



A new Indian touch

Hôtel Vagabond, Singapore, is the first of Marriott's Tribute Portfolio independent hotels

India's connection to Singapore is multi-layered and complex, hovering safely between trade and finance and the Mustafa Centre. It is rarely as unexpected as the newly opened *hôtel Vagabond*.

Located at a corner of Little India, this is a converted heritage building. On stepping in, you might think you have entered a Parisian salon. And you would not be too off the mark. The *Vagabond Salon* is the heart of the hotel, with its rich tapestry of visual art on display and converting to a music salon thrice weekly. The design is by French designer Jacques Garcia, known for his opulent designs, and every surface is redolent in a heady mix of art and aesthetics, in red and gold!

Yet, the Indian touches are ever present, starting with owners, Satinder Garcha and Harpreet Bedi, for whom it has been a project of lavish love. Eclectic collectors of art, on ample display all over the hotel, they have curated with care. Easily the most noticeable are the gold-coloured banyan trees, spread across the lobby and reception areas, which were painstakingly custom made by Rajasthan's erstwhile armourers, the Allahbuksh family. There is also a life-size gold rhino, which doubles as a reception desk and

a couple of gold elephants!

Vagabond is an experiential luxury boutique hotel, complete with a heritage touch befitting an Art Deco heritage building that once was a centre of 'entertainment' in the area in Singapore's not-so-old history. It fits perfectly with the brand it has just become part of – Tribute. When the deal was signed, Tribute was of course still part of Starwood, which has since been acquired by the Marriott group. The first Tribute hotel in the region, it exemplifies the brand's independent hotel philosophy.

Best art works

The exterior of this 1950-built structure has been spruced up, but retains its original look. Inside, at about 22 sq metres, the rooms are plush and cosy, with ample touch points to the past again. Note the old world telephone, or the French screen panels or the dark hardwood floors that compliment the hardwood mahogany writing desk, or a Roberts Radio in signature hand sewn Scottish leather.

This is a sleek, contemporary hotel too – which features like the 42" wall TV with curated content reflect. There's a mobile phone for guests' use from which one can make

unlimited local calls and data, and call to six countries for free! Yes, you can carry it around while exploring Singapore.

If unoccupied, do visit the *Vagabond Suite* for seeing some of the best art works in the hotel, including original art by some of India's top modern artists. As Bedi points out, real art is in the way people take in the experiences. The salon also hosts live music gigs thrice a week, and hosts performances and cinema screenings too.

The hotel's location, in the far corner of Syed Alwi Street, is a great vantage point to explore a usually overlooked side of Singapore. If you stand at the hotel entrance, you can see the famous 24-hour single store mall Mustafa Centre, just down the road.

On one side of the hotel is *Kampong Glam*, the original Malay and Arab quarters, with its beautiful buildings, trendy restaurants and retail. On the other side is Little India, where short walks take you past prettified townhouses, busy markets, temples, restaurants serving a dizzying array of cuisines, 'Bollywood bars', jewellery stores, where you can see Indians, surely haggling, *phoolmala* vendors, and everything that could make you forget you are in a glitzy financial capital just around the corner. Next time you are not in the mood for a cookie cutter hotel stay, *Vagabond* could just be the antidote you have been looking for!

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