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Singapore:
Welcome To Utopia



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Singapore: Welcome To Utopia

By **Leon Wilfran**

Singapore is a diamond in otherwise rough Southeast Asia... and a place that will always hold a special place in my heart.

I first came here in 2016, freshly graduated and hoping to find more opportunities than Europe offered at the time. Considering my options around the world, Singapore seemed like the ideal place for me. It is located in the fastest-growing region in the world, is developed, and English is its official language.

Life here has a feeling of tranquility and city buzz wrapped into one. Locals are friendly, and everyone has an overly positive demeanor, which is a far cry from Europe and especially my native Slovenia. The people are proud of their country, its success over the decades, its leadership in innovation, technology, and the coexistence of different ethnicities. The locals often remind me of adult children because of this super-optimistic outlook... and I wonder how they would fare in more hostile situations elsewhere in the world.

Indeed, it felt at first like I landed in utopia, and, to this day, life in Singapore is the closest I have ever been to experiencing one. Everything works, the city is safe, and you're surrounded by a mix of technology and nature at all times.

Some expats compare Singapore to Disneyland because it does feel so artificial at times... Not as much as Dubai, for example, but still... The city has no rhythm... no heartbeat like other cities I have been to. It just is.

Even the news here focuses only on positive stories. While in the West we're all about the shock value, turn on Channel News Asia once in a while—it's like a therapy session, you just start feeling good about life.

[Continued on page 9](#)



Nevertheless, Singapore serves its purpose: It is great for doing business and a regional hub for many industries... But keep in mind that this is primarily a “working city,” most of its residents are here for a job unless they’ve grown up here. To live-here full time, for me, lacks excitement.

Luckily, it makes a great base for travel, so when you need a dose of reality, you can jet to Malaysia, Thailand, Bali, Vietnam, China, India, Australia... you name it. From Singapore, all of Southeast Asia and the Pacific is wide open to you.

Or the tranquility might be just what you’re looking for... you’ll have to come visit for yourself to know if this unique atmosphere and lifestyle would suit you long term.

From Temasek To Singa Pura—How Asia’s “Lion City” Came To Be

Long before Singapore was called the Garden City, as it is today, this patch of land was known as Temasek. According to legend, a Sumatran prince landed here and thought he saw a lion (singa in Malay), thus he named his discovery Singa Pura, the Temple of the Lion. (As it turned out, there are no lions in Singapore, and what he saw was likely a Malayan Tiger.)

The founding of modern Singapore began in 1819 with the arrival of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, a Lieutenant Governor of a nearby British colony, who came looking for potential strategic ports in the Strait of Malacca. A British port on the island would rival the Dutch dominance of the area and secure a vital trade route between China and British India.



Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, a British statesman, Lieutenant-Governor of British Java, and Governor-General of Bencoolen

At the time, the Dutch commanded the Sultan of Johor who nominally ruled the island of Singapore and would thus never allow the British to build a port. Fortunately for the Brits, he had an exiled older brother, Tengku Long, challenging his rule.

Raffles found Tengku, offered to smuggle him back to Singapore, recognize him as the rightful Sultan of Johor, and provide him with a yearly payment if he would allow the British to establish a trading post on the island. Tengku agreed to the treaty and later proceeded to sign another one, giving the British control of the whole island. After that, trade flourished, and the population grew from a few thousand to over 80,000 by the 1860s.

During World War II, the Imperial Japanese Army invaded and took control of Singapore, despite the large British naval base on the island. They did this with relative ease, as the British couldn’t afford to relocate any troops to Singapore, busy as they were fighting the Germans back home.

Winston Churchill called this the worst disaster in British military history. The Japanese renamed the city Syonan-to, meaning “Light of the South,” and held it until the end of the war.

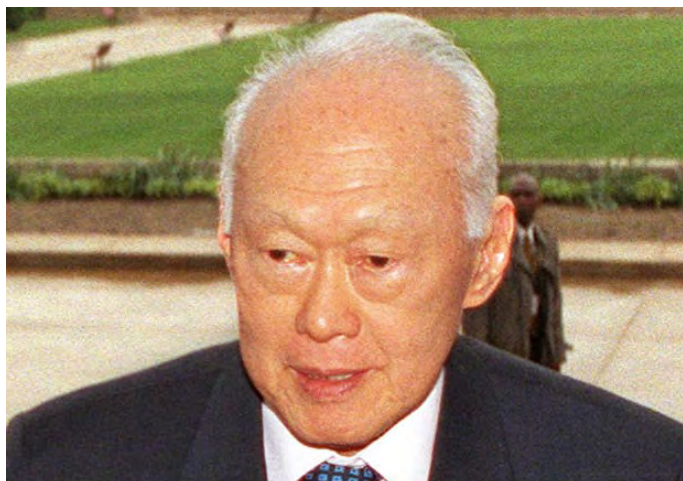
After the Japanese surrender, Singapore once again became a part of Great Britain. Failure to defend the island during the war, however, ignited nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments among the native population, which led to Singapore gradually gaining more autonomy.

In 1956, the country became fully self-governed in all matters but defense and foreign affairs, and three years later it held the first independent general elections, won decisively by the People’s Action Party (PAP) and its famous leader, Lee Kuan Yew.

At this point, Singapore was still a Third-World country struggling with the lack of natural resources and slow economic development. In hopes of improving the situation, the people voted to become part of Malaysia in 1962, but the alliance was short-lived due to political differences, and Singapore broke off again in 1965.

After the 1965 independence, things started to improve. Lee Kuan Yew and his government focused on policies supporting rapid economic growth and business entrepreneurship. In the 80s, the unemployment rate

dropped to 3% and GDP growth averaged at around 8% until 1999. Singapore effectively transformed from developing nation to First World in a single generation.



Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of modern Singapore

Lee Kuan Yew served as prime minister for 31 years, until 1990. Afterwards, he served 21 additional years as the senior minister and the minister mentor. He is widely recognized as the most important figure of modern Singapore.

Politics And Punishments

Singapore is a parliamentary republic and part of the Commonwealth of Nations. The role of the president is mainly ceremonial, so the executive power resides with the Cabinet of Singapore and the prime minister at its head. The parliament, which serves as the legislative branch, has been dominated by the People's Action Party in every single election. Astonishingly, in its 59-year history, Singapore only had three prime ministers. More to the point, the current one is Lee Kuan Yew's son.

Transparency International consistently ranks Singapore as one of the least corrupt countries in the world, and I attribute this to its meritocracy wage model for government employees. Top positions pay only about 30% less than top corporate jobs, which attract competent people and, more importantly, discourage employees to seek additional revenue by taking bribes. The prime minister, for example, earns S\$2.2 million per year and is by far the highest-paid politician in the world. (At the time of this writing, one Singapore dollar is worth about 75 U.S. cents.)

English common law is the basis for Singapore's legal system, though it has a few significant differences. Most

notably, it includes corporal punishment in the form of caning and capital punishment for murder and specific drug and firearms offenses. Any use of drugs is strictly prohibited.

Its foreign policy aims to maintain security in Southeast Asia and improve political and economic ties with other countries. Singapore is the founding member of both the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has strong relations with China, and a free-trade agreement with the United States. Singapore also boasts the most technologically advanced military in Southeast Asia and spends about 5% of its GDP maintaining it. Furthermore, all Singaporean boys perform a mandatory service in its military.

The Economy: Booming And Business-Friendly

Singapore has a highly developed economy known for being the most open and business-friendly in the world, with low corruption and favorable tax policy. The last recorded GDP growth was 3.1% year-on-year, with the government estimating similar rates over the next two years. In 2017, inflation turned positive after two years at 0.91%, while the unemployment rate held a steady rate of 2.2%. The three key industries driving the economy are the financial services industry, logistics, and manufacturing.



Singapore's financial district

Depending on where you look, ratings list Singapore as the third or the fourth top financial center in the world. It offers financial services of the highest quality in sectors such as wealth management, retail banking, investment banking, insurance, and other support services, and acts as a regional gateway for the renminbi.

Today, the future of this industry looks all but secure, with emerging financial centers like Abu Dhabi and Shenzhen rapidly increasing their market share of the world's financial markets. Moreover, blockchain and other technologies threaten to eliminate a substantial amount of the existing banking services.

To address this issue, the government plans to transform Singapore into a hub for fintech (financial technology) by leveraging the country's technological advances and reforming the human infrastructure. You can already observe this in the amount of funding that is available to fintech startups.

The second pillar of the economy is logistics with the port of Singapore at its core. It is the busiest transshipment port in the world—second regarding total shipping tonnage. Moreover, it transships half of the world's annual supply of crude oil and a fifth of all shipping containers. It is also a principal support element for the manufacturing industry, supplying raw ingredients and shipping out finished products.



Port of Singapore, a vital element in the country's success

Manufacturing is another historically important sector in Singapore and the third pillar of its economy. In the past, the sector focused on labor-intensive industries but had to evolve due to higher labor costs and overwhelming regional competition.

Nowadays, manufacturing clusters are research- and knowledge-based and are comprised of electronics, petroleum refining, chemicals, transport engineering, and biomedical. Singapore is the world's second-largest integrated circuit exporter and home to 2 of the world's top 15 largest refineries.

Singapore also ranks second in ease-of-doing-business rankings, and it's no surprise that lately it has transformed

into a thriving startup hub. I firmly believe that this is the best place to incorporate if you are an internet entrepreneur, and one of the best if you are looking for startup funding.

This is a reputable jurisdiction with low taxes, world-class banking, and a variety of private and governmental funding at your disposal. In addition, all newly established companies are taxed at 0% on the first S\$100,000 for each of their first three years. To get a sense of this culture, visit the iconic Block 71, a hub for hundreds of startups and venture capitalist firms.

An All-Inclusive Culture

Despite its small size, Singapore is home to a massive variety of people from vastly different cultures. The three big ethnic groups are the Chinese, Malays, and Indians, with a significant part of the population—1.6 million or 28%—consisting of non-residents.

There are also four official languages: English, Standard Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil.

Singapore is believed to be the most religiously diverse nation in the world, with all the major religions represented.

The government propagates religious harmony as an essential part of the country's success. A prominent example of the multicultural symbiosis is the Loyang Tua Pek Kong Temple, which co-hosts three different religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism—all under one roof. All the major religious festivals are also considered public holidays for everyone, which is a nice perk for those working in Singapore, especially because any holiday that falls on the weekend results in a work-free Monday.



The Buddha Tooth Relic Temple

Of course, the British left their imprint as well, and you will find several old colonial buildings around the central district. The most famous are the National Museum of Singapore, Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall, and the Supreme Court.

Speaking Singlish

This mix of people in such a small space gave birth to a distinct Singaporean slang called Singlish (Singaporean English). It takes some time to get used to, but you eventually catch on to it.

A common thing they do is add “lah” to a sentence as a way to emphasize something. Also, when referring to an older person, they call them “auntie” or “uncle.”

The Spice Of Life

One of the best things about multi-cultural environments is being able to enjoy delicious varieties of food.

You can eat at a restaurant, but if you want to live like a local, try a hawker center, which are like food courts with lots of different food stalls offering every type of cuisine you could think of. The stalls can number anywhere from 20 to more than 100, and it can be sometimes difficult to pick the right one... The best advice I can give you: Go where the line is longest. Dishes are cheap, with the average price about S\$3 to S\$5.

Without a doubt, the most famous Singaporean dish is chicken rice: steamed chicken and gravy served on plain

10 Essential Singlish Phrases

“Catch no ball” - indicate that the speaker doesn’t understand what someone is saying

Example: Can you say that again, I catch no ball.

“Die die must try” - means that something is so amazing you must try it.

Example: My mom makes the best rendang, you die die must try.

“Talk cock” - means that somebody is talking nonsense.

Example: Don’t listen what he’s saying, he’s talking cock.

“Ang Mo” - means red hair, and usually indicates a person of Caucasian descent.

Example: This bar is full of ang mohs.

“Shiok” - indicates excitement.

Example: Wow, this pizza is shiok.

“Banana” - a term used to describe a Westernized Asian person, yellow on the outside, white on the inside.

Example: Listen how she talks, she is a total banana.

“Paiseh” - means you are embarrassed.

Example: Paiseh, I’m late because of the traffic.

“Sabo” - to deliberately cause harm to someone or get them in trouble.

Example: Hey, why did you sabo me? Now the teacher is mad at me.

“Kiasu” - means that someone is overly competitive.

Example: He’s got kiasu parents and must study all the time.

“Blur like sotong” - indicates someone who is clueless or slow at catching on.

Example: My boss is blur like sotong, we’ll soon go out of business.

white race. Other traditional dishes include laksa (a spicy noodle soup), chili crab (a seafood dish in a thick, sweet and savory tomato- and chili-based sauce—not spicy despite the name), and rendang (a spicy meat dish).

Singaporeans also have their version of coffee called kopi. It is much sweeter and stronger than coffee in the West, and they traditionally serve it with a kaya toast and a couple of boiled eggs.



Chicken Rice

A Sultry, Tropical Climate

Singapore is positioned almost precisely on the equator, just 1.5 degrees to its north, and has a tropical climate with no distinct seasons. Daily temperatures range from 75°F to 85°F (24°C to 30°C), while the humidity stays around 85%.

To accommodate the heat, the clothing etiquette is more relaxed than in a typical business town. You don't need a suit jacket and a tie every day, only for formal occasions or high-profile meetings. An extra layer can come handy, though, as Singaporeans are notorious for cranking up the air conditioning.

It rains almost every day, and when it does it falls heavily, so you should keep an umbrella or a raincoat with you at all times. From November to January it rains even more because of monsoon season, and walking around in it sometimes feels like a steam sauna. There is also almost no wind to help you cool off.

If you've never lived in the tropics, this can be quite an adjustment.

February is the best month in Singapore, as it is the windiest and has the least amount of rain. This

combination makes the weather cooler, and if you sit by the water late in the evening, you almost feel like you need a jacket... almost.

While the government handles the domestic pollution well, Singapore still suffers from it because of neighboring Indonesia. Farmers in Sumatra burn vast parts of rain forest to create land for the plantation of oil palms. Haze from these bushfires will often find its way across the strait and cover the city. This is a topic of political discussions between the two countries, but, so far, the problem remains unsolved. Until we stop using palm oil in our products, the burning of Indonesian rain forest will continue.

Getting Around On The Island

Car Ownership

Owning a car is a luxury few can afford in Singapore.

Singapore is a small island with one of the highest population densities in the world, so the government restricts the number of cars that can drive on the roads to curb pollution and congestion. They do this by imposing high duties on vehicles—about one-and-a-half times their market value.

On top of that, vehicle owners must bid for a limited number of Certificate of Entitlement (COEs) which lets them use the car for 10 years. COEs can be extended for an additional 5 to 10 years, after which the owners must scrap or export their vehicle. Land Transport Authority organizes two online bidding exercises each month during which owners can place bids for the available certificates. In January 2018, the prices for COEs ranged from S\$41,400 to S\$47,400, while just five years before they reached a maximum of S\$97,900.

Public Transport

Fortunately, Singapore has an excellent and well-planned public transport system. Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), or subway, and Light Rail Transit (LRT) are the fastest and most popular options, with over 3 million passengers using them daily. I recommend them during traffic jams and for long-distance commutes.

The Land Transport Authority is building even more rail lines and plans to expand the network to 360 kms by 2030.

By that time, 8 in 10 households will live within 10 minutes of a train station. Singapore also has about a thousand different bus routes, which serve best when going places not easily accessed with the MRT or for local commutes.

Moovit is a smartphone app and the best option for navigating the public transport. It will show you the best route, timetables, and will notify you before you arrive at your station. I can't recommend this one enough.

Uber and Grab are also options, and if you don't mind paying a little extra, regular taxis are available. Upper-middle-class citizens and business people prefer these options.

Sidewalks, MRT, and LRT, are all accessible for disabled people, but you would need a bit of help boarding the buses. Luckily, Singaporeans are some of the nicest people on the planet, and everyone is always eager to help.

Changi airport serves as a major transportation hub in Southeast Asia and offers flights to every possible destination imaginable. Skytrax has rated it the best airport in the world for the fifth consecutive year and with good reason. Everything works quickly, is convenient, and on top of it looks nice. What more could you want? Take the green MRT line to get to the city, or grab an Uber for about S\$20 to S\$30.



Indoor gardens at the Changi airport

Shopping Singapore-Style

If there is one thing Singaporeans love, it's shopping.

Sometimes you get the feeling this whole city is one large shopping mall. Indeed, you can find one or several malls at almost every MRT stop.

For the real experience, however, you must go to Orchard Road, Asia's most famous shopping street. Stretching 2.2 kms through downtown Singapore, Orchard Road offers iconic boutiques, large shopping malls, restaurants, and hotels for every budget.



Orchard Road, Asia's premier shopping street

Shopping in Singapore is also cheap, and on top of that, you can claim a GST (sales tax) refund when you exit the country as a tourist. The process is simple, and it's easy to find the kiosk at the border or airport. All purchases above S\$100 are eligible for a 7% GST refund—you can even combine the purchases made on the same day in the same shop to reach the necessary limit.

If you're in the market for electronic devices, then look no further than Sim Lim Square next to Rochor MRT, featuring six floors and two basements full of hundreds of individual stores, offering new, used, or custom-made computers and other electronics.

The important thing is that you check several stores, compare the prices, and always haggle. Everybody does it, and you should be able to lower the initial offer by at least 10%. Combine that with a GST refund, and you've just saved yourself a couple of hundred bucks.

Keeping Busy And Having Fun On The Island

Attractions In The Marina Bay Area

The Marina Bay Area is the southernmost tip of the island and home to several of the city's marinas. This area offers a range of activities...

Gardens by the Bay, a nature park spanning 101 hectares of reclaimed land, has won countless awards and continues to impress its visitors (if you've seen a picture of

Singapore, it was likely of this park). Take a stroll and relax among the giant super-tree structures, or come at nightfall to enjoy the kaleidoscope of colors in the award-winning lightshow that starts every night at 8 p.m. Here you can enter the largest glass greenhouse in the world, the Flower Dome, and the “Cloud Forest” within.



Supertree structures during the lightshow

Next to Gardens by the Bay, you’ll find Singapore’s most iconic modern structure, the Marina Bay Sands complex. From the top, it offers the best view of the city and its famous skyline. You can pay an entrance fee to the SkyPark—S\$23 for adults and S\$12 for kids—or you can enjoy almost the same view from the luxurious Sky On 57 restaurant or the posh CÉ LA VI Club Lounge and Skybar. The famous infinity pool you see on the postcards is unfortunately only available to hotel guests. The complex is also home to the only casino on the island.

Furthermore, you can enjoy Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, a multi-purpose culture and arts center with a theatre, outdoor performance area, and a separate concert hall, hosting cultural displays and live performances on the regular.

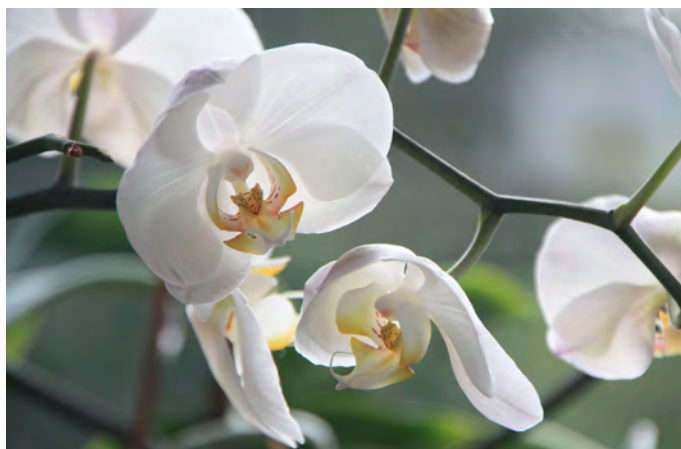
Outdoor Activities

Year-round warm temperatures are perfect for outdoor activities. Almost all apartment buildings in Singapore feature a common area where you can cook, barbecue, have a picnic, or organize a birthday party. Being a popular activity, you’ve got to make sure to book in advance with the facilities manager.

Singapore may be one of the most densely populated cities in the world, but it is also one of the greenest I ever visited. Parks range in size and the degree to which they

are manicured—some are more jungle than park! They are teeming with all sorts of wildlife: birds, otters, giant turtles, monkeys, wild hogs, lizards, and 15 different types of venomous snakes, for example.

Singapore Botanic Gardens is a 158-year old tropical garden and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and it is spectacular. Entry is free, and is open every day from five in the morning until midnight. Inside you will also find the National Orchid Garden featuring over 1,000 species of orchid and 2,000 hybrid species. To see it, you must pay a small admission fee of S\$5 for adults and S\$1 for seniors and student (kids enter free).



One of the 3,000 species on display in the National Orchid Garden

On the other side of the spectrum, you have the MacRitchie Reservoir Park. One of the city’s four reservoirs that surround its nature reserves is a full-on rain forest smack dab in the middle of the city. You can hire a canoe or a kayak to explore the lake, or you can hike the many trails weaving through the park.

The most famous of the trails takes you to the TreeTop Walk, a 250-meter long walkway where you can observe the community of animals and plants that live in the forest canopy. Make sure you leave early though, as it takes you an hour or two to reach it and it closes at 5 p.m.

If you have kids, then chances are you will frequent the Wildlife Reserves Area. There you can find the Singapore Zoo, the River Safari, and the Night Safari. Single park tickets cost from S\$30 to S\$45 for adults and S\$20 to S\$30 for kids, while admission to all four costs S\$78 for adults and S\$58 for kids.

Sentosa, “the state of fun,” is an island resort located off the southern coast and a popular weekend destination. It

features multiple attractions, spa retreats, sandy beaches, resorts, golf courses, luxurious residences, a deep-water yachting marina, and the Universal Studios Singapore theme park. You can reach it by cab, the Sentosa Express monorail, with a scenic cable car, or by the 500-meter Sentosa Boardwalk.



Palawan Beach on Sentosa Island

The second largest Singapore island behind Sentosa is Pulau Ubin. It is one of the few places that was preserved from urban development and features an abundance of flora and fauna, a mangrove boardwalk, an 8-kilometer-long mountain bike trail, and camping sites.

Golfers have a particularly good time in Singapore, with more than 20 different golf courses available with several more on the nearby Indonesian Islands. You can enroll in any of the 14 private clubs or play at one of the 3 public courses, one of which is the award-winning 18-hole Marina Bay Golf Course.

Attractions Around Singapore

In case you get a bit fed up with the island... you're in luck. Singapore is a major air transport hub and offers cheap flights to various Southeast Asian destinations. Whenever the public holiday falls on a Monday or a Friday, the locals use this opportunity to take a short three-day trip to visit another city or relax on a tropical beach.

Even easier is to take a ferry to one of the nearby Indonesian Islands, Pulau Batam and Pulau Bintan. They are both resort islands offering lower prices than Singapore, with Bintan being a decent kite-surfing spot as well.

Another nearby destination is the neighboring city of Johor Bahru (JB), Malaysia, where you can visit

a famous night market, a water adventure park, Legoland, or the Angry Birds theme park. Connections are plentiful, and you can get there with a bus, train, or a taxi. The fastest option is the shuttle train which takes only five minutes to go from Woodlands Train Checkpoint to JB Sentral.

Nightlife And Eating Out

Behind shopping, eating is the hands-down second-favorite activity for locals.

Rightfully so, considering the number of different cuisines on offer for every budget: Indian, Malay, Japanese, Italian, Mexican, and everything in between. You even have the world's cheapest Michelin-star restaurant, a humble hawker stall called Liao Fan Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice & Noodle.

Expect to pay S\$20 to S\$30 per meal in a mid-range restaurant and anywhere from S\$30 to stratosphere levels at an expensive place. I suggest you download Eatigo, a restaurant-reservation app offering time-based discounts of up to 50%.

Taxes on alcohol and cigarettes are extremely high, so if you want to save a few bucks, pay close attention to happy hours. Brewerkz is my favorite beer place, offering an excellent selection of handcrafted beers at four locations around the city center.

If you are a wine enthusiast, then check out Wine Connection. They offer a wide variety of wines from all over the globe and a variety of delicious food. Best of all, you can order a bottle of wine for a mere S\$50. There are several locations, but the favorite is without a doubt the one on Orchard Road.

Most of the nightlife centers around two areas, the Central Business District and Clarke Quay. Central Business District features a lot of fancy rooftop bars, such as 1-Altitude, Logo, and HI-SO, while Clarke Quay takes the role of a party hub, with many buzzing bars and nightclubs all squeezed into one place.

Two more places are worth mentioning: The first one is Duxton Hill, which caters to a younger, hip crowd, while the second is the notorious Orchard Towers, a five-story shopping mall with clubs, massage parlors, and fast food parlors.

Most of the clubs in Singapore close at 3 a.m., but the Orchard Towers stay open until the morning. Beware though, as this is one of the centers for prostitution, which is legal in Singapore. If you can look past that, then you will find decent clubs there playing live music all night long.

The Expat Community

With one of the largest expat populations in the world, socializing is not an issue. If you are looking for expats from your own country, your best choice is to search for Facebook groups and ask to join. That was my initial contact with Slovenian expats (hardly one of the most populous ethnicities represented abroad!), and I know of several other nationalities that do the same.

These groups organize regular meetings, usually during their country's holidays, to create an atmosphere that feels closer to home. You could also join InterNations, a popular expat community. In my experience, however, their events are usually dominated by housewives... at least in the chapters I've been involved with.

Joining clubs focusing on activities you enjoy is another good choice to meet likeminded people. For soccer enthusiast, I recommend you join strangersoccer.com. Social dancing is a popular way for expats to meet and socialize abroad, as are getting involved with various volunteering opportunities.

The LGBT community might find Singapore a bit difficult. Male same-sex sexual activity, same-sex relationships, and adoption for same-sex parents are all illegal. Furthermore, expressing affection in public might raise an eyebrow or two, especially if you are in a local neighborhood, as some ethnicities take a heavier stance towards it. You don't have to worry about any violence of course, and chances are you wouldn't even be bothered, but, still, as a foreigner, you should always respect local customs.

Finding A Place To Hang Your Hat

Types Of Housing To Choose From

HDB stands for Housing and Development Board, and the flats that they provide are oriented towards working-class citizens. They are low-cost yet high-quality and house more than 80% of the population. The majority of residents are locals, although you can find a foreigner here and there renting a room in a shared flat.

Condominiums are the most popular choice for expats. A wide variety exists at all price levels—hunt for 20th century homes on the more affordable side, or splurge on ultra-modern new-build projects. Common areas always include a pool and a gym, and sometimes also other facilities, like squash, basketball, or tennis courts, children's playrooms, libraries, bars, and restaurants. The more expensive ones also offer free shuttle services to the city center and local MRT stations.

Houses are not as typical as the other two options, so finding one is more of a challenge. They come in all shapes and sizes and styles vary depending on location and budget. The important thing for you is to distinguish between landed property and non-landed or strata property. With landed property, you also hold a title to the land, whereas with strata you own only the unit.

Civic District And CBD

The Civic District and Central Business District (CBD), located right in the center of the city, represent the soul and spirit of Singapore, with the old and the new blending in a mix of colonial buildings and ultra-modern skyscrapers. Neighborhoods like Arab Street, Bugis, Downtown Core, and Chinatown all represent something unique, and you can experience Singapore's cultural diversity here like nowhere else.

While you can find accommodations for a variety of budgets in this area with condos, HDBs, and old low-rise apartment blocks, prices tend to be quite high. Because it's a business district, few health facilities are available nearby, and no international schools. While this shouldn't be a problem with all the public transport options at your disposal, I would still recommend this part of the city to a single person or a couple who enjoy uber-urban living, with shopping, art, history, and culture all at your doorstep.

Tanglin And Orchard

Tanglin and Orchard are Singapore's premier residential districts.

While few locations on the planet can match Orchard Road for its shopping activity, just off the main avenue, you can find quiet streets offering spacious family-style

housing. Choose from spacious townhouses, large new bungalows, or condominiums.

West of Orchard, in Tanglin, housing is even more impressive. The British colonists first developed this area in the 19th century, so the properties here are large, built in colonial style, and are mostly occupied by embassies and the affluent. As a bonus, the western side of Tanglin also offers access to the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

It is easy to see why this is the most sought-after part of town. You are just a stone's throw away from Orchard Road, offering all the city buzz you can imagine, yet you live in a quiet area with a suburban feel, surrounded by embassies, top-drawer neighbors, and with easy access to the most beautiful park in Singapore. The two districts also feature two of the best hospitals and a couple of international schools.

One inconvenience you must be aware of in this part of town is the traffic on Orchard Road. During peak hours, the congestion here will delay you if you rely on a bus or a cab to get around.

River Valley

Just south of Tanglin and Orchard Road, you can find another expensive district, the River Valley. Well-heeled expatriates and locals populate this busy area, and the housing mostly comes in the form of condos. Living here feels like being in the center of Singapore, with quick access to Downtown, Orchard Road, the lively Clarke and Boat Quays, and the more tranquil Robertson Quay.

River Valley offers plenty of medical facilities and international schools. No MRT lines run directly through this district, but there are several on its border. Northwest are the Somerset and Dhoby Ghaut stations, with Clarke Quay and Outram Park stations to the southeast. There is, however, an option to use the river taxi service. The service offers 16 stops between Esplanade Drive and Jiak Kim Street, with ticket prices between S\$2 and S\$8.

Newton, Novena, Toa Payoh

North of Orchard Road are three adjacent districts, connected between themselves and to Downtown by the red MRT line. They offer a more suburban feel while

still being very close to the city. Plenty of housing options exist here, both affordable and luxury, with a mix of HDBs, condominiums, terrace houses, and cluster houses.

The side streets are quiet, and there is loads of greenery around. You can also find a high number of schools in this area and several medical facilities. In my opinion, this is the most convenient area to live in.

East Coast

The East Coast spans from Marina Bay east all the way to Changi Airport. With a 15-km long scenic coastline, this area is perfect for those who enjoy outdoor activities and living next to the sea. Moreover, those who travel frequently (or want to) benefit from the proximity of the airport.

Expats looking to get a bit more bang for their buck, lots of open space, and a more relaxed pace of life prefer these neighborhoods. The proximity of the ocean means that these districts catch a bit of breeze and thus feel slightly cooler. There are plenty of housing options and health facilities available, and, while still quite low compared to other districts, the number of international schools is increasing.

Bukit Timah

Bukit Timah is located just west of the central districts and caters best to families looking for a suburban lifestyle.

All types of housing are available here, but the majority comes in the form of low-rise blocks and stand-alone houses. The streets are quiet with plenty of greenery, and with Bukit Timah Hill in the middle, some of them can be quite steep. A lot of the people here also own cars, as the MRT connection is not as good as in the other parts of the city.

These districts are also popular with families because they feature the highest number of international schools. Only smaller medical facilities rather than hospitals are available, however.

Outer Districts

I wouldn't recommend living in the outer districts if your work is Downtown because the commutes will be long. However, if you have the privilege of working from home, happen to work in that area, or prefer a quieter suburban lifestyle, then this might be the place for you. You also don't have to worry about convenience, as even the

remote areas of Singapore offer shopping malls, schools, restaurants, and so on.

Woodlands is located at the very edge of Singapore and about 20 kms to the north of the Central Business District. You can reach it with the red line, which takes about an hour from Downtown. It is the greenest, leafiest part of the country, has many housing options, and is popular with expat families looking for an alternative to apartment living.

Woodlands is also the location of the Singapore American School, and thus one of the favorites for American families. Finally, there is the Johor Causeway, a bridge to the popular Malaysian city of Johor Bahru. There are plenty of medical services around, as well.

Buying Property In Singapore

When it comes to buying property, Singapore, like many other Asian countries, imposes restrictions on foreigners. By doing this, the government can plan the use of the limited space available and ensure that foreigners don't outprice the native population out of their homes.

As a foreigner, you are allowed to purchase the following types of properties:

- Condominium or apartment units;
- Executive condominiums older than 10 years;
- Commercial real estate, such as shops, hotels, malls, offices, etc.;
- Landed properties that are either part of a larger condominium or those located around the luxurious Sentosa Cove.

The purchase of HDB flats is strictly prohibited for non-citizens.

Investor appetite and global economic boom-and-bust cycles are the primary influencers behind Singapore's real estate prices. The third quarter of 2013 was the last peak in prices, and since then they have been dropping.

However, it looks to me as if they've hit bottom in 2017 and are ready for another bullish run. Singapore has one of the most expensive real estate markets in the world, with condominiums costing on average S\$3 million in the core central region, S\$1.4 million in the rest of the central region, and S\$1.1 million outside of the central region.

If you're looking at residential property as an investment, then expect a rental yield somewhere in the range of 3% to 3.5%, and, according to Morgan Stanley, a one-time value increase by 2030.

Buyers in Singapore must pay a stamp duty, which for foreigners comes at a flat rate of 15%. For Singaporeans, the rate depends on the number of properties they own but is never more than 10%. This same scaled system applies to U.S. citizens thanks to the United States-Singapore Free Trade Agreement.

Singapore imposes an annual property tax calculated on a progressive scale ranging from 0% to 20%. To calculate the annual property tax, you must multiply the applicable tax rate with something called the Annual Value (AV). The AV represents an estimated gross annual rent of the property if you would rent it out, excluding furnishing and maintenance fees. You determine it based on rates of similar properties. You can access those values at mytax.iras.gov.sg for a small charge of S\$2.50 per inquiry.

Singapore's banks are keen on issuing housing credits to locals as well as Permanent Residency Card (PRC) holders. A typical loan will consist of a 20% down payment, 1.6% interest rate, and a tenure of 25 years.

Renting Properties

If buying is not for you, then you will be happy to hear that there are no restrictions for foreigners looking to rent a property, including those developed under the HDB scheme.

Average rents per month are about S\$3,000 for a one-bedroom apartment in the central area and S\$2,000 for those located outside of the central region. Add approximately 50% if you're looking for a two- or three-bedroom apartment.

Utility and management costs run in the S\$150 to S\$300 range. As is the habit in most of the world, the landlord will require a two-month deposit plus one month rent in advance.

Getting A Job

Singapore has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world, which usually ranges around 2% (the most recent recorded was 2.2%). The government considers this to be a healthy number, consisting of fresh graduates

and those switching jobs. However, don't be fooled into believing that because unemployment is low, it is easy to get a job as a foreigner.

In general, Singapore lacks its own labor force because of low birth rates, so they must import it—both unskilled labor and trained professionals. Unskilled labor gets in on a special type of visa that Singapore only issues for specific countries like Indonesia, Bangladesh, Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India. Skilled professionals get in on the Employment Pass (EP), which is more or less the only option available to foreigners from countries with advanced economies.

Nonetheless, the job market fluctuates like any other, and there are times when the country has a glut of potential workers and lacks of jobs for them. When this shift happens, the country isn't shy about throwing out foreigners just as simply as they were willing to let them in during the good times. What's more, they only give you 30 days to leave.

By regulating the amount of foreign labor, the government maintains low unemployment and keeps the local population employed—you getting a job in Singapore depends very much on these principles. Unfortunately, the current situation doesn't favor foreigners, and even highly skilled managers are getting kicked out of the country.

The EP allows for foreign professionals, managers, and executives to work in Singapore for up to three years. It used to be common to get the pass for two to three years, but because of the current job market climate, most last for only one year. To qualify for it, a candidate must receive a fixed monthly salary of at least S\$3,600. For comparison, an average cost of living for a local graduate ranges from S\$2,500 to S\$3,300. Therefore, unless you have a managerial level or similar experience, chances of getting an EP are pretty slim.

The best way to get in is to get a job in your home country at a company that also has offices in Singapore and then look for an internal transfer. Alternatively, you can contact headhunting or recruitment companies in Singapore, share your resume with them, and see if they come up with something for you. International students studying in Singapore have the option to apply for internships, which usually results in the company hiring them.

If you consider yourself a serial entrepreneur, high-caliber innovator, or an experienced investor, then you may have a chance of obtaining an Entrepreneur Pass or EntrePass. To qualify, you must meet the criteria found on [this website](#).

Residency And Visa Options



Taxes

As a Singapore resident, you will be subject to the local tax regime, which will most likely turn out to be more favorable than in your country. Personal income tax rates are progressive and have 10 brackets that range from 0% for those earning less than S\$10,000 per year to 22% for those making more than S\$320,000 per year.

To qualify as a tax resident, you must stay in the country for at least 183 days in a tax year, or at least 183 days for a continuous period over two tax years. If your employment lasts less than 183 days, then you fall into a category of a nonresident. In this case, the income tax follows the progressive rates used for residents, or it is 15%, whichever gives rise to a higher amount. When the duration is less than 60 days, then the income is tax free.

Besides salaries, employment benefits such as stock options and housing are taxable, while dividends and bank interest are tax-exempt. Also, any income derived from outside, even when wired to a Singaporean bank account, is tax exempt and you don't need to file it. Just be careful that you don't perform the service from Singapore to an outside client.

Internal Revenue Authority of Singapore (IRAS) allows the deduction of employment expenses. These include entertainment expenses incurred in entertaining clients, traveling costs incurred on public transport, and subscriptions paid to professional bodies or society for professional updates, knowledge, and networking.

As a nonresident director of a company incorporated in Singapore, you are subject to a withholding tax of 22%, while as a nonresident public entertainer (a singer, a athlete, etc.) your withholding tax comes down to 10%.

Singapore signed tax treaties to avoid double taxation with most of the world—but not with the United States... Something to consider if you come from that part of the world.

Filing taxes is easy, and you can do it online. Moreover, [IRAS](#) has a comprehensive website in case you need any extra information.

Cost Of Living

Singapore definitely lives up to its reputation as one of the most expensive places on the planet.

With the second highest number of millionaires per capita, it's not surprising that the local costs of living reflect the population's high net worth. Nonetheless, ordinary people can still enjoy the lifestyle here without going broke.

When looking for accommodation, focus on HDB flats, or, if you like to have a gym and a pool included, on older condominiums. You could also opt to rent a room in a shared flat, which is a popular choice for students and young professionals.

If you can afford more and enjoy a resort-type lifestyle, a newer condo might be more suitable. Some of these architectural marvels are the most beautiful you will ever see.

For buying groceries, I recommend Fairprice, the largest grocery retailer in Singapore. They have shops everywhere, are probably the cheapest option, and offer a variety of products, including international brands. Two more budget options are Redmart and Sheng Siong, though they only have a few shops around the island and a smaller selection of items. On a higher end, you have Giant, Cold Storage, and Jason's, which offer higher quality and imported products. All grocers provide home delivery.

Then there's the Mustafa Centre. Located in Little India, this place is worth a visit even if you don't live there. A six-floor shopping mall but always crowded, here you can buy anything and everything from electronics, clothes, food, and alcohol to home equipment and everything else you can imagine.

The government is aware that sports are essential for people's health, so they created a wonderful program called ActiveSG through which you can access gyms and other sports facilities. They offer the lowest gym

membership on the market at S\$300 per year. Another affordable option is Gymboxx, which costs only S\$720 for a yearly membership, or if you prefer to visit just occasionally, S\$3 to S\$10 per entry.

If you want a gym that offers a lot of other services as well, then you might like True Fitness or Anytime Fitness. Their fees start at around S\$100 per month, requiring at least a 12-month contract and a signing fee, but it is possible to find existing members who want to sell out of their contract—you pick up where they leave off.

Health Care

Singapore is famous for offering some of the best health care in the world through both private and government medical facilities.

The primary focus of government health care facilities is to provide subsidized services to Singaporeans. Although the government wholly owns the public-sector hospitals, they function as private limited companies so that they can compete on service and quality with the private sector. Don't let the term "government hospitals" fool you... These high-quality facilities provide excellent services to the masses as well as handle more complicated cases than private hospitals and neighboring countries.

The government health system also establishes benchmarks for the private sector on prices and standards of medical services by influencing long-term trends in the supply of hospital beds, the rate of cost increases, the introduction of high-cost, high-tech medicine, and so on.

Singaporeans dedicate part of their pay for national insurance, which covers the services rendered in government health facilities. For a non-Singaporean, on the other hand, choosing between the private and the government health facilities doesn't make any difference when it comes to costs, as the two sectors directly compete with one another.

The only difference is in the level of service and the waiting lines... They are much better in the private health care facilities and is why most expats and medical tourists choose to go private.

Expect to pay S\$50 for a brief 15-minute visit to a doctor and S\$100 for a yearly dental checkup, cleaning, and

polishing. Daily hospitalization charges range from S\$30 for an open ward without air conditioning up to S\$3,000 if you want a private, five-star medical suite.

A heart bypass costs S\$16,000 to S\$35,000, while knee surgery costs about S\$3,000 for a minor operation and up to S\$30,000 for something like a knee replacement.

Private health insurance ranges from S\$75 per month to S\$400 per month, depending on the candidate. Considering the level of health care, the prices are reasonable, particularly when compared to the States.

Parting Words

If you travel even a little, chances are you've already been or will be in Singapore at least once in your life. As with any place, the experience of visiting as a tourist compared to living here is different, and, as you can see, the country offers a lot for both options.

To me, arriving in Singapore always felt like arriving in heaven too soon. I value this city, not only because of the business opportunities it presents, but also because of the many memories and the friends I made here.

The utopia is real.

Come see it for yourself... and check out the video on the next page. 📺



About The Author

Leon Wilfan is a freelance writer and a location independent entrepreneur. He worked 7 years in a real estate investing firm before completing an MBA degree specializing in finance at WU Vienna, one of the top business schools in Europe.

Hunting for new opportunities, in 2016 Leon moved to the fastest growing region in the world, Southeast Asia. Now he lives as a digital nomad, moving from country to country, constantly on the prowl for new and more efficient ways to optimize his worldwide income.

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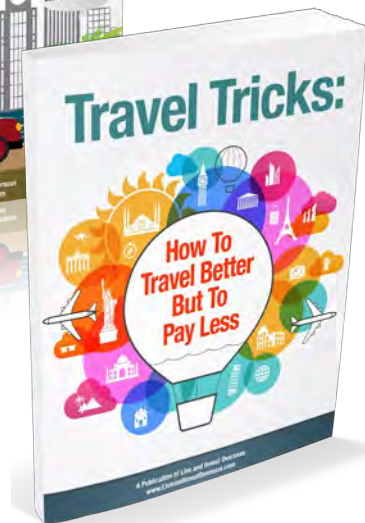


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