

# Asian fusion



Visual: Pongthob/Pongthob/Three Lines; Huber/Steig; AGF; Alamy



**Singapore is unrecognisable from my old family album – it's now an Asian tiger with a utopian skyline that's more redolent of Flash Gordon than of a Gordon's and tonic sipped amid the bromeliads**

Pagoda Street, above, is at the heart of Singapore's Chinatown, while Sentosa Island, above right, offers the jet-set beach lifestyle



The measures have had the desired effect. "Between mid-2009 and the third quarter of 2013, prices rose 62%, but over the past six quarters they have moderated by 6%," Hui says. "The outlook is for prices to soften further in 2015 and possibly into 2016." To feed the insatiable demand among Singaporeans for property, the British-born Chris Comer's company Castlewood Group offers investors commercial property

in Australia, London and Vancouver. Comer has opted to take advantage of falling rents – although his home on Sentosa Island was "flipped" nine times before he became the first tenant. A 15-minute drive across the causeway, Sentosa is the Monaco of Singapore, offering a resort lifestyle with oceanfront homes, moorings, golf, eateries and beaches. His neighbours are Chinese, Indians, Malaysians and Indonesians. "That tells you who invests in

In 1959, my parents stepped off the boat and landed in Singapore to start a new life. That same year, Lee Kuan Yew became the island state's first prime minister. I grew up with visits to the snake temple, country-club pool, street markets and home of our amah (housekeeper) to celebrate the autumn lantern festival, along with mandatory trips to Fraser's Hill, in Malaya, to escape the sweltering heat of the urban sprawl. It had all the trappings of a colonial life in the tropics. At the same time, the newly elected People's Action party was grappling to find homes for thousands of slum-dwellers. In 1960 the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was introduced to provide as many low-cost rental units as possible. Five years later, Singapore was an

In the 50 years since Singapore gained independence it has become home to some of the world's most expensive property. **Sue Chester** charts its rise, plus we highlight three more Far Eastern tigers

independent nation state and the government allowed citizens to use their Central Provident Fund (national insurance) savings as a down payment to purchase their HDB homes – one of the first right-to-buy schemes, if you will. A nation of property owners was born. Within a decade, the economy was booming, and the aspiration of the skyline matched the ambition and lifestyle of a new middle class of Singaporeans. The story of what followed is one of the most high-rise, high-priced national property booms in history. When I returned in 1994, it was to discover that my birthplace had transformed

into what appeared to be the world's largest airport, with fake plants, mirrors, chrome balustrades and marble glittered with national pride. The city was unrecognisable from the family photo album, where tall trees peppered the streetscape with tropical greenery. Instead I found concrete plazas and cantilevered outside rectangular tower blocks. As Singapore celebrates 50 years of independence in August, this tiny dot of land – now a little less tiny thanks to extensive land-reclamation projects – has developed into a safe, spotless, placid Asian tiger, with a utopian skyline that's more redolent of Flash Gordon than of a Gordon's and tonic sipped amid the

bromeliads. Inventive architecture, such as that of the Marina Bay Sands hotel, competes with colonial Raffles, with many now preferring to sip their Singapore sling 57 storeys up beside the Sand's rooftop infinity pool. Or you could do the same from your own 49ft private pool, cantilevered outside your apartment at the Marq, a bombastic two-tower condo on Paterson Hill. Prices for the 21 properties start at \$816 (£7.9m) and go up to \$40m. This is where the Singaporean "six Cs" – cash, career, credit card, car, condo and country-club membership – come together in palatial surroundings with 21ft-high ceilings and panoramic views.



Singapore bling: The city's high-rise waterfront, including the Marina Bay Sands hotel with its rooftop infinity pool, is a far cry from the scene in 1955, left

A decade ago, Singapore's "build and they will come" attitude rejuvenated the business district, as luxury condos went up alongside commercial and office blocks. V on Shenton is one of the latest mixed-use additions, a short walk from Raffles Place. The 54-storey residential block contains 510 units, ranging from a 452 sq ft studio (\$1.19m) to a 7,255 sq ft penthouse for an as-yet undisclosed price (savills.com). Now considered to be one of the richest countries in the world, Singapore also tops The Economist's worldwide cost of living index and has the fifth most expensive luxury property market in the

world, according to the latest Knight Frank Wealth Report. Typical 1,800 sq ft flats in prime District 9 were selling for \$4.5m in 2014, a far cry from the 1960s, when an HDB two-bedder cost \$5,000. Singapore's median gross monthly salary may now have risen to \$5,040, but, according to Savills, property prices have increased by 78% over the past 10 years. Values rose most dramatically between 2010 and 2013, when foreign and local investors bought frenetically, many of them "flipping" (the practice of buying then selling within months to make a quick profit, often off-plan). Such was the scale of this buying

frenzy that by early 2011 the government introduced a tiered seller's stamp duty, charging 16% if the property is sold within one year, then reducing gradually to zero after the fourth year of ownership, to try to stem the rate of price growth in the market – not a policy that any British political party has dared put forward as part of its manifesto. Ong Teck Hui, national director of research at the consultancy JLL Singapore, details the other cooling measures imposed by the government in recent years: "Borrowing limits were tightened, additional buyers' stamp duty introduced [15% for foreigners, on top of the regular 3% for the first house, 7% for a second property and 10% for third and subsequent properties], and a total debt-servicing ratio of 60% of income, which takes into account all loans, property and non-property, in determining how much the buyer can borrow."

**SENTOSA ISLAND**  
£14.8m

Life 33 Style is 12,000 sq ft of Asian Hollywood glamour, with Venetian plaster walls, white marble floors and an entrance foyer with a 30ft ceiling. The waterfront garden has a mineral pool and a pontoon. There's also a games room with a custom-built poker table, a six-seat cinema and a wine cellar. **00 41 44 400 9876, premier-suisse-group.com**

**PATERSON HILL**  
From £7.9m

The Signature Tower at the Marq development, in District 9, consists of 21 five-bedroom flats, with double-height ceilings. Each property has its own 49ft cantilevered pool with a timber decking area, offering panoramic views of the Orchard Road skyline. **00 65 6100 2323, themarq.com.sg**

## HOME OVERSEAS

→ Singapore from overseas," he says.

With prices sky high, buyers are even rediscovering those government homes. "When you have a social-housing system as successful as HDB, where they provide a quality product for the nation, Singaporeans are thinking, 'Am I better off moving back into my HDB?'"

Foreigners are also starting to discover Singapore's social housing, which has become one of the few affordable options in town. However, buyers are only eligible to purchase resale properties older than five years; a typical three-bedroom costs \$350,000-\$500,000.

This trend is a reflection of the changing expat scene, which has been transformed since the 2007 credit crisis.

"Everyone used to live in Orchard Road, Bukit Timah and Tanglin," says Alan Cheong, a partner in the research and consultancy department at Savills' Singapore outpost. "Many of these new incoming foreigners don't have those expat packages. They rent mid-tier, mass-market, even rooms in flats." These "mid-tier" prices range from \$1,600 to \$2,000 a month and tend to be in gated developments — with a shared pool and barbecue area — on the fringes of the CBD and prime residential neighbourhoods.

The prime areas remain Districts 9 to 11, known collectively as Orchard (Ardmore Park, Nassim Road and Paterson Hill are some of the most elite addresses), as well as the CBD, and stamp-duty hikes have not put off the high-net-worth buyers. I look forward to stepping off the plane in 15 years to see what ingenious solutions the "little red dot" (as the nation calls itself) has created from its ambitious "Singapore 2030" land-reclamation plans.

### HONG KONG

A heady, sometimes jarring mix of east and west, Hong Kong, with its cloud-wreathed cocktail bars and relentless pace of life — and even hip surf culture thrown into the mix — retains its powerful pull on our imaginations, as well as our wallets. The cost of living is steep — the ninth highest in the world, according to The Economist — and it has some of the world's most expensive property, with house prices increasing by about 10% in 2014. Homes in Hong Kong Island's glamorous enclaves of the Peak, Deep Water Bay and Repulse Bay now cost £8,000 or more per sq ft, and Angela Schaal, director of business development at Landscape, predicts values will rise by a further 10% this year.

"The government enacted onerous stamp-duty and



The Bongeunsa temple stands amid the skyscrapers of Seoul's fashionable Gangnam district

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### MILAN

**What's the pull** Pack your Armani, not your Asos. If you want to blend in. Even cyclists are gorgeously designed down to their manicured fingertips. Besides hosting fashion week twice a year, Milan also holds the world's biggest annual design fair, and the 2015 World Expo is now open. Beneath the glamour lies a heart that beats business. Berlusconi grew up here and Milan has the highest per capita income in Italy. The Milanese have a serious work ethic — Mr Armani works a 14-hour day, and he's 80 — but they also play hard, taking advantage of mountains and lakes an hour away.

**Where to live** Once the wrong side of the tracks, Isola has seen blue-collar workers replaced with creative types drawn by



low rents, family-run trattorie and farmers' markets. It also abuts Porta Nuova, a futuristic glass-and-steel village that has turned Piazza Gae Aulenti into a Vogue Italia catwalk. A penthouse can fetch €2.5m (£1.84). The canals of Navigli, built by Napoleon (then king of Italy) to bring industry — and marble — to Milan, are undergoing renovation as city dwellers seek loft conversions and waterside passeggiata (sunset strolls).

**The cost of living** It's expensive. A one-bedroom flat in Brera, in the centre, can cost €1,000 to rent, and €450,000 to buy.

**What the locals say** Is that Prada you're wearing?

**Who to contact** casatravella.com

Alison Thomson



### VIETNAM

Estella Heights, in District 2, Ho Chi Minh City, has a range of one- to four-bedroom flats, ranging in size from 835 sq ft to 1,925 sq ft. The development, to be completed in 2017, includes two pools, a business centre and cinema room, and the grounds have barbecue pavilions for those balmy evenings. **00 84 8 3823 9205, savills.com.vn**

**Ho Chi Minh City — still known to many as Saigon — is now a neon wonderland where colonial architecture jostles with Starbucks**



### HONG KONG

This crescent-shaped, 2,041 sq ft two-bedroom flat is in the Century Tower One development, in Mid-Levels Central, Hong Kong Island. It has an open-plan living/dining area and a balcony, and the buyer will have use of a gym, outdoor swimming pool and children's playground. **00 852 2866 0022, landscape-christies.com**

resale taxes between 2011 and 2013, which led many overseas investors to look elsewhere," she says. Although there are no restrictions on foreigners, buyers who don't have a Hong Kong permanent residency ID card pay a special stamp duty of 23.5% of the total property price. It's little wonder that Brits not staying long are drawn to West Kowloon's high-rise flats, where you can rent a shoebox for a couple of thousand pounds a month. However, Ap Lei Chau and Kennedy Town are tipped as hot investment areas.

### VIETNAM

Vietnam may still be a one-party state, but today, Ho Chi Minh City — the country's largest conurbation, and still known unofficially to many of its residents as Saigon — is a neon wonderland where French-colonial architecture jostles with skyscrapers, Starbucks and global banks. The beautiful people hang out at the Saigon Skydeck, on the Bitexco Financial Tower, which has its own helipad; tourists flock to the restaurants on the banks of the polluted but atmospheric Saigon River, which cater for all budgets.

The country might not be the most obvious holiday-home destination, but the latest New World Wealth report shows that Ho Chi Minh City had the fastest increase in the number of multimillionaire residents in Asia between 2004 and 2014, with 400% growth, and the much-discussed amendment to the housing laws will come into effect this summer, allowing foreigners to lease and own a maximum of 30% of an apartment building, or up to a maximum of 250 villas or townhouses. In a city where living expenses are so low, it's certainly tempting: you can live a luxurious life in District 1, the heart of the city

centre, for about £1,000 a month, including rent in a furnished pad, the services of a cleaner, and going out and having fun, although a two-bedroom flat will cost £200,000 to buy. For up-and-coming areas further out, look to District 2 (specifically Thao Dien and An Phu), family-friendly neighbourhoods with quiet, tree-lined streets and international schools and western-style housing options. You can buy a four-bedroom, fully furnished flat here for less than £200,000.

### SEOUL

Not yet down with K-cool? Then you'd better catch up. When South Korean Psy's ludicrously catchy Gangnam Style exploded into the western consciousness in 2012, he may have been mocking Seoul's super-rich, but it started the big push that knocked Tokyo off its Asian fashion capital pedestal. A member of what Forbes calls "the trillion-dollar club of world economies" since 2004, Seoul is the city of choice for fashion brands such as Chanel to present their collections, with the shopping mecca of Garosu-gil presenting the world's latest style trends, no matter how off the wall.

"House-price growth has stalled in recent years following strong growth in the lead-up to the global financial crisis," says Richard Orbell, head of advisory at JLL Korea. "House prices have increased by an average of 2.2% per annum since the crisis, compared with 5.3% in the decade before."

However, Seoul's prices remain well above those in the rest of the country, with an average apartment costing 497m won (£301,000) in March, compared with the national average of 273m won. Orbell says foreign investment accounted for 40% of transaction volumes last year.

Additional reporting by Emma Wells