

Sightsee and feast...on a bus



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Last Saturday afternoon, married couple Roy Tan, 47, and Lim Geok Lian, 44, had a meal of Samsui ginger chicken and dim sum on board a double-decker bus as it cruised past famous Singapore sights.

Along with 18 Singaporeans and tourists, they were the first passengers on the Singapore Gourmetbus, the new concept by home-grown tour company Duck & Hippo.

Ms Lim, a teacher, says: "For tourists, it's a brief introduction to Singapore, while for locals, it's a new experience."

This is one bus where eating is not only permitted, but also the main draw.

Passengers hop on at 1 or 7.30pm for a two-hour ride, during which a three-course Asian feast, prepared by F&B establishments Soup Restaurant and IndoChine Group, is served. The bus runs daily except for Sundays.

The three-course lunch (\$57++) by Soup Restaurant consists of its signature Samsui Ginger Chicken and a selection of dim sum, while dinner (\$97++) by IndoChine comes with five dishes.

The prices of Duck & Hippo's hop-on and hop-off City Sightseeing starts at \$43.

The public can book the lunch service via www.gourmetbus.com.sg and the dinner service will be available for booking from next Friday.

The tour launched last Friday. Ms Zener Teo, Duck & Hippo's assistant director for communications, says the 34-seater is half filled on average during lunch.

The bus - which has Wi-Fi access, microphones and a projector screen on each table - is available for private and corporate charters, which start at \$1,688. There have been two dinner charters and two more scheduled for this month.

Later this year, two new menus - Singapore Brunch and Peranakan High Tea - will be introduced.

No cooking is done on the bus. The meals are prepared at Soup Restaurant and IndoChine outlets in Suntec City. A warming oven on the bus keeps the food heated between 70 and 75 deg C.

Moving at 40 to 45kmh, the purpose-built bus meanders through the Civic District and Chinatown, passing landmarks such as National Gallery Singapore and Merlion Park.

Some may think dining on a moving vehicle could be an accident waiting to happen, but Ms Teo says Duck & Hippo has done extensive feasibility studies.

"On each table are non-slip placemats and customised glass-holders to ensure the cutlery doesn't fly off," she says.

Food is served only when the bus is stationary - before it moves off from the bus bay and during a mid-journey stop at Gardens by the Bay. If there are any accidents with the food, a change of clothes is available.

Singaporean Leong Yeu Hun, 56, who was with his wife, says he enjoyed the tour and would go again.

"I usually drive past these sights, but this time, I'm a passenger with a better view and there's good food. What's not to like?"

Some passengers had suggestions to improve the experience.

Canadian Paul Sinclair, 50, who took the ride with his wife last Saturday, did not know what he was looking at and wished there was an audio guide.

"This is my first time in Singapore and I was hoping to learn about the sights besides eating on the bus," he says.

Ms Teo says the bus has started running guided commentary on the sights since Tuesday.

Passengers now have to pay separately for drinks, which Singaporean Lau Chang Siong, 43, feels should be part of the package.

Customers can buy a \$13 drinks package that includes free flow of soft drinks, juices and water, or order from an a la carte drinks list (prices start at \$4). Alcoholic drinks are not available as the company has yet to get an alcohol licence.

Mr Lau, an assistant general manager, says: "It'd be better if they include free flow of drinks."

Ms Teo says: "By not bundling the drinks with food, we are giving guests the freedom to choose what they want to drink, or not at all."

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