TWO THINGS YOU MUST DO IN TOKYO, AND A THIRD THAT MOST PEOPLE DONT KNOW ABOUT!

Tokyo, a city always on the move, and a city of the future. Nowhere else on Earth will you find such modernity and culture shock. The Japanese people have figured out how to enjoy modern life, from Cat Cafes, to Michelin star restaurants, there's something for everyone in Tokyo. Here's my quick guide of must see's that I find to be uniquely original to this amazing city:

1. **Harajuku**: You've heard the name before. This is where people from around the world come to consume. I'm not a mall person, but Harajuku is so full of sights and sounds that you won't feel like you're trapped in a strip mall looking at the same shops you'd find anywhere else. To be fair, Japan is a consumer nation and Tokyo has many places to shop, but Harajuku dethrones them all. There's stores dedicated to "Kawaii" or cute items, there's fetish shops, there's stores that are dedicated to Lady Gaga outfits. If you want different and special, this is the place to go. On top of that, you can't go wrong with the numerous restaurants in Harajuku. This really is a place to wander and get lost in, think of it as a modern Souk.



Your head will spin with all the stuff to look/buy/eat in Harajuku

2. **Have some Ramen:** I'll refer over to the Eater guide for the full list, but if you come to Tokyo, you have to try the Ramen. There's national competitions here for this stuff, it's the national dish and akin to Chili in the US – each region has something different to offer. Even if your connotation of Ramen is Top-Ramen noodle microwaved in a dorm room, you should get over it and check out some of the concoctions made in Japan. My personal favorite is Tanaka Second, where they serve a soup made with abalone. You'll be having Ramen more than once if you're a foodie, and Tokyo is the place to do it!



This is the Abalone soup Ramen at Tanaka Second. My personal favorite. However YMMV.

3. **Golden Gai:** This is something that just shouldn’t be missed. Looking like a shantytown tucked away in a little corner of Shinjuku, Golden Gai is a cluster of small buildings leftover from old Tokyo, with merely six streets and alleyways so small they can only fit people walking through them. A magnet area for celebrities and artist types, this is the “cool spot” of Tokyo. Bars are hidden upstairs and are just a quick ladder climb away. Most of them are so small that they only seat 6-7 people, and many only serve regulars, but be nice, make some friends, and you’ll be sure to have an awesome night bar hopping in this area.



You can’t miss this secretive bar area. Believe me.

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3 Things to do in Dubai & Abu Dhabi on a layover

So you are spanning the globe, either to the African continent, or from Asia to Europe, or somewhere else in the Middle East. Whatever it is, you probably have a stopover in Dubai or Abu Dhabi, and you should extend your stay for a little bit if you haven’t checked out these desert locales. The best way to describe the UAE is a mecca of modernity that rises out of what seems like extraterrestrial conditions. Here are the spots I recommend you check out while you’re in Dubai:

1. **The Sheikh Zayad Mosque:** Singlehandedly one of the most beautiful architectural sights i’ve ever witnessed, this is probably on the same level as the Taj Mahal. Built to be the most incredible mosque in the world, I think

the builders reached their goal. Gorgeous and stunning from every angle, you could stay here for a few hours and still be mesmerized. This is a must see.



In all its gloriousness, 180 degrees of beauty

2. **The Dubai Mall & Fountains:** I usually shy away from places I can find elsewhere when i’m traveling, and the malls usually fall into this category, especially if they don’t carry goods only found locally (this is tough nowadays with the internet and easy shipping). However, the Dubai Mall is a very cool place, with water fountain shows every hour, and an indoor aquarium that looks like a who’s who of sea creatures. It’s worth visiting this place for these two spots alone.



Not your average mall. I guarantee it.

3. **Hang out at Jumeirah Beach:** The Burj Al Arab is here, the sail looking hotel, but what I found more interesting was just spending some time at the beach. The gulf waters are warm and saltier than most other oceans, and the sand is incredibly nice. It's a unique experience being at the beach in the middle of a desert, and something that is quite different from spending beach time on a tropical island per se. For that fact alone, I think it's worth checking out Jumeirah Beach.



It’s not the prettiest beach, but its unique. You’re in the middle of the desert, but you’re also at the beach. Think about that.

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3 Things to Do in the Walled City of Cartagena, Colombia

The walled city of Cartagena is one of the most stunning historic UNESCO cities i’ve visited. It has its own culture and flair and the colorful alleyways and constant buzz make this city always comes to the top of my list when i’m asked where I would recommend to go in the world. This is where you should stay if you’re visiting, and you might not ever want to leave. Here are a few reasons why:

1. **You can have some of the best Ceviche in the world:** La Cevicheria is home to what Anthony Bourdain calls some of the best Ceviche he’s had. Now, I would say it’s

pretty damn good, but I would also say you can get some pretty incredible ceviche in Panama as well. However, what makes this place one of my favorites is their hot sauce that they make and bottle themselves! Anyone that knows me knows i'm a hot sauce aficionado, and the combination of fresh seafood and some spicy sauce makes me about as happy as a kid on Christmas. Check this place out when you're here.



Eat here. I beg of you.

2. **You can get lost, and enjoy it too:** The streets are meandering here, the street signs are hard to see, and for the most part, there's no way to figure out from a faraway waypoint where you are. But this is all ok here in Cartagena. Much like other older cities around the world (Marrakech in Morroco, The Old City in Barcelona, Casco Viejo in Panama) you tend to walk down a meandering road and not know where you're going, but there's something fun and interesting happening around every corner here and you won't ever get bored or

actually feel lost. The walls are colorful, there's a million smells, and this is a place where time slows down and you can enjoy just getting lost.



How can you not want to get lost in this? (Rhetorical)

3. **You can Enjoy Sunsets with a Cocktail in the Streets:** Everyone loves this, the romantical gesture of having a cocktail on a patio on the street, watching the locals

stroll by. You can't beat Cartagena if this is one of your favorite leisurely activities. I would check out Demente, El Baron, and Donde Fidel.



It might be 85 at night, but it's perfect for a drink and some people watching

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Three Things You Have to Do While in Seattle (From a former native)

I've been to Seattle quite a few times, being that I used to own a small wine & beer company in said town. Even so,

whenever I come back to visit old friends, I always end up going to the same places because they're so unique to this city. Here they are listed below:

1. **Waterfront Market:** Home to a few things, the first Starbucks, the fish market, and one of my favorite clam chowder spots in the US – Pikes Place Chowder. I mostly go here just for a leisurely stroll, coffee in hand, and people watch. It's beautiful, owing to the fact that the waterfront is sloped and as you walk towards the market you have incredible views of Elliotts Bay just beyond.



The all famous Seattle Waterfront market

2. **Spend some time at South Lake Union:** This area of town has grown considerably since I lived in Seattle, but it still retains its relaxed atmosphere and feel. The Lake itself is enormously huge, and seaplanes are constantly departing and arriving from it. It's a beautiful place to either picnic, stroll around leisurely, or have a nice meal on the waterfront. It's also close to the Space Needle, which is worth seeing but only on a clear

day (for the views of course).



It’s beautiful isn’t it? South Lake Union is yet another place to kill a few hours relaxing with a beer and picnicking

3. **Definitely Eat Seafood:** You have to check out the seafood offerings in Seattle. Being a town in the Pacific Northwest, it has access to some of the best fresh oysters and salmon you will find anywhere in the US. My favorite is Elliotts where they serve Oysters during a progressive happy hour from 3PM on. One of my first meals in Seattle is usually spent at Elliotts. That should tell you something.



Elliotts is the place to go for fresh seafood and a great view.

4. **If you love coffee the Starbucks Reserve:** Even if you don't it's worth visiting the Starbucks Reserve. This is one of the most awesome coffee institutions in the world, even if you're a snob. It's a massive warehouse-turned-coffee-mecca where they roast the coffee in front of you in beautiful 2 story copper roasters and serve caffeinated concoctions that can only be found at this location. The other Starbucks at the waterfront might be the first one, but this is BY FAR the best coffee shop i've seen the world over. You HAVE to visit this spot if you're ever in Seattle and even mildly appreciate coffee.



This is THE coffee mecca

The Young Travelier Guide to New Orleans

New Orleans, the city of soul, the city of food, and a city where you're likely to not remember much, is one of my favorite places in the US. Follow my quick guide below on must-sees while you're here!

1. **Eat a Beignet:** There's only one real place to eat a beignet, and it's at the famous Cafe Du Monde. If you're not familiar with the beignet, it's a close cousin to the doughnut. It's basically a fried pillow of dough dipped in some white sugar and served piping hot. Cafe Du Monde has been at its main location on Decatur street for over 150 years and it's a unique experience. You get into line to sit down, then the minute your butt hits the seat a menu is handed to you with the expectation that orders be placed with haste. Don't worry, once you get your order in relax and soak in the scene. Be sure to order a coffee with hickory from this joint, and enjoy every savory bite of your

beignets here because there's nowhere else in the world you can get one like it! (I know, i've tried looking)



Its soft, chewy, sweet, but not overly so, and with coffee – you don't get many moments more perfect than this

2. **Get a Alligator Airboat Tour:** It's no secret that New Orleans is below sea level. It has been devastated by more than one hurricane, but the tenacity of its residents allows it to get back onto its feet every time. There is one positive note to its geographic location – it's that the local area has been endowed with swampland that is not only uniquely beautiful, but full of life. Airboats are the way to get around, and the ride out to swampland is usually only 45 minutes. If you've never been on an airboat, it's an awesome time! Cruising (more like sliding around) on water only inches deep at 45+ mph, the beauty of the land rushing by you, you get a sense of just how much countryside there is around the bustling city of New Orleans. In

the summer months you'll definitely see alligators, but even if you don't, it's worth going out on the water just for the sheer joy and beauty of it.



Riding around the swamps on an airboat is one of the most incredible things you can do when visiting New Orleans!

3. **Get Involved in the Cuisine:** This city is known for food, and there's a lot of it to eat here so make sure you came hungry, or brought your stretchy pants! There's a multitude of places to eat here, and many are staples that have been around for a while, check out The Ruby Slipper Cafe for some of the most gluttonous and delicious southern breakfasts you'll ever have, grab a famous Muffuletta sandwich (A version of an Italian sub) for lunch, and then have dinner at Commander's Palace where everything is served with class and elegance. The mixture of Southern and French influences in New Orleans means everything has butter in it, or is friend (or is a combo of both), so although your health

might suffer a bit, your stomach will always be happy and full.



Breakfast at the Ruby Slipper is nothing short of spectacular. If you like benedicts, they have plenty of choices!

4. **Catch a Jazz Show in the French Quarter:** So you have heard of the French Quarter, it's rowdy, it's the center of the city, and it's a lot of fun. However, if you're no longer looking to just get black out drunk and would like to combine your imbibing with some class, check out the numerous Jazz Clubs that line this part of town. I prefer Cafe Beignet because of its open air atmosphere. They do serve beignets, which are great, but of course still don't compare to Cafe Du Monde's.



Cafe Beignet. Check it out. Have a drink, have a beignet, and enjoy the jazz.

The FIVE things you have to do in Hong Kong during a layover!

Hong Kong is a conflux of ancient and modern, the intersection of East and West, and one of the most lively and exciting cities one can experience. Whether it's indulging in gourmet dim sum, shopping for electronics or random gifts in the Ladies Market, or just sightseeing from Victoria's Peak – I can't stress enough that there's something for everyone in this city-state. Having been to HK over a dozen times, I still choose to drop by here for layovers and without further

delay, here are all the spots I recommend you checking out while you're here for a short period of time!

1. Victorias Peak: This is usually at the top of everyone's list of tourist spots, mostly because it has incredible views of Hong Kong harbor, along with views of mainland China on just the other side of the peak. You can take a cab up here, the tram, or go for a hike! There's also a mall on top and lots of shops, so expect to spend a little bit of time taking in the view, and having a snack. If it's cloudy, avoid Victoria's Peak because you really won't be able to see much up here.



The view from here doesn't get much better as you can see out over both Hong Kong, and into Mainland China

2. Eat Dim Sum: This is where it all started. Dim Sum, or small snack in cantonese, means small dishes meant to be shared. Ask for opinions on which restaurant in Hong Kong serves the best Dim Sum, and you'll be hard pressed to find

one answer. However, I will recommend **Tim Ho Wan** as one of the top Dim Sum restaurants in Hong Kong. It's a hole in the wall joint, and it doesn't have the traditional Dim Sum carts rolling around for you to choose dishes. There is also usually a wait, but it goes by very quickly as the service is incredibly fast at this spot. If you're looking for something fancier, I suggest checking out **One Dim Sum**. Either way, if you're in Hong Kong, you HAVE to have Dim Sum! My favorite dish, which is tough to replicate almost anywhere else in the world is "Har Gao", which is steamed shrimp with chives inside a delicate doughy shell. The mark of a good Har Gao is a soft relatively thin glutinous shell that isn't too chewy yet doesn't break apart the minute you bite into it.



Tim Ho Wan. It's not the fanciest, but damn its good

3. Tian Tan Buddha: So i'd place this one in the tourist category, but definitely one of the tourist sites worth seeing. Located outside of Hong Kong city itself, it isn't a terribly far journey, but definitely will take a few hours out of your day to visit. The Buddha itself is massive, and the area its located in (Ngong Ping) on Lantau Island, is green and lush, and feels a world away from the bustle of the city. The cable car ride up is worth doing, and remember to bring your hiking shoes because it's a few hundred steps up to the top of the Buddha!



Come for the Buddha, stay for the relaxing atmosphere. (Pic Courtesy Artelounge – because they took a better one than mine!)

4. Walk Tsim sha Tsui Promenade: I'm going to preface this by saying, there's not a lot going on at just the promenade, but spend a little bit of time and just wander the area, because

whether it’s getting lost in Mong Kok (the nearby shopping area), sightseeing the Skyline of Hong Kong across the harbor, or just leisurely exploring the dozen or so museums in this area, you’re sure to find something to do by taking some time and just meandering. You might feel like you’re lost, but I guarantee you’ll be excited by this very walkable neighborhood of Hong Kong.



TST, or Tsim Sha Tsui, is one of the most interesting places in Hong Kong to get lost in.

5. Eat on a floating restaurant: There are quite a few of these “junk boats” in the harbor and each one boasts to possess the best cuisine. My favorite is the original – Jumbo. However, depending on capacity and how early you book you really can’t go wrong because the experience of eating in

the harbor on one of these boats, where you can choose fresh seafood brought live to your table, is something that is very uniquely Hong Kong. The menu constantly changes, but since you’re at a seafood restaurant, I would suggest ordering some seafood



Great food, views on the water, how can you go wrong?

Whatever you do, you’ll have fun, because Hong Kong is a city of lights and a city of life, and everything about it is vibrant and unique!

REVIEW: The Four Seasons Johannesburg – The Perfect Post Safari Hotel

The Four Seasons in Johannesburg is a unique property, built into a hillside right in the middle of Johannesburg, and ripe with colonial inspired architecture. As a newly remodeled property (as of this writing in 2017), it is absolutely gorgeous, and is very much in line with other top Four Seasons properties throughout the world.



Nestled into the side of a hill, this expansive property does not fail to impress

My stay here was just for one night, and if you are in South Africa for one of the famed safaris, this should be your preferred hotel while you're waiting for transfer to your next destination.

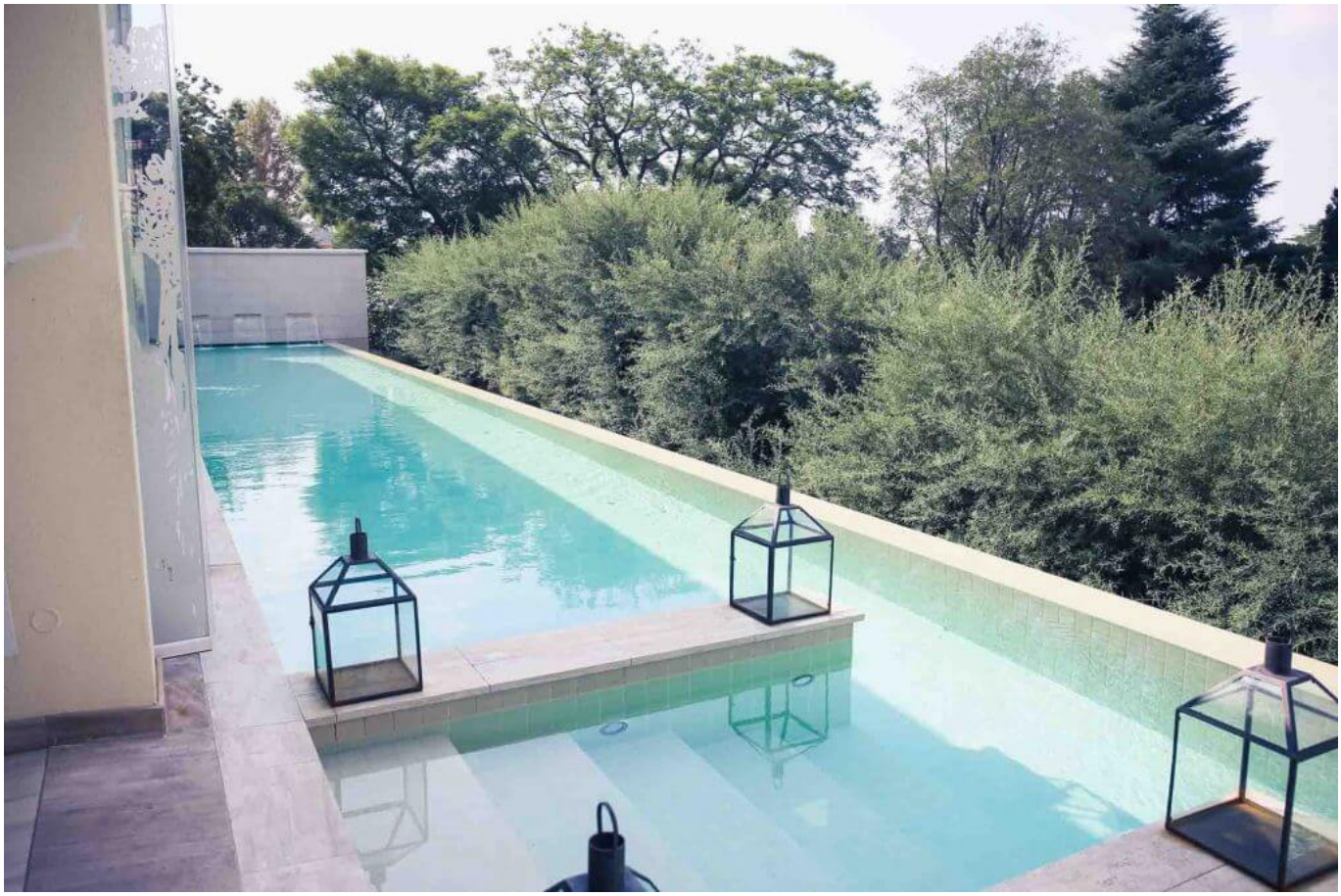
Johannesburg is a bustling city, and unfortunately, it also has one of the highest crime rates in South Africa, and in the

world. This shouldn’t dissuade you from visiting, but it should be of concern when selecting a property.

When you enter, you’ll notice that there is armed security at the front entrance of the hotel, and diligent staff ensuring the safety of the premises. Once you are inside the gates, the hotel amazes at once.

The hotel is a large complex, and it spans multiple buildings in the side of the Westcliff hills, encompassing two pools, a massive spa complex, and rooms with some incredible views of the surrounding city.

My single most favorite part of this property was the spa, which I spent half a day at



The rooms are classically Four Seasons, luxurious and modern but with refined touches that will age well. Nothing was amiss in my room, and the bed was especially comfortable (dare I say, more so than any other Four Seasons bed i’ve slept in!).

I loved the newly decorated rooms and enjoyed an amazing night of rest here!

At the top of the hill is the premier restaurant on the property – Flames – which offers stunning views, and some pretty awesome local cuisine.



Flames restaurant has impressive decor, amazing views, and delicious cuisine
I had the pleasure of both dining there for brunch and dinner, and am happy to report that it is definitely the place to eat at if you’re staying here.



There is a lot to like about this property, including the welcoming and warm staff, the impressive spa, and the beauty of the gardens and architecture. If I were to visit Johannesburg again, transit or otherwise, I wouldn’t think twice about staying at the Four Seasons here!

RATING:

Hard Product:

-Location (How close is this to top attractions in the surrounding area?)

It’s right in the center of Johannesburg, so if you’re looking to get around town, it doesn’t get any closer

10/10

-Cleanliness (Is the grout in the bathroom clean? How good is

maid service here?)

Extremely well put together, and very well maintained

9/10

-Upkeep (Is the hotel in need of a remodel, or is it being constantly kept up?)

Just remodeled, this is the time to come to this new property!

10/10

-Public Spaces (How unique/inventive/useful are the public spaces?)

Great public spaces including a hillside terrace, rose gardens, multiple pools, and relaxation spaces

9/10

Soft Product:

-Service (How good is the service here?)

Wonderful service, representative of Four Seasons

9/10

-Restaurants On-Site (Are the restaurants on site somewhere even the locals would go to?)

Great food on site, I highly recommend the in room dining as well!

8/10

-Concierge (Specifically, how effective is the Concierge at helping you with a new locale?)

The concierge service did a great job helping me handle some personal errands including shipping packages back to the US

10/10

TOTAL: 65/70

(35/70 is average)

PROS:

Lovely spa spaces
Just remodeled!
The views from Flame restaurant are outstanding
CONS:

It is sort of tough to get up the hill unless you can find a golf cart to take you, but just consider it the exercise!
SECRETS:

Be sure to check out the free spa relaxation area near the gym

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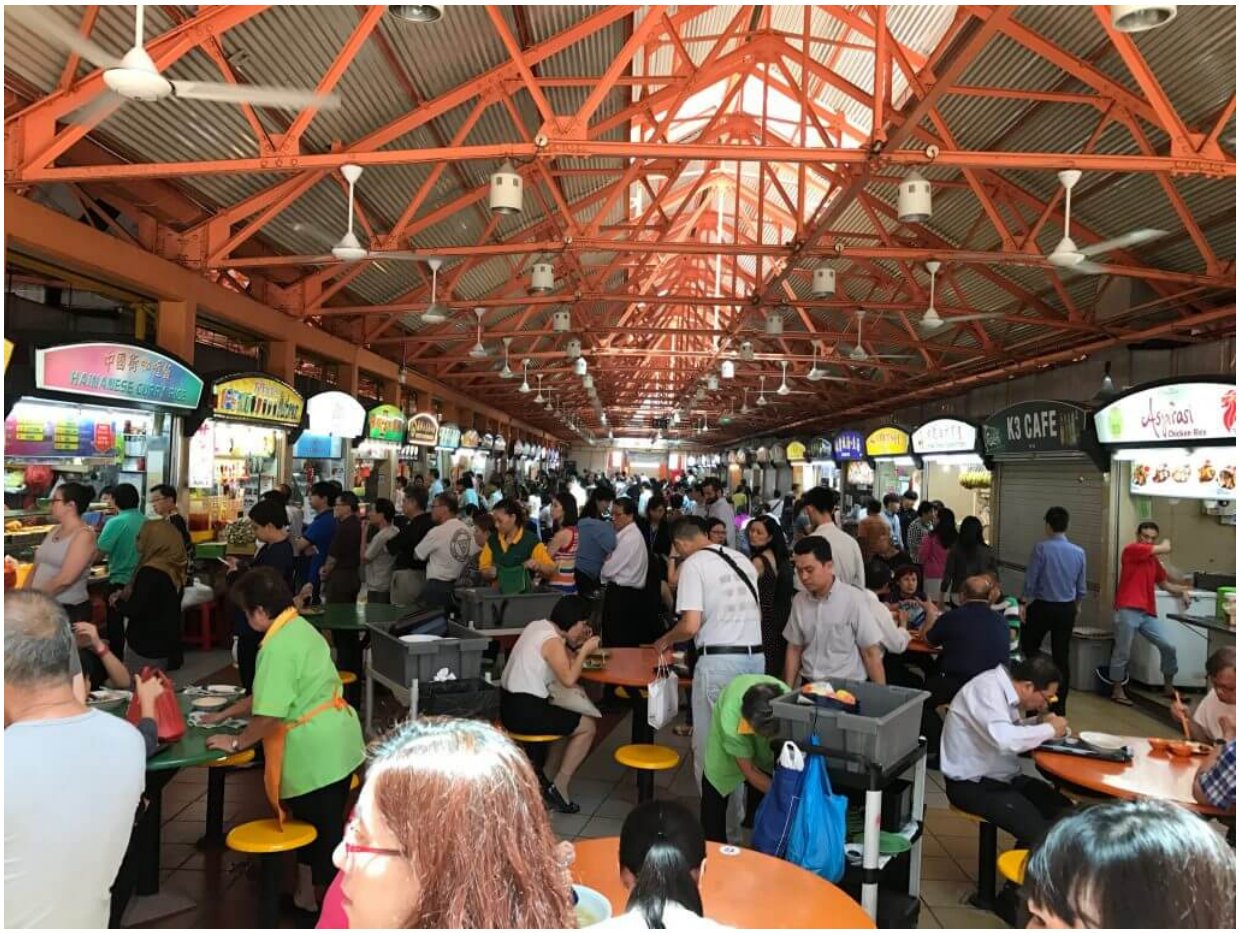
24 Hours in Singapore: Quick and Concise Guide to do it right!

So you have found yourself in Singapore, on a layover, because well – that happens quite a lot.

I found myself at the airport wondering what I could do in such a short period of time, not wanting to miss out on everything that this metropolis of a City-State had to offer so I googled articles furiously, only to find that many of them were either outdated or featured way too many things to accomplish an a short period of time. I ended up enlisting the help of the VERY knowledgable concierge at the Four

Seasons Singapore (where they had graciously put me up), and referenced a local friend of mine, and ended up with a much more concise list which you can find below. There is no reason to do any of these in any particular order, but this is the order in which I did them. You won't be rushed, but you'll certainly have a great time exploring Singapore in a single day! I also have made no assumptions about what part of the day you've had 24 hours to spend, so you might want to start and end at a certain spot, but just know that Singapore is more or less a 24 hour city so many things are open late except for some of the parks!

1. HAWKER MARKETS: So there are quite a few of these, and by hawker market, they mean markets where people "hawk" items. In Singapore, the most famous of these are the food hawker markets. Now it just so happened that the one I wanted to go to initially was closed (The Tiong Bahru Market). Luckily, there are many more – and the one which I ended up in was the Maxwell Food Centre Hawker Market. This is one of the more famous ones, with over 100 stalls, and is centered right in Chinatown. You might ask, should I walk around Chinatown? My answer is – no – if you've been to one Chinatown, you probably know what you're gonna see in another one. However, the Maxwell Food Centre Market had some of the most delicious and cheapest noodle soups I have ever had. Don't wait in line for the "famous" chicken and rice here, because the truth is, there's a ton of places around Singapore that you can get this famous dish and there's no reason to waste your precious 24 hours with 30-45min in line here.


HAINANESE CURRY RICE
K3 CAFE



2. TIONG BAHRU BAKERY: So you want pastries? Well, I'm not particularly a pastry type of person, but then I came here. Known for their caffeinated concoctions along with their incredible croissants and Kouign Amann's, this place is a must drop by spot. There's not much to say except for, have a pastry, get one to go if

you must, but don’t skip this bakery, they make some incredible concoctions. I thought that a croissant was a croissant was a croissant, until I came here. Keep in mind they have THREE locations, so just choose the one closest to you, knowing that one of them closes later than the other two.



This is carb heaven

3. THE GARDENS BY THE BAY: I usually love museums, but many times one can get burnt out going to them, because unless you are deeply attached to the exhibit, things can get dull very quickly (all you Art History majors/buffs please don’t hate mail me on this). The Gardens by the Bay is a great exception. There are actually multiple exhibits here but the two which I believe are worth your time are the Flower Dome and Cloud Forest. The Flower Dome is really a quick walkthrough of an incredibly intricate (and really great smelling) indoor flower garden, while the Cloud Forest is Singapore’s rendition of a vertical forest. You’re going to want to spend some time in the Cloud Forest, because there’s a fun walkway that takes you through the interior and exterior of the vertical growth as you

explore all the exhibits hidden throughout the zig-zagging path. There's really nothing quite like it and out of everything in Singapore, this probably "wow'ed" me the most.



It's exactly what they call it, a forest in the clouds, and its pretty darn impressive

4. RAFFLES CITY (Plaza): So you've heard of Raffles City, named after the famous Standford Raffles who had the vision to put Singapore on the map as a mercantile trading capital of the world. Raffles City and the nearby Plaza is a mix of modernity and history, with some really cool architecture that is a pure throwback to the colonial days, mixed in with newer hotels and office spaces. It is certainly a great place to just stroll and take in Singapore, with a mix of restaurants nearby (if you still happen to be hungry). Of course it's worth stopping by to have a cold concoction at the original home of the Singapore Sling at the Raffles Hotel, but DO NOT actually order the Singapore Sling. It's a jumbled mess of pure sugar with no complexity or

redeeming value, and overly priced at that.



The Colonially Famous Raffles Hotel

5. THE MARINA BAY SANDS: Not quite sure what kind of architectural statement the developers of the Marina Bay Sands were trying to make, but one thing is for certain, up close the hotel is pretty awe-inspiring. It resembles a ship on stilts, or a bauhaus designed flower planter. It's definitely worth checking out this hotel and having high-noon tea at the restaurant upstairs. The view is worth the price of admission alone, and being such an iconic part of the skyline – the Marina Bay Sands should be on every visitor's list. There's a pool and two bars upstairs, but most of it is inaccessible except for hotel guests, but don't let that stop you from visiting the bars and enjoying the glass balconies and the views they impart.



It’s an iconic building, so go see it!

I’m sure I have missed a thing here or there, and there will always be some degree of argument about what bakery or hawker market is best, but lets just say after visiting a few failed spots from some other lists, this one did me good on my quick excursion into Singapore. Oh, and if you’re wondering about transportation, I recommend taking taxis or Ubers, because as great as the public transportation is, it’s just that much quicker to taxi from spot to spot.

REVIEW: The Four Seasons Singapore

The Four Seasons in Singapore is not the newest hotel, nor is it in the famed “Raffles” district of the tiny city-state, but after a quick stay at this property, I realized that none of that matters.

For a property that is over 10 years old, the Four Seasons in Singapore is in impeccably great condition. There is a great attention to detail in keeping everything clean and well-maintained, from furniture that looks like it was just installed this last year, to bathrooms that have been re-grouted to keep up their appearance, I was very surprised that this property looked and felt like it was just built.

Furthermore, with staff that were incredibly attentive and polished, I can’t help but recommend the Four Seasons to anyone looking to spend a little time in Singapore.

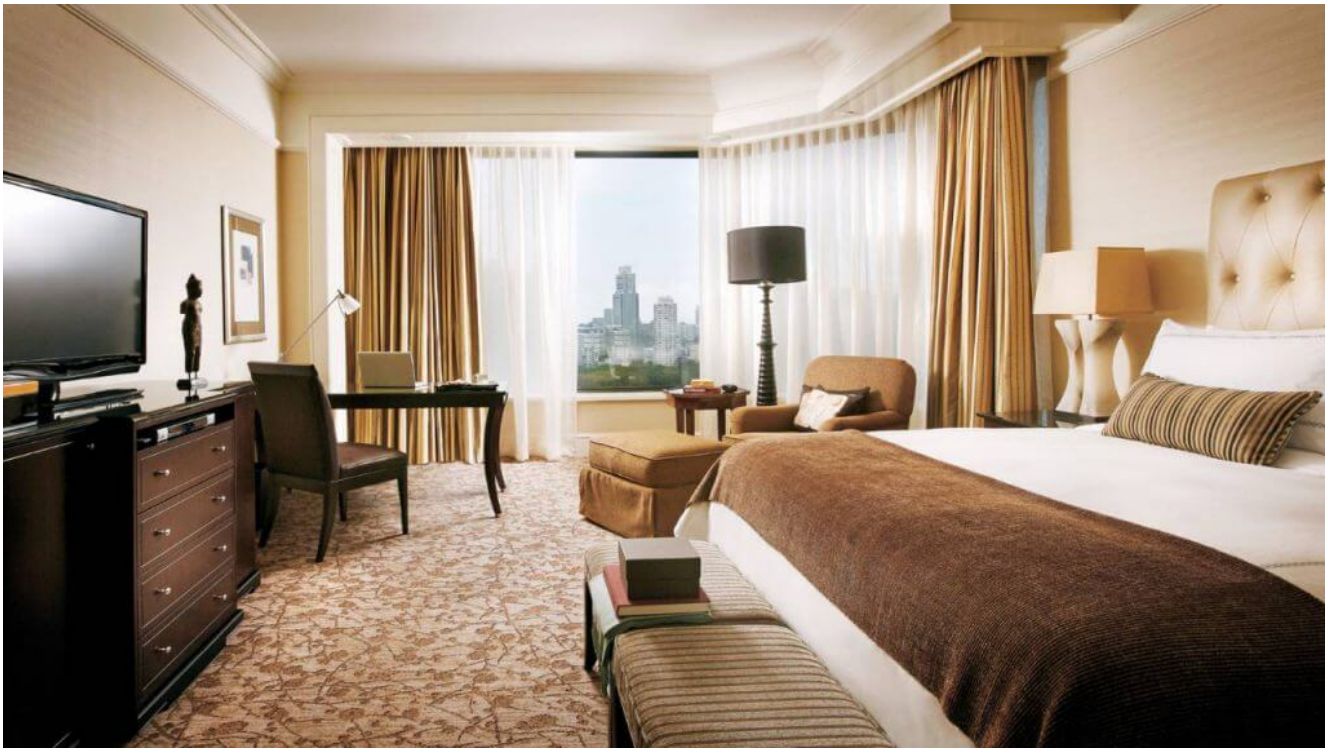
Oh, and the issue of location? Well the city is so small, that honestly it doesn’t matter where you stay, because you’ll be only a few minutes ride away from where you’re trying to go.

The hotel itself has one exceptionally nice feature, which is the rooftop pool. I personally didn’t get to spend much time here, but watching the sun set over the city from this vantage point was a highlight of being at this property.



The views from up here are pretty spectacular

The rooms themselves are large and luxuriously appointed, and as per usual, the bed was incredibly comfortable. The colors and decor are nothing that will blow your socks away, but what the rooms lack in singleness they make up for in luxuriousness.



The Rooms – It’s not the most modern of designs, but it sure is luxurious



The lobby bar was a cozy and swanky affair

I would recommend spending some time in the lobby bar, because that is probably my second favorite space in this property

next to the rooftop pool. It is a well put together space, and in a city like Singapore where business is being done everywhere, this is one of those bars you would want to spend some time in while either 1.dealmaking or 2.relaxing.

RATING:

Hard Product:

-Location (How close is this to top attractions in the surrounding area?)

It’s not next to some of the major hawker markets or raffles, or the gardens, but Singapore is small so it’s not out of the way either

7/10

-Cleanliness (Is the grout in the bathroom clean? How good is maid service here?)

Not a single thing out of place here.

9/10

-Upkeep (Is the hotel in need of a remodel, or is it being constantly kept up?)

For being a property over a decade old, this Four Seasons has been kept in tip top shape

9/10

-Public Spaces (How unique/inventive/useful are the public spaces?)

Not a lot of them, but the few that are there are great places to spend time in

8/10

Soft Product:

-Service (How good is the service here?)

From in-room check in to personalized greetings for every guest, along with very well trained local staff, I couldn’t have asked for more

9/10

-Restaurants On-Site (Are the restaurants on site somewhere even the locals would go to?)

The food was incredible, but Singapore has such great food everywhere that it’s hard to just recommend someone eat at the hotel

7/10

-Concierge (Specifically, how effective is the Concierge at helping you with a new locale?)

The concierge service was impeccable

10/10

TOTAL: 55/70

(35/70 is average)

PROS:

- Great rooftop pool
- Well maintained
- Service was impeccable

CONS:

- The hotel needs some updating, not that it looks worn in because it doesn’t, but because it’s getting a little long in the tooth

SECRETS:

- This hotel has a light breakfast service in the pool area that is free for guests. Be sure to take advantage of it!

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

Check out the Singapore in 24 hours guide!

Do Ubud Bali in ONE day! Three must sees!



Lush, Green, and Peaceful. Ubud is a world in itself.

Sure, you could spend a whole week in the lush rainforest region of Ubud in Bali, but sometimes you are just wanting to see everything else on the island, Seminyak, Uluwatu, Nusa Dua, the list goes on. I recently spent two weeks in Bali, and if I had to narrow it down for you and distill Ubud into one day, these are it!

MONKEY FOREST

You've heard of this one before, and there's a lot of youtube videos regarding the monkey forest, but here are the tips you'll need.

- Be sure to NOT buy bananas at the sanctuary, and do not come with food anywhere on you. This includes drinks in cans or bottles. These monkeys have a sixth sense. They will come up and bite or scratch you if you have

any food or drinks. Now, if you REALLY must have a picture of a monkey on you, then go ahead and buy some bananas and feed them, but don't say I didn't warn you!
- Be sure to keep everything buttoned up, or hidden in a backpack/purse. These monkeys will hop around and go through your stuff. I saw more than one person get robbed by these funny little guys monkeying around.



These guys love to monkey around.

RICE FIELDS OF UBUD

There's something deeply satisfying about rice fields terraced just perfectly. They're infinitesimally green and well manicured, and they're just plain cool to look at.

- There's a lot of peddlers who set up shop in the middle of these rice fields trying to charge you just to walk around them, you don't have to pay them, but bring a few small coins with you just in case. It's not worth an argument over a few cents.

- Bring your walking (or hiking shoes), because walking up and down these terraces can be relatively slippery and the last thing you want to do is fall into a rice paddy.
- There's quite a few nice restaurants up overlooking the rice paddy's. It gets really hot in the fields so i'd recommend having one of the many refreshing Balinese drink concoctions. These are pretty unique, and are made of local herbs and young coconut water blended up



Stunning to look at, semi-difficult to hike, but well worth it.

KANTO LAMPO WATERFALL

Sure, there are a LOT of waterfalls to check out in Bali, and around Ubud, but the problem is the majority of them have become so touristy that it's hard to get a good photograph of just you and the waterfall unless you plan on going there at 4AM. Furthermore, if you just want to enjoy yourself, instead of hanging out with 300 other people, this is THE waterfall to go to. Now, I know that by telling people on the internet about this place i'm going to inevitably make it busier, but hey, you heard it here first!

- This is a VERY easy waterfall to get to, so unlike many of the other ones, its a short three minute walk from your car or motorbike to the falls
- There’s also another fall that is not too far down the river from the main Kanto Lampo waterfall, check it out!



This may not be the prettiest waterfall in Bali, but it’s relaxing and really deserted most of the time, which is nice if you’re trying to relax.

So there you go! Three things you can do in Ubud, Bali, in less than a day. There are tons more things to do in Bali, so if you want to check out 22 Awesome things click on that link and check out my friend’s blog!

REVIEW: The Ritz-Carlton Mandapa Reserve in Ubud, Bali

This was my second experience at a Ritz Reserve, with the first being at the Dorado Beach Property. If you're not familiar with the Reserve chain, it is the top tier of hotels within the Ritz-Carlton family, with only three current offerings, and a handful more in the works. The Ritz Reserve Mandapa is special, however, in that it is the first property in the Reserve line to be built entirely from scratch.

Let me start by saying, there is NOTHING average or normal about this property. One immediately notices something special is going on when they enter the 5.5 acre Reserve. It's hidden in a 300 ft long alleyway behind some nondescript businesses and a temple.



This is the hidden entrance. Go down this alleyway, and you'll

be surprised what you find

Once you reach the end of the alley, you're greeted by two guards who greet you with smiles and open the gates to, what I would call, one of the most beautiful resort properties that has ever been built. The small alley opens up to a wide courtyard, and a beautiful lobby suspended over the Mandapa valley, overlooking the valley forest and Ayung river below (which the staff told me is the longest running river in Bali).



The Lobby's overflow water feature and endless views of the valley below are a sight to behold

Every Ritz-Reserve has less than 100 rooms, and this one is no exception. This means that service is at a premium beyond anything you'd normally experience at even your top 5-star resort. Upon checking in you're introduced to your butler and personal concierge. Any wish desired is taken care of immediately. The attentiveness to perfection is so beyond any expectation that it only takes a few minutes before you begin

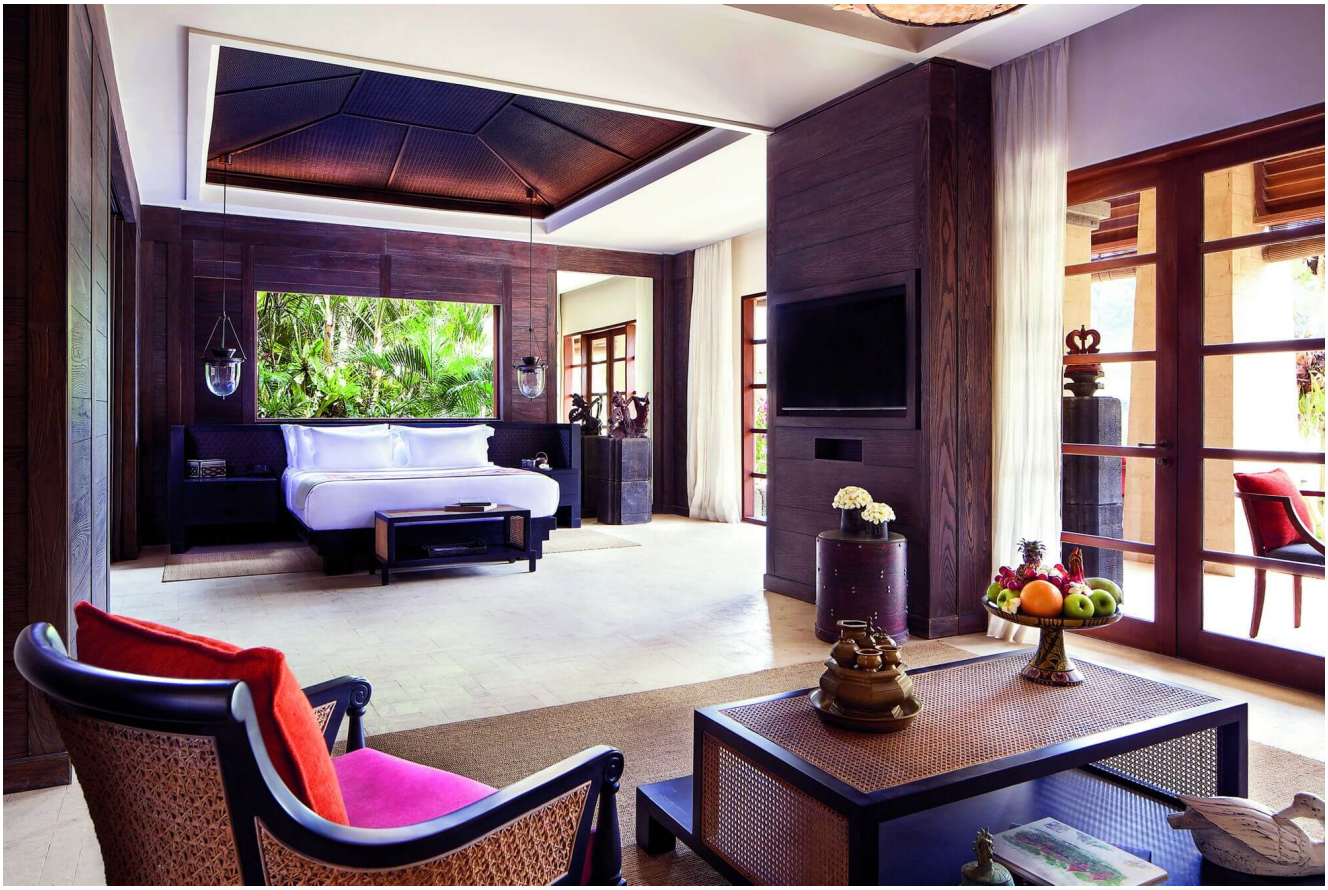
to realize just how special the property is.



The 5.5 acre property sits in the sacred Mandapa valley next to the Ayung river

Golf carts take you everywhere, and the staff are there to assist you with a ride, often anticipating where you'll go next! I believe that this is the true difference between the Ritz-Reserve properties and other resorts, the service is not just responsive, but proactive. Combine this with the kind spirit of the Balinese people, and you have some of the most top notch hospitality i've ever experienced.

The rooms are split evenly between villas on the river's edge, and large suites on the upper floors. They are all BEAUTIFULLY appointed with custom finishes, high ceiling roofs, and luxurious amenities. The devil is in the details here, the toilets are high end electronic bidets which open and close for you with the help of motion sensors, while the individual sinks are hand carved teak bowls which are re-varnished after every stay. No expense was spared in the development of this Mandapa resort, and it truly shows.



The rooms are beautifully executed, with bright airy spaces, custom local finishes, and a moveable dividing wall



The bathrooms were one of the highlights, with gorgeous soaking tubs that were delightful just to look at, and some exotic finishes all around.

I did not get a chance to visit one of the restaurants at the resort (Kubu), which happens to be the #1 ranked restaurant (at the time of this writing in March 2017), but it sits right at the river's edge. Sawah Terrace served incredibly fresh and local cuisine for breakfast and dinner, while the library served some of the most refreshing libations i've experienced in my travels.

Rounding out the experience was a multitude of experiences in and around the property, from an educational tour of the rice fields right in the middle of Mandapa, to personalized cultural events that the hotel changed on a seasonal basis.

Of the hundreds of luxury hotels that i've had the pleasure of staying at, the Ritz-Reserve in Mandapa ranks near the very top. Kudos to the chain and all the staff for making this hotel an experience to remember.

RATING:

Hard Product:

-Location (How close is this to top attractions in the surrounding area?)

Ubud is a great city if you're looking for something more low key than nearby Seminyak, and you want to experience the rainforest and lush rice fields. This resort is set right in the middle of the city, but hidden in its own valley

10/10

-Cleanliness (Is the grout in the bathroom clean? How good is maid service here?)

Not a single thing out of place here.

10/10

-Upkeep (Is the hotel in need of a remodel, or is it being constantly kept up?)

Still a relatively new property, it is being kept in tip top shape

10/10

-Public Spaces (How unique/inventive/useful are the public spaces?)

This hotel has so many spaces to explore and is set in such a serene and beautiful setting that it doesn’t get much better

10/10

Soft Product:

-Service (How good is the service here?)

From in-room check in to personalized greetings for every guest, along with very well trained local staff, I couldn’t have asked for more

10/10

-Restaurants On-Site (Are the restaurants on site somewhere even the locals would go to?)

The food was incredible, but the menu could have offered just a little more variety at the pool area. However, it was still well above and beyond.

8/10

-Concierge (Specifically, how effective is the Concierge at

helping you with a new locale?)

The concierge service was stunning here, all Reserves assign a butler to each guest, and they really do look after you. For example, the minute I was done with breakfast, they knew I needed to get to the lobby to take a car into the city, and had everything from the golf cart to the driver arranged without my even asking.

10/10

TOTAL: 68/70

(35/70 is average)

PROS:

- The setting is surreal its so beautiful
- The service at a Reserve is beyond reproach
- The rooms are absolutely stunning in build quality

CONS:

- Only recommendation would be a revamp of the menu at the pool, or the addition of a few more items

SECRETS:

- Do take the time to make a reservation ahead of time with the concierge before you arrive, so that you can eat at Kubu, and so that you can plan for some of the local cultural events held by the hotel

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

Check out the Ubud guide!

REVIEW: The Ritz-Carlton Hong Kong, the TALLEST (and maybe best) hotel in the world

Ok, so saying that a hotel is the best in the world is sort of like saying “Pizza is the best food in the world”. However, if there was a list of top properties this one would definitely make the cut.

The first part that we’ll have to get out of the way, is that the Ritz in HK is indeed the tallest hotel in the world, occupying the 102nd to the 108th floor of the ICC building on the Kowloon side of the city. As such, the views you get are completely superior to almost any other building or establishment in the city of Hong Kong. Combine this with the fact that the hotel is on the Kowloon side, and you end up seeing the gorgeous Hong Kong side skyline (which is world famous and rightfully so).



That’s the exterior, and yes, it is VERY tall



The harbor views from the rooms are all incredible thinks to

the height of the building.

To get to the hotel, you start with an elevator ride from the lobby. Staff are there to assist you and it’s rare that you even have to push the “up” button for the elevator banks. When the Ritz says that they’re a full service hotel, they really mean it here. Once you’re up in the main lobby you have the option of going up to the rooftop bar, or taking a separate bank of elevators to your room.

The rooms themselves are incredibly well put together, with impeccably beautiful furniture, and small luxurious touches such as ipods with custom playlists pre-loaded for the guests. These are the things that make a hotel experience that much better, and really show off the attentiveness of a property.



The main lobby is actually on the 103rd floor, and is a grand affair

I should mention that there are some incredible restaurants in the main lobby. The staff calls it the “360 degrees” of dining. This is because there’s multiple restaurants on all sides of the 102nd floor, including TWO 2-Michelin star restaurants, a caviar bar, and an incredible breakfast/lunch/dinner buffet restaurant. I had the pleasure

of dining at Tin Lung Heen which I highly recommend trying out – it's elevated Cantonese cuisine. Cafe 103 serves daily buffets for all three meals, and frankly speaking – it's one of the best buffets i've been to – where they don't cut corners just to give you more variety. Between all the restaurants, the pool and hottub on the top story, and the Ozone bar also on the rooftop of the property, you can more or less stay in the hotel all day and not have to leave.

And that is where I have to admit – that this property was so nice that at times it made me not want to leave. Don't get me wrong, Hong Kong is such an incredible city, full of vibrant life, cuisine, and culture. However, you know you're staying at a near perfect property when you make excuses to stay just a little bit longer.

If you're staying in Hong Kong there are a LOT of luxurious hotel choices, but you'd be making a mistake if you didn't spend at least one of your nights at the Ritz-Carlton.

RATING:

Hard Product:

-Location (How close is this to top attractions in the surrounding area?)

Mong Kok is nearby, but if you want to go to Hong Kong side it's only a short cab or MTA ride away

9/10

-Cleanliness (Is the grout in the bathroom clean? How good is maid service here?)

When the maid service noticed I had left the "busy" sign up but thought I was out of the room, they went as far as emailing me to ask if I needed service

10/10

-Upkeep (Is the hotel in need of a remodel, or is it being constantly kept up?)

Still a relatively new property, it is being kept in tip top shape

10/10

-Public Spaces (How unique/inventive/useful are the public spaces?)

Stunning property, with the added advantage of being so high up that the views are incredible from every public space available, including the club lounge, the pool, and all of the restaurants

10/10

Soft Product:

-Service (How good is the service here?)

From in-room check in to personalized greetings for every guest, this Ritz-Carlton is being run like a VERY tight ship

10/10

-Restaurants On-Site (Are the restaurants on site somewhere even the locals would go to?)

It’s tough competition in Hong Kong, but the restaurants on site left almost nothing wanting. Only 1 point deducted for the price

9/10

-Concierge (Specifically, how effective is the Concierge at helping you with a new locale?)

Other than some minor language gaps, the concierge service was accommodating and extremely helpful. They planned my short trip in Hong Kong perfectly.

9/10

TOTAL: 67/70

(35/70 is average)

PROS:

- The views are absolutely breathtaking
- The restaurants at the establishment cannot be beat
- The service is top notch and impeccable

CONS:

- This is really nitpicking, but it does take two elevators to get to your room – however they make it as seamless as possible, and come on – you’re in the tallest hotel in the world!

SECRETS:

- Do take the time to make a reservation ahead of time for the restaurants on property as they get booked up VERY quickly

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

Check out the Hong Kong guide!