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This solid brass rhino, which doubles as the reception desk, took eight months to create. Photos: Hotel Vagabond Singapore

## You can get into 'trouble' at Hotel Vagabond Singapore

 FEBRUARY 9, 2017

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BY CHESTER CHIN

Just look for Jesus. That's what you can do while locating the powder room at the salon of the Hotel Vagabond in Singapore.

If the aforementioned sounds irreverent, it's only because the "Jesus" in question happens to be the most controversial piece of artwork at the luxurious boutique hotel.

Hanging on the wall between the bar and entryway to the lavatories is a photo of artist León Ferrari's *Western Christian Civilization*. Christ the Saviour, as depicted by the late Argentine conceptual artist here, is crucified on an American fighter plane.

The piece is the kind of art that has the ability to provoke. And a gasp is exactly what escapes my mouth when I step into the dim interior of the hotel one sunny afternoon, provoked by the outlandish sight before my eyes.

A life-size elephant sculpture stands on either side of the elevator. Above, the branches of golden banyan trees sprawl over the ceiling of the property. The legs of some stools assume beast-like forms. Topping it all off, the interior is draped with lush red velvet curtains. All of it looks like a sultry set out of Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* – or a fantastical zoo show on a luxurious high.



One of two majestic elephants that flank the elevator at the hotel.

But "bestial" isn't exactly a word you would associate with the hotel. Upon closer inspection of the hand-hammered golden leaves and smooth surface of the elephants, it's apparent that all these wondrous aesthetics have been carefully designed.

Inching closer to a solid brass rhinoceros, it dawns on me that the sculpture doubles as the reception desk.

"Welcome to the Hotel Vagabond. Take a seat and I'll show you to your room shortly," says the friendly Johorean receptionist behind the rhino, uh, desk.

This is it, I have arrived at the cheeky world of Jacques Garcia.

### **Artistic touch**

Located along the bustling Syed Alwi Street, Hotel Vagabond (a Tribute Portfolio Hotel) is the first property in Asia to be conceptualised by the celebrated French architect and interior decorator. As I am not much of an art enthusiast, Garcia's reputation eluded me at first. But you don't have to be an aficionado to appreciate the extensive art collection found at the hotel.

The one that catches my attention most is the video playing in the elevator. It's hard not to be fixated upon snippets of scenes from blockbuster movies such as *Star Wars* and *Ben-Hur*.

I entertain a fellow guest's challenge to identify the films – that is, until I spot some NSFW (not safe for work) scenes in the mix.

Another must-see video art installation is placed right outside the restrooms: short-loop GIFs of three men who have been painted and filmed. It's riveting yet disconcerting, seeing the piece come alive.

Meanwhile, a variety of artwork – curated by British artist Peter Millard – adorns the gallery walls of the salon. It would have been the perfect template for an Instagram-worthy shot, if not for the scarce natural lighting inside.





The originals, prints and reproductions that cover the walls are curated and installed by British artist Peter Millard.

But one gets the sense that the shadowy interior is perhaps deliberate. In the past, the 1950s Art Deco heritage building was once an illegal workers' dormitory, a bike shop, and a brothel, among others.

Not that hotel owner Harpreet Bedi – who co-founded the property with husband Satinder Garcha – is discreet about the venue's seedy past.

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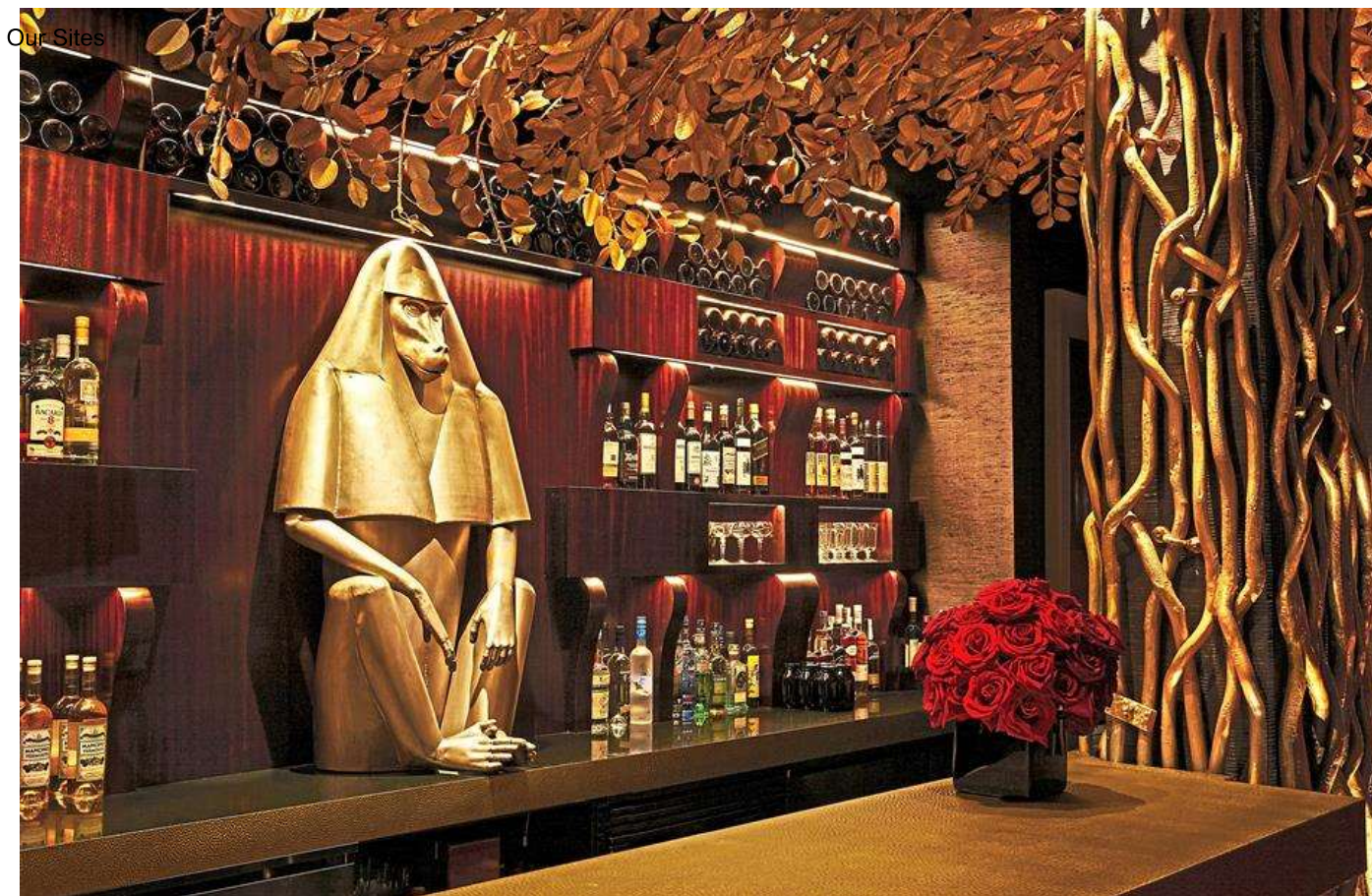


The 1950s Art Deco heritage building, where the hotel is housed, used to be a bike shop, among other things.

"For us, it's all about the location, art and edginess. The area is steeped in history ... ghost stories even," she gushes, as we walk to the bar. "Ask the bartender for my favourite (she meant a cocktail, not a ghost story)."

That favourite turns out to be a concoction christened Musth Mahout. Be careful, though, this unassuming blend of lemongrass, ginger, lychee and gin is surprisingly strong. When the monkey sculpture at the bar begins to resemble the demonic nun from *The Conjuring 2*, I excuse myself.





The bar features a quirky monkey sculpture designed by the artist Franck Le Ray from France.

If the common areas are dark and edgy, the rooms are the total opposite. Pushing open the heavy door of my Classic room, I'm greeted by a bright and romantic atmosphere.

The first thing I notice is the gorgeous floral panels. And then the charming travel photographs that hang over the king-sized bed. A mahogany writing desk stands at the corner, by the window.



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The Classic room where the writer stayed at has a very romantic quality to it, thanks to lovely floral panels.

A generous description would be that the room is cosy and compact. But I can see how those who are accustomed to more spacious interiors might feel slightly claustrophobic.

The smartphone in the room, courtesy of the hotel, is an excellent touch for a millennial traveller like me. Usage of the device comes with complimentary mobile data as well as local and international calls to selected countries. Curiously, calls to Malaysia are not part of the package.

### Cultural centre

While the 400-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets are reason enough to stay in, the real thrill lies outside the walls of Hotel Vagabond. Its location – on the fringe of Little India and Kampong Glam – is at the heart of Singapore's most vibrant ethnic districts. It's also the hub for some local food.

Of course, guests can opt to have breakfast at the hotel's lounge. Items on the menu range from international foods such as pork sausage and Spanish omelette to local delicacies such as kaya toast. The other media members seemed quite happy with the offerings. I opted for *char kueh kak* (Chinese carrot cake) as I wanted to also check out the many hawker stalls around the vicinity. You can ask the friendly concierge for some suggestions on what to eat and do.



A quick chat with one of the staff leads me to Mustafa Centre, a 24-hour shopping mall. I would recommend visiting just to experience the crowd and sheer size of the venue.

If anything, you can't accuse the hotel's location of being sterile – a description that Singapore's often unflatteringly tagged with. Just a stone's throw from the property are the Tan Teng Niah House and Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple in Little India. The former is a brightly coloured landmark that warrants a visit for its striking visuals. For some history, there's the Old Malay Cemetery at Kampong Glam.



Near the hotel and worth a visit is Tan Teng Niah House, with its striking colours. Photo: The Star/Chester Chin

But if you want to explore other parts of the island state, the nearest MRT stations are Lavender and Bugis, about 20 minutes' walk away.

The hotel's tagline is "If you must get into trouble, do it at the Vagabond". But the way I see it, if you're looking for character, this is also the place to be.

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## Hotel Vagabond Singapore



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