



SINGAPORE

By Anne Dean, Editorial Director, *Living Abroad LLC*

The distinction between Singapore and Singapore City has virtually disappeared, as almost the entire island has become urbanized," according to the Columbia Encyclopedia, sixth edition, 2004. Dean describes the relocation atmosphere of this tiny island nation located off the tip of the Malaysian peninsula.

Singapore, which lies less than a 100 miles north of the equator, is home to three major cultures. Of its more than three million inhabitants, 78 percent are Chinese, 14 percent are Malay, and 7 percent are Indian. Foreign nationals and expatriates make up the remaining 1 percent of the population.

The British, led by Sir Stamford Raffles, staked their claim on this strategically placed island in 1819, and they are partly responsible for turning Singapore into the thriving free port it is today. However, many changes have occurred on this island since the end of British colonial rule. Along with Raffles, the most significant figure in defining Singapore's present-day status is former Prime Minister Harry Lee Kuan Yew. During his 31-year rule, Yew built the business and industrial infrastructure that characterizes Singapore's modern, thriving economy. In addition, Singapore became a self-governing state and independent republic, and a member of the United Nations in 1965.

Singapore has four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. While Malay is the national language, English is the language most commonly spoken. It is used widely in the business arena and is taught in schools. Most Singaporeans in the corporate sector speak fair to excellent English; taxi drivers and some shopkeepers speak an unofficial dialect known as "singlish," which is a mixture of English and Mandarin Chinese words and grammatical structures.

In addition, most Singaporeans (46 percent) are fluent in two or more languages, so foreign nationals should not have a difficulty communicating in Singapore.

Being so close to the equator, Singapore has an extremely humid climate and is hot all year. In the beginning of an assignment, the weather can be tiring, so undue exertion should be avoided during outdoor activities. Ample hydration and sunscreen is advised for any length of time in the sun.

Due to its proximity to the equator, Singapore has an average daytime temperature of about 31 degrees Celsius (88 degrees Fahrenheit), and an average nighttime temperature of approximately 23 degrees Celsius (73 degrees Fahrenheit). There are moderate fluctuations in temperature due to prevailing sea breezes, yet there is almost no seasonal variation in Singapore. Rain falls throughout the year, but it is heaviest from November to January. During those months, Singapore experiences monsoons coming from the northeast.

The Culture

The population in Singapore is a mix of ethnic Chinese, Malay, Indian, and small groups of other ethnicities. While these groups have retained most of their traditional customs and culture, they also take pride in a distinct identity as Singaporeans. Singaporeans are known world-wide as one of the major societies in which people of different races and creeds can live and work together in harmony.

Singaporeans as a rule are very conservative, and they generally do not show emotion in public. As an old Chinese rule, individualism is frowned on. An individual must concede to authority as well as to the good of the collective group. However, status is quite important in all aspects of Singaporean life. Singapore has very strict laws regarding public behavior, littering and jaywalking.

Singaporeans comprise a rich and diverse religious background. Approximately 86 percent of the population is affiliated with some religious faith in one capacity or another. The major religions are Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Taoism, while various other religions, such as Judaism and the Sikh, are practiced by religious minorities in Singapore.

Doing Business

Singapore's business arena is known globally as a model of efficiency. The Singaporeans have been compared to the Swiss in their ability to take an area lacking in natural resources and develop it into a hub of business and trade. Singapore's standard of living is among the highest in Asia, and its leaders hold up Switzerland as a role model. Despite rising business costs, international companies continue to set up and run their regional businesses there because of Singapore's efficient financial network, excellent telecommunications, stable government and strong economy. One should not be misled by the very Western appearance of Singapore, as many things are still done in the Asian way. A majority of Singapore's business people are ethnically Chinese; therefore, a distinctly Chinese paradigm pervades. For instance, being polite and staying calm is critical to face-saving situations and will benefit an assignee more than loss of patience or overreacting.

Confrontation is taboo in Singapore, as in much of Asia. When giving instructions, one must be aware that the other person may nod or act as if he or she understands when the opposite may be the case. In general, Singaporeans may not speak up or ask questions as easily as their Western counterparts.

Handshakes are the universal greeting in the business arena, but do not be surprised if a Singaporean woman chooses not to offer her hand. In addition, firm handshakes are not given as much importance among the Asians. Often, they will exchange business cards with both hands. The important thing to remember, however, is that the writing should always be facing the recipient, and not whether the card is handed to that person with one or two hands.

While Westerners pride themselves on their punctuality, Singaporeans do not like to appear too eager. The assignee always should be punctual, however, as that will make a good impression on the host of the meeting.

Dress

In such a cosmopolitan and multicultural city, diversity is the operative word when it comes to styles of dress. Wearing outfits common to any of the four main cultural groups is acceptable almost any time of the day, anywhere, and for whatever occasion. However, as the weather in Singapore is warm and humid most of the time, light summer clothes

(especially natural fibers) are recommended. "Smart casual" is the operative phrase, which means collared shirts (long- or short-sleeved, but not T-shirts), trousers (not jeans) and shoes (not athletic shoes) are acceptable. "Smart casual" is acceptable everywhere except for formal business dining or when specified in an invitation. For women, comfortable blouses and skirts, or slacks, are appropriate. As in any country, modest and conservative dress for business is always well thought of.

Social Customs

Greetings in Singapore vary, depending on the age and nationality of the people involved. Most people do shake hands, but women who are close friends also may hold hands. A slight bow, along with a handshake, is appropriate when meeting an older Chinese person. Giving a slight bow when entering or leaving a room is a sign of courtesy and respect.

The most commonly used titles before a last name are "Mr." and "Mrs." "Ms." is normally used only in business dealings. When meeting a Chinese person, Singaporeans will voice their family name first, then their middle name, and lastly, their given name. For example, a woman named Chan Yuen Mimi is known as "Mrs. Chan." However, Malaysian names have a different set-up. They include their father's name after their own. For example, a Malay man named Hassan Ahmed will be known as "Mr. Hassan." Indians do not use surnames, but instead, they add the initial of their father's name in front of their given name.

Public Transportation

Due to its small size and the compactness of its center, Singapore is an easily navigable city. It also has a fairly inexpensive, extensive, and reliable public transportation system, partly because cars are not very affordable for most Singaporeans. The Singapore metro system, called the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), is one of the most efficient ways to travel within the city. The authorities uphold rigorous standards of cleanliness and comfort (including air-conditioned platforms) for the entire system. With more than 40 stations linking the city center and outlying suburbs, the two main lines run north-south and east-west through the city; there are MRT stops at many business locations.

Taxis are plentiful, although they must, by law, be hailed at taxi ranks or more than 50 meters away from a traffic light. All taxis are electronically metered, generally comfortable, and drivers usually are civilized. Most speak at least a little English. Booking a taxi in advance by telephone is also possible, but you will pay an additional fee.

Airport Information

Changi International Airport is at the far eastern end of the island, approximately 20 kilometers (12 miles) from the city center. Unfortunately, the MRT does not run to Changi. But you will find that taxi cabs readily can take you to and from the airport. Taxi queues from the airport are easy to find, orderly, and move quickly. Bus service No. 36 runs regular transport between the airport and Orchard Road (the hub of the retail shopping area).

Health Care

Care and treatment of the highest standard are readily available in Singapore with its modern health system. Government and private hospitals provide comprehensive preventative and curative health care services, with a full range of inpatient and outpatient services, 24-hour accident and emergency services, and ambulance and paramedic services.

An assignee does not need to be vaccinated against any disease before entering Singapore. However, the government strongly recommends that long-term residents of Singapore be vaccinated against hepatitis B.

Singapore is one of Asia's healthiest countries, and its tap water is safe to drink. It meets World Health Organization standards. Bottled water also is readily available.

Dining

Singapore has a worldwide reputation for being clean, and everything from its water to food from its street vendors must meet stringent standards. Hotels and restaurants are regularly checked by the health authorities. Smoking is prohibited in all air-conditioned restaurants in Singapore.

Afternoon tea, generally taken around 4:00 p.m., is a popular daily break for Singaporeans of all ages. Due to the natives' love for dining out, the city's wide variety of restaurants generally stays open until 11:00 p.m. or midnight. Some food courts and hawker centers may stay open as late as 4:00 a.m.

Local Cuisine

Singapore often is referred to as "Asia's food capital." The diverse mixture of cultures in Singapore lends itself to a great variety of regional and ethnic specialties. In addition, the high population of foreign nationals living in Singapore and a relatively high standard of living make Singapore a center of diverse haute cuisine.

Visitors may find eateries devoted to Mediterranean, French, and nouvelle Asian cuisine, as well as a veritable smorgasbord of Indian, Malay, and Chinese variations. Ingredients such as lemongrass and coconut milk season many dishes, including fresh seafood from the waters that surround the island nation. The unofficial "national dish" of Singapore is *satay*, or skewers of spicy beef or chicken served with peanut sauce. Also popular is *nasi lemak*, or rice cooked with coconut milk and mixed with a variety of other sweet or savory ingredients. Hawker centers, scattered throughout the city, offer a wide variety of food at fairly low prices. Chinese, Malay, and Indian dishes are sold from a variety of stalls that are joined together under a single roof and surround eating areas. Some favorite hawker centers in the city area include Bugis Street, Lau Pa Sat and Maxwell Road Market.

A 10 percent service charge is added to bills in fine restaurants; otherwise, tipping is generally not practiced and may even be actively discouraged.

Entertainment and Shopping

Stores in Singapore are open Monday to Saturday, from 10:30 a.m. to 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. Shops in the bigger shopping malls as well as some smaller boutiques also are open on Sundays. Most post offices are open Monday to Friday, from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Saturday, from 8:30 a.m. to noon.

Singapore has been labeled a "shopper's paradise;" valuables such as antiques, jewelry, and woven silk are retailed at low prices. If an expat is looking for reputable antique dealers, they will be found in the Tanglin Shopping Center, and they welcome anyone to browse through their shops. If one is looking for great prices for fabric, Malaysian and Indonesian silks are sold primarily along Arab Street. In addition, Singapore is known as a hub of electronics retailing; cutting-edge technology is found side-by-side with reasonable prices at retail shops along Orchard and Scotts Roads.

The city's ethnic enclaves offer visitors a glimpse of "traditional" Singapore, as well as preserving its diverse cultural heritage. In the eastern part of the city, Arab Street remains a living showcase of Singapore's Muslim roots. Food is sold at traditional roadside stalls, and shoppers may bargain for woven batiks and handicrafts at small shops. Since its completion in 1928, the Sultan Mosque has been one of Singapore's architectural highlights.

Chinatown, situated in the southern part of the city, has been renovated recently on a large scale. However, colorful temples as well as displays of artwork and merchandise for sale (outside stores) still add to Chinatown's flavor. In addition, Chinatown houses a number of renowned, upscale eateries, bars, discos, and other spots that attract a thriving nightlife. Singaporeans are avid cinema-goers; consequently, cinemas and cineplexes are plentiful. There also are film festivals, such as the annual Singapore International Film Festival, which are organized by groups like The Alliance Française, the British Council, and the Goethe Institute. On alternate years the National Arts Council organizes the Singapore Arts Festival and the Asian Festival of Performing Arts.

Security

Singapore credits much of its financial success and high standard of living to a variety of laws that may seem unusual or autocratic to foreigners. Some regulations are worth noting. Jaywalking is punishable by a substantial fine, as are spitting, littering, and the importation of chewing gum. Drug trafficking can be punishable by death. In addition, the country is a non-smoker's paradise; not only is smoking prohibited inside all air-conditioned buildings, but minors are not allowed to buy cigarettes. Singapore enjoys an almost non-existent crime rate; its citizens appreciate a standard of security nearly unparalleled worldwide.

Road conditions in Singapore are very good. Traffic may build during peak hours, particularly if construction is in progress. Motorcyclists pose a slight hazard, since they often ignore lane markings. Note that traffic laws are punishable by means similar to other offenses in Singapore, and they may carry criminal penalties. Public transportation and taxis are abundant, inexpensive and safe.

Passports and Visas

Since visa requirements are subject to change, all individuals should check the most current requirements. All individuals are advised to consult the proper embassy or consulate, or immigration lawyer before traveling abroad.

All foreign nationals need passports to enter Singapore. Foreign nationals of the United States staying in Singapore a maximum of 30 days do not need a visa.

When all is said and done, you need to understand that if you want to send an assignee to Singapore, you need to remember that Singapore has replaced its exotic opium dens and pearl divers for concrete and glass office buildings, and, its sweltering rickshaw image for 21st century technology. If that is what your expatriate or business traveler will expect, then they will certainly enjoy the experience.

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