

'Lucky accident' led him to find home here

SICC CEO Victor Mills loves Singapore for its friendliness, egalitarianism, and good race relations

By Chin Yong Chang
ycchin@sph.com.sg

Singapore

ARRIVING in Singapore 33 years ago by what he calls a stroke of luck, one of the most profound things that Singapore International Chamber of Commerce CEO Victor Mills noticed was the country's egalitarianism and friendliness.

Whether it's Singapore's good race relations, or the unifying ability of its local food culture, the self-confessed lover of mangosteen and chicken rice (his wife is Hainanese) told *The Business Times* in an interview that he has "loved every minute" of living here for these reasons and more.

Before being posted to Singapore by the international bank he worked for in 1985, Mr Mills was first sent to Hong Kong for three years. Contrasting the two places, he said: "In those days in Hong Kong, it was the tail end of the colonial era. If you were Caucasian, you were treated like the last 'great white hope' or were completely ignored. There was no middle ground. That was the colonial dynamic then.

"By contrast, Singapore in 1985 was a very egalitarian place with no



fake deference so that was very refreshing. Secondly, here was a country that preached good race relations, and by and large, had them, which was a step up from the situation in Britain and in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 80s."

When asked about his decision to settle down in Singapore, Mr Mills said: "Within three days of arriving here, I noticed the woman - born and bred in Singapore - who was to become my wife. Within six months, we were engaged. And within another six months, we were married."

Mr Mills completed his one-year Singapore posting in 1986, and left

for Brunei for four years with his wife. But when he was asked to go to Abu Dhabi after that - when the first Gulf War was still ongoing - he declined. Instead, he decided to stay on in Singapore.

He joined a boutique American bank, called Republic National Bank of New York. The bank was acquired by HSBC eight and a half years later, which saw Mr Mills becoming an employee of the bank, firmly basing himself here where he has been since.

He joined the SICC in 2013 as COO before becoming its CEO less than a year after that. He became a naturalised Singaporean citizen in 2012.

Singapore is also unique, says Mr Mills, because there are a number of factors which unify its people, one of them being its food culture. BT FILE PHOTO

Mr Mills says: "This is a very special country and many of my fellow Singaporeans don't realise that because they don't have as many points of comparisons as I do, and that's often the case with naturalised citizens.

"The obvious one, for me, is how it is a multiracial and multireligious society. This was not by accident. Comparing it to my place of birth - Northern Ireland - which was much more fraught, this puts Singapore in a very special context for me."

Singapore is also unique, he says, because there are a number of factors which unify its people, one of them being its food culture. "Food is also one of the great levellers here. The hawker centre is one of the places where even the most high flying executives . . . will have their favourite duck rice stall or mee pok stall, and is prepared to sit down and dine next to a crowd of people with whom he or she may not normally socialise with."

Describing Singapore as a "beacon of hope in a world that has quite frankly gone mad", he says Singapore needs to sustain what it has built in an economic sense, and also sustain its values of openness and egalitarianism if it is to survive and thrive in future.