

# A Pox on Christmas

Suzanne Spinner

'WIN A FAMILY HOLIDAY IN SINGAPORE' the ad said. I was hooked.

*To enter, write a descriptive travel essay of no more than 500 words on your funniest-ever family holiday, either in Australia or overseas.*

*Entries will be judged on originality, writing merit and humorous content.*

And underneath the details of the prize there was the logo of The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, the word SINGAPORE in casually elegant flowing calligraphic script (the Asian influence) and an inky dinky little picture of a Becak driver (or was it a rickshaw?) with a Traveller's Palm beside him (the imagery was alluring I thought, encouraging) all in silhouette and beneath that, the memorable words in neat Western typeface - 'The Most Surprising Tropical Island on Earth.'

I had the holiday, and I thought I had their measure, living as I do in the least surprising tropical city in the world. All they needed was a sense of irony and all I had to do was confine myself to five hundred words, and come next Christmas we'd all jet away for the holiday we should have had last year. . .

## Our Funniest-ever Family Holiday

I started confidently -

*I blame it on the boy who was the Christmas beetle in the end of year school play; no doubt the other 128 passengers on the flight from Darwin to Melbourne on Dec. 22 would blame it on some other child in another school play. Little do they know, but much do they now know, who knew us that jolly Yuletide. Those 47 Aunts and 47 Uncles and 64 cousins, bar one who'd had it before - they all blame it on our Christmas*

*Fairy, Bella Stella for ruining everyone's Christmas by infecting all of theirs with the dreaded POX, Chickenus Vulgaris.*

Will they understand that funny can mean not simply ha ha, but funny peculiar, funny awful?? No, probably not. Funny is funny, and the Singaporeans have never found the excessively gorgeous transvestites on Bugis Street funny, have they? In fact they have systematically removed, or relocated everything that was funny/peculiar, funny/interesting from the entire city. It makes you think twice about a holiday there - doesn't it? But I didn't. . .

I tactfully refrained from mentioning Ansett, the carrier in question so as not to offend -

'SINGAPORE AIRLINES: Affairs to remember', since they were the co-sponsors and unlikely to take kindly to free advertising for someone else.

And will they even get the Asian reference to The Story of Ping? It's set in China, is that politic? At least it's not Malaysia, and I do like Ping.

*If a memorable holiday is one where something truly ghastly happens, as I read in the inflight magazine en route, then this was a memorable holiday and in retrospect it was funny, for us.*

They worship their ancestors, they won't think it's funny if the joke is on your close relatives. . .

*This Victorian holiday is etched in our memories along with the delicate, white, pitted craters that now pock and peck the previously perfect skins of the aforementioned cousins bar the one who'd had it before, and mustn't have picked her's because she hadn't scarred. . .*

They're obsessed with cleanliness, they won't like a story about disease and scab picking, but it's all true except for the bit about the Christmas Beetle - he was actually in a Crepe paper Green Ant Costume, and he only came out of quarantine early so he could be in the damned play!

*Blithely even gaily we stepped into our hired car, because one Melbourne Silvertop with its attendant ballast of LP gas tanks in the boot can't accommodate the four of us, and all our luggage for the 59 changes of season one would be foolish not to expect in Victoria in January, as well as all the X presents for the aforementioned Aunts, Uncles and Cousins including the one who'd had it before, because we didn't know that then, and had bought her a present anyway.*

Surely everyone thinks Melbourne's weather funny. That is a *donne* as Henry James often said, and I didn't go on to make other jokes at the expense of Victoria, which would have been in bad taste and offended all our relatives who still live there and aren't laughing and would have read my winning entry. But funny weather can't be blamed on Joan Kirner or even Jeff Kennett. And I was sure I should keep politics out of it as they do in Singapore, and are trying to in Victoria these days, though somewhat less successfully. . . On the other hand working a flattering aside about Lee Kwan Yew would no doubt help. My father has always been impressed with the economic miracle he has wrought.

*We had thoughtfully arrived a few days early so we could catch up with all the family in the relative intimacy of their own homes before the Big Day, which as we all know is often a trifle tense. The smallest thing, at the best of times, can set people off. . . Little did they know how big the surprise we had en baggage. They had no idea what they were really getting for X, nor had we for that matter.*

Given their adulation, no mystification of the family - are clan gatherings ever tense there? Probably not. . . Well, they always are in our family and multi-culturalism and bi-laterality assumes a plurality of values - surely?

*So on X Eve as we settled down in front of 'Carols by Candlelight' on the fractious black and white portable in Mother-In-Law's beach house, an excited cry escaped from the tiny bathroom. The size of the beach house bathroom may not seem material but it will soon become apparent that it is a relevant fact in this particular summer Holiday.*

Will they think I'm slinging off (now that's a good one - how can I work it in?) at the cramped high rises with the washing on the bamboo poles? Or worse implying that they have the lowest rate of bathrooms per capita?

*Son, Numreo uno, Lorenzo the Magnificent uttered the immortal words:*

*'Come and have a look at these funny spots on Bella!!!' They were indeed funny - pinkish, smallish but definitely thereish and moreish rather than lessish. . . 'What funny little spots?' her father and I carolled at the same time as Julie Antony hit a high C on 'Pear tree', our united voices rising to a feverish pitch, as we both jostled our way in to get a better look at Bella's tummy.*

By now they must catch on to the precise sense in which I mean, 'funny'. as in nurses' parlance for alcohol damaged babies - FLK's. . . I don't suppose footnotes are the go in travel essay comps.

*At Grandma's the following morning, before anything - presents, drinks, kisses even, we shared our joy with the family. Esteemed Aunt No. 1 who happened to be the mother of the only one who'd already had it and so was in a position to know, confirmed the Good News. But we might as well have been door-knocking Evangelists for the X cheer with which the G.News was greeted.*

Do Buddhists door-knock? Is it bad karma to turn anyone away from the family hearth? Probably. . . But they aren't all Buddhists are they? Christian Evangelism is a world wide phenonmena, the Mormons are everywhere. Life in Singapore is based on religious tolerance.

*X day is a day so easily spoiled by almost anything you could care to name, by miniscule things. Such things as these, mere spots might well have been Black Holes in an uncertain universe. For as irrevocably as the Big Dipper dips at Luna Park, we had plunged them all into uncertainty. And this was no mere dip in spirits but a definite downer. We had probably spoilt their holidays, which they were all leaving for, the day after Boxing Day or whenever the car was finally packed.*

I'm uncertain about Stephen Hawking - is it too intellectual and is Luna Park too local? They'd hardly regard it as a tourist attraction. But it is landmark in Victoria, and there aren't

many landmarks there or in Singapore for that matter. And his book was a best seller, so it has presumably been seen if not read by the other travel writers who are judging this. . . and the mixing of metaphors undeniably has a deep ironic structure. . . And I like deep ironic structures, I don't even mind shallow or facile ones. I'm easy to please.

*You can imagine the joy to the assembled small world. It was infectious, the laughter alone was contagious, and was summarily stopped mid-chortle by the anxious Aunts who clearly wished we had been distributing surgical masks instead of gay green plastic Croc water pistols to their offspring. . . Nobody seemed at all concerned about the prospects of our holiday being spoiled. For them our annual X pilgrimage to Victoria had been a mysterious kin ritual, demanded of us, as the price exacted by the venerable and esteemed Grandparents. But a Holiday in Victoria, you must be joking!*

*Why, had they not always departed for beaches and camping grounds north of the Murray within days of our arrival in the South??*

Do they wear surgical masks there for the smog like they do in Japan, and should in Bangkok, but don't? No, no, Premier Lee would have seen to lead-free years ago.

*Had, at that awful moment, there been Aunts and Uncles courageous enough to face the truth, things may have been different. For there were none among them who could truly look into the unmarked faces of their children and not see the spectre of the imminent spots. But there were none stouthearted and self-denying among their number. Nothing but nothing would stop them setting off on that holiday.*

*They all knew it was too late. Too late to put off their holidays, too late for us to have spoiled X Day by not showing up. Hadn't we spoiled it enough already? We had come this far steeped in spots, there was no turning back. The kissing cousins had already spread the contagion before that fateful Eve when the spots showed up. With the sincere but misguided instincts of the real gambler, they would press on regardless and meet on the choked highways of the Hume or the Pacific what fate had in store.*

All Asians who've been colonised by the British love Shakespeare, and there is a certain cadence to it, it builds – it's almost Homeric, and that was about a journey, a trip, a sort of a holiday.

You might be wondering why we come to Victoria for an annual holiday when Bali, even China is closer and the flights undoubtedly cheaper. I'm sure the Aunts and Uncles had always been mystified, but the G-parents knew. The other reason we come is because we live in Darwin, a Tropical Paradise to the fun/sun-seeking Southern holidaymaker, but to us who live there – 'the least surprising tropical town on earth' due to the absolute predictability of its grab bag of tropique terrors during the Cyclone season. But this January we did think of those of you who were up there, while we were having the time of our life down here waiting for the sun to come out. . .

At this point I should clarify something which I'm sure the Singaporeans wouldn't have wanted to know about either, though it does cut both ways. It was as I said Chicken Pox Vulgaris, and not a rare Tropical strain as the Victorian chemists we bought our medical supplies from were quick to tell us. It was everywhere in Australia that summer. This was a great relief to us, as our mothers regard our children as a contagious danger to their cousins at the best of times due to the virulence of the head lice they contend we bring with us every year. My own esteemed Mother is so appalled that when she has our kids overnight, she travels to the next town to buy chemical lotions from dispensers not

personally known to her in brown paper bags, and mid-purchase in a voice louder than is necessary, proclaims to anyone who might by chance be also shopping for unmentionables, that it's for her grandchildren 'who come FROM DARWIN!'

Now obviously the Singaporeans wouldn't have relished a passing reference to the virulence of tropical strains and would not necessarily have been relieved, as I was that this particular shame job, was for once, not a product of the dank and foetid living conditions pertaining in such climes as ours and the Singaporeans. I think I was right not to draw attention to the ordinariness of this Pox. Although again the delicious irony did tempt me.

*Not that the absence of sun, and the presence of rain and howling winds mattered much as we were quarantined in what quickly became more a beachhead than a beachhouse.*

Is it tactful to bring up the War? Then again, Sentosa Island itself has a particularly fetching waxworks assemblage celebrating the Fall of Singapore.

*Inside, ensconced in the teeny tiny bathroom, we swam in perpetual seas of oily green Pinetrasol, lazed on fluffy balls of cotton wool and watched the sky turn from pale Calamine pink to lurid Panadol Red, and in the evening the silvery elixir that promised a phenergan sleep beckoned us all to bed, until the dreamy effects wore off and the perpetual itch roared again, like the Southern Ocean, breaking on the beach we hadn't got onto yet. . .*

Asians adore children. I bet they never drug their children? And if they did they'd waft them off to a spiritually refreshing rest with the merest dab of Tiger Balm on their little burning foreheads.

*Gosh it was fun and the videos weren't that bad, at least not the first three times. But the best and most genuinely itch-distracting activity for all of us was when the phone calls came in - from little windy telephone booths in beachside caravan parks, from bedside handsets in cramped overbooked hotels and even one car phone in the now raging Range Rover. From points dotted strategically along the east coast of Australia, our phone rang hot, as one by one the Enraged Aunts and Uncles reported in. They thought we should be the first to know, that theirs too had come down, and come out spotty all over.*

What a pity it's not being sponsored by Optus or Telecom. . .

*For the sheer joy of it we marked the cousins off on a wall chart that soon resembled the bomb sites of Darwin c. 1942. Intelligence was sought of contagion movement; the colour, size, viscosity, quantity, position and spread of spots along with any other interesting side effects was gleefully elicited by our two, who had followed each other like the moon and a tidal wave. As she subsided, he grew and grew. The sibling competitiveness about who was sickest reached, the pitch of competitors in the Barcelona marathon, but neither was going to drop out of the race.*

Surely they'll like the bombing of Darwin, it's familiar, allies in adversity. On the other hand is it opening old wounds? If Singapore hadn't fallen we wouldn't have been bombed. . .

*In fact Lorenzo was so funny with it, he required hospitalisation but the hospital wouldn't admit him because he was too contagious, and we were sent home for more*

*fun-filled nights until the complications settled down after all the spots had finally appeared. Nonetheless the paediatrician was so excited by the funny presentation he asked us back to Casualty, the following morning, so he could photograph the patient.*

(I suspect he was hoping for a tropical mutant strain and publication himself!)

*The round trip to the hospital was a mere 80 ks and proved to be a delightful sidetrip and a relief from the tedium of the beach, and the scab picking in front of the video, so we returned for the snaps.*

I had to mention the scabs again. . .

*In the end the kids had 'a great holiday', and really, isn't that what matters - because all their usually absent cousins had to come back early. And as the beachouse was the No. 1 Field Hospital, so what the heck, the Resigned Esteemed Aunts and Uncles said, 'Let them play together!!' So the kids had a great time with their infected cousins. But as they sensitively, added 'It wasn't so great for Mum and Dad'. Funny, yes the funniest holiday in a long while, but not so great.*

Surely my maternal homily and the cuteness of the kids comment will appeal?

*Now, Singapore, all four of us. . . That does sound like fun. But I can't help wondering, how many passengers are there on your average Singapore Airlines Jumbo flight ex Darwin who haven't had measles? Only joking! Ours have been vaccinated against it - have yours?*

They wont think I'm joking - will they? It's the sort of thing an airline with a reputation to uphold, and pre-eminent position in the Pacific Rim market, would rather not think about; even as a joke it's in bad taste. But by now, what the heck? ,

I didn't win. It must have too long. So our family of four did not sample the surprising delights and sights of a Bumboat cruise or Mass Rapid Transfers this Christmas!

## Win a family holiday in Singapore

Affairs to Remember  
SINGAPORE AIRLINES HOLIDAYS



IN conjunction with Singapore Airlines Asian Affairs Holidays and the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, *The Weekend Australian* is offering readers a chance to win an exciting family holiday in Singapore.

The prize is valued at approximately \$4000 and consists of return economy-class airfares for two adults and two children under the age of 12 to Singapore from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Darwin or Perth. Also included are five nights' family room accommodation at the luxury Westin Stamford Hotel, airport transfers, mass rapid transit tourist tickets, ferry pass and family admission ticket to the island of Sentosa, and admission to a choice of three Singapore attractions (Zoological Gardens, Jurong Bird Park, Guinness World of Records, Singapore Science Centre, Singapore River "bumboat" cruise or Empress Place Museum).

To enter, write a descriptive travel essay of no more than 500 words on your funniest-ever family holiday, either in Australia or overseas. Entries will be judged on originality, writing merit and humorous content. Please type or print clearly and attach your essay to the form below.

### ENTRY FORM

Name SUZANNE SPUNNER

Address 1. MC KINLAY ST,  
FANNIE BAY,  
DARWIN, NT 0820

Daytime telephone number 089-812755

Send to: Singapore Family Holiday, The Weekend Australian, PO Box 170, Strawberry Hills, NSW 2013

Entries close on April 30, 1993. The winning entry will be published in full in *The Weekend Review*, May 22-23, 1993.

Travel is to be undertaken by two adults and two children travelling together and must be completed by November 21, 1993. Winners are responsible for their own transport to and from the nearest Singapore Airlines departure port within Australia. The prize is not transferable or redeemable for cash. The decision of the judges is final and no correspondence will be entered into. Entry is open to all Australian residents except employees and their families of News Limited, Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, Singapore Airlines and associated advertising and public relations agencies. Entries will not be returned.

*Singapore*   
The most surprising tropical island on Earth