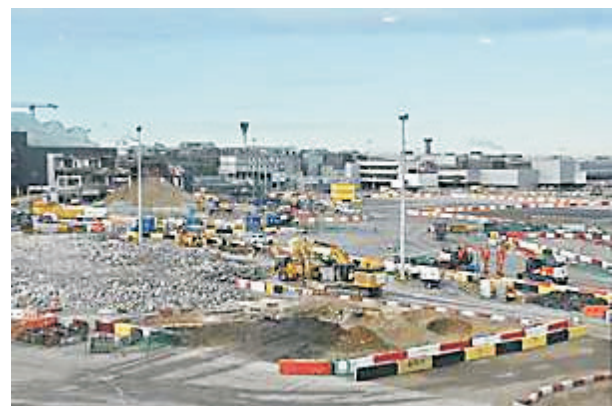
An almost healthy breakfast

The lounge was quiet when I arrived but gradually filled up. I availed myself of some bacon, which I didn't photograph, and a healthy bowl of fruit, which I did. The coffee was pretty good, so I had a couple of cups to cheer myself up while I waited. I needed cheering as I had to ignore the self-serve Tiger tap.

Outside there was lots of building work in progress and also lots of blue sky. It still looked rather cold. I had another double espresso and awaited my boarding call.



First Tiger of the trip - but not for me



Lots of road works

We pushed back a couple of minutes early, joined a long queue and were airborne reasonably quickly.

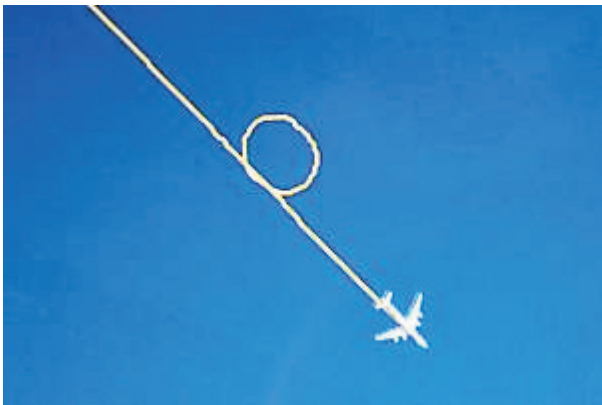
The A380 cabin was dated but the service was good and the food reasonable. Both Air NZ and Virgin are better. The wine list wasn't bad at all, definitely better than Virgin. Neither can rival Air NZ.



They served good food

The bed was more comfortable than it looked but I slept little. I was able to stretch out, though, so must have had a lot of rest.

The latter third of the flight was a little turbulent. Nothing serious but enough to keep us strapped down most of the time.



An interesting route

When the lights came on again, the flight map showed that we had performed a circle over the Indian Ocean. This might have been to avoid turbulence or to lose time so that we didn't arrive too early or because the driver got lost. I will never know.

Breakfast came and went and we landed almost exactly on schedule at 07.30. As usual, everything went into overdrive and, after a wait of a few minutes for the air bridge, I was through Immigration and Customs 30 minutes after touchdown.

The taxi driver couldn't remember where Coleman Street was so I had to tell him enough to enable him to program his Sat Nav (his phone). He warned me that traffic was heavy, the morning rush, but we still made it to the hotel in 25 minutes, less than an hour after touching down.

I checked in but couldn't claim my room until 2 pm. I did a quick change in the lobby and joined a long queue for the lift - one of the three was being repaired. It took about ten minutes to descend a couple of floors to the entrance, where I abandoned my bags until after lunch.



The New Year is nigh

Outside, it was warm and almost sunny. I took a quick tour of the New Year decorations, then followed my usual path round the corner to The Sidewalk, where I ignored the wildly unhealthy Malaysian kopi and had a Chinese tea. The only change that I could see was that the fresh fruit now had its own little stall. All of the main food outlets seemed to be the same as usual.



The Sidewalk was quiet this morning



HSBC was having its face washed

The first part of my journey was successful. I photographed more signs of the forthcoming New Year festivities and then walked to the MRT station, added some cash to my travel card and caught the train a couple of stops to Somerset. There, I located the HSBC machine, which was having its face washed, and extracted some cash from it.



Orchard Road Visitor Centre

The Visitor Centre is a few doors away so I went in there. It has often failed to be of much use as it depends almost entirely on the WWW. This time the lady was determined to give me some brochures, so I came away with a handful.



Interesting decorations - for the New Year?

Killiney Street Post Office is just round the corner so I went there to buy some stamps. Very cheap. About 30p to send a card to the UK! I have always liked this Post Office as it shares the building with a bar. A most unusual occurrence.

Whilst at the Tourist Office, I noticed a map of the MRT, which showed the Downtown Line running all the way to Upper Changi. I decided to go there, just to see how far it is from Changi Village.

There were two immediate problems. Firstly, the new stations have been built adjacent to (ie within a ten minute walk) of the stations on the old line. This meant a long walk along corridors between the lines at each interchange. Secondly, the new lines run all over the island. This means that it is often quicker to catch several trains than to sit on the same train all of the way from A to Z.



A busy new road ...

I took several trains, ended up at Upper Changi and found almost nothing. A new station on the side of a new road. There was no indication of where it was in relation to Changi Village. (A study of a map when back in the UK showed that it was least a couple of miles away).



Killiney Street Post Office



... and an ugly new station



The Sidewalk was busy

Feeling both increasingly tired and increasingly hungry, I retraced my steps by a slightly different route and arrived safely back at The Sidewalk.

It was in the middle of the lunchtime rush but I found a table and consumed a plate of spicy prawns and vegetables with a little rice. Very good, particularly for about £2.50.



New Year trinkets

I bought some post cards, looked at the temporary stall selling New Year trinkets, and then sat in the quiet hotel foyer, wrote my diary and enjoyed the comfy seats and the air conditioning.



Air conditioned elegance



My view over the Fire Station

I collected my bags from downstairs (all three lifts working this time) and checked in about a minute early. My room overlooked the main fire station rather than the building site and was very smart. By now, however, I was too tired to care and slept for a couple of hours.

A shower made me feel a little better so I put my valuables in the safe and walked round the corner again to the café for my first Tiger of the trip. I regret that these will be few and far between this trip.



The first of the trip

I wrote a couple of cards, drank my beer and tried to chill out.



Architecture - sublime ...



... and ridiculous



Raffles hoardings

I walked a mile up the road, viewing the architecture, which varies from the sublime to the ridiculous. Raffles was closed for restoration and surrounded by decorated hoardings. Much of the city seems like that at the moment.



A modern waiter

I arrived at Jai Thai, the Thai restaurant that I have visited several times before, to discover a major leap into the digital age. Each table is equipped with a tablet which contains the menu and an ordering system. This, presumably, is linked to the kitchen. Time will tell if the right messages get through.



Beef and brown rice

My Chinese tea did arrive immediately and the rest followed shortly afterwards. The beef wasn't exciting but it was hot. I will try something different next time. They did offer brown rice, which I was happy to enjoy.

I walked back to the hotel, stopped to photograph the Paparazzi Dogs, now world famous, and reached the hotel for the usual evening's clerical activities.

By 8pm I was exhausted so I went to bed.



Paparazzi Dogs



Paparazzi Dogs



Raffles City swans

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I slept well for four hours, woke up for a couple, and then slept again. I got up at 7, feeling reasonably fit. The room felt very cold and a check of the air conditioning revealed that it was set at 13. No wonder it was cold. I adjusted it so that it should be OK for the rest of my stay.



Malaysian breakfast

Outside, the weather looked OK so I ventured out to The Sidewalk for breakfast. The usual Malaysian stall provided vegetable curry with noodles for about £1.30. Excellent flavours and reasonably healthy. Chinese tea completed things. The food court was only moderately busy so I had no trouble finding a portion of a table.

I left feeling that more food would have been good but I will now feel justified in having a decent lunch.



Jurong Lake

I had originally planned to take the train as far as the end of the line - just to see what was there. En route, however, I saw Lakeside and decided to disembark there as the lake looked pretty.



The local runners use the lake



Jurong Lake



Not a pretty garden fence



Chinese bridge

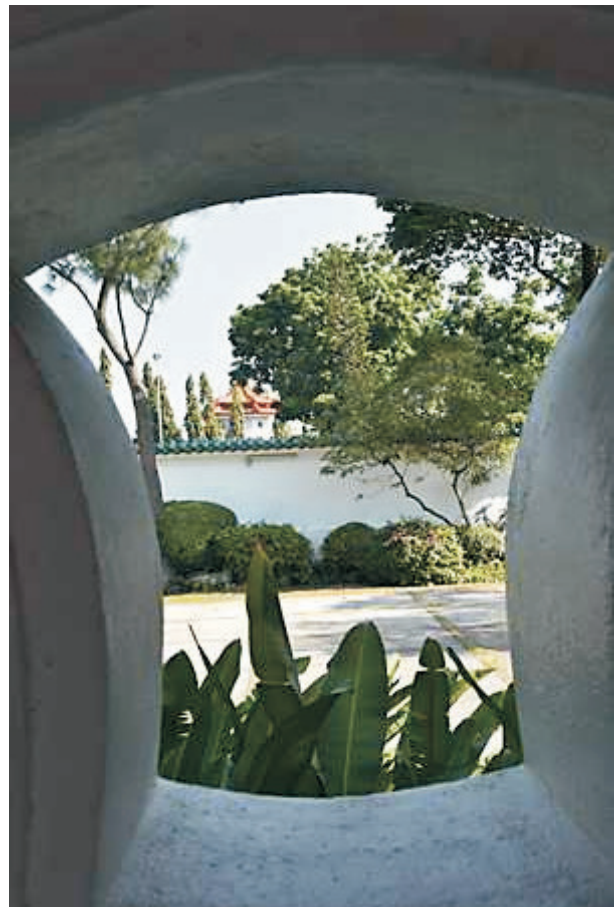
After a very short walk, however, I encountered a very large fence which was hiding lots of construction work. The signs pointed me towards the Chinese Garden, which I soon found.



Lots of work going on

This was lovely, a mixture of lakes, buildings and flowers. I wasn't sure about the tortoise exhibition but the children loved it. I had to be very careful where I trod in case I crunched one of the residents. The lady at the door did sell me an OAP's ticket without even asking!

The bonsai garden was very delicate. Lots of tiny trees in a building which reminded me of the Chinese Garden in Dunedin. (I later visited a couple in China which were very similar in appearance).



Chinese Garden



The children liked the tortoises



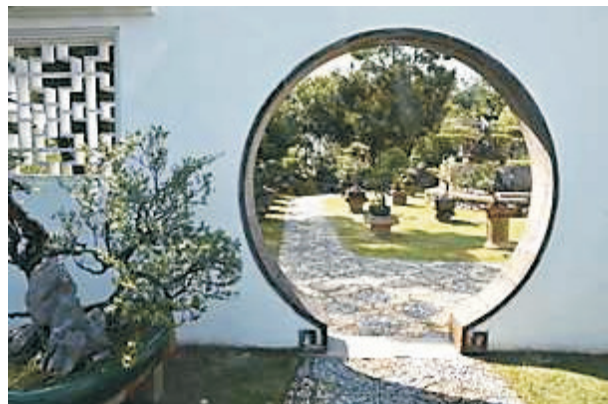
No mistaking where I was



The Bonsai Garden



I love these Chinese doorways



Small trees and another door



More Chinese architecture



The red path to the pagoda



The pagoda

I eventually found signs pointing towards Chinese Garden Station and found a train after about an hour and 3 kilometres walking. It was a good way to start the morning as it would have been too hot for comfort in the afternoon.



Chinese Garden Station across the park

One stop back on the line is Jurong East, home to the Science Centre. I wandered down from the platform and into the bus garage, now hosting a temporary market. This provided a cold lemon drink, which was probably unhealthy but less damaging than dehydration.



Chinese Garden Station

I found more signs of the forthcoming New Year celebrations, a garden centre and some assorted food stalls.



Tasteful New Year decoration

There was an interesting local history walk, which told me quite a lot about the history of the area.

On the other side of a major road I could see the Science Centre - it was difficult to miss. In between me and it was a crash being closely marshalled by the local constabulary. I did my best to photograph proceedings without being arrested.



Pomelo with hats on



An interesting way to display local history



The Science Centre was hard to miss



A well marked path to the Science Centre



Lots of water features ...



Traffic chaos - Singapore style



... aimed at the children

The Science Centre was full of children. Not surprising, really. Even before entering the main exhibition, I could see a large water display. I don't know if it was educational but it was quite good fun.



"View with a twist", a clever wire sculpture



It transforms from an elephant into two giraffes

Once inside, I wandered around looking at lots of stuff, most of which was impressive and very well labelled.



Not sure what it was but it looked like fun

At 12.00 they announced a demonstration of a Tesla Generator. The technicalities of it were unintelligible but it generated lots of sparks and noise. A lady volunteer sat in a Faraday cage and escaped incineration but two hydrogen balloons placed alongside the machine blew up with great enthusiasm.



The Tesla Generator



They set light to a volunteer in a cage ...



... and then blew up some balloons



Pretty coloured fish

I explored a few more galleries, including one which contained lots of beautiful fish. And another which featured hydroponics.



Lettuce with a story

I got lost and then found the café. A Chinese tea was probably healthy. A seafood laksa probably wasn't. It tasted good, however, and gave me the chance for a much needed rest.



Very acceptable laksa

I gave a little attention to the section on old age - I was by far the oldest there - glanced at a few more galleries and decided that I was too tired to take in any more information. As I have come to expect here, everything was done to a very high standard.



A stair climbing wheelchair

I walked back to the bus station - it really was hot now - and thought of catching a bus. The only one which appeared to go where I wanted wasn't around so I returned to the train. This wasn't relaxing as I had to stand most of the way.



Big bus stop. Not many buses

Back at the hotel, I had a snooze and returned to the real world just before 6. The Sidewalk was surprisingly quiet and as soon as I entered, the little girl in the very short skirt provided by the brewery ordered my beer - she knew what I wanted - and escorted me to my table. I'm sure she has been working there for years and must be much older than she looks. I don't think I dare take a photo.



Dragons in the traffic

As I was walking along minding my own business, the peace and quiet was rudely interrupted by the sound of a dragon dance blasting off a small truck. I was just able to grab a photo of it passing through the usual heavy traffic.



Raffles City fountain

I called in at Raffles City to do a little shopping and found some scissors but no Birthday card. There are several fountains in the centre and I tried but probably failed to get a decent photo of them.



Pork, greens, chips and peas

Along the road and almost opposite where I ate last night is Chin Chin, a huge Chinese restaurant. Last time, I was taken aback when the Hainanese pork chop arrived with chips and peas. I thought the waiter must have been taking the p**s. This time, the same happened. A large Chinese family on the next table also received the same treatment, so it must be the right way to serve the dish. The green vegetable sambal was excellent but there was lots of fried rice and the ginger tea was very gingery but also very sweet. I suspect I would have been safer with a beer. The food was good.

I walked back, stopped at The Sidewalk to buy a lump of pineapple and returned to the hotel.

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A good way to start the day

A poor night's sleep. I started my morning at The Sidewalk. A mixed plate of chicken, noodles and vegetables, a whole £2.50 worth. The garlic beans were excellent.

My plan was to walk as far as the river mouth and then follow the river inland.



The Padang was being watered

I crossed the Padang, which was being well watered, and took the obligatory photographs of the grass and the surrounding buildings, both ultra-modern and colonial classics.



Great buildings both ancient and modern



In honour of the fresh water system

I found a fine fountain that I hadn't noticed before. It was originally unveiled in 1882 in honour of the wealthy businessman who helped fund the provision of clean water to the city in 1857. It was moved to its current site in 1925.

Tam King Sen, for it was he, features later in this story as one of the river bridges was named after his grandson, himself a leading businessman and political leader.



The "Happy Family of Five"

The Arts Centre had an outside area with lots of statues. Singapore has increasing amounts of public art, not what one might expect in what is supposed to be a very utilitarian and money dominated society.



Decorative columns



Marina Bay Sands



The Merlion and friends

There were lots of people, mainly clustered around the merlion. The sun was shining brightly and everything looked magnificent.



The river from Clifford Pier

I explored the old quays, was disappointed that the Custom House appeared to have been badly transformed into a café and then retraced my steps to the river.

I followed this for over an hour, photographing each bridge in turn and enjoying the changes of atmosphere and scenery. Except for the myriad of bikes, both pedalled and electric, it was reasonably quiet, with most of the cafes and bars not yet having opened.



Clifford Pier



Anderson Bridge



Marina Bay Sands



Elgin Bridge



Clemenceau Bridge



Clifford Pier



Alkaff Bridge



Jiak Kim Bridge - as previously discussed

After a walk of about five kilometres, I came to an enforced end where construction work on the path had blocked it. It has to be said that it isn't as great a feat as walking the length of the Thames. The Singapore River runs to the great length of about two miles!

I walked uphill to the main road, where I found a bus which would take me to a stop almost outside the hotel, only about ten minutes away.



The path ended in the trees ...



The Armenian Church

The stop was outside the Armenian Church which, as ever, I visited. It is a delightful place. Calm in the midst of the chaos that is Singapore.

I seized the opportunity to have an iced lemon tea at The Sidewalk. Lots of sugar in it but probably less than in a glass of orange juice.



Orchard Road was busy



... in front of a large wall

I took the train a couple of stops to Somerset and started my hunt for a Birthday card and some lunch. Orchard Road was buzzing with both people and cars. It was Saturday lunchtime so that wasn't really a surprise. I found nothing vaguely resembling a card of any sort. I had thought of lunch in the basement of Lucky Plaza but it was heaving.



Ngee Ann City

I had read about a posh bookshop in the Ngee Ann City building, a huge edifice on the other side of Orchard road. I found it and, with the help of an assistant, found a rack of all sorts of cards. I also found a street map of Shanghai. A satisfactory end to a long search.

The building's basement housed lots of food stores and a busy food court. I bought some chicken and vegetables with brown rice and a bottle of lemon barley, which said it wasn't sweet. It did contain 30 grams of sugar! Even the brown rice seemed to be a mix of brown and white. Oh dear!

Outside, I could hear the drums of a dragon dance coming from the other side of the road. When I made it over, I found a large crowd watching four drummers. I slowly made my way to the front and finally got a clear view and some photos.



Large scale calligraphy

After a few minutes they abandoned their drums and the announcer said that the next performance would be a highly skilled calligrapher. We clustered around a very old man with a very large but pointy brush with which he drew very delicate patterns on the floor. This was not a spectator sport which will attract a large crowd so I beat a hasty retreat.

Not having any particular aims, I decided to walk back to the hotel, a distance, as it turned out, of about two and a half kilometres. By now, it should be said, I was tired, hot and sticky.



Another dragon dance



Istana Park

I remembered Istana Park from a previous visit. Lots of flowers and a nice pond in the centre of the city. From there I climbed the steps into Fort Canning Park and then up some more steps. It is quite wild in places, not what you expect in central Singapore.



Fort Canning Park



Up, up and away



Fort Canning Park

The arches are definitely European and, on the far side, the staff were preparing for an open air concert or similar event.



They were preparing for an event

I wandered down the hill towards the hotel, only a short distance away, and collapsed in my room for a rest and a shower.

After a couple of hours rest but with my legs feeling rather heavy, I walked the short distance to the Padang to see if there was any sport to watch. There was a rugby match in progress, which I watched for quarter of an hour, and tried to take action photos. Needless to say, the tries were at the other end of the pitch or on the other side of the ground.



My waitress

The Sidewalk was reasonably quiet I started with a beer - served by my little waitress friend, then had some dumpling soup and finished with prawns and greens. I managed to avoid both rice and noodles.



One of the Sidewalk's best

February 11 and 12 Singapore to Christchurch and Paraparaumu



Breakfast fit for a king

Some sleep but not enough. The morning commenced with packing and checking the wardrobe, safe and bathroom for forgotten items. I must repeat the process after breakfast.

This was back at The Sidewalk. Noodles, fishcake, and a couple of vegetables. I treated myself to the luxury of tea and pineapple afterwards. I'm sure both are good for me.



Colours on Armenian Street

I did a final check of the room, checked out at Reception and left my bags with the concierge.

It was 09.30 and the museums - or anything much else - don't open until 10. I made my way slowly to Armenian Street, only a few hundred metres, and sat on a block outside the Law School.



The Peranakan Museum

There are a few old buildings on the street, one of which houses the Peranakan Museum. This is the culture which has grown up in Singapore as an amalgam of Chinese, Malay and the cultures of the other traders who arrived on the island. I remembered visiting and enjoying it about eight years ago so decided that it would be a good place in which to start Sunday morning. Lots of others obviously thought the same as there was a sizeable queue by ten o'clock.

The collection isn't large but covers a culture which values the very ornate in furniture, ceramics and dress. Perhaps the most famous son of the culture was Lee Kuan Yew, who embodied values from both Europe and Asia and was the founding Father of the nation.

Just down the road is the Philatelic Museum. It wasn't exciting - would you expect it to be - but well presented and interesting.



The Philatelic Museum



Strange place to find a Vespa

I was pleased to find a Vespa on display, not at all what I was expecting. My main complaint was that there was nowhere to sit down. It was getting warmer and I was already tired.

Being almost opposite The Sidewalk and as I needed a drink, an iced lemon tea was called for. The place had been quiet at breakfast time but was now heaving. I found a seat and took the opportunity for a rest.



The best louvres ...

Towards the river is the old Police Barracks, now Government Offices, which I always photograph because of its amazing colours.



... I have ever seen



Busy on the river

Once on the river, I went in reverse direction to yesterday and entered a small exhibition about the river at the rear of the Asian Civilization Museum. The main thing that I learned was that the river, so vital to the history of the city, is as short as it is, only a little over three kilometres.

The main museum is huge but doesn't actually have a huge collection. There were lots of empty rooms.



Lots of elegant but empty rooms

The most exciting part of the collection was the material found in the wreck of The Tang. This was a ninth century merchant ship discovered off Java. It was packed with ceramics from all over China, probably en route to what is now Saudi Arabia.



Plates from The Tang

It indicated the scale of the Chinese trade in ceramics and also how highly organised it was. There was a lot of other china on display and a corridor lined with photographs of the main religious buildings in Singapore. Quite a collection. There were several galleries of religious artefacts from all over Asia but they didn't appeal very much.

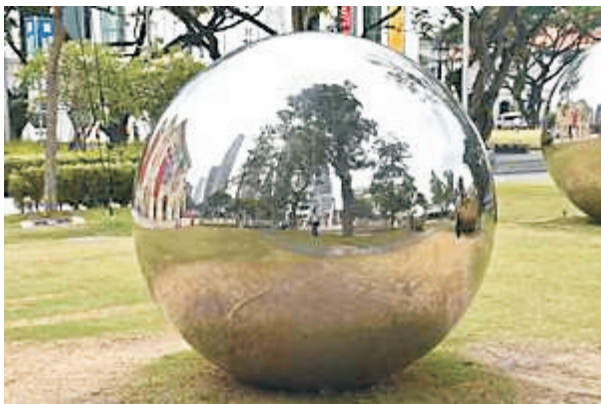


Nasi Goreng in posh surroundings

On the ground floor was a fairly posh café. The Nasi Goreng turned out to be huge but it was all freshly cooked and there was enough cucumber in it to convince me that all the rice wouldn't do me too much harm. There was also a cabinet containing amazing cakes and buns but I was good and didn't succumb.



Cakes to die for



Excellent reflections



Interesting view of the photographer

With a couple of hours to occupy, I took a few photos of the big stainless steel balls on the lawn, then examined the Old Parliament Building and took a photo of the elephant. This was erected to commemorate the King of Thailand's 1st overseas trip in 1871.



In honour of the King of Thailand

I had hoped that there might be some sport on The Padang but, whilst there were grounds men aplenty, there was no sign of a ball.

The area surrounding my hotel is Little Burma and, since my trip last year, a flea market has opened up on the pavements opposite. It was doing a roaring trade.



Lots of groundsmen but no ball



.. and a huge new one



A pop-up market

With 90 minutes still to go, I decided to take the train to the end of the line, Marina South Pier. This also had the benefit of showing me that the trains on the airport line were packed and that fighting through the crowds with a big suitcase might not be a good idea. I resolved to take a cab.

I re packed my bag and a taxi was summoned for me. There was little traffic so we sped to the airport. The fare was only \$15. Can't be bad. It is normally about \$20. The formalities were quick and painless so I was through in under five minutes. I should say that security checks are performed at the individual gate lounges so that may cause a delay later on.



Changi flowers



An interesting old boat ...

The pier was exactly that, with lots of boats in evidence and a huge liner, half the size of a city, moored alongside. Whilst it was pretty enough there and there were some interesting things to look at, it wasn't exciting so I returned to the hotel by train.

One of the main features of Changi Airport has been the amazing displays of orchids in the older terminals. Terminal 3 has not been given these, which is bit of a let down.

I had a shower in the lounge and changed into my travelling shirt. This made me feel cleaner but not livelier. I had a very good self-assembly bowl of laksa. This included dry laksa leaf (aka Vietnamese mint or Vietnamese coriander), which was very good. I must dry some of mine next autumn. I also had some fruit.

Following this, I whiled away some time by organising photos, sending emails and watching TV.

At the appropriate time I left the lounge and followed the signs to my gate finding, en route, some flowers. Not as good as the orchids but someone had made an effort.



Photos along the track ...

I was directed towards the Skytrain - the gate must be a very long way away. I'd never seen this before but piled on board and wondered how to take some photos. For some reason, there was no one at the front window so I grabbed the position and took photos along the track. A little train then appeared coming in the opposite direction - on a different track! I snatched a photo which may or may not come out. The trip took all of about three minutes.



... then the train came into view

At Changi, as I have already said, the security checks take place at each individual gate lounge so I had to queue for a few minutes but passed through with only the usual noises from my hip. I marched straight on board and found my seat.

The plane was old, the food was OK and the service inscrutable. On the good side, the wine was quite good and the bed was comfortable. I must have slept for three or four hours.

We pushed back 30 minutes late - air traffic control or some such excuse - and then taxied for fifteen minutes. By the end of the flight though, we were only expected to arrive six minutes late. Time will tell.

In the end, we were only five minutes late landing in Christchurch. I was through Immigration in a couple of minutes but then had to wait for my bag. Total time from touchdown to completing the formalities was about 30 minutes.

I had to hand my bag over again for the ongoing flight to Wellington and had a lengthy chat with the chap in charge about New Zealand beers. He was obviously an enthusiast.

I communicated with John by txt and we soon arrived in the same place at the same time. Outside, it was hot and sunny. My jacket was completely surplus to requirements but I had to carry it with me.



A Spitfire on a stick

The shopping area just outside the main airport buildings is marked by a fine Spitfire mounted on a stick. I don't know if it is a real one or a plastic copy.



Kate's flowers

We drove a couple of minutes up the road and parked outside the Countdown supermarket, which we entered in order to examine Kate's flower stall. She was in the build up towards Valentine's Day so was rather busy.



Kate's flowers



Good salad lunch

It being her chance for a coffee break, we decamped next door for a coffee. She returned to work, leaving John and I to have very respectable salad lunches.



Music for the public

John departed and I walked the short distance back to the terminal, where I joined the massed crowds at the regional part of the terminal. It seems a feature of New Zealand airports that the gates handling the smaller planes are far too small for the number of people waiting there. I did find a piano asking to be played - but I didn't.



The plane awaited me

The flight to Wellington was smooth, uneventful and on time. I caught an airport bus and then a crowded rush hour train to Paraparaumu. I arrived about two hours after landing in Wellington. Not a bad journey.

Valerie collected me and drove me home. Soon after, we went round to Nic & Meriam's for dinner and for me to meet the new baby.

An enjoyable evening. We returned home, where it was still very humid.