



ain scenery

green gumboots and clutching a fistful of young rice shoots, I wade into a rectangular mud pit and try to mimic the actions of our teacher, who has taken just seconds to thrust dozens of shoots effortlessly into the ground, producing perfectly straight lines, before leaping back on to dry ground.

My efforts are rather more rustic. Great clumps of greenery, in no particular sequence, stand out like the proverbial sore thumb against the teacher's perfect example. They begin listing dangerously just seconds after they've gone into the ground. But it's not nearly as embarrassing as finding, when I am ready to make my excuses and leave the pit, that I am stuck fast in the mud. The deep, dark morass is acting like a suction cuff around my too-big boots.

I am eventually pulled from the quicksand and treated to a drink from a freshly hewn coconut before Twin leads my husband and me to the resort's spa, where a *batukali*, or traditional river stone treatment, is next on the list of activities. Like many blokes, my husband has an aversion to all things spa-related and is expecting to tolerate this through gritted

gardens and offers cooking classes, including a market visit.

Other dining options at Sayan include the Riverside Cafe, a casual poolside diner with wood-burning pizza oven, but the pick is Ayung Terrace, which occupies what must be one of the best dining-room vantage points in the world.

We are staying at the Four Seasons for three nights and figure that will be ample time to check out Ubud, the artists' village that draws travellers from across the world, particularly since Elizabeth Gilbert's book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, described her sessions with Ubud-based healer Ketut Liyer.

We do venture into Ubud a couple of times, once to visit Cafe Lotus, set around an exquisite lotus pond, which my husband chanced on 20 years ago when he took two years off to travel the world, falling in love with Indonesia above all other destinations he visited. We also sample the wares of Ibu Oka warung, much talked about as offering the best suckling pig on the island.

Back at Four Seasons Sayan, we flip through a photo album that Twin has prepared; it sports pictures of our attempts at being rice

## THE INCIDENTAL TOURIST

# There's no stopping the karaoke queens

TINA MORGANELLA

AT a bar in Hong Kong, I nervously clutch my gin and tonic. It is the only thing that is going to save me from passing out. My friend Michelle and I are about to do karaoke for the first time and not just sing in public but to a foreign public. I need every bit of courage I can muster. In fact, it is time for the big guns; it is time for a mojito.

We have shunned Kowloon's mainstream karaoke bars such as Neway and Red Box for a taxi driver's recommendation. Yes 11th is a small, dimly lit place on the 11th floor of an office building in downtown Tsim Sha Tsui.

A big group is having a great time performing harmonies, duets and ballads accompanied by wringing hands and tortured expressions. A girl with bright blue eye shadow tells me that in Hong Kong people work hard and are usually very reserved. Karaoke is their chance to stand out from the crowd.

So this is a true cultural experience I am about to have. Perhaps one more mojito will help.

A guy comes over, introducing himself as James, a stockbroker. He agrees that karaoke is an opportunity to expose your true self and have a shot at the person you really want to be. I find it hard to see the rock star in him; he's dressed in smart slacks, silk shirt and sensible shoes.

"It's a moment of fantasy," he tells me.

"When I sing, I am a star."

James takes the microphone and proceeds to serenade us with an evidently popular Chinese love song. His voice dips and wails, warbles and strains. He screws up his eyes (he doesn't need the lyric prompt) and dramatically whispers the final few

lines. He certainly gives a rock star performance. The bar breaks into applause.

One of the girls in the big group walks over to us smiling and shyly hands over the microphone. This is it. Sing or run. Michelle takes my arm. We scroll the menu and settle on a Shakira number. "I don't think I can do this," I tell her. My voice is wobbly, my throat dry. There is a little encouraging applause, though, and then the music starts.

With tiny voices, Michelle and I start singing. Through my screwed-up eyelids, I see smiling, encouraging faces. People are not covering their ears in distress. We up the volume, swing our hips and finish with our best vocal flourish.

The mojitos have done their job. The whole bar is erupting into cheers and clapping. I can breathe again; perhaps I have discovered the elusive elements that make karaoke strangely intoxicating: infectious smiles and a sense of joyful camaraderie, and a shared, albeit sometimes traumatic, experience. We have stepped out of our ordinary lives and been stars for 3½ minutes.

Certainly there is no other environment where strangers would listen patiently while I wring the life out of *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Heartened, we warble our way through Billy Joel's *Uptown Girl* and even consider trying our hand at a Cantonese number, despite our absolute lack of the language. We don't need more mojitos; we are on a roll, even stealing the microphone from each other for dramatic solos.

Five songs later, the pretty girl who brought us the microphone comes over to take it gently from our hands.

She's smiling and nodding politely, but her grip is firm as she prises it away.

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