DEAD TOWN: Party around the clock? Not in Orchard Road last Thursday morning, where even the revellers had abandoned it at 12.45am when this picture was taken.
Is Singapore a city that never sleeps? Not quite yet

Mak Mun San

Off night owl Christopher Lim, 32, says he works irregular hours, so it’s great to be able to do these things at my own convenience,” says the bachelor.

But asked if he thinks Singapore is in the league of 24/7 regional cities like Tokyo, Seoul, Taipei and Hong Kong, he replies with out hesitation: “Far from it.”

Unlike these cities, Singapore’s nocturnal activities are “limited in size and choices,” says Mr Lim, who travels frequently around the region for work and leisure.

Singapore, he says, lacks alternative entertainment options like 24-hour comic book stores in Tokyo or all-night street markets in Taipei.

Industry players here also give a resounding “No” when asked if Singapore can now call itself a city that never sleeps.

This, despite survey findings that show 54 per cent of Singaporeans stay up past midnight.

In the 2004 survey by ACNielsen which covered 28 countries, Singapore was ranked seventh in the top 10 night owls’ list.

Portugal was first, followed by Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong and Japan were ranked second, third, fourth and sixth respectively.

Changing scene

But most industry players are quick to add that Singapore is moving towards a 24/7 culture – slowly.

Mr Robert Kho, chief executive of the National Association of Travel Agents Singapore (Natas), says: “We’re slowly moving towards that, maybe not in terms of accommodation but certainly 24-hour dining and entertainment.”

Echoing his sentiments, veteran club operator Dennis Foo, who runs Devil’s Bar in Orchard Parade Hotel, says there must be an “eco-system of sorts” comprising critical mass – nightlife venues and a large number of 24-hour establishments for a city to earn the 24/7 tag.

“It’s a chicken and egg situation, but some eggs take a longer time to hatch,” he quips.

To be fair, Singapore’s midnight scene has changed dramatically over the last few years with the introduction of 24-hour Clubbing, midnight movies and all-night shopping, to name a few.

While round-the-clock eateries like 24 prata shops and the Kopitiam chain have been around for more than 15 years, the 24-hour concept has been slow to catch on in the retail and entertainment industries.

Yokoso, the first 24-hour supermarket and department store here, was probably ahead of its time. It opened in 1991 at Tampines Kao Tong Complex near Geylang Serai but closed in the late 1990s due to poor business.

Mustafa Centre (below) in Serangoon Road took up the challenge in June 2005 – despite the economic slowdown caused by the Sars crisis and the Iraq war and the Sars crisis – and opened its doors 24 hours.

The gamble seems to have paid off.

The 300,000 sq ft store, which stocks as much as nothing from gold jewellery to toiletries, had a turnover of about $100 million last year.

Annual turnover has grown by about 30 per cent since it went 24 hours.

Singapore’s nightlife got another shot in the arm with the opening last November of Heeren which opened last November, in the only place which does not pull down its shutters even on slow nights.

It is run by LifeBrandz, the same people behind the Ministry Of Sound club at Clarke Quay, which opened last December.

LifeBrandz’s executive director Clement Lee admits that the costs are “relatively high”.

Londoners are there, but not that many customers during the late hours.

“But one view is that if you don’t establish a policy of 24/7, and you’re closed sometimes and open at others, people might not know when to come,” he explains.

Cathay Cineleisure Orchard gave Singapore another late-night leisure option in November 2003 when it introduced 24-hour movie screenings on Fridays, Saturdays and the public holiday of Good Friday.

They proved so popular that Cathay began offering daily midnight screenings from Fridays to Thursdays the following year.

Supermarket chains also jumped on the 24-hour bandwagon, with NTUC FairPrice opening FairPrice Xpress stores at three ExcoMobil stations starting in December 2003.

Five more are scheduled to open over the next three months.

Prime Supermarket has also been operating around the clock since the 18 outlets since March last year, with Cold Storage following suit at its Holland Village branch last May.

To not be outdone, fast-food giant McDonald’s (right, above) opened its doors around the clock and rolled out a 24-hour in-sandwich delivery service last August.

Currently, 39 of its 125 restaurants are open 24 hours.

In managing director, Mr Kenneth Chan says business has been on an “upward trend” since going around the clock, with sales doubling at its 24-hour restaurants.

Meanwhile, Clarke Quay, currently under-goin an $80-million revamp, looks set to be come a round-the-clock entertainment hub by August this year.

Integrated resorts

OF COURSE, there are the integrated resorts, which are expected to inject life – and money – into the midnight economy when they are up and running.

Singapore Tourism Board also plans to transform the Singapore River into the “most iconic 24-hour waterfront entertainment and lifestyle precinct in the region” by 2015.

Since its night-time landscape is changing just what is holding Singapore back from becoming an all-night 24R city?

After all, going by the ACNielsen survey which of Singaporeans turn in after late.

But Singaporeans’ late sleeping habit does not necessarily translate into nocturnal activities, says Associate Professor Thomas Tan from the School of Marketing at the Sin-

“Good housing doesn’t make for good street life,” concludes Assoc Prof Tan.

But there are signs that the mindset is evolving, at least among the younger set.

In a survey conducted by the Urban Redevelopment Authority from 2002 to 2004, more than 40 per cent of over 4,000 youths and young adults polled felt that 24-hour cafes and food outlets were lacking here.

However, those hoping for more 24-hour stores here like Kong Kong’s APM shopping mall and Taipei’s Entire Bookstore may have to wait a little longer.

When asked if they have plans to enter the 24-hour market, most shopping malls and bookshops declined comment.

On why fellow retailers seem hesitant to take the plunge, Mustafa’s assistant general manager, Mr R B Subiah, says: “They must have done their calculations.”

Out of the store’s 2,100-strong staff, 300 are needed to run the night shift.

Mr Subiah says the extra manpower costs incurred in operating around the clock can be covered because the store now enjoys a monopoly in the late-night market.

But having more 24-hour outlets is only part of the equation, says Dr Lilda Wee, the Director at the Centre for Innovation and Enter-

“We to be a 24R city, factors such as a good public transport system, security and flexible working hours have to be in place,” she says, adding that Singapore’s safe environment is conducive for late-night activities.

Although it is hard to say who should take the lead – the entertainment and lifestyle sec-

cular or government bodies – experts agree the perceived lack of consumer demand is pre-

“one question remains: Is it important for Singapore to become a 24R city in the first place?”

Yes, says LifeBrandz’s Mr Lee: “To become a global city, we must be a city that never sleeps,” he says.

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What can be done to make Singapore more of a 24/7 city? E-mail stlive@sph.com.sg