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3,500 S'poreans get a feel of home in San Francisco



Visitors donning virtual reality glasses to explore what Singapore might be like in future. ST PHOTO: MELISSA SIM

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Many travel to US West Coast city for Singapore Day, with key focus on tech

Melissa Sim US Correspondent In Washington

Following the smell of laksa wafting through the air, more than 3,500 Singaporeans homed in on an abandoned warehouse at Pier 70 in San Francisco - the site of this year's Singapore Day.

"This could be somewhere in Singapore. It's quite nostalgic, like going back to a Singapore warehouse in the olden days with rusty pillars and broken windows," said Mr Eugene Chan, a 59-year-old retiree living in Arizona, last Saturday.

He was in San Francisco with his wife, civil servant Ho Mei Fun, 57, while their son Elroy, 25, a software engineer, flew in from Seattle.

Technology was a key focus of this year's event, with many interactive exhibits informing Singaporeans of developments back home. There was even a networking session organised for tech professionals.

Saturday's event was the ninth Singapore Day organised by the Overseas Singaporean Unit to help keep overseas Singaporeans connected to home, and this is the first time it has been held on the West Coast of the United States.

The event, a highlight for many living abroad, has been held in cities ranging from Shanghai and Sydney to London and New York.

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Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said part of the reason the event was held on the West Coast was to "build connections" between Singapore and the vibrant Bay Area and its technology start-ups.

He also launched the Action Community for Entrepreneurship Silicon Valley Chapter, which will help Singapore start-ups ease into the US market by tapping networks such as the Bay Area Tech Singaporeans.

"I hope those who have gained valuable expertise and experience will bring these skills back and play active roles in building a better future for all Singaporeans," he added.

Addressing the crowd, Mr Teo also spoke about the economy, leadership and political succession planning in Singapore, as well as security and terrorism.

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On the last topic, he brought up the new SGSecure movement, which he said would help "keep everyone alert, help everyone stay connected and, in this way, everyone can stay strong".

One of the most popular interactive exhibits allowed guests to immerse themselves in a virtual reality experience to get a glimpse of what Singapore's future might look like.

"It was interesting to see how Singapore developed and the future of the Singapore landscape," said student Ryan Ranjiv Singh, 24, an economics and statistics student at Boston University, who travelled here with friends just for the event.

Another interactive stop was the Singapore Sliders exhibit, where guests could swipe a screen to look at Singapore scenes of today juxtaposed with what they looked like in the past.

"There are always so many changes in Singapore," said Mr John Cockrell, 44, while comparing a photograph of the Singapore River taken in 1975 with one today. He was with his Singaporean wife Joyce.

While some went through the exhibits, others lazed around on the artificial lawn enjoying performances by artists such as Dick Lee, Taufik Batisah and The Sam Willows.

What probably attracted the most attention was Singapore hawker food such as nasi lemak, fried carrot cake and Indian rojak.

Some said there should have been a canopy as they waited in line under the hot sun, while others suggested a separate queue for seniors and the handicapped in the future.

But overall, many praised the "excellent" and "authentic" fare.

Singaporeans also enjoyed being around other Singaporeans and hearing the familiar accent.

Said Mr Arun Prasath, 40, an IT professional who has lived in San Francisco with his family for three years: "It's nice to be with fellow Singaporeans. It's like we are in Singapore."

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