

S'pore is all the rage, even Down Under

Down Under with Neil Humphreys
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THE phone rang far too early in the morning. Its persistent ringing interrupted a bizarre dream that involved Paris Hilton, a prison cell and England striker Peter Crouch. This is what happens when you work in the media. Daily events haunt your dreams.

No one rings me this early in the morning though. It wasn't even 10am.

I answered the phone in that gruff, early morning voice that is a half decent impression of Jabba the Hutt.

I coughed out the words, "Hello, who is it?", but it could've easily been "haw, haw, haw, he's no Jedi."

"Hello, Neil? Oh, I'm sorry did I wake you?"

"No, I always sound like I'm running a cheese grater up and down my larynx."

"It's Tracy here from Radio Australia and we were wondering if you might do a phone interview."

"Sure. Just let me find my glasses, my voice and my sensibilities and I'm all yours. When's the interview?"

"Oh, take your time. We've got at least 15 minutes."

This is not the first time this has happened.

Last week, the station called to discuss the upcoming Asian Cup. Until very recently, the football tournament had zero interest in Australia. I could've discussed a china cup in my kitchen.

But Australia is now in the Asian Cup and a leading contender and Aussies are happy to discuss tournaments they might win.

"So what are we talking about this week?" I croaked in my best Jabba the Hutt voice.

"Singapore."

You guys are all the rage at the moment. The city-state is popping up in glossy magazines and there's not a stick of chewing gum in sight.

Singapore has gone all George Clooney by appearing on the cover of Time magazine. The Australian edition of Time had the headline "Singapore's New Look: Why the country wants more foreigners."

A new look? I thought the country has always wanted foreigners, but I digress.

"Yeah, Singapore's in the news and you've written three books on the country," the producer said. "And your new omnibus edition, which is available at all Singapore bookstores, actually makes it four books."

She never said the last part, but veracity is critically important in a newspaper column.

"What are some of the experiences or observations you think you could share with our listeners who may not be familiar with Singapore?" She asked.

So I dutifully listed a few ...

Naked landladies, coffee shops for cannibals, Romancing Singapore, making babies for both the nation and that annoying auntie who only visits on Chinese New Year, mad aunties slapping down bus seats with the aggression of a serial killer, Crazy Horse can, Crazy Horse cannot, and taxi drivers who play with my "half balls".

"Er, yeah, okay, right," said the producer, clearly wondering how I was ever given an employment pass never mind a publishing deal. "Shall we just stick to Singapore's attempt to turn Marina Bay into an Asian Venice?"

So that's what we did. Re-reading the Time magazine article again and brushing up on the upcoming developments earmarked for Marina Bay, Sentosa and Orchard Road, I was struck by an obvious truth.

Singapore is really going to nail this sexy city concept. It can't fail. And I don't mean seedy sexy in an "Orchard-Towers - transvestite - hello madam, you're very attractive, but you shouldn't keep your spring roll down there" kind of way.

But in a thoroughly desirable, family destination, complete holiday package kind of way.

You have no idea how many millions of tourist dollars Singapore loses out on every year. I do. I encounter the big spenders every day. They're called Australians and they don't know Singapore. They know a place called "Transit". They pop in for a day or two before heading off to the funky towns of Bangkok and Koh Samui.

An office colleague recently returned from a round-the-world trip. She didn't visit Singapore. But she did pop by "Transit."

"Yeah, Transit was great," she told me. "We shopped."

Singapore knows it can do much better and casinos, museums, amusement parks, theatres, water sports, art exhibitions and alfresco dining is the only way to go.

The notion of a tourist's playground will work because Singapore has an obvious, priceless advantage over every other major metropolis.

It's safe. Eat, drink and be merry. For 24 hours. Safely. Where else can you do that?

I'll be back in a few weeks and fully intend to explore the ongoing changes around Marina Bay, Sentosa and Orchard Road. But not before 10am.

Neil Humphreys' latest book, Complete Notes From Singapore, is now available in stores.