



Tourists' Perceptions of Parks and Gardens in Singapore

Parks and Tourism

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Images as credited

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Singapore is a small city-state with a land area of 710 square kilometres and a population of 5.4 million. Due to its small land area, there have always been competing demands for the use of its land space, and proper planning was needed in the creation of green spaces to ensure that the country did not turn into a concrete jungle. In recent times, the city's green strategies and policies have focused on transforming Singapore into a “City in a Garden” by consciously building homes and workplaces integrated with nature and biodiversity.

National Parks Board (NParks) manages over 300 parks and four nature reserves, which cover a total area of 2,300 hectares. Apart from fostering urban biodiversity, NParks is responsible for cultivating urban greenery for local residents to enjoy. It also engages the community in activities to improve the quality of their living environment and gain public support for environmental values and practices (NParks 2012). There are several categories of parks in Singapore, determined by size, function, and location. They include arts and heritage parks, community parks, coastal parks, and riverine parks. Local residents are the primary users of community parks, which are located near residential areas.

Apart from local residents, Singapore is also striving to increase the number of visitors from another category to her parks: tourists. Currently, Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and travel guidebooks actively promote parks and gardens situated near, or in the vicinity of, the Central Business District, such as the Esplanade Park, Fort Canning Park, and Singapore Botanic Gardens. These are usually more accessible to tourists because they are located near other tourist attractions or along tourist bus routes. As a result, tourists visit these parks more than community parks, which are often not as accessible, unless one is familiar with the local transportation system.

Many tourists visit the parks and gardens in Singapore. To date, however, no study has been done to reveal how tourists use or perceive local parks and gardens. There are many ways to conduct such a study, one of which is to interview the tourists who visit these parks and gardens. For this study, a secondary research approach was used. Specifically, tourists' postings on travel blogs were evaluated. The use of data from travel blogs has been adopted in previous studies and has generated valid results (Pan, MacLaurin, and Crofts 2007; Wu and Pearce 2014).

Travel blogs such as *TripAdvisor* and *TravelBlogs* have become very popular among travellers. At the end of a trip or even during the trip, travellers describe their experiences and offer advice or recommendations about their travel destinations on these travel blogs. Such postings have become an increasingly important source of information for other travellers. In fact, tourists tend to place greater credence on these reports than official marketing collaterals put up by government agencies. Even travellers who use official websites tend to complement the information provided with first-hand reports from other travellers (Gunter et al. 2009).

The comments on travel blogs are valuable as they enable other tourists to hone in on the key features when they visit a destination. As MacCannell suggested, “[A]nything is potentially an attraction. It simply awaits one person to take the trouble to point out to another as something noteworthy or worth seeing” (1992, 192). By exploring some of the features highlighted by the tourists in the postings, this research aims to provide insights to help travel operators better promote Singapore's parks and gardens to tourists and park managers to improve the overall quality of their experiences.



Methodology

Data for this research study was derived from relevant postings found on the travel blog, *TripAdvisor*. As *TripAdvisor* is the world's largest travel website, with more than 100 million reviews (Lee 2013) and utilised by many travellers, the postings by tourists on this website were deemed to be sufficient for the purpose of this research study.

Only parks that met the following criteria were included in this study:

- Listed in STB's "Top 10 Parks and Gardens"
- Managed by or associated with NParks
- Had an average of at least one post about them per month, or at least 24 postings about them during the study period (July 2012–June 2014)

Based on the aforementioned criteria, the parks included in this study are:

- Singapore Botanic Gardens (1,982 postings)
- Gardens by the Bay (1,137 postings)
- MacRitchie Reservoir Park (169 postings)
- Fort Canning Park (68 postings)
- East Coast Park (62 postings)
- Bukit Timah Nature Reserve (39 postings)
- Mount Faber Park (24 postings)

In this study, 3,481 postings were analysed. Most of the postings came from tourists from Australia (32.2 percent), United Kingdom (UK; 30.0 percent), and the United States of America (USA; 16.4 percent). Singapore Botanic Gardens and Gardens by the Bay were the two

most popular gardens among the tourists. Both are accessible to tourists as they are located within or near to the city. The National Orchid Garden at Singapore Botanic Gardens was ranked Number 1 by *TripAdvisor* reviewers among the 346 attractions in Singapore in 2014. At the same time, many other parks are located a distance away from the city, but tourists were still able to find their way there. This was especially true for tourists looking for special experiences like a walk in a nature reserve or a jog in a park.

In this study, thematic analysis was used to identify the patterns of meanings and experiences in the postings. Following the procedures of Gibbs (2007) and Hollbrook (1977), postings were reviewed several times by two researchers to gain an overall perspective of the experiences described. The data was then coded for a more detailed and nuanced analysis. This process was then repeated to ensure that all relevant texts had been reviewed. Similar codes were grouped together to highlight recurrent patterns that revealed emergent themes.

To ensure reliability, another researcher with experience in qualitative methodology was invited to audit the codes and themes as well as propose alternatives in the event of discrepancies among the analyses of the two researchers. After agreement was reached among the three researchers, exemplary excerpts were chosen to illustrate the identified themes. Three main themes were identified in the results: unique selling points; recreational activities of tourists; and words of wisdom from other tourists.



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1. These seven Singapore parks, deemed most popular among tourists, were shortlisted for the study (Illustration: Dexian Feng).

2. Attractions at Gardens by the Bay include the two dome-shaped conservatories, Supertrees, and OCBC Skyway (Photo: Charlie Kwan).

3. Set up by the Agri-Horticultural Society in 1859, Singapore Botanic Gardens is Singapore's oldest garden (Photo: Jeanette Ng).

4. Heritage tree at Singapore Botanic Gardens (Photo: Jeanette Ng).

5. Clear direction signs help visitors navigate the 74-hectare-large Singapore Botanic Gardens (Photo: Jeanette Ng).

6. The Bandstand at Singapore Botanic Gardens was formerly a performance venue for military bands (Photo: Jeanette Ng).

7. Yellow-leaved rain tree at Singapore Botanic Gardens (Photo: Jeanette Ng).

Unique Selling Points

The evaluations that tourists made of the seven parks can be further divided into three categories: unexpected greenery and biodiversity in urban spaces; value for money; and well-designed and clean parks.

Unexpected greenery and biodiversity in urban spaces

Some tourists were surprised by the many green spaces in Singapore:

"It's a very pleasant surprise to find this wooded, quiet sanctuary in Singapore."

—Tourist from the Philippines who visited the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve in September 2013

"I was not expecting much greenery or much of a hike in Singapore, but this was a very welcome surprise. Once we started hiking, it felt like we were not even in Singapore anymore!"

—Tourist from France who visited MacRitchie Reservoir in April 2014

Furthermore, many tourists were delighted to see the different types of wild animals living in the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, particularly in an urban setting like Singapore:

"In this nature reserve is the highest natural point in Singapore, a change from all the high-rise buildings. This is nature at its best. A chance to see various wildlife and magnificent trees. We were lucky enough to see the monkeys (plus baby), monitor lizards and tree squirrels."

—Tourist from the UK who visited the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve in June 2014

Most of the websites and brochures promoting Singapore tend to showcase the city's skyscraper-dotted skylines, and the only wild animals shown are usually zoo exhibits. Many tourists were thus pleasantly surprised to see wild animals in our nature reserves. For example, the monkey was the most common animal sighted at the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and MacRitchie Reservoir Park. The word "monkey" appeared 102 times in 169 of the postings about MacRitchie Reservoir. Websites or brochures promoting Singapore may want to include greenery and wildlife in promoting Singapore so that tourists who are nature lovers can visit these parks.

Value for money

Generally, all the parks and gardens in Singapore do not charge any admission fees as compared to parks in other parts of the world such as the Kew Gardens in London and Butchart Garden in Vancouver. Hence, some tourists were pleasantly surprised by this. There were 199 mentions about the free admission in 1,137 postings for Gardens by the Bay (17.5 percent of the postings) and 558 mentions in 1,982 postings (28.2 percent) for the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Here are two examples of the mentions:

"Entrance is free although there is a charge for the domes and the skywalk."

—Tourist from the UK who visited Gardens by the Bay in May 2014

"It's huge, it's free, it's very nice and easily accessible."

—Tourist from Canada who visited Singapore Botanic Gardens in March 2014

As highlighted in one of the excerpts above, visitors who want to visit certain sections of a park may need to pay a fee, as in the cases of the: National Orchid Garden at the Singapore Botanic Gardens; and Flower Dome, Cloud Forest, and OCBC Skyway at Gardens by the Bay.

However, it is important to point out that the fees charged are generally quite low (Yong 2011). For example, the admission fee to the National Orchid Garden is S\$5, while entry to both the Flower Dome and Cloud Forest totals S\$28. Notably, not a single posting contained complaints about the admission fees charged. This suggests that the admission fee is optimally priced, with the tourists perceiving value for money. About 25 percent of the tourists who visited Gardens by the Bay specifically mentioned that it was worth visiting these special sections of the park, despite the admission fee. One such tourist from Australia, who visited the Flower Dome and Cloud Forest at Gardens by the Bay in July 2012, commented:

"The Supertrees light up at 7:45 and 8:45 and watching them with the Marina Bay Sands and the Flyer lit up behind—just breathtaking. \$28 well spent!!!!"



Well-designed and clean parks

Tourists who had visited the parks were generally impressed that all the parks were well kept and well designed. For example, at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, which is divided into three cores, maps are strategically placed at various locations to help tourists to navigate. Moreover, thanks to these maps, visitors can decide whether to focus their time within one core or visit all three cores. Here are two excerpts that highlight the visitors' thoughts of the Singapore Botanic Gardens:

"The botanical gardens reminded me of Central Park, only cleaner and filled with incredible plants of all kinds..."
—Tourist from the USA who visited the Singapore Botanic Gardens in June 2013

"...[It] is carefully structured, pathways and footpaths through the garden enable you to have access to all parts of the garden... There are also indicators so that you don't get lost in the park. Trees and other bushes are annotated so that you get a history of the park and plants there."
—Tourist from United Arab Emirates (UAE) who visited Singapore Botanic Gardens in September 2013

Other parks also garnered similar reviews:

"We went to Mount Faber by coach to take the cable car to Sentosa. It is a nice hill and the roads were nicely maintained. Very quiet place and the views are great. I would like to visit this place again."
—Tourist from Sri Lanka who visited Mount Faber Park in April 2014

"This is a really great place to tackle a nature trail. I agree with all the comments that the park is well-maintained; the trails are neat and quite clean."
—Tourist from the Philippines who visited MacRitchie Reservoir in January 2014

Based on their good impressions of the parks, it is little wonder that these tourists encouraged others to visit the parks or stated that they would revisit the parks. The word "beautiful" (or other related words like "lovely" or "pretty") was commonly used to describe the parks in the postings. 53.0 percent and 38.8 percent of the postings described the Singapore Botanic Gardens and Gardens by the Bay with these terms respectively. One Australian tourist who visited the Singapore Botanic Gardens in August 2013 said:

"It was one of the loveliest gardens I have seen... Everything was so green and beautiful. Recommend a visit, especially in the morning."

Phrases such as "a must-see" or "worth coming" also recurred in the postings:

"A must see attraction in SG! Not that expensive too. Very relaxing inside."
—Tourist from Japan who visited Gardens by the Bay in June 2014

"I went there only once, but I would like to come back. It's a very beautiful reservoir, and there are different trails among which you can choose..."
—Tourist from UAE who visited MacRitchie Reservoir in August 2012

Even though most parks and gardens received positive comments, a few negative comments were posted concerning the cleanliness of East Coast Park. Specifically, a few tourists found litter along the walkways, which meant that the bins were not used. Postings also noted that the beach was dirty and full of rubbish; some reviewers even wondered how people could swim in the water.



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8. Bukit Timah Nature Reserve houses Singapore's highest hill, Bukit Timah Hill, which is 164 metres high (Photo: mauwf/ Flickr/ CC BY-ND 2.0).

9-11. Bukit Timah Nature Reserve offers many different walking trails and a mountain biking path (Photo: Elizabeth Lim).

12. Monkeys are commonly sighted at Bukit Timah Nature Reserve (Photo: mauwf/ Flickr/ CC BY-ND 2.0).

13, 14. MacRitchie Reservoir is surrounded by more than 500 hectares of primary and secondary forests (Photo: Kimon Berlin/ Flickr/ CC BY-SA 2.0).

15. The Tree-Top Walk at MacRitchie Reservoir Park is a 250-metre-long freestanding suspension bridge 25 metres above the forest floor (Photo: Kimon Berlin/ Flickr/ CC BY-SA 2.0).

16. The National Orchid Garden at Singapore Botanic Gardens was ranked Number 1 by *TripAdvisor* reviewers among 346 attractions in Singapore in 2014 (Photo: Chelsea Sia).

17. Fort Canning Park was where the Malay Kings ruled the island in the nineteenth century. Many historical and artefacts, such as the Fort Gate, are still visible today (Photo: Charlie Kwan).

18. Fort Caning Centre was the barracks of the British Army in the 1920s. It is now the home of Pinacothèque de Paris (Photo: Charlie Kwan).

Recreational Activities of Tourists

Tourists visiting the parks engaged in different types of activities, from strolling, jogging and running in the park to people-watching and admiring the scenery around the park.

Stroll, jog, and hike

The most common activities that tourists engaged in were strolling in the parks and admiring the surrounding flora and fauna. A few tourists reported that they went to jog at the park, especially those who stayed at nearby hotels. Most who jogged also took the opportunity to admire the nature as well as any unique features of the park, like Fort Canning Park's historical artefacts. A tourist from the Philippines, who jogged to Fort Canning Park from the YMCA hotel where he was staying in June 2013, said:

"I took a quick early evening run from YMCA to Fort Canning and ended up staying for hours. Fort Canning, located at a hill which used to house defences for the 'old' Singapura, is a free park and historical site in one. It's a welcome respite from the hustle and bustle of commercial Singapore and you could spend hours jogging..."

A tourist from the UK tried out the trails at the MacRitchie Reservoir Park in April 2013 said:

"We did the full circuit here (I think 12 or 13k) and it's beautiful. You'll see monkeys, lizards, lots of birds and some really beautiful views with the highlight being the treetop bridge..."

Cycle

Among the seven parks in this study, only East Coast Park offers bicycle rental services and a long-distance paved cycling track. Based on the postings, 33.9 percent of the tourists who visited East Coast Park mentioned the bicycle rental service. Some tourists (27 percent) stated that they rented a bicycle and rode around on the bicycle paths in the park. While cycling through the park, they could enjoy the scenery along the cycling track and the sea breeze. A Russian tourist had a particularly enjoyable experience at the park in July 2013:

"I came back twice, once [to rent a] bicycle and the next day blades. It is really [nicely] maintained and perfect for any type of outdoor [activity]... Love trees and the size of park. I will definitely come back again!"

People-watching

Tourists who preferred a more sedentary activity enjoyed sitting on benches and observing the surroundings. They saw local families engaged in diverse recreational activities such as having a picnic, having a barbecue, camping, jogging, and practising *tai chi*. This presented tourists with a different perspective of Singapore and a first-hand experience of what local residents do in their free time. For example, a tourist from Australia documented the following observation at East Coast Park in May 2013:

"Our hotel was near here so we decided to breakfast in the park. It was great people watching with many Singaporeans exercising and using the bbq pits.... We enjoyed watching the daily lives of the locals..."

Enjoy the panoramic view

From the postings, there were tourists who enjoyed the views of the parks, especially those who visited parks at higher elevation—Mount Faber Park and Fort Canning Park. They were mesmerised by the panoramic views of the city and the southern islands:

"Mount Faber is something quite different. Lush green surroundings and no high-rises. At the top the views are fantastic both of the harbour and the cityscape..."

—Tourist from the UK who visited the Mount Faber Park in October 2013

"A little climb, yet the history, tranquillity and views of Singapore through the trees are well worth it."

—Tourist from the UK who visited Fort Canning Park in April 2014



Taking pictures

Other tourists highlighted ideal places for taking good pictures of the colourful flora and fauna in the parks. Several of the parks were considered to be ideal for photo-taking. An Indonesian tourist highlighted Fort Canning Park as one in January 2013:

"I never knew that this place was [a] cemetery and was nice with old grave[s] and big tree[s]. Awesome, nice for taking [photos]."

An Australian tourist commented in January 2014:

"Loved Gardens by the Bay. Such a great idea and has been executed to perfection. The views from the walkway were amazing, fantastic photo opportunities..."

Educational

The parks were educational in two different ways. First, about 41.1 percent of the tourists who visited Fort Canning Park wrote that artefacts such as the Fort and the Battle Box were interesting. Two out of 68 tourists mentioned that the information on the signboards provided at the park taught them about the significance of these artefacts to Singapore's history. Such a posting came from an Australian tourist in October 2012:

"The history of the place is intriguing for the adults and the huge gate is fascinating for little boys! The Battlebox is also a place of huge interest."

Second, those who were more interested in nature and plants found the visit to the Singapore Botanic Gardens to be highly educational. They learnt about the plants from the information displayed in the garden, as pointed out by a tourist from the UK in September 2012:

"Trees and other plants are clearly labelled so that travellers can learn about tropical flora."

Dining

Among all the seven parks in this study, East Coast Park had the most postings related to food and beverage. About 17.7 percent of the tourists who visited this park mentioned that it had many food and beverage outlets, ranging from hawker centres to restaurants. Some postings included the names of seafood restaurants and specific recommendations about the dishes. This park provided tourists with opportunities to try the local cuisine in outdoor restaurants or hawker centres, while enjoying the sea breeze. One such posting is:

"Great place for family bonding while enjoying the great view of [the] beach and lots of [activities. After] you get tired the amount of food available just within the area [is] fabulous. [The wide] range of Chinese and Malay cuisine makes your stomach go rocking inside."
—Tourist from Malaysia in May 2013



Words of Wisdom from Other Tourists

Tips and advice given in postings can be classified under three categories: things to bring; information on how to get there; and the best time to visit.

Things to bring

Singapore is a tropical country that is hot and humid all year round. Thus, the weather can be quite uncomfortable, especially for tourists from temperate climates. Most of the advice in the postings centred on items to bring and precautionary measures to take to protect oneself against the sun and heat. For example:

"Needless to say it was hot and humid the day we went up to the summit of Bukit Timah—it's well marked with a big stone. When I say prepare yourself I mean take plenty of water and wear sensible, stout footwear..."

—Tourist from the UK who visited Bukit Timah Nature Reserve in November 2013

Perhaps more can be done to bring comfort to the tourists, such as building more cooling shades and water-filling points around the parks, so that tourists can have respite from the heat, refill their water supply, and rest their feet.

Information on how to get there

Tourists often gave directional instructions to the parks, especially the ones that are far from the city centre and not easily accessible via public transport or those that are hard to locate. Here is one such example:

"Nice view from the top even if you don't take the cable car. You can take the MRT to Harbourfront and then walk up to Mount Faber via the Marang trail. This is a nice place to stop on the Southern Ridges hike."

—Tourist from the USA who visited Mount Faber Park in June 2014

Even though tourists get their information from various websites like travel blogs, it is still not easy to find their way around. Equipping hotel concierges with easy-to-follow transportation guides to some of these parks and gardens might be helpful.

Best time to visit

Many tourists also posted advice about the best time to visit the parks. The advice is especially useful for first-time tourists to Singapore. For example, 10 percent of those who visited the Singapore Botanic Gardens advised other tourists on the best time to visit it. This advice may relate to physical comfort:

"Do this [in the] early morning or late evening when it's not so hot... Just don't get caught in the rain."

—Tourist from Australia who visited Singapore Botanic Gardens in June 2013

In addition, about 42.5 percent of the tourists advised on the best time to visit Gardens by the Bay:

"Essential to visit in daylight but also to stay until after dark to witness the light show (7.45pm and 8.45pm)."

—Tourist from France who visited Gardens by the Bay in May 2014

Discussion

Parks and gardens are part of the ingredients to make Singapore a City in a Garden, and the vision is taking shape systematically as more parks and gardens are being developed or enhanced for recreational use by local residents. However, tourists are also beginning to share these green spaces with the local residents and more nature lovers are being attracted to Singapore. This research shows that parks and gardens are seen by tourists as worth visiting because they can experience unique tropical ecosystems, often different from other parks they have visited in their travels.

On the whole, all the parks and gardens in this study were well received by the tourists. Many enjoyed their visit to the parks and stated that they were clean, well managed, and well maintained. Many were surprised to find so much green space in a densely populated city. The parks provided many tourists with a place to relax in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the city. The tourists were highly appreciative of the free admission to the parks; no tourists that had paid for admission to special sections in the parks complained, suggesting that the charges were reasonable. Finally, the gardens and parks have attractions for different types of tourists, from the young to old and including those who enjoy outdoor sports and sedentary activities. Tourists also enjoyed mingling with Singaporeans and seeing how they play and exercise in the tropical city.

What more can be done to enhance the experiences of tourists at our parks and gardens? Even though the parks and gardens are built for local residents, tourists also share the space. Thus, measures may be taken to make them a little more tourist-friendly. For example, there were many mentions in the postings about the heat and humidity that hindered their experience. Park managers may want to build more cooling shades at various strategic locations in the parks so that tourists can get respite from the heat and more places to rest. Maintaining an overstorey of greenery also provides shade to reduce temperatures and exposure to sun. Within the shades, water-filling points can be installed for visitors to refill their water supply.

In many postings, tourists took interest in describing the activities of local residents at the park, such as having a picnic and barbecue. It would be good for tourists seeking a different experience to participate in some of these activities together with the local residents. During concerts held in Singapore Botanic Gardens, many local residents bring along picnic baskets and enjoy the concerts together with their family and friends. To provide convenience to tourists, park managers may want to consider making picnic baskets available to them. During special events, food carts can be set up to allow tourists to spend more time in the parks and gardens instead of going somewhere else for their meals.

There were some negative comments made about East Coast Park regarding the cleanliness of the beach and park. Perhaps more regular

clean-up and regular educational programmes could be organised to ensure that certain levels of cleanliness and hygiene are observed at all times.

Singapore boasts of many parks and gardens that are well designed and well maintained, reflecting the significant amount of effort and funding that has been invested in them, for the well-being of local residents. Additional efforts to develop tourist-friendly features and services in the parks and gardens and actively promote them to tourists could enhance the quality of their visit to the City in a Garden. 

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19. Mount Faber Park is where visitors take the cable car from the mainland to Sentosa and vice versa. It features many lookout points with panoramic views of the island (Photo: Kyla Duhamel).

20, 21. East Coast Park offers opportunities for people-watching and recreation. It has cycling tracks, campsites, and barbecue pits (Photo: Loh Juh Khang).