



Golden Dragon Hotel (above) in Geylang, where reporter Clara Lock spent a night, has good views of the surrounding red-light neighbourhood. ST PHOTOS: KUA CHEE SIONG

A night in the worst-ranked hotel in Singapore?

# Keep calm and use bug spray

Rooms at Golden Dragon Hotel cost about \$50 a night, reek of stale cigarette smoke and have stained walls and bed sheets with holes, but they give you front-row seats to the goings-on in the Geylang red-light district



Clara Lock  
Travel Correspondent

Flies buzz around my face, there are gaping holes in the comforter, and are those bedbugs making my legs itch? Lying awake at last, I resign myself to a night of very little sleep.

I am spending a night at the Golden Dragon Hotel, in the heart of Singapore's red-light district.

With an average rating of 1.5 out of five stars on travel ratings site TripAdvisor, it is possibly one of Singapore's worst-ranked hotels.

Budget accommodation is plentiful in Geylang, but at \$45 a night on weekdays and \$50 a night on weekends, the Golden Dragon Hotel offers one of Singapore's cheapest private rooms.

My assignment is to find out just what \$50 gets you in Singapore, where hotel rooms cost an average of \$218.60 a night last year, according to statistics from the Singapore Tourism Board published last month.

I ask for a non-smoking room when I check in on a Friday afternoon at 3pm. The receptionist hands me two keys and lets me view the rooms, both of which reek of stale cigarette smoke.

What I really want to know, however, is where they found the body. Last year, an Indonesian woman was found dead in one of the rooms and a man was later charged with her murder.

The receptionist is coy when I ask - "I don't have to tell you," she deflects in Mandarin, then helpfully adds that it was in neither of the rooms she is offering.

My room, located at the end of the corridor, seems decent at first glance. The bed is neatly made. The TV, air-conditioning and all-important Wi-Fi are working.

The decor is functional, if dated. Perhaps the dismal reviews are exaggerated.

But cracks show up as I look closer. The paper-thin bed sheet is pockmarked with cigarette-butt burn-holes. The bedside lamps are caked with dust. The walls are streaked with runny stains. In a hotel where the day rate starts at \$20 for two hours, I try not to think about where those stains came from.

Exploring the neighbourhood provides some distraction. Foodie haunts such as Eminent Frog Porridge and Penang Seafood Restaurant are just a couple of streets away.

I tuck into a punchy bowl of assam laksa at Penang Seafood Restaurant, snack on chive dumplings from dim sum shop Ho Kee Pau, sample quinoa puffs at an organic food store and pop into a Japanese heat therapy outlet where customers lie on heated ceramic tiles to improve their blood circulation.



The room decor (above) is functional, if dated, the bedside lamps (far left) are dusty and the bed sheet is pockmarked with cigarette-butt burn-holes (left centre). Toilet paper, a kettle and cups are provided (left).

After dark, I pass a man selling illegal cigarettes out of a duffel bag on the street and painted prostitutes waiting outside brothels. My room window, which overlooks Lorong 18, offers a similar view. I have been to Geylang many times, but have rarely seen its nocturnal activities up close. I find that I am actually enjoying myself - until the time comes to actually sleep.

I can live with lumpy pillows and saggy mattresses. I have even brought earplugs to muffle the rumble of traffic that goes on till about 3am.

But it is the moth flies that keep me wide awake - small, furry pests I

keep swatting away. Finally, I give up trying to sleep and watch Netflix on my phone instead.

Close to daybreak, as koel birds sound their dawn chorus, fatigue takes over and I drift into a restless slumber. It lasts just two hours, until the sound of running water and flushing toilets next door wakes me. I am exhausted but relieved at having lasted the night.

Upon checking out, I spy two tourists taking photos of each other on an adjacent street. They look fresh and excited, ready for a day of sightseeing.

They remind me of my younger self who stayed at budget properties across China, Europe and the

United States in order to stretch my backpacking dollar. The small towns and neighbourhoods, if rough, were always exciting.

Geylang is Singapore's version of that, a side of the country that does not make it into tourism brochures, but is part of our identity all the same.

It is the rare Singaporean who has not had supper along these streets or taken a spin along the even-numbered lorongs to check out the action.

The Golden Dragon Hotel offers a front-row view. Just take along bug spray.

claral@sph.com.sg

Is this Singapore's worst hotel?

SCAN TO WATCH

<http://str.sg/worsthotel>