

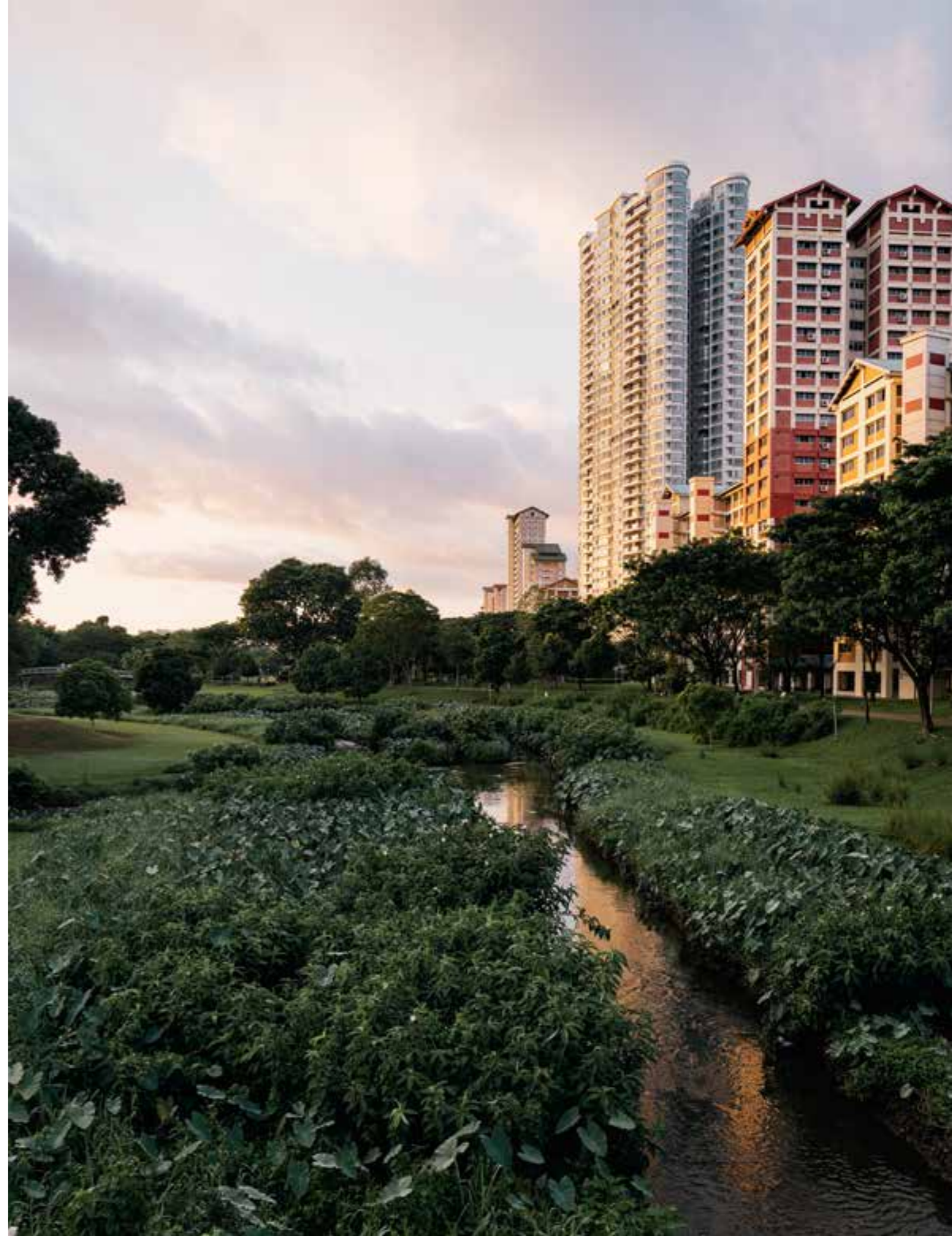
A HIKING TRAIL THAT TAKES IN DENSE RAINFOREST AND  
HIDDEN HISTORY REVEALS A DIFFERENT SIDE OF SINGAPORE.  
BY ALEXIS BUXTON-COLLINS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURYNISHAK

# URBAN JUNGLE



Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park in central Singapore (opposite)





I'm 163 metres above sea level and Singapore's skyline sprawls out below me. Early-morning crowds jostle but there isn't a suit in sight. Instead, I'm sharing the view from the highest point of this bustling island nation with a troop of silvery long-tailed macaques and human walkers in fitness apparel, the air around us filled with the high-pitched drone of jungle insects.

In this highly urbanised city-state, Bukit Timah Nature Reserve is perhaps the wildest place that remains. Civets, pangolin and sambar deer prowl through the jungle beneath spiky rattan palms and 40-metre-high seraya trees that trail vines as thick as my arm.

And yet, just an hour later I'm scanning the hawkers' stalls at bustling Adam Road Food Centre, where the princely sum of

S\$5.50 is enough to secure what is reputedly the Sultan of Brunei's favourite nasi lemak. Tucking into a plate loaded with fluffy coconut rice, crisp ikan bilis and zingy sambal, I reflect that my hectic day is all par for the course on the 36-kilometre Coast-to-Coast Trail (C2C; [nparks.gov.sg](http://nparks.gov.sg)).

Launched in 2019, the C2C plots an unlikely route through one of the most densely populated countries on earth, all the way from the freshwater swamp forests of Jurong Lake Gardens in the south-west to the woodlands and mangroves that fringe the north-east coast. The path switches regularly between the city and the jungle and three days gives me plenty of time to make stops along the way.



Toon Hee is my sprightly 60-year-old guide and he seems to get a kick out of confounding my expectations on a regular basis. When we enter the Central Catchment Nature Reserve I'm so busy staring at a sign warning me about wild boars that I almost step on a clouded monitor with lace-like patterns across its skin. Startled, it pads quickly away through the chocolate-coloured soil before turning back and flicking its long tongue at me. At 50 centimetres long, Hee tells me, this one's just a baby – adults can grow up to four times as large.

"Not what you were expecting?" he asks with a gently mocking smile, as if fending off wild boars and giant lizards is the norm in a place where an outbreak of littering is almost a national emergency.

Just minutes after leaving the reserve we reach Marymount MRT Station, one of several stops along the trail that make it easily accessible from the Parkroyal Collection Pickering hotel ([hotel.qantas.com.au/parkroyalcollectionpickering](http://hotel.qantas.com.au/parkroyalcollectionpickering)). After a day walking in the heat, it's a relief to arrive at this "hotel in a garden", which brings the greenery to the city centre with banks of foliage that erupt from the terraces wrapped around every third floor.

My accommodation is a far cry from Kampong Lorong Buangkok, a cluster of two dozen humble wooden bungalows with zinc roofs that lies near the end of the walk. Singapore's last remaining traditional village is like a time capsule, offering a faint echo of the rural landscape that covered much of the island within living memory. It provokes a rush of sentimentality from my normally ebullient guide.

"I was born in a place like this," he recalls. "In those days nobody closed the doors, everyone was welcome and it was a simple life. We didn't have much but we made toys out of bottle caps and went swimming whenever we wanted. Now there's no trace of that life left."

It's a version of Singapore that I struggle to picture but one that feels tangible when a sea breeze drifts through the casuarina forest at the trail's terminus on peaceful Coney Island.

I'm watching a mustard-coloured woodpecker with a bright red crest hammering on a trunk when a rustle in the undergrowth draws my attention to a sleek ribbon of fur sliding through the greenery at my feet. A pair of dark eyes emerges above a whiskered face and after letting out a gentle mew, the otter steps onto the path and continues on its way.

Charmed by the encounter, I can't help but laugh when Hee tells me these gorgeous creatures have earned the ire of some residents due to their habit of taking expensive koi from household ponds. "But that's what happens when you live close to nature."

When Singapore gained independence in 1965, "we said we would have a garden in a city. Now, after more than 50 years, we've expanded that idea to become a city in a garden. Not every visitor sees it but it's easy to find if you look in the right places." ●

Kampong Lorong Buangkok (top); the Parkroyal Collection Pickering hotel (above)