



# The Insiders' Guide on What It's Like to Live in Singapore

*The Norms, Languages and  
Our Multi-Cultural Community*



2021 Edition



# *Hi there!*

Moving to a new country can be equal parts exhilarating and nerve-racking. Will it be hard to meet new people? What about my job? Will I be used to the food – and where can I get my caffeine fix? We're here to make the transition a little easier with a guide to what it's like to live in Singapore.

This guide covers just enough for you to get an idea of what living here is like – our heritage, our culture, language and food. While this guide can't possibly beat experiencing Singapore for yourself, we hope it allays some worries and gets you excited about experiencing life here.

If there's anything you're looking for that you can't find in this guide, we're only [one click away](#).

Love,  
*Singapore Global Network*



South Bridge Road

**This is Singapore:**  
**A Modern  
Metropolis**

Walk the streets of our island nation today and you can hear (perhaps even feel) the invisible rumble of an urbanised country. It is this energy that has transformed Singapore from a developing country to a first-world nation in under fifty years.

“

*In a generation, Singapore became an international financial centre, the leading intellectual metropolis of Southeast Asia,*

*the location of the region's major hospitals and a favoured site for conferences on international affairs. It did so by adhering to an extraordinary pragmatism: by opening careers to the best talents and encouraging them to adopt the best practices from all over the world.”*

*Henry A. Kissinger  
Former U.S. Secretary of State (2015)*

# Singapore's Road to Independence

## 3<sup>RD</sup> CENTURY

A Chinese account describes it as '*Pu-luo-chung*', referring to '*Pulau Ujong*' which means the 'island at the end of a peninsula' in the Malay language.



## 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Modern Singapore was founded by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles and transformed into a British Colony.



## 1963

Merger with Malaya results in the birth of Malaysia.

## 1965

Singapore separates from Malaysia to become an independent and sovereign nation.



## 4<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Sang Nila Utama, a prince from Palembang renamed the island, '*Singapura*', also known as 'The Lion City'.

## 1955

Self-governance started with the country's first general election being held in this year.

# Enjoy World-class Infrastructure in One of the World's Safest Cities



Living in Singapore is to live in [one of the safest cities in the world](#). Residents enjoy top-notch education, affordable and efficient public transportation and world-class healthcare.



“

**Singapore is a rare and precious example of a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious society where people live harmoniously together. This is not by chance. The Government and the different communities worked hard together to make this happen.”**

*Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, posted on his [Facebook](#) on the eve of Racial Harmony Day (2017)*



Home to many cultures, ethnicities and religions, our strength lies in harnessing our diversity to build an inclusive society. Since our beginnings as a 19th-century colony, immigrants from China, India and all over the Malay Archipelago have come to settle here in search of a better life, growing together to form the multi-cultural society we live in today.

Today, this strong belief in racial, cultural and religious harmony is reflected in the policies, values and festivities here.

# Diversity at Our Core

Our strength has always come from harnessing our diversity to build an inclusive society. Since our beginnings as a 19th century colony, immigrants from China, India and all over the Malay Archipelago have come to settle here in search of a better life, growing together to form the multi-cultural society we live in today.

Singapore largely comprises three predominant ethnic groups – Chinese, Malay and Indian – with a growing population of other ethnicities that includes Eurasian and other non-Asian ethnic groups. Over the past decade, our ethnic make-up has only become more diverse. Among all the ethnicities (i.e. Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others, or 'CMIO' for short), we've seen the highest growth in the minority ethnicities, and have welcomed new residents with ethnicities ranging from Peranakan, Eurasian, Filipino, Caucasian, Arab, Thai, to Japanese.



Unique to this part of the world, the term [Peranakan](#) translates to 'local born' in the Indonesian or Malay language and refers to people of mixed Chinese and Malay or Indonesian heritage.

Peranakan cultural creations have become an inseparable part of Singaporean culture. Besides their [unique cuisine](#), Peranakans are skilled for their beadwork and embroidery. Their iconic sarong kebaya, a traditional Peranakan dress, might be familiar to you as they are worn by air stewardesses of Singapore Airlines as cabin crew uniforms.

# The Stories Behind Our Singaporean Street Names

As you explore the streets of Singapore, you may come across roads, avenues and streets bearing [unique names](#). Here is a selection of street names derived from [interesting people](#) and items:

## 1. Keong Saik Road

was named after a merchant Tan Keong Saik in 1926. The shophouses evolved from a residential space, into a red-light district in the 1960s and is now occupied by coffee shops and art galleries today.



Keong Saik Road



## 2. Temple Street

was originally named Almeida Street after Joaquim d'Almeida, a Portuguese naval surgeon. At the time, there were two other roads named after members of the d'Almeida family so to avoid confusion, it was renamed to Temple Street in 1908 as there are many temples in the area.

## 3. Bukit Merah

translates to Red Hill named after a jealous sultan who sent soldiers to kill a young boy in an old folktale.

## 4. Lorong Pisang Batu

translated to Stone Banana Street.

# Keeping the Faith

As part of our cultural diversity, we respect and welcome all faiths and all cultures. As you wander the streets of Singapore, you'll find churches, mosques, and temples situated within close proximity to each other.

Religious holidays have also since been gazetted by law as public holidays so that devotees can have the day off to partake in celebrations and carry out their religious rites.



## **Lunar New Year** *(or Chinese New Year and Spring Festival)*

Chinese celebrate their familial ties with a Reunion Dinner and house visiting among relatives. There's usually a beautiful light-up display you can check out along Chinatown too!



## **Hari Raya Aidilfitri** *(or Hari Raya Puasa and Eid Al-Fitr)*

Muslims celebrate the end of Ramadan or the 'fasting month' with a day of prayer, feasting and celebration in their new and colourful traditional outfits. You don't want to miss the bustling Geylang Serai bazaar, too.



## **Hari Raya Haji** *(or Eid al-Adha)*

Known as the Festival of Sacrifice, this signifies the end of the Muslim 'hajj' pilgrimage and is a more solemn day of prayer and reflection.



## **Good Friday**

A Christian holiday observed on the Friday before Easter Sunday to commemorate Jesus's crucifixion.



## **Vesak Day**

A Buddhist holiday celebrating the birth, enlightenment and death of Buddha.



## **Deepavali (in Tamil)** *(or Diwali in Hindi)*

Also known as the 'Festival of Lights', Hindus celebrate the triumph of light over darkness on this day. Look out for the festivities along Little India, and spot the vivid rangoli artworks outside the doorway of a Hindu home.



## **Christmas**

Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ on this day, but festivities in Singapore remain mostly secular with entertainment and Christmas light-ups in the key shopping districts.

# Local Religious Festivals & Traditions

## Hungry Ghost Festival

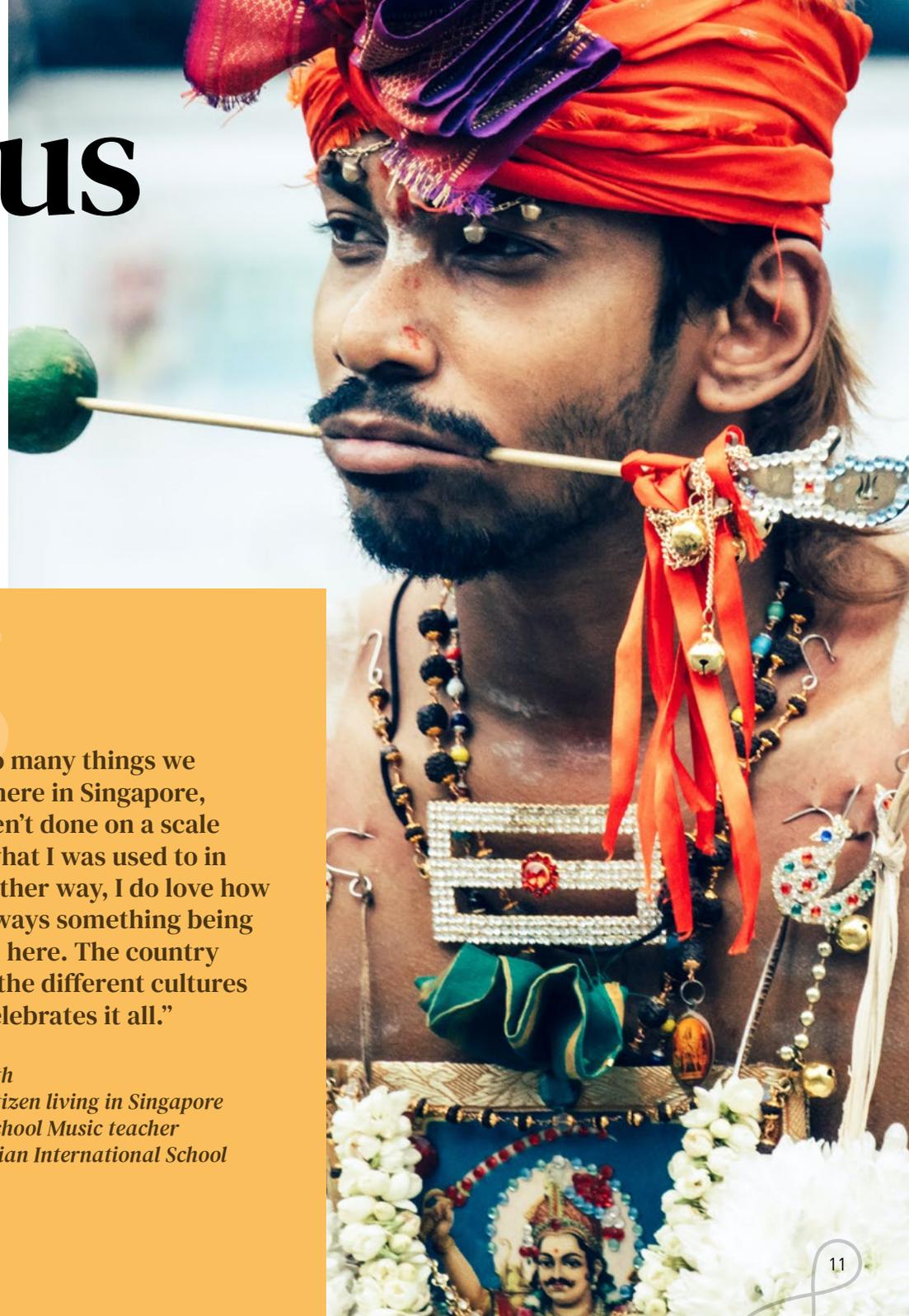
The Hungry Ghost Festival is celebrated by Chinese Buddhists and Taoists in honour of their dearly departed. According to traditional customs, the souls of the dead are believed to roam the earth during the festival, which takes place during the seventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar. When ignored, it is believed that these ghosts may create mischief. To avoid this, offerings such as paper garments, cars and even Hell Notes — printed paper banknotes to be used in the afterlife — are burnt to appease the deceased.

## Firewalking Festival

Also known as *Theemithi*, this is a Hindu religious practise where devotees walk across a fire pit in exchange for a wish or blessing granted by the goddess Draupadi. *Theemithi* is part of a larger ceremony stretching over a two-and-a-half-month period during which devotees perform up to 18 distinguishable rites. This festival is celebrated by Hindus around the world.

“We have so many things we celebrate here in Singapore, so they aren’t done on a scale as big as what I was used to in Canada. Either way, I do love how there is always something being celebrated here. The country embraces the different cultures and just celebrates it all.”

*Jasmine Heath*  
Canadian Citizen living in Singapore  
Secondary School Music teacher  
at the Canadian International School



# Embracing Uniquely Singaporean Norms

As diverse as our culture is, it should come as no surprise that their influences come through in certain uniquely Singaporean idiosyncrasies. We have also adapted to each culture's customs and beliefs, forming some of the norms that we practice today.



Remove your footwear when entering homes, and before entering most temples or mosques.

Hand things over with two hands, particularly business cards and money. Offering an item with one hand is considered disrespectful.



It is widely accepted to address people older than yourself as 'uncle' or 'aunty' as a form of respect even if they are strangers.



In business and social situations alike, introduce your seniors first.



If you're not walking up, stand on the left on escalators.



No drinking or eating is allowed on buses and trains.



Avoid extending handshakes to Muslim women unless they first offer. A slight bow or nod will do.



Do not leave chopsticks in an upright position as that is reminiscent of offerings at funerals. Instead, rest them on the edge of your dish or chopstick rest.



'Choping' or reserving tables using tissue packets or umbrellas is widely accepted at food courts.



Tipping is not customary as a 7% Goods & Service Tax and 10% Service Charge will be included in your bill. Simply thank your waiters or leave a review.



When returning your cutlery at food centres, it is important to separate the utensils from Halal and non-Halal stalls.



'Priority' seats are left vacant for those who need it more. The seats are located near the train or bus doors, and demarcated with stickers or a different colour.



English is the language of choice in social and professional life. If you feel that your English is a little rusty, there are many options here for sharpening your language skills, such as at the [British Council](#).

However, if you were to spend some time in Singapore, you'd likely overhear a somewhat modified version of the language being spoken between locals.

# Getting Out & About in Singapore

# Speak Some Singlish, *lah!*



The influence of our multi-cultural society comes through in the informal language we use to communicate with each other. While each ethnicity has its own mother tongue that most Singaporeans still speak today, we've incorporated little idiosyncrasies from different languages to create Singlish.

Peppered with discourse particles like *lah, leh, lor*, Singlish is a local dialect where smatterings of phrases from different languages are mixed with English to become a language with unique grammar and syntax. This 'common tongue' brings us closer and quickly becomes familiar to nationalities brought into our fold.

“I like to use Singlish phrases such as ‘Uncle/aunty, I’m local lah, give me a good price can or not’ to humour the stall owners. An invaluable phrase I’ve picked up is ‘*Kopi C Kosong Kurang Susu*’ – black coffee with less evaporated milk and no sugar. On days when I feel like a blur king (another phrase I picked up which describes someone who is gets confused easily), I will order a *Kopi Gao* for a strong cup of coffee.”

*Charles P.  
U.S. Citizen living in Singapore  
Social Entrepreneur & Co-founder of a Singaporean slow fashion brand*



**The national language of Singapore is Malay, which plays a symbolic role, as Malays are constitutionally recognised as the indigenous peoples of Singapore, and it is the government's duty to protect their language and heritage.**

**In fact, our National Anthem, '*Majulah Singapura*', or 'Onward Singapore', is written entirely in Malay. But in everyday life, English is the lingua franca of choice and you'll have no trouble communicating with others.**

# Singlish 101

## MAKAN

(pronounced 'mah-karn')



### DEFINITION

A casual slang and Malay term used to describe eating or having a meal

### USED IN A SENTENCE

"Hey, let's go *makan*!"

"What do you want to *makan* for lunch?"

## DABAO

(pronounced 'dar-ba-ow')



To takeaway or packed to go.

"Do you want to eat here at the coffeeshop or *dabao*?"

"Uncle/Aunty, one laksa, *dabao* please!"

## SHIOK

(pronounced 'she-oak')



This word usually refers to a meal or dish that tastes so good, others absolutely must try it to believe it.

"You have to try this chicken rice – the chicken with the chili is super *shio*!"

## KOPITIAM

(pronounced 'k o-pee-tee-um')



Kopitiam (pronounced 'Ko-pee-tee-um') – '*Kopi*' means 'coffee' in Malay and '*tiam*' means 'shop' in Hokkien, a Chinese dialect. It refers to a local food or hawker establishment with a variety of stalls.

"The *kopitiam* across the street is famous for its breakfast, Indian food and economic rice too."

"Where is the nearest *kopitiam* I can get coffee at?"

# Singlish 101

## BOJIO

(pronounced 'boh-ji-oh')



### DEFINITION

A Hokkien phrase that translates to 'never invite', refers to an act of being left out of an event or activity. You'd often hear Singaporeans saying 'don't say *bojio*' because we'd always share a good deal or offer with each other.

### USED IN A SENTENCE

"Hey, I saw this promotion and wanted to share with you – don't say *bojio*!"

## KIASU

(pronounced 'kee-ah-soo')



Derived from the Hokkien dialect which essentially means a 'fear of missing out' but with a competitive undertone and wanting the best for oneself.

"She is so *kiasu*, she arrived at the airport 5 hours before her flight!"

## ATAS

(pronounced 'ah-tahs')



A word which has recently been added to the Oxford dictionary, this term refers to a person or place that is posh and considered to be of a higher social status.

"Wow this mall is so *atas* – there are many luxury boutiques and fine dining restaurants here."

# Ordering Drinks,



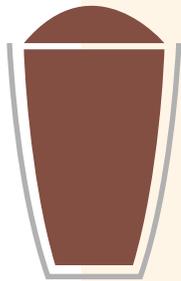
Because locals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could not afford expensive Arabica beans, *kopi* brewers invented a new way to roast Robusto beans to give them a bold, delicious flavour. They would wok-roast the beans with sugar, margarine or butter, and sometimes pineapple skin and maize, to a deep brown colour, before grinding the beans and passing the brew grounds through sock-like cotton strainers in watering can sized pots. This method is still practised today!

# Singaporean-Style

Wondering how you should translate terms like Latte, Americano, and Cappuccino the next time you're ordering coffee at the *kopitiam*, or coffeeshop, near home? It's not an exact conversion because how the coffee is brewed is different, but here's a [guide](#) to help you out.

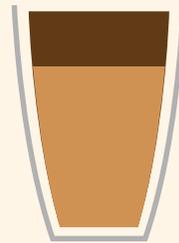
# Order Like a Local

Besides learning to ordering a *Kopi O* (black coffee with sugar) like a pro, here's a secret menu of drinks for real insiders.



## MILO DINOSAUR

An iced chocolate-malt drink with condensed milk, topped with a generous spoonful of Milo powder.



## YUAN YANG

A mixed glass of three parts coffee and seven parts milk tea.



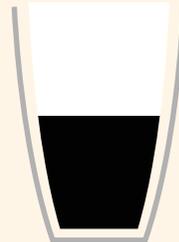
## TEH TARIK

*Teh* ('tea' in Hokkien) is stirred with condensed and evaporated milk before being 'pulled' or Tarik (Malay) from a height to create a frothy cap.



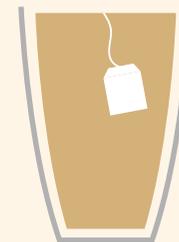
## JI BA HO

In Hokkien, this phrase means 'number 100'. It is the nickname given to the 100 Plus isotonic drink.



## MICHAEL JACKSON

Named after the famous singer, it is a glass of soybean milk mixed with chin chow (grass jelly).



## DIAO YU

Loosely translated as 'fishing' in Mandarin. The drink got its name from dipping a teabag in hot water, resembling a fisherman dropping bait into the river.



# Our Kampung Spirit

Known as our *Kampung Spirit* (Malay for 'Village'), our community is closely knit and believe in doing our part to keeping our neighbourhoods safe. We keep an eye out for each other's families and enjoy social gatherings.

This is no different within the expatriate communities in Singapore, which have banded together to establish unofficial enclaves of their own to share advice and experiences on everything from enrolling in schools to where the most authentic cuisines can be found.

If you're new in town and looking to [make some expat friends](#), here are some good ways to get started.

# Join Online Communities

“When I came to Singapore for my Masters, Facebook communities such as Indians in Singapore, Singapore expats, Flat & Flatmates in Singapore provided me great suggestions for accommodation, food and home furniture. If I had any utility related assistance required, I used an app called Carousell which provided me with a host of highly rates experts at an affordable price. It also functions as a marketplace as I could sell second-hand furniture to end-users hassle-free and is definitely a platform people can tap into when starting off in Singapore.

I recommend joining these groups as they are not only helpful to provide suggestions and answer queries, but act as a great medium to connect and make friends with people who are similar situations or have faced similar challenges.

*Akshit Garg  
Indian national living in Singapore  
Digital Marketing Specialist*



There are many online communities you can join to stay in touch with likeminded people. Log on and join these communities:

## **Singapore Global Network**

Gain access to a vibrant and exciting global network of family, friends and fans of Singapore. You will also receive invites to join our regular social and professional get-togethers, events and parties in various cities around the world.

# Expand Your Social Circles by Joining Expat Groups on Facebook



## **Expats in Singapore** *(Open)*

This group is for anyone who wants to share upcoming activities and events or need help in relocating to Singapore.

## **Singapore Expats** *(Private; request needed to join)*

For anyone who needs assistance or has questions about relocating to Singapore



## **Singapore Expat Women**

*(Private; request needed to join)*

Anyone looking to connect with like-minded women from all walks of life who have either moved to Singapore lately, been here for some time or are looking to move here soon.

## **New Singapore Expats**

*(Private; request needed to join)*

This group is for all expatriates who have just arrived in Singapore or arriving in Singapore and seeking advice on anything pertaining to living in Singapore – from accommodation, food and recreation here in a new environment. Fellow new expats can even group up for activities and make new friends.

# For More Expatriate Communities & Information on Living in Singapore

## Singapore Expats

This website is a one-stop residential property guide in Singapore. Get tips on how to navigate the local renting procedures when deciding to relocate to Singapore.

## InterNations

Join this community to get answers from other like-minded expatriates who may be currently based in Singapore or who are looking to relocate here.



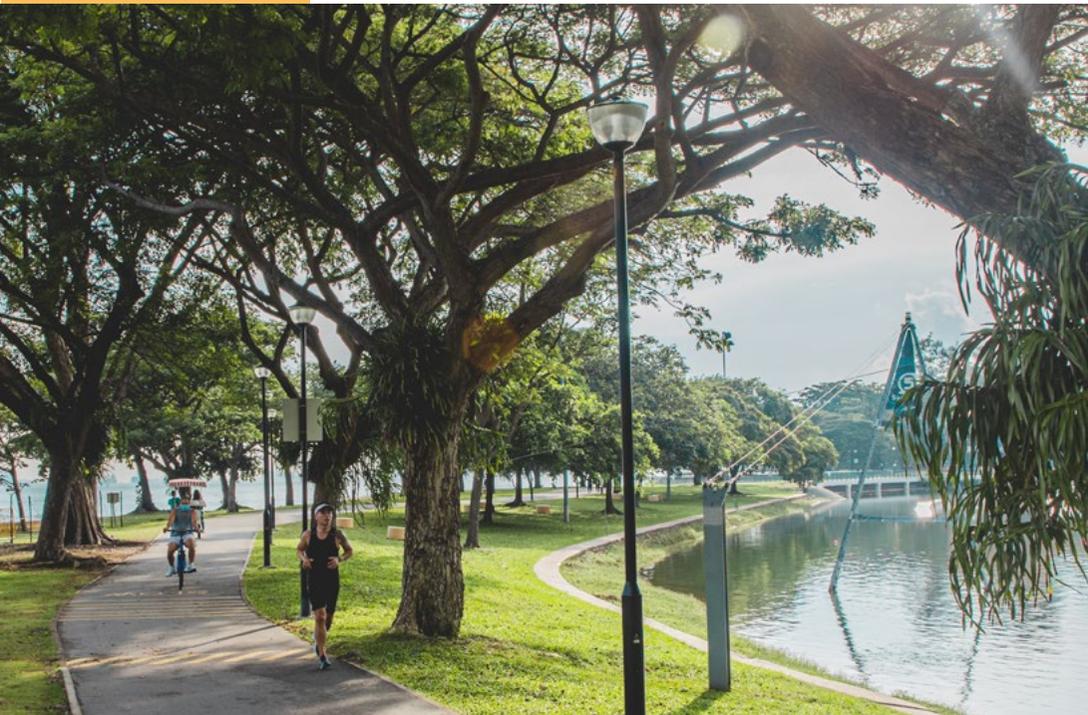
## Expatriate Living

Keep yourself up to date about the happenings in Singapore's expatriate community. The regularly updated 'Things to Do' lists are great for times when you're looking for activities to do as a family other than a Netflix binge.

## Living in Singapore

From places of interest to check out to a comprehensive list of things to do and look out for when relocating to Singapore, this guide for expatriates by expatriates based in Singapore is an invaluable resource.

# Stay Fit in Our Garden City



Prefer something more structured? Then, try exploring a wide variety of gyms touting new and innovative workout routines that'll help you get in shape and expand your social circle while you are at it. From big-box gyms like Virgin Fitness, Fitness First, and True Fitness to 24-hour options like GYMMBOXX, The Gym Pod, and Anytime Fitness; you will find one that will fit your lifestyle needs.



There are over [350 parks and 4 nature reserves](#) spread across our city, giving you plenty of outdoor spaces for you to explore during the weekends to engage in recreational activities with friends or family. Click [here](#) to discover the closest neighbourhood park where you live.

# Get to Know People Through Fun Activities & Interest Groups

Our [community centres](#) are where you'll find courts for everything from basketball to tennis. Download the [ActiveSG app](#) to reserve these facilities, register for classes and buy entry passes to Sports Centres, where you might just find your new workout buddy.

Fitness aside, classes are another great way to expand your social circle. Consider joining [culinary masterclasses](#), picking up a new [language](#), or even joining niche interest groups such as flower arrangement.

Finally, volunteering is always a great way to make friends while giving back to the community. [SGCares](#), [Volunteer.sg](#), and [Singapore Prevention of Cruelty to Animals \(SPCA\)](#) are good places to start!



# Our Parting Words



Futuristic skyscrapers, infinity pools and our famous efficiency aside, Singapore is a place where people from all over the world come together to build their dreams. We hope this guide has given you a better idea of who we are and our way of life.

Don't just take our word for it – we look forward to welcoming you to our home one day, where you'll experience a different Singapore unique to you.

If you're even a little curious, check out our guides on career, education, and entertainment in Singapore. For all you need to know about relocating to Singapore, we've prepared a Settling in Singapore guide here too.

Finally, if you would like to connect with someone who's previously made the move from abroad to Singapore and learn about their experiences first-hand, contact us at [hello@singaporeglobalnetwork.sg](mailto:hello@singaporeglobalnetwork.sg).

We hope to see you soon!

Love,  
**Singapore Global Network**

