



Naked Guns

When the sun goes down and the bright lights of the city signal nightfall, Singapore's gay community comes out to play. **Duarte G Lim** immerses himself in the hot, steamy cabins of Singapore's gay saunas.

PHOTOS **mervin chua**



While Singapore postures as a bastion of conservative values, it's well known that a staggeringly high percentage of our male population is gay.

Maybe it's that we're too close to our mothers growing up, or that encouraged to shower en masse with other men during National Service (NS), many of us just took it to the next logical level. But like it or not, next time you're in a bar, bus or the gym, chances are, one of us is standing next to you. And, the life of a gay boy in Singapore is much like Quentin Tarantino's deconstruction of Madonna's song, *Like A Virgin*. It's basically all about "dick."

The average gay boy in Singapore gets more sex in a week than most straight men will get in a lifetime. Ask any gay boy you know. Ask him how often he gets action and watch him squirm as he mentally tries desperately to slash the number down to something this side of tartdom as he mentally re-enacts the multitude of lascivious scenes from the night, week and month before. You see, gay men enjoy sex, we rejoice in sex and we like to have sex as often, and with as many attractive people, as possible. Can't relate? Ask any straight man what his dream sexual scenario is. He will doubtlessly say life on some fantasy island full of beautiful women that want to have sex with him, no strings attached. Now substitute "beautiful women" with hot guys and your "fantasy island" quickly becomes the Lion City.

Back when I was in NS and active in the local gay scene, I was a regular member of several Internet Relay Chat rooms for gay boys, as well as a frequent participant at gay activist forums. Somehow my immediate group of friends always got news of orgies happening around town. It was explained to me that being young, buff and "fresh", we were in demand. Some of us would go eagerly, others were more reticent. Of the latter persuasion, I was secretly thrilled at the stories of the action at these events. Moreover, I thought to myself, "how nice it must be to let yourself go, be secure in who you are and celebrate your sexual desires". Eventually, curiosity got the better of me and I was persuaded to come along en masse to an upcoming orgy, with the more experienced members promising to provide safety in numbers. "If you don't want to join in, it's ok... it's just like watching porn!"

The venue was a home along Spottiswoode Park Road, and when we got there, it was like a large house party with the lights down and lots of candles around the place. The scent of incense-cones hung thickly in the air, rose petals were strewn on the floor and quiet jazz played in the background. It felt like a very laid-

back chill out evening. Across the sofas and chairs and on to the polished parquet floor were sprawled the arms and legs of dozens of men and boys. Most knew one another as evident from the energy and postures. Certain groups huddled in threes or fours to share stories and gossip; other twosomes sat very close talking seriously into each other's ears; others mingled restlessly from one pod to another, hugging and kissing. Every few minutes or so, a different guy would come by our group and start chatting us up. Was it our first time at one of these parties? Were we comfortable? Did we know what to do?

I caught the eye of one beautiful young blonde man that looked my way and I felt the nervous flutter of butterflies in my stomach. Then, almost imperceptibly, the mood started to change. People around us started hugging closer and kissing. My best friend whispered the obvious in my ear: "I think the fun's about to start".

Like a wave that came crashing down, the fun began. As Johnny Hartman sang *They Say It's Wonderful*, guys around us began to lose items of clothing. Poppers were provided, as were condoms and packets of lubricant in bowls around the place. I tried to count the number of people in the house, but the lights were down and almost everyone looked the same naked. Plus, it wasn't easy counting when limbs were sticking out at impossible angles.

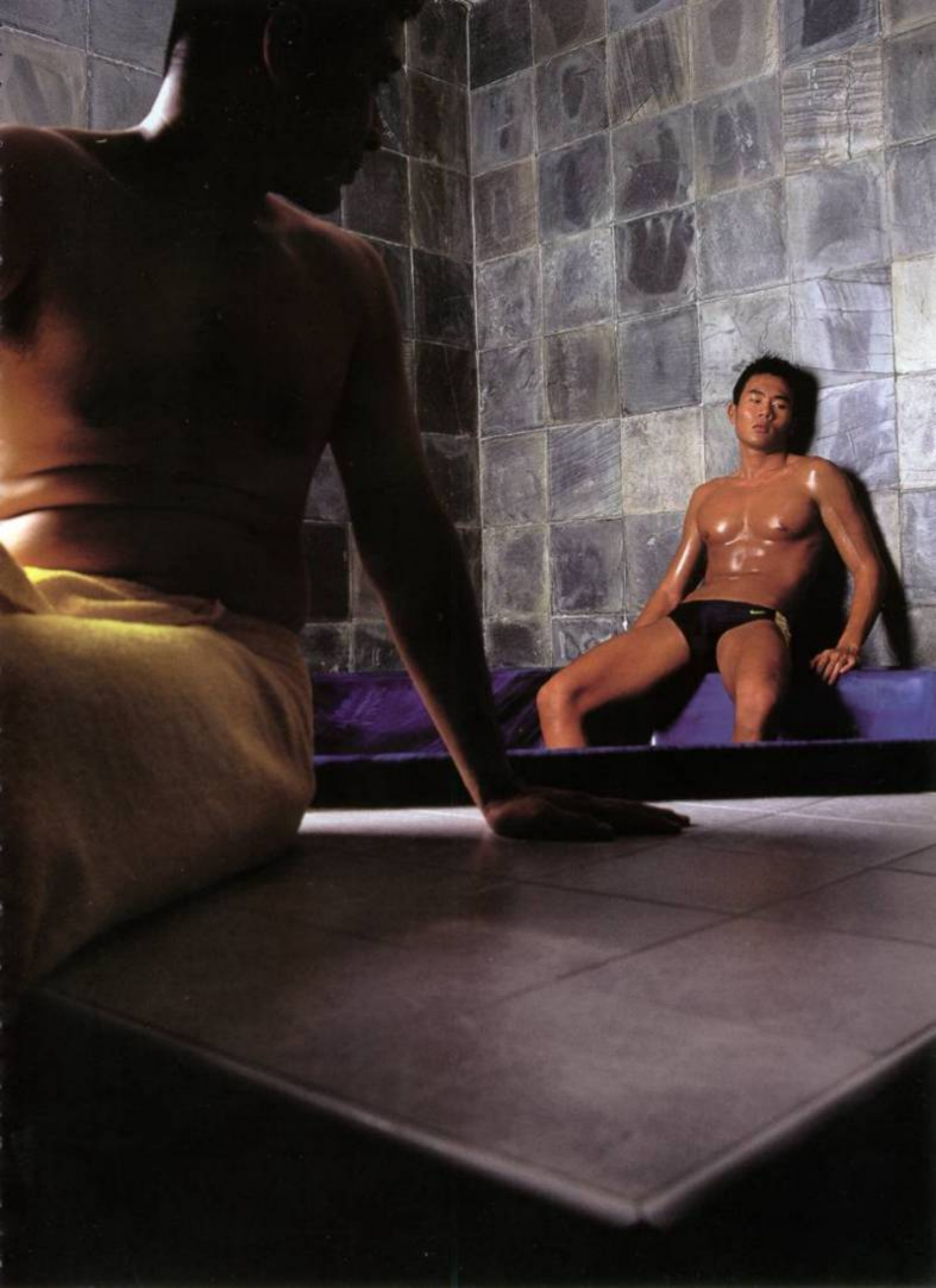
Suddenly everyone was having sex. I turned to find my friends had abandoned me and made my way over a prominent local plastic surgeon being filled in at both ends by two buff commandos. Suddenly feeling claustrophobic, I made my way into the garden. There too held a surprise—a young local TV actor was on his hands and knees, a rough looking goateed man in his forties kneeling behind him. Just then, someone appeared in front of me: the lovely blonde boy who I shared a look with. I stammered at a loss for words—he was even more stunning naked and tumescent before me. He threw me a cherubic smile and slid to his knees. From that point, the evening was one beautiful blur.

We left variously in the small hours of the morning, the host shaking our hands and graciously thanking us for coming. He expressed the wish that perhaps we might join in next time. As I left, I felt somehow liberated. I felt, for the first time, that I'd been truly comfortable in my own skin. Over the next few years in NS, I attended more of these orgies, both individually and with groups of friends. Locations ranged from a penthouse in Four Seasons Park to a chalet on Sentosa. Who would have guessed?

PART DEUX

After several years abroad, I returned to Singapore wondering how the scene had developed. I was to be surprised in several ways. For one thing, the old IRC cruising scene of the late Nineties was almost gone. Back in its heyday in '97 and '98, #GAM (that's Gay Asian Male) had some 250 people in it. Now there are barely 100 people at peak hours. Also, the private gay orgies still went on, but only at a fraction of the frequency of before.

The outdoor cruising grounds at Fort Road and Ann Siang Hill (nicknamed "The Hill of Ill-Repute") were much quieter, as were the indoor ones such as Raffles City (nicknamed "Headquarters") and the Heeren (where HMV was said to stand for Homosexuals Meeting Venue). So where were all the gay boys? I would soon discover that they had found more "above the ground" venues to play at. It seemed that in the New Economy, men were flaunting the fact that they were gay. There are now four club gay nights a week where the rooms are packed and the crowds brazenly gay. Most curiously, for me, was a new phenomenon—the gay saunas. At last count, there were five such exclusively gay saunas in Singapore. Perhaps the first was Spartacus, opened in 1997, located in a shophouse painted a garish purple and yellow, with a sign on the front door that read, "Entry by the Rear".





IT GOES BACK A LONG WAY

To understand the social significance of the gay sauna, you have to regard their history. The exclusively gay American bathhouses and sex clubs started in New York and San Francisco in the 1950s onwards, and were oases of homosexual camaraderie and places where it was safe to be gay. There was an unspoken rule that you never discussed what happened inside the sauna, outside the sauna. Patrons felt that they were more protected from blackmail and harm than elsewhere, plus these places offered a much safer alternative to sex in public parks. Their popularity took a nosedive with the emergence of AIDS in the early 1980s, and few tears were shed when they were eventually closed in the mid-1980s by the authorities.

When asked what the point of these saunas was, Sasha, the owner of one such establishment, replied quite candidly that they were the envy of straight men because they were about sex with “no peacock dancing, no courtship”. Most clients were there for carnal reasons, but there were those who came to socialise, unwind and relax in an exclusively gay environment. Most would be surprised to hear that Sasha’s sauna has some 9,000 members, but Sasha merely smiles and says, “we’ve not reached out to the whole gay population yet.”

Patrons of these places tend to be those who can afford the membership fee and entry charges, so that rules out anyone below a certain age. To reduce competition, the saunas market themselves differently, targeting diverse crowds. Discount entry is one way of attracting specific patrons—one offers it for men under 24, others for students and national servicemen; yet another prohibits entry to those over 30 on weekdays.

There are those who will cry that this is unfair discrimination, but Sasha explains that, “it is not the place of a private business to enforce public morality”, and that the first duty of a business is to its shareholders and that survival is their biggest concern at the moment. Other owners echoed his view—“if we don’t get the young cute and hunky ones, no one’s going to come to play with the uncles.”

One outfit nestled near the Central Business District, bills itself as “Singapore’s first cruise club”. Another holds regular games and competitions for its customers, including a “Biggest Cock” competition, just like the bathhouses of San Francisco in the early 1980s. Theme nights are also popular. One such is “Skimpy Saturday”, where the dress code is “Briefs, boxers, g-strings, jock-straps, fundoshi, swimwear, mini-sarongs, loincloths... anything skimpy!” Not surprisingly, nudist nights are highly popular at several establishments – one place describes it as “all nude, all floors, all night”.

A tour around one of these saunas proved interesting. Upon entry, there is a counter where one is sized up and if considered acceptable, one is allowed to enter through a door that leads into the ground floor changing room. Some places permit mingling of dressed and undressed patrons, but the rule here is that patrons are to leave their clothes in lockers and change into towels before proceeding anywhere else.

Candles and aromatherapy oil burners were everywhere. “We’re a classy place,” admits Sasha. Apparently not all the other places have these amenities. A glass door at the back leads to an open-air smoking terrace with plants and a small fountain, with a hot Jacuzzi (hidden for privacy) bubbling next to the terrace.

Up the stairs on the first floor is a lounge where patrons do their socialising/cruising. On the same level is a steam room, “cleaned every two or three hours”. The showers on the second floor (not partitioned into cubicles) are not for the shy. Soap boys are available at \$5 for a good soaping or a scrub. The most curious feature, though, is the Dark Room, with black curtains at the entrance and is, as the name suggests, entirely devoid of light inside, “for those who like a bit of a grope in the dark”. On the same floor I found the alluring Privacy Cabins, lovingly appointed with a single mattress on the floor and a wall-mounted lubricant dispenser and tissue holder. Sasha notices the bemused expression on my face and explains that while patrons are allowed to have sex anywhere in the sauna, they tend to prefer the intimacy of the cabins. “There are those who will have sex in other places, but it’s not often and they tend to be the kinkier or more exhibitionistic ones.”

While these places tend to be open all night on weekends, they usually close before midnight on weekdays, and Sasha tells me that visitors from abroad who come to his sauna are often surprised at the early closing times. The reason for this, Sasha explains, is that here, the evening meal is usually eaten between 6pm and 8pm, leaving the slot from 8pm to 11pm free time for most. This is when saunas do the best business.

Most patrons stay for a few hours. One customer gets action at least three times before leaving, in order to get his money’s worth. But what kind of people came to these saunas and how easy was it to get picked up? There was only one way to find out and after disrobing and making myself comfortable in a towel, I sat on a bench and waited.

Suffice to say, I was apprehensive as I’d been away from the scene for so long. But about 10 minutes later, an attractive couple of men came in. They were Dutch and I soon learned that they came to Singapore often for business. Both were well-built with defined shoulders and flat stomachs. Soon one of them asked me if I wanted to make my way upstairs with them. I smiled broadly and nodded, reminding myself, as I felt that same nervous flutter in my stomach I’d experienced so many years ago at my first orgy, that this was just like riding a bicycle. []