



# Singapore

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## *cultural note*

singapore remains a booming center of capitalism in Southeast Asia. It is considered very safe (even antiseptic), but visitors should be warned that Singapore's myriad laws apply to natives and foreigners equally. Before arrival, travelers should become familiar with these laws, e.g., no littering, no chewing gum, no illegal drugs, no pornographic materials, no weapons, no jaywalking, no spitting, no smoking in most public places. And be sure to flush a public toilet after you use it; the fine for not doing so is \$150.

## Country Background

### History

A crossroads of trade for centuries, Singapore was annexed by the British in 1819. British rule was to last some 120 years, and gave the island British legal traditions and the English language. During World War 11, the Japanese occupied Singapore from 1942 to 1945. After the war Singapore became a British Crown Colony, but the power of the British Empire was fading.

Singapore's first election was held in 1959. The People's Action Party (PAP) took the election and has remained in power ever since. The first prime minister was Cambridge-educated Lee Kuan Yew. Singapore experienced tremendous development under Lee and the PAP.

Singapore joined the Malayan Federation in 1963, but it seceded just two years later. Since 1965 it has been a separate, sovereign nation and a member of the British Commonwealth.

Many did not believe that Singapore could survive as an independent country. The tiny island had no natural resources aside from its harbor, and no way to defend itself against populous and often aggressive neighbors. Realizing that Singapore's people were its greatest national asset, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's government embarked upon social engineering on a grand scale. The people would be educated, and capitalism would be encouraged. Old traditions were suppressed, and Singapore was turned into a true meritocracy.

No aspect of life was considered beyond the reach of the government. The "3S Plan" of Social Responsibility, Social Attitude, and Skill became an official credo. Citizens were constantly reminded of the threat from Singapore's populous neighbors, and internal dissent was silenced. Tiny Singapore built up defense forces with the most up-to-date technology in the world. However, opponents of the government were sometimes jailed

without trial, and overly critical foreign journalists were deported, and any publication that employed such a journalist was liable to be banned from sale in Singapore.

## Type of Government

The Republic of Singapore is a parliamentary democracy that has been ruled by one party since the nation achieved independence from Malaysia in 1965. The government exhorts its people to accept stringent limitations on freedom in return for peace and prosperity. These limitations often make Singapore more attractive from a business standpoint. (For example, Singapore's citizens have a high rate of savings, since participation in the Central Provident Fund—a pension program—is mandatory for all citizens.)

The leaders of Singapore are fond of saying that their island's only resources are the wit, industry, and inventiveness of the Singaporean people. They have successfully turned a developing nation into a center of capitalism.

Singapore has a unicameral 87-seat parliament. The prime minister is the head of government. The chief of state is the president.

## Language

Singapore has four official languages: Malay, Tamil, Chinese, and English. To unify Singapore's three fractious ethnic groups—the Chinese, Malays, and Indians—English (native to none of these groups) became the language of instruction, business, and government. (This process has not ended; to unify the diverse Chinese populations, only Mandarin Chinese movies may be shown—despite the fact that most Singaporean Chinese speak Cantonese, not Mandarin.)

## Religion

Most of the indigenous Malay are Muslim, but not all Muslims are Malay. The Muslims account for over 15 percent of the population. Similarly, Christianity is adhered to by several different ethnic groups (totaling almost 13 percent). Those Singaporeans who trace their roots to the Indian subcontinent come from many different ethnic groups; they may be Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Zoroastrian, Sikh, or adherents of yet another religion. The majority Chinese may profess to follow Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, none of these, or several of the above simultaneously. Wisely, Singapore has no official religion.

## Demographics

Almost 2,800,000 people live in this tiny nation. As a prosperous trading center, Singapore attracted many races. The indigenous Malay now constitute only 15 percent of Singapore's citizenry. Numerous ethnic groups from the Indian subcontinent call Singapore home; together they make up 7 percent of the population of Singapore. Europeans were attracted to Singapore, especially when it was a British colony. But Europeans now constitute less than 1 percent of Singapore's population. The vast majority (76 percent) of Singaporeans are Chinese.

## Cultural Orientation

### Cognitive Styles: How Singaporeans Organize and Process Information

In Singapore we find a culture closed to all but select information. Singaporeans' basic education teaches them to think associatively, but higher education brings in conceptual

and analytical thinking. They have strong loyalties to nation, companies, and groups, but particular relationships are more important than personal values.

### Negotiation Strategies: What Singaporeans Accept as Evidence

Immediate feelings have a strong influence on the truth. This is usually biased by faith in the ideologies of nationalism, and supplemented by the accumulation of objective facts.

### Value Systems: The Basis for Behavior

The strong Malay and Indian subcultures have different value systems from those of the Chinese. The following three sections identify the Value Systems in the predominant culture—their methods of dividing right from wrong, good from evil, and so forth.

#### Locus of Decision Making

Individuals must work within the consensus of the group and forgo personal triumphs. The person with the highest ethos in the group (usually the oldest member) is the de facto leader. One must not lose face or cause another to lose face, so Singaporeans would rather use polite vagaries than say an outright "no." There is a very strong authoritative structure that demands impartiality and obedience. One must build a relationship with the participants of a group before one can conduct business.

#### Sources of Anxiety Reduction

The family is the most important unit of social organization. Political power, wealth, and education are the criteria for social status. There is a very strong work ethic in which emotional restraint is prized and aggressive behavior is frowned upon. Although this is a multiracial society with strong national identity, the social structure continues to change, and this leads to uncertainty. Multiracial housing has fostered feelings of insecurity, not community.

#### Issues of Equality/Inequality

Businesses are more competitive and ethnocentric than in the United States. Emphasis is on competence, merit, and team play. Performance, progress, excellence, and achievement are highly prized for the group. There is an inherent trust in people of the same ethnic group, with a strong feeling of interdependency among members of a group or business. There is some evidence of ethnic bias among the dominant Chinese against the Malays and the Indians. There are clearly differentiated sex roles in society, but Western style equality is creeping in. Men still dominate in all public situations.

## Business Practices

### Appointments



#### *punctuality*

- It is important to be on time for all business appointments. Making a Singaporean executive wait is insulting and impolite.

### *cultural note*

in Singapore, social events can involve different rules for different cultural groups. In general, when invited to a social event, most Singaporeans arrive on time or slightly late. Traditionalists are concerned that arriving on time to a dinner may make them appear greedy and impatient.

Once a close friendship has been established, guests may arrive a few minutes early to a social occasion. If you are the host and your guests are close friends, it is important to be ready early.

- Try to schedule appointments at least two weeks in advance. Executives are quite busy and travel frequently-especially to conferences in their area of specialization.
- English is the language of most business transactions and virtually all business or government correspondence in Singapore. However, the English spoken often has native inflections, syntax, and grammar, which can easily lead to misunderstandings.
- Business hours are generally 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., Monday through Friday. However, many offices stagger their work hours, with workers arriving any time from 7:30 A.M. to 9:30 A.M. Some offices will be open for a half day on Saturdays, generally in the morning.
- The traditional lunchtime was from 12:00 noon to 2:00 P.M. Efforts have been made to reduce this to a single hour, from 1:00 to 2:00 P.M.; nevertheless, many people will take longer than an hour for lunch. Friday is the Muslim holy day, and Muslims who work on Fridays will take a two-hour break at lunchtime.
- Remember that Singapore is a meritocracy. Few people get ahead, either in business or in government, without hard work and long hours. Executives will often work far longer days than their subordinates.



### Negotiating

- The pace of business negotiations in Singapore is much slower than that in the United States. Be patient.
- It would be unusual to complete a complicated business deal in only one trip to Singapore. Expect to take several trips over a period of months.
- Since politeness demands that a Singaporean not disagree openly, the word "no" is rarely heard. A polite but evasive "yes" is simply a technique to avoid giving offense. In Singapore, "yes" can mean anything from "I agree" to "maybe" to "I hope you can tell from my lack of enthusiasm that I really mean 'no'."
- A clear way to indicate "no" is to suck in air through the teeth. This sound always indicates a problem, no matter what words are said.
- Evading is indicative of a "no," even if the person has said neither "yes" nor "no." The person may even pretend that the question was never asked.
- Remember that a Singaporean must like and be comfortable with you personally in order to do business. This relationship does not extend to your company. If your company replaces you with another executive, the new executive will have to forge this relationship anew (unless the new executive is a blood relative of yours).
- Politeness is the single most important attribute for successful relationships in Singapore. This politeness in no way hinders the determination of Singaporean business people to get their own way.

### *cultural note*

standards of polite behavior vary widely between cultures. Many Singaporeans will ask you highly personal questions (such as "Why aren't you married?" or "How much do you earn?") without realizing that Westerners find such questions intrusive. Simply smile and explain that such topics are not discussed openly in your culture and be aware that you, too, will unknowingly violate local standards of polite behavior.

- People in Singapore may smile or laugh in situations that Westerners consider inappropriate. Smiles may hide embarrassment, shyness, bitterness, discord, and/or loss of face. Singaporean businessmen may laugh at the most serious part of a business meeting; this may be an expression of anxiety<sup>4</sup> not frivolity.
- In Singapore, one who expresses anger in public has shamefully lost face. A person who loses his or her temper is considered unable to control himself or herself. Such a person will not be trusted or respected.
- It is considered polite among Singaporean Chinese to offer both the positive and negative options in virtually every decision. Even when speaking in English, they are likely to add a "yes/no" pattern to a question. Rather than asking "Would you like to have dinner?" they are likely to ask "You want dinner or not?" The phrases involved ("want or not want?" "good or not?" "can or cannot?") are direct translations of Chinese phrases into English. They often sound unduly aggressive to Western ears.
- Be cautious in asking Singaporean Chinese a question. English speakers would give a negative answer to the question "Isn't my order ready yet?" by responding "no" (meaning, "No, it's not ready"). The Chinese pattern is the opposite: "yes" (meaning, "Yes, it is not ready").
- Age and seniority are highly respected. If you are part of a delegation, line up in such a way that the most important persons will be introduced first. If you are introducing two people, state the name of the most important person first (e.g., "President Smith, this is Engineer Wong").
- Speak in quiet, gentle tones. Always remain calm. Leave plenty of time for someone to respond to a statement you make; people in Singapore do not jump on the end of someone else's sentences. Politeness demands that they leave a respectful pause (as long as ten to fifteen seconds) before responding. Westerners often assume that they have agreement and resume talking before a Singaporean has a chance to respond.
- Business cards should be printed (preferably embossed) in English. Since ethnic Chinese constitute the majority of Singaporeans (and an even higher percentage of business people), it is a good idea to have the reverse side of your card translated into Chinese (gold ink is the most prestigious color for Chinese characters).
- The exchange of business cards is a formal ceremony in Singapore. After introductions are made, the visiting business person should offer his or her card. Make sure you give a card to each person present. With both hands on your card, present it to the recipient with the print facing him or her, so that he or she can read it. The recipient will receive the card with both hands, then study it for a few moments before carefully putting it away in a pocket. You should do the same when a card is presented to you. Never put a card in your back pocket, where many men carry their wallets. Do not write on someone's business card.
- Topics to avoid in conversation include any criticism of Singaporean ways, religion, bureaucracy, or politics. Also avoid any discussion of sex.

- Good topics for discussion include tourism, travel, plans for the future, organizational success (talking about personal success is considered impolite boasting), and food (while remaining complimentary to the local cuisine).



## Business Entertaining

- Take advantage of any invitations to social events. Establishing a successful business relationship hinges on establishing a social relationship as well.
- Food is vitally important in Singapore culture. Social occasions always involve food. Indeed, the standard Chinese greeting literally means "Have you eaten?"
- Respond to written invitations in writing. Among the Chinese, white and blue are colors associated with sadness; do not print invitations on paper of these colors. Red or pink paper is a good choice for invitations.
- Generally, spouses may be invited to dinners but not to lunch. However, no business will be discussed at an event where spouses are present.
- Singapore's anticorruption laws are so strict that government officials may be prohibited from attending social events.

## Time

- Singapore is eight hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (G.M.T. + 8), making it thirteen hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Standard Time (E.S.T. + 13).

## Protocol



## Greetings

- Singapore has three major ethnic groups, each with its own traditions: Chinese, Malay, and Indian.
- With younger or foreign-educated Singaporeans, a handshake is the most common form of greeting. The standard Asian handshake is more of a handclasp; it is rather limp and lasts for some ten or twelve seconds. (By contrast, most North American handshakes last for only three or four seconds.) Often, both hands will be used.
- In Singapore, Westernized women may shake hands with both men and women. Singaporean men usually wait for a woman to offer her hand. It is perfectly acceptable for a woman to simply nod upon an introduction rather than offer her hand. Women should offer their hands only upon greetings; too-frequent handshaking is easily misinterpreted as an amorous advance. (Among themselves, men tend to shake hands on both greeting and departure.)
- Among Singaporean Chinese, the traditional greeting was a bow. However, most now shake hands or combine a bow with a handshake. Chinese men are likely to be comfortable shaking hands with a woman-more so than other ethnic groups of Singapore.
- Singaporean Malay are generally Muslim. Traditionally, there is no physical contact between Muslim men and women. Indeed, if a religious Muslim male is touched by a woman, he must ritually cleanse himself before he prays again. Because of this, women should not offer to shake hands with Malay men nor should men offer to

shake hands with Malay women. Of course, if a Westernized Malay offers to shake hands, do so.

- The traditional Malay greeting is called the salaam, which is akin to a handshake without the grip. Both parties stretch out one or both hands, touch each other's hand(s) lightly, then bring their hand(s) back to rest over their heart. This greeting is done only between people of the same sex. However, if cloth such as a scarf or shawl prevents actual skin-to-skin contact, then Malay men and women may engage in the salaam.
- Many, but not all, Singaporean Indians are Hindu. They avoid public contact between men and women, although not as vehemently as most Muslims. Men may shake hands with men, and women with women, but only Westernized Hindus will shake hands with the opposite sex.
- The traditional Indian greeting involves a slight bow with the palms of the hands together (as if praying). This greeting, called the *namaste*, will generally be used only by older, traditional Hindus. However, it is also an acceptable alternative to a handshake when a Western businesswoman greets an Indian man.



### Titles / Forms of Address

- Most people you meet should be addressed with a title and their name. If a person does not have a professional title (President, Engineer, Doctor), simply use Mr. or Madam, Mrs., or Miss, plus their name.
- Each of the three major ethnic groups in Singapore has different naming patterns.
- Chinese names generally consist of a family name followed by two (sometimes one) personal names. In the name Chang Wu Jiang, Chang is the surname (or clan name). He would be addressed with his title plus Chang (Mr. Chang, Dr. Chang).
- Chinese wives do not generally take their husband's surnames, but instead maintain their maiden names. Although Westerners commonly address a married woman as Mrs. plus her husband's family name, it is more appropriate to call her Madam plus her maiden family name. For example, Li Chu Chin (female) is married to Chang Wu Jiang (male). Westerners would probably call her Mrs. Chang. She is properly addressed as Madam Li.
- Thankfully, many Chinese adopt an English first name so that English speakers can have a familiar-sounding name to identify them by. Thus, Chang Wu Jiang may call himself Mr. Wally Chang. Others use their initials (Mr. W J. Chang).
- If many Chinese seem to have similar clan names, it is because there are only about 400 different surnames in China. However, when these surnames are transcribed into English, there are several possible variations. For example, Wong, Wang, and Huang are all English versions of the same Chinese clan name.
- Malays do not have family names. Each Muslim is known by a given name plus *bin* (son of) plus their father's name. For example, Osman bin Ali is "Osman, son of Ali." He would properly be called Mr. Osman, not Mr. Ali-Mr. Ali would be Osman's father.
- A Malay woman is known by her given name plus *binti* (daughter of) plus her father's name. For example, Khadijah binti Fauzi is "Khadijah, daughter of Fauzi." She would be known as Miss Khadijah or, if married, Mrs. Khadijah. For business purposes, some Malay women attach their husband's name. Thus, if Khadijah was

married to Osman, she might choose to be known as Mrs. Khadijah Osman. Note that in English, *binti* may also be spelled *binte*.

- Some Westernized Malays drop the *bin* or *bind* from their name.
- Indians in Singapore may follow several different traditions. While they did not traditionally have surnames, some have now adopted a family name that all members of their family use, generation after generation.
- Traditional Indians have no family surname. An Indian male will use the initial of his father's name first, followed by his own personal name. For example, V. Thiruselvan is "Thiruselvan, son of 'V.'" For legal purposes, both names would be written out with an "s/o" (for "son of") between the names: Thiruselvan s/o Vijay. In either case, he would be known as Mr. Thiruselvan. However, long Indian names are often shortened. He may prefer to be called either Mr. Thiru or Mr. Selvan.
- Indian female names follow the same pattern: father's initial plus personal name. When written fully out, "d/o" ("daughter of") is used instead of "s/o." When an Indian woman marries, she usually ceases to use her father's initial; instead, she follows her personal name with her husband's name. For instance, when S. Kamala (female) marries V Thiru (male), she will go by Mrs. Kamala Thiru.
- With so many complexities, it is best to ask a Singaporean what you should call him or her. Repeat it to make sure you have it correct. Be forward in explaining what they should call you (they may be equally unsure as to which is your surname), but choose the same degree of formality. Don't tell a Singaporean to "just call me Bob" when you are calling him Dr. Gupta.



## Gestures

- Aside from handshakes, there is no public contact between the sexes in Singapore. Do not kiss or hug a person of the opposite sex in public—even if you are husband and wife. On the other hand, contact is permitted between people of the same sex. Men may hold hands with men or even walk with their arms around each other; this is interpreted as nothing except friendship.
- Among both Muslims and Hindus, the left hand is considered unclean. Eat with your right hand only. Do not touch anything or anyone with your left hand if you can use your right hand instead. Accept gifts and hold cash in the right hand. (Obviously, when both hands are needed, use them both.)
- The foot is also considered unclean. Do not move anything with your feet, and do not touch anything with your feet.
- Do not show the soles of your feet or shoes. This restriction determines how one sits: You can cross your legs at the knee, but you cannot sit with one ankle on the other knee. Also, do not prop your feet up on anything not intended for feet, such as a desk.
- It is impolite to point at anyone with the forefinger. Malays use a forefinger only to point at animals. Even pointing with two fingers is impolite among many Indians. When you must indicate something or someone, use the entire right hand (palm out). You can also point with your right thumb, as long as all four fingers are curled down. (Make sure all your fingers are curled - older Malays would interpret a fist with the thumb and little finger extended as an insult.)

- Pounding one fist into the palm of your other hand is another obscene Malay gesture to be avoided.
- The head is considered the seat of the soul by many Indians and Malays. Never touch someone's head, not even to pat the hair of a child.
- Among Indians, a side-to-side toss of one's head indicates agreement, although Westerners may interpret it as a nod meaning "no." Watch carefully; the Indian head toss is not quite the same as the Western negative nod (which leads with the jaw).
- As in much of the world, to beckon someone, you hold your hand out, palm downward, and make a scooping motion with the fingers. Beckoning someone with the palm up and wagging one finger, as in the United States, can be construed as an insult.
- Standing tall with your hands on your hips-the "arms akimbo" position-is always interpreted as an angry, aggressive posture.
- The comfortable standing distance between two people in Singapore varies with the culture. In general, stand as far apart as you would if you were about to shake hands (about 2 to 3 feet). Indians tend to stand a bit further apart (3 or 3 1/2 feet).



## Gifts

- Singapore prides itself on being the most corruption-free state in Asia. Consequently, it has strict laws against bribery. Government employees may not accept any gift at all.
- Gifts are given between friends. Do not give a gift to anyone before you have established a personal relationship with that person. Otherwise, the gift may have the appearance of a bribe.
- It is not the custom to unwrap a gift in the presence of the giver. To do so would suggest that the recipient is greedy and impatient. Worse, if the gift is somehow inappropriate or disappointing, loss of face would result. Expect the recipient to thank you briefly, then put the still-wrapped gift aside until you have left.
- The Chinese traditionally decline a gift three times before accepting; this prevents them from appearing greedy. Continue to insist; once they accept the gift, say that you are pleased that they have done so.
- Gifts of food are always appreciated by Chinese, but avoid bringing food gifts with you to a dinner or party unless it has been agreed upon beforehand. To bring food may imply that your host cannot provide enough. Instead, send food as a thank-you gift afterwards. Candy or fruit baskets are good choices.

### *cultural note*

the Chinese associate all of the following with funerals--do not give them as gifts:

- Straw sandals
- Clocks
- A stork or crane (although the Western association of storks with births is known to many young Chinese)
- Handkerchiefs (often given at funerals; they symbolize sadness and weeping)
- Gifts or wrapping paper where the predominant color is white, black, or blue

Also avoid any gifts of knives, scissors, or cutting tools; to the Chinese, they suggest the severing of a friendship.

Although the Chinese only brought flowers to the sick or to funerals, Western advertising has popularized flowers as gifts. Make sure you give an even number of flowers; an odd number would be very unlucky.

- At Chinese New Year, it is customary to give a gift of money in a red envelope to children and to the nongovernmental service personnel you deal with on a regular basis. This gift is called a *hong bao*. Give only new bills in even numbers and even amounts. Many employers give each employee a hong bao equivalent to one month's salary.
- Since pork and alcohol are prohibited to observing Muslims, do not give them as gifts to Malays. Other foods make good gifts, although meat products must be *halal* (the Muslim equivalent of kosher). The prohibition against pork and alcohol also precludes pigskin products and perfumes containing alcohol.
- Malays consider dogs unclean. Do not give toy dogs or gifts that picture dogs.
- Among Indians, the frangipani flower (used by Hawaiians to make leis) is used only for funeral wreaths.
- Should you give money to an Indian, make sure it is an odd number (just the opposite of Chinese tradition). Usually this is done by adding a single dollar; for example, give \$11 instead of \$10.
- Observant Hindus do not eat beef or use cattle products. This eliminates most leather products as gifts.



## Dress

- Singapore is only some 85 miles (136.8 km) north of the Equator. It is hot and humid all year long, with a temperature range of 75 to 88°F (24 to 31°C), and humidity above 90 percent.
- The rainy season is November through January, but sudden showers occur all year long. Many people carry an umbrella every day.
- Because of the heat and humidity, business dress in Singapore is often casual. Standard formal office wear for men is dark trousers, light-colored long-sleeved shirt, and tie, without a jacket. Many businessmen wear a short-sleeved shirt with no tie.
- Businesswomen wear a light-colored long-sleeved blouse and a skirt. Stockings and business suits are reserved for more formal offices. Fashions for businesswomen tend to be more frilly and decorative than those worn by U.S. businesswomen.
- As a foreigner, you should dress more conservatively until you are sure what degree of formality is expected. Men should expect to wear a suit jacket and tie, and remove them if it seems appropriate. Whatever you wear, try to stay clean and well-groomed; bathe several times a day if necessary.
- Many Singaporean men wear an open-necked batik shirt to work. These are also popular for casual wear. Jeans are good for casual wear, but shorts should be avoided.
- In deference to Muslim and Hindu sensibilities, women should always wear blouses that cover at least their upper arms. Skirts should be knee length or longer.