Big buzz in Little India

Rarely associated with the hip crowd, things are starting to change for Little India. MELISSA LWEE-RAMASY looks at how new businesses are buying into the hawker charms and making it the latest lifestyle hub in Singapore

The building's maintenance manager, Sharmeen Ahmad, who reveals that buildings opposite Mustafa are no longer run-down and filled with "We are bringing in many new things including branded items and stores to attract the younger generation. The new building is nicer and the rooftop restaurant will be an attraction. I think the new wing will help to make Little India more popular with Singaporeans."

Ultimately, however, it is the unchanged character of Little India that has captured the hearts of the various lifestyle operators who have chosen to open shop there.

Hotelier Loh Lik Peng, for one, has been attracted to Little India because it has always been "Little India's ability to blend old-world with new-world says SMU's associate professor of marketing in the School of Retail Management. "It makes it stand out from other enclaves in Singapore, while still being within a short commuting distance of City Centre."

"It makes a nice setting for 'hang-out' type places such as bars, restaurants, spas, tattoo parlours etc, especially for the visiting budget Westerner expert traveller, but also perhaps to the alternative crowd among the young and old in Singapore as a whole," he says.

This old-world and unique charm makes that entire area of greater interest to certain kinds of tourists from the Western world - the young, the backpackers, the ones looking for the rustic feel the path less travelled."

The pure energy of the place, with the vegetable sellers, the trinket seller and the small stalls from the skies, it’s just so vibrant and I know that kind of people that choose to stay at our hotels would appreciate this sort of environment," he adds. Indeed, as founder of Pamplem and Green Pura, Puja Parew points out, "Most of this area is still untouched. Apart from Tekka Mall that is now the Lotus, Little India is all still hawker stalls, the way it has always been."

"Little India should be a cocktail bar for the young and bar-savvy."

There were quite a few who were either reluctant or didn’t know how to find the place," she says. "Now, everyone knows how to find my place and there is a growing appreciation for the area, I feel." It perhaps explains why even the most unlikely of businesses can thrive in Little India today.

Just ask Mr Loih whose French bistro Corotte in Wanderlust is doing roaring trade. "When I first told people that I was going to open a French Bistro at Wanderlust, everyone thought I was nuts," he laughs in recollection. "But Corotte has been doing extremely well and 90 per cent of our customers are Singaporeans."

"For the moment, Little India already has quite a good niche for itself by catering to the more intrepid travellers," concludes Mr Loih. "Parts of it will gentrify and more high-end operations will move in. That’s clear to me. But I can’t see it turning into a Chinatown or Ann Siang Hill. I don’t think that a really mainstream business like Starbucks for instance will ever be a part of Little India."