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A Snake-Charmed Life in Singapore

By Michael Richardson International Herald Tribune.

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As a boy who spent time on farms in Australia, I was taught that the best snake is a dead one. The vast island-continent, home to such peculiar but lovable animals as the kangaroo and the koala bear, is also a breeding ground for some of the world's most venomous serpents.

So when I arrived in Singapore — a small island-state where nearly all of the original tropical

jungle has been replaced by apartment and office blocks, factories, highways and manicured parks and gardens — I did not expect any further problems with snakes.

But nature has a way of striking back just when mankind thinks that it has been tamed.

I work out of the converted garage of my house, which was built in the 1930's when Britain ruled Singapore and its armed forces set aside extensive parks for officer housing.

When the British military pulled out in 1971, these oases of grass, trees and winding lanes in what was already one of the most rapidly urbanizing and industrializing countries on earth were handed to the Singapore government. Its agencies rented the houses out, mainly to foreigners.

I have lately discovered that one of the reasons Singaporeans are disinclined to rent such places — apart from their reputation as being haunted — is the prevalence of snakes.

The old British military quarters have become wildlife refuges. Most of the creatures are colorful, melodious companions: birds such as barbets, golden orioles, bee-eaters, sunbirds, pheasant coucals, dollar birds, woodpeckers and nightjars.

But it is hard to feel so affectionate about the snakes that seek sanctuary in the park where we live.

One morning not long ago, I came down to my office to find a grass snake curled up at the bottom of the large wicker basket I use for waste paper. The person who cleans the office had removed the paper by hand but had evidently not seen the snake, which continued to slumber on peacefully until I dropped it back into the grass on the far side of the lane that runs past our house.

If people tell you that snakes can't fly, don't believe them. I was sitting at my desk, stone cold sober on a bright sunny day, looking out the open door onto the garden when an object, rather like a small flying saucer, landed with a splat on the grass.

I blinked, rose and went to inspect. There, coiled up, was a paradise tree snake, not even winded after its semiglide down from the roof about 20 feet above.

I figured out what must have happened. We had some tree cutters in about a week before to trim branches that were touching the roof. This must have left the snake stranded on high with no way down — except to fly.

Another frequent visitor to our garden is a beautiful green snake that is the color of young rice plants. It uses our garden fence to get from tree to tree.

I never try to harm these snakes as none of them is aggressive or seriously venomous.

But the cobra is a different matter. Its bite can be deadly. So when my wife told me that there was a four-foot black cobra in the back garden, I grabbed a heavy stick and rushed to the rescue.

The snake was fully exposed on a bare embankment — a relatively easy target for my stick. But instead of striking, I hesitated, mesmerized by its slow, sinuous movement.

Although clearly aware of our presence, the cobra seemed to be in no hurry to escape. Its hood extended slightly as it moved away up the slope, as if giving me a subtle warning of its power and speed.

I remembered, then, the twin stone balustrades, each carved in the shape of a naga — the many-headed cobra of Indian and Khmer legend — guarding the entrance to the ancient Cambodian temple of Angkor Wat.

The jungle, almost silent in the oppressive heat of the day, had come to life in the relative coolness of the late afternoon. It echoed with the sound of birds, insects and monkeys.

It was 1982. A few years earlier, Vietnam had occupied Cambodia to crush the Khmer Rouge.

Behind us, a group of Vietnamese soldiers in ill-fitting khaki uniforms, pith helmets and caps clambered down from the back of an army truck. They, too, were visiting the Angkor Wat for the first time.

The temple and its towers were a marvelous sight in the evening as the lichen-encrusted sandstone glowed pink, reflecting the color of the sinking sun.

At midday, under the full strength of the sun, the impression the Angkor Wat left was sharper, like an intricate etching on stone.

Throughout the day, slow-moving ox carts — their big, metal rimmed wooden wheels creaking and raising clouds of dust — carried peasant families, bundles of wood, vegetables and rice through the forest past the temple.

There was a timeless quality about that place. ...

"Why on earth didn't you kill the cobra?" my wife asked, sounding both surprised and angry. "You know it could kill our dogs or spit venom into their eyes. And what about our safety?"

She was right, of course. But the cobra had vanished into a patch of shadowy undergrowth beneath a palm tree halfway up the embankment.

"You know I haven't been feeling well," I replied lamely. "I'm in no fit shape to be sure of killing a cobra."

It was true that I was still recovering from food poisoning. But that was only part of the truth.

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