

# Glamour galore

Slowly but surely, Singapore is moving up the rungs of the world glamour ladder, writes **MELISSA LWEE**

**S**INGAPORE may well have earned its place as one of the most globalised cities in the world, but what is less well known is that it is slowly inching its way up the glamour ladder as well. Last year's Formula One was its first major stab at becoming the Monaco of the East, and when the two integrated resorts come on-stream, the city will up its glamour cred. Meanwhile though, the glitterati set haven't been sitting quietly on the sidelines in their Louboutin heels – over the past decade or so, the number of black-tie events held in Singapore has been growing steadily and shows little sign of slowing down despite the current recession.

While the scale of such society balls has come down a notch or two, the interest has not. Last year saw at least 60 black tie events – mostly charity or luxury product related, compared to roughly half that number just five years ago. The most high-profile ones include the annual SRT Ball thrown in aid of the Singapore Repertory Theatre and the Passion Ball that benefits the Food from the Heart charity organisation that distributes unsold bread to the needy, both of which are now staples in Singapore's social calendars.

"2006 to 2008 were really the boom years for balls," says Gilbert Cheah, managing director of *Singapore Tatler*, a well-known society magazine which Mr Cheah says covered at least 40 such events last year. "We're talking a black tie event every few days and that's not a small number."

The "demand" is two-fold: One, there is a growing number of people who see the value – from the glamour as

## Tight budgets

Unfortunately, the ones that have it the hardest are those who throw charity balls.

"The main challenge with charity balls is that you need to find creative ways to work with extremely tight budgets," explains Ms Lee. "Unlike corporate black-tie events, the organisers of charity balls have a social responsibility to keep costs low and in accordance with government fund-raising laws so as to be able to give more to the cause. We have to work with incredibly tight budgets, yet entertain Singapore's most discerning and sophisticated society set."

Try telling that to Ms Iserlis who has been organising chichi events for the last 10 years. "When I throw a charity ball, I work with the smallest budget possible," she says. "I've been very lucky in that many organisations have been willing to help out with my various events. For my upcoming Passion Ball, Capella Singapore kindly helped out with the location and food and Lufthansa helped with air tickets for the entertainment. If you make an effort to ask around, they will help, even in these tough times."

"But still, when people are paying so much money for a charity ball, on top of doing good, they still want to have fun. Providing them the best entertainment while working on a tight budget is a challenge, no doubt."

But even with all this fanfare and effort, there are those like restaurateur Michel Lu who actively shy away from local balls. Mr Lu, who used to attend black-tie events at least twice a month when he was living in Hong Kong, has lowered the frequency to a mere one or two a year.

"People don't dress up properly in Singapore. Only about 50 per cent of the guests would actually be in black-tie. I like going out in formal wear, but when I see people not respecting the dress code, it puts me off."

He adds that Singapore's black-tie events lack the buzz and glamour that comes with a bigger and more cosmopolitan city like Hong Kong. The latter boasts a stronger celebrity culture.

well as networking angles – of such events; and two, charity and luxury brands which recognise this growing interest and are quick to leverage on it.

The American Express Centurion Gala dinners are a good example. Last year's dinner not only boasted an exclusive guest list of only the creme de la creme of Singapore, organiser Olga Iserlis also managed to bring international designer Elie Saab in to grace the event – branding the credit card in the most glamorous way possible.

Marketing aside, the bulk (roughly 90 per cent) of the black-tie events in Singapore are for charity.

## Fun and purpose

Says Tjin Lee, managing director of public relations and events company Mercury Marketing Communication. "They present society with a channel to give back to the community and have fun doing so. There is more interest and awareness in these events, especially as media coverage of these events has increased."

"Also, we noticed that in the past, where mostly high society guests attended the black-tie balls, there are more PMEBs interested in attending, as they are supportive of charitable causes."

"Philanthropy is still fairly young in Singapore – we need to nurture this culture of charitable giving by creating more events that will generate the publicity and glamour so as to attract individual donors to a good cause."

This explains the success of charity drives such as last year's Singapore Wine Auction Gala Dinner that managed to raise nearly \$800,000 in aid of the Viva Foundation for Children with Cancer.

As Singapore Management University's practice associate professor of marketing Seshan Ramaswami points out: "Singapore lacks celebrities... who can command adulation and following."

Thus on Mr Lu's part, he tried – albeit unsuccessfully – to bring in supermodel Naomi Campbell for his Formula One party at Prive last year. "There are some people like Naomi who just walk in and the entire room lights up," he explains. "I'm definitely going to try and bring her in again this year. An investment has to be made to give Singapore that extra bit of panache."

Which begs the question: What can be done to propel Singapore upwards in the glamour game?

"If you want a quick fix for conversion to a glamorous place, you would have to import the glamour. The F1 race will do some of that. And as the resorts come up, more glamorous events might be hosted in the island," says Dr Ramaswami.

And there are high hopes for the IRs. "A big problem now is that after the balls, all the guests are dressed up but there's nowhere glamorous enough for them to go and party afterwards," says Mr Cheah. "I'm hoping the IRs will rectify that."

Thankfully, the IRs look poised to meet the challenge. Resorts World at Sentosa will boast a huge range of venues like a 6,500 square metre Grand ballroom that will give more event organisers choices for their next glam bash. In turn, Marina Bay Sands aims to add a touch of glamour to high-society events with the biggest ballroom in Asia.

But until then, local organisers will have to raise the glamour stakes. Still, "it will take time for us to reach the same level of glamour and vibrancy that Hong Kong or New York has", says Mr Cintamani. "Compared to neighbouring countries, Singapore is very well positioned in this evolutionary process, so the challenge is to make our black-tie events more unique and better than before."



Having a ball of a time: Guests at a St Regis black and white ball. Simple, elegant sit-down dinners are no longer enough to satisfy the guests at society balls

Sulian Tan-Wijaya, a senior director at Savills who makes it a point to support charities, has similarly noticed that the crowd has evolved. "There are still guests I see from a decade ago, and there are also up and coming younger socialites and businessmen. It's a good mix," she says. "I also noticed that both the men and women are getting more and more fashionable, it's almost like a Hollywood red carpet event."

To which Mr Cheah quips: "We don't have many celebrities here so the only way to provide glamour is to dress each other up." Which gives yet another reason for the raging popularity for these black-tie events. "Before the rise of the society balls, people had no occasions to wear their beautiful clothing," he says. "When *Tatler* first started throwing balls 20 years ago, we did it so that people would have a chance to be photographed in their evening best and this spurred them to buy new clothing as well to wear to the next event. This kept our advertisers happy. This business model has not changed over the years."

However, despite the growing popularity of these balls, the pool of regular ball attendees is at most a modest 400, which leads to one thing: competition. As a result, founder of events company 1 Werks Jeremy Tan points out that he has noticed that many of his clients who throw these balls have been trying to up the ante by making their balls more spectacular. He says: "What used to be a simple, elegant sit-down dinner is no longer enough to satisfy the guests. Sets are now more elaborate and many bring in big international acts."

True enough, Ms Lee's Mercury has created sets from ice palaces to aeroplane runways; Frank Cintamani – founder of lifestyle design and build company, Fide – imported a 24-piece swing ensemble for his St Regis Manhattan black and white ball last New Year's Eve, and Ms Iserlis is bringing in a Cirque Du Soleil act for her upcoming charity Passion Ball in April.



Boost for business: Organiser Olga Iserlis and designer Elie Saab (standing) at the Centurion Gala 2008 (above); and the Singapore Tatler Ball (below)



Boost for charity: Last year's Singapore Wine Auction Gala Dinner managed to raise nearly \$800,000 in aid of Viva Foundation