

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Anju Cawthra



It is a gorgeous sunny breezy day in Singapore, and Anju Cawthra has just arrived looking resplendent in a fuchsia wrap dress and bearing Chinese New Year treats. While I make us coffees we do away with small talk and launch straight into the importance of eyebrows, choosing the right glasses to frame your face, hair, feeling good on the inside and how delicious Chinese New Year biscuits are with all their melt in the mouth buttery goodness.

Anju has a wonderful disarming openness - which I suspect is the perfect prerequisite for her newly appointed role as Director of the Facebook group, Seasoned Singapore Expat Women. So with buttery biscuits and coffee at hand, we sit down to talk all things living in Singapore.

What started as a six month stint in Singapore has turned into a 14 year residency. And whilst that sounds like a long time, I think it is a common occurrence for expats to arrive thinking they will only be here a short time only to find themselves making the move more permanent. There is a shift that happens once you have lived away for a while and part of what drew me to the role at Seasoned Singapore Expat Women was the community that it created for what I like to think of as the ‘long timer’ expats. To join SSEW you have to have lived in Singapore for a minimum of 3 years - and the reason for that is that once you are established with your feet firmly planted in Singapore, the kind of interactions and support you are looking for is different from those who have only just arrived. So it makes sense to have this community within the community.

My whole first year in Singapore I wore jeans. I had come from living in the UK and that was the look I was used to - jeans, dark tops, scarves (I am all about accessories, so scarves were always a part of my ‘look’) and it took me time to let go of my London style. Now I look back and think “what was I doing??” There definitely comes a point where you let go of your previous life and embrace where you are - but it can take time.

I have witnessed so many changes to the expat experience since moving to Singapore. When I first arrived there was a different pace to the expat life - most families were here on expat packages and not as many women were working (partly because a decade ago expat postings were more often for a predetermined period of time and with the financial packages, fewer women needed to work). As a result the way the expat community supported one another was much more in person - coffee mornings, outings and activities together. Now, there is a growing trend for expats to move here and stay - with a desire to call Singapore home for the foreseeable future. Many more

expat women are interested in finding meaningful work and continuing on their career path, or creating a new one.

Facebook groups like SSEW have now become the new online version of a coffee morning get together. With busier lives, people are looking for advice and guidance on a range of topics and whilst the online experience can never replace meeting up in person, it certainly helps to know you have a community of people ready to support you.



I find it curious that the longer you live somewhere, the less you explore. When you first arrive in a new country you head out to discover your new home - but after a while, we tend to fall into our regular patterns of living - coffee here, a walk with a friend there, dinner here...it’s all lovely and familiar and predictable. But if this past year has

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taught us anything, it is that we really need to explore what is on our doorstep in Singapore because we are not going anywhere else for a while. I recently went to Pasir Ris for a beach clean up day and realised when I arrived, that it had been many years since my last visit to the area. But why? Pasir Ris beach is lovely (and actually quite clean...which meant we had a fairly easy job on the day!) So one of my aims with SSEW is to bring interesting content about what is on in Singapore and get people interested in our little red dot again.

To this end, I recently did a whole week spotlight on Joo Chiat. I visited the shops and businesses in the area and got to know what is on offer in this trendy suburb. Now, if you live in the East, Joo Chiat is obviously well known to you - but, you would be amazed by how many expats living elsewhere on the island haven't been to Joo Chiat for a long time, or in some cases ever! So it has been a popular series of videos on the SSEW site for everyone wishing to see a little of what Joo Chiat has to offer.

My first job in Singapore was working for a charity called i-india that supports street children in India. It was a great introduction to working in Singapore and it

is a charity that is still very close to my heart. Through my work I made some great friendships that are still ongoing today and I am grateful that I had the chance to find work amongst a group of locals and seasoned expats as it has meant my friendship base here hasn't changed every couple of years. Saying goodbye to good friends is surely one of the toughest aspects of living abroad so I am always grateful for these long term friendships which help to keep me feeling grounded here.

My friends jokingly call me a walking ‘Time Out’. There is nothing I love more than heading out to new places, trying new exhibitions, bars or restaurants and I feel so lucky to live in a city that has so much choice.

Sometimes it takes time to let go of the cultural values you grew up with. Both of my parents are Indian and I was born and raised in the UK. My parents aren't particularly conservative but I would say they do have traditional values, so growing up I had a mixture of Indian and British values. It dawned on me recently how the cultural values I have grown up with have informed the decisions I've made in my life - like not ever wearing a bikini until recently! As I grow older I am able to question some

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of these values, take them out and examine them, and decide if they fit who I am. I think this is the same for many of us and living abroad enables the questioning of our cultural beliefs or values in a way that maybe wouldn't happen if we still lived in our home countries.

I often get complimented on my short hair and it has now become my defining style statement.

My mother taught me when I was growing up that a girl's hair was her 'crowning glory'. The expectation was that a girl's hair should be long, luscious and feminine - and mine was - for a very long time. That was until I became a mother for the first time. In those first few months of motherhood I felt that I'd lost a little of 'me' so I decided to tackle this feeling with a haircut. Once I'd taken the plunge with a pixie cut, I was all in for the short hair and I've never looked back. Now when I look in the mirror I see 'me' and love the confidence that brings.

Anju is the Director of Seasoned Singapore Expat Women, a supportive community predominantly run through a closed Facebook group. If you have lived in Singapore for at least 3 years you can join the #wisetribes [here](#). Or follow them on Instagram [here](#).

Anju's Singapore Favourites

SIP... *a Blue cheese martini at IBHQ (yes really!) or my go-to, a Manhattan.*

SEE... *The National Gallery - it really is awe inspiring. As a creative I always love to spend time there.*

EAT... *at Siri House for somewhere funky or Odette for a super special occasion*

DO... *head to the Botanic Gardens for outdoor yoga, evening runs or thinking time with your favourite tree**

STAY... *at the Shangri-La Orchard to tick all the boxes - happy kids, happy life!*