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Looking for a Few Good Men

By Bill Poorman



We're quickly running out of places to sit so we shove more tables together. About 15 of us guys have gathered here in the basement food court at Shaw Centre. It's the regular weekly lunch of the Singapore Overbooked Men's Association aka SOMA. The name is quite a mouthful. More on that in a moment.

The conversation ranges among the usual expat guy stuff: finding out from where people come, best places to eat, best places to buy electronics, sports. As SOMA co-founder Jim Arpin says, "Guys band together and share ideas on issues that guys have."

But there's one key difference: we also talk a lot about how to navigate the rules for working in Singapore, even if it's part-time. You see, we're here on a Dependent Pass, having followed our wives, who are the primary breadwinners. Welcome to the world of the male trailing spouse in Singapore.

SOMA held its first get-together in March of 2014. Like many things in Singapore, SOMA is an import. The group's initial organizer, Arpin, was living in Shanghai when he joined a men's group there for male trailing spouses that had gathered more than 100 members. When his wife's job was relocated to Singapore, he decided to launch a similar group. He knew he'd have company right away. A fellow male trailing spouse from Shanghai, Francisco Marin, had already moved here and became a co-founder. Other Shanghai transferees came soon after. Thanks to those relationships and other networking opportunities – like the ones provided by American Association, CRCE, and the American Club – the group quickly has grown to nearly a score of members.

So far SOMA members have bowled together, visited museums, volunteered, attended happy hours, visited Batam and Bintan in Indonesia and even visited Singapore's water infrastructure out of sheer curiosity. But the core activity remains the group's weekly lunches, which provide the way for people to stay in contact on a regular basis and plan the other excursions. "We didn't want people to wait a month to become involved," says Arpin.

Arpin also explains that despite the connections to the American Association of Singapore and other related groups, SOMA has no formal affiliations with those organizations. Arpin says, "It's not exclusively Americans. It's not by nationality. In fact, Arpin's co-founder Marin is a Mexican national. "We wanted to make it as open as possible" says Arpin. SOMA also doesn't have the usual trappings of a club. There are no fees, no forms to sign and certainly no secret handshake.

But what SOMA lacks in formality, it makes up for in camaraderie and that can be critical for male trailing

spouses. Dr. Yvonne McNulty studies expat life through her consultancy, Expat Research, based here in Singapore. "Everyone needs a place where they belong. Everyone needs a soft landing."

Those resources and formal and informal networks are well developed for female trailing spouses, who have long been a part of the expat experience. But the growth in the number of male trailing spouses is relatively new. McNulty says, over the last decade, women have made up between 16 and 24 percent of the global expat workforce and about half of those were the primary breadwinners. Twenty years ago, only between two and five percent of global expat workforce was women. McNulty says the prevalence of male trailing spouses can vary by city and by industry, but "globalization has broken down a lot of barriers" and "women are more willing, able and interested" today to take on expat assignments.

And that's where SOMA comes in: partially filling that social gap for male trailing spouses and giving them an opportunity to find one another. In fact, Arpin says, the group even connected "two guys who lived in the same building and didn't even know it!"

Now, you've probably been wondering about that name – Singapore Overbooked Men's Association. You're not alone. Many of us have. It's usually the second or third question after, "Where's lunch?" Here's the story: back in Shanghai, Arpin explains, the name for the group there was Guy Tais, a play on the word tai tai, which refers to a wealthy married woman who doesn't have to work. But Arpin felt he needed a name that reflected the diversity of Singapore. In the early days of organizing the group, Arpin says he used the tongue-in-cheek name of "Jim's Great Adventures," but of course that wouldn't "scale." While organizing early activities, he said he was "listening to all of the excuses" that the men joining the group had for why they couldn't make it to a given event: kids schedules, air conditioners to get repaired, etc. He found despite no one having a job, each was thoroughly busy. In fact, they were overbooked, just like the lunchtime gatherings at Shaw. Well, at least until we pull more tables together.

Find SOMA online at:
www.singaporeoverbookedmensassociation.com

Photo by Francisco Marin

Bill Poorman is a first-time expat male trailing spouse having moved to Singapore less than a year ago when his wife transferred here with Caterpillar. And in case you hadn't guessed, he's part of that unruly SOMA crowd.