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# INTRODUCING SINGAPORE



*Chefs at Raffles Hotel (p124) indulging, sating, fuelling Singapore's greatest obsession: food*

Always the bridesmaid and never the bride, this perennial stopover city is reinventing itself as a destination in its own right.

Most people know about the shopping and the eating, but Singapore has taken a serious look at the subject of fun, decided that it is good, and set about converting itself into the ultimate 21st-century metropolis. And in a city for which constant change and improvement are almost a religion, decisions quickly turn into reality.

Almost every facet of this tiny island state is undergoing a renaissance: arts and entertainment, sports, tourist attractions, nature spots and, of course, food and shopping.

The once-staid entertainment scene has erupted into life, with new megaclubs and beach parties placing the city on Asia's nightlife map. Two vast new 'integrated resorts' promise to lure hordes of visitors to their casinos, theme parks and big-note attractions. Huge, modern new malls are jostling into every available space on the city's famous Orchard Road shopping strip. Arts and cultural festivals crowd the calendar. Suddenly Singapore is on the international sporting calendar, too, hosting Formula One's first night race and the 2010 Youth Olympics.

And always, everywhere, there is food, glorious food, the single overwhelming obsession that unites and defines all Singaporeans.

Yet, nestled among it all, and frequently overlooked, are the wonderful green spaces that make Singapore such a masterpiece of urban design, surprising anyone who thinks of this tiny island state as an urban jungle.

Whatever you thought you knew about Singapore, there's always a surprise around the corner.



## CITY LIFE

Aside from the identity of their government, when Mr & Mrs Average Singapore step out the door of their Housing Development Board flat every morning, change – or the prospect of it – is the one constant in their lives.

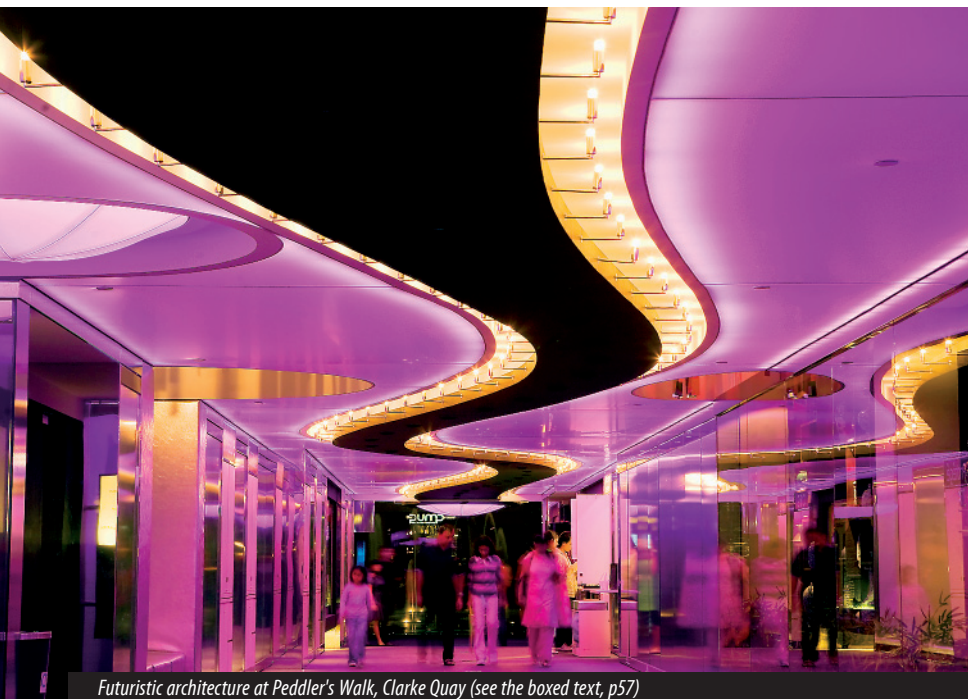
The old, glowingly prosperous and comfortably insular days of the 1980s and early '90s are over. Prosperity remains, but the fickle winds of the global economy, as they are constantly reminded by politicians and the media, are blowing harder, and Singaporeans must learn to blow with them.

And those same global winds are blowing the rest of the world into Singapore, too. There are more foreigners these days, and they're no longer confined to the rich, expat havens of old, travelling by cab or company car. Now they're out in the heartland suburbs, catching buses and trains, eating in the food courts and hawker centres. And tourists too – lots of them, with even more to come, Mr & Mrs Average Singapore are told.

Everywhere there is construction and everywhere there is change. The casinos, the Universal Studios theme park, the world's biggest aquarium, the Singapore Flyer. A new MRT line nearly complete, work on another one about to start. A Formula One race. New roads, more traffic, higher road tolls. New condominiums everywhere. Drainage canals turned into water-themed leisure zones, new botanical gardens on the bay. High-tech industries moving in from Europe. Biomedical research hubs. Another terminal at the airport. New restaurant and entertainment developments. A new land-reclamation project announced. A sale at the brand new mall. A hawker centre closed for renovation. A museum upgraded and reopened.

Hang on, we were here six months ago, where did that building come from? And where did our favourite pub go? It was here last week.

Singapore is going places fast in its quest to become an even more modern, liveable city. For the visitor, this can only be a good thing. As for Mr & Mrs Average Singapore, well, it'll happen whether they like it or not, so they have no choice but to try and keep up.



*Futuristic architecture at Peddler's Walk, Clarke Quay (see the boxed text, p57)*

# GETTING STARTED

Singapore is a breeze – possibly one of the least challenging cities in the world to visit. Plonk some 10-year-olds at Changi Airport and chances are that within a couple of hours they'll be booked into a hotel, scooting around on the MRT, munching on chicken rice and deciding which movie to see first.

They'll need plenty of pocket money, though. Singapore is not the cheapest destination, though it's possible to cut costs dramatically by eating at hawker centres and using public transport. Accommodation can also fill up fast, so it's a good idea to book a room well in advance. If you're coming in September during the Formula One grand prix, reschedule or be prepared to pay well over the odds for a room.

## WHEN TO GO

Any time's a good time to go to Singapore. There are cultural events and festivals all year round, from fashion to film to food, and because Singapore is home to so many ethnic communities, you can hardly step outside without bumping into a festival. The less spectacular, less extravagant aspects of traditional culture are visible, and even the casual visitor will notice the numerous little street shrines, with their incense sticks, offerings and pyramids of oranges, that are inserted sometimes into the most unexpected corners.

Practically on the equator, Singapore is constantly hot (the temperature never drops below 20°C) and humid and gets fairly steady year-round rainfall. The wettest months are supposedly November to January, when it's also a degree or two cooler, while the driest are supposedly May to July, but in reality there is little distinction between the seasons. Similarly, there is no high and low tourism season as such, though during local school holidays (see p196) and major cultural festivals things become noticeably more crowded.

## FESTIVALS

Singapore is awash with festivals – religious, cultural, national and commercial. Religious festivals in particular are timed according to lunar calendars, but the Singapore Tourism Board's online what's-on guide usually lists precise days.

### January

#### PONGGAL

A four-day harvest festival celebrated by southern Indians, especially at the Sri Mariamman Temple (p61) on South Bridge Rd or in Little India. It's traditional for people to

greet each other by saying '*pal pongitha*' (Has the milk boiled over in your house?). Sweetened, spiced rice is cooked in milk and allowed to boil over to symbolise bounty, and the boiling over is accompanied by cries of '*pongollo ponggal!*'

#### THAIPUSAM

This is one of the most dramatic Hindu festivals, in which devotees honour Lord Subramaniam with acts of amazing masochism. In Singapore, Hindus march in a procession from the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple (p70) on Serangoon Rd to the Chettiar Hindu Temple (p57) on Tank Rd carrying *kavadis* (heavy metal frames decorated with peacock feathers, fruit and flowers). The *kavadis* are hung from followers' bodies with metal hooks and spikes that are driven into their flesh. Other devotees pierce their cheeks and tongues with metal skewers (*vel*), or walk on sandals of nails.

### February

#### CHINESE NEW YEAR

Dragon dances and pedestrian parades mark the start of the New Year. Families hold open house, unmarried relatives (especially children) receive *ang pow* (gifts of money in red packets), businesses clear their debts and everybody says '*Gung hei faat choi*' (I hope that you gain lots of money). Chinatown is lit up, especially Eu Tong Sen St and New Bridge Rd, and the 'Singapore River Hongbao Special' features *pasar malam* (night market) stalls, variety shows and fireworks.

#### CHINGAY

[www.chingay.org.sg](http://www.chingay.org.sg)

Singapore's biggest street parade occurs on the 22nd day after the Chinese New

Year. It's a flamboyant multicultural event, with subliminal themes bolstering the social order, and held either along Orchard Rd or around the Colonial District, with flag bearers, lion dancers, floats and other cultural performers. Buy tickets in advance for a seat in the viewing galleries, or battle the crowds for a place at the roadside barriers.

## March

### MOSAIC MUSIC FESTIVAL

[www.mosaicmusicfestival.com](http://www.mosaicmusicfestival.com)

Annual 10-day feast of world music, jazz and indie laid on by the Esplanade theatre, featuring acts local and international, renowned and obscure. The schedule is peppered with free concerts held in the Esplanade's smaller venues.

### SINGAPORE FASHION FESTIVAL

[www.singaporefashionfestival.com.sg](http://www.singaporefashionfestival.com.sg)

Not quite Paris, but probably as close as you'll get in Southeast Asia, this festival also features a fortnight of shows from local designers as well as prominent international names.

## April

### QING MING FESTIVAL

On All Souls' Day, Chinese traditionally visit the tombs of their ancestors to clean and repair them and make offerings. Singapore's largest temple complex, Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (p86), in the centre of the island, is the place to be on consecutive weekends throughout the month, when relatives descend on columbaria en masse, causing chaos on the surrounding roads.

### WORLD GOURMET SUMMIT

[www.worldgourmetsummit.com](http://www.worldgourmetsummit.com)

Celebrating the national passion, the month-long Singapore Food Festival ([www.singaporefoodfestival.com](http://www.singaporefoodfestival.com)) from the end of March to end of April (though it has been known to switch months) has special offerings at everything from hawk centres to top-end restaurants. The two-week World Gourmet Summit is a gathering of top international chefs, with foodie events, classes and dinners.

## INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

[www.filmfest.org.sg](http://www.filmfest.org.sg)

Independent and art-house movies are pretty thin on the ground in Hollywood-obsessed Singapore, so this showcase of world cinema is a rare chance to see cinematic talent from some of the planet's other countries.

## GOOD FRIDAY

A candle-lit procession bearing the figure of the crucified Christ takes place at St Joseph's Catholic Church (Map pp52-3) at Victoria St.

## May

### VESAK DAY

Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death are celebrated by various events, including the release of caged birds to symbolise the setting free of captive souls. Temples such as Sakaya Muni Buddha Gaya Temple (p70) in Little India throng with worshippers, but the centre of the activity is the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple (p61) on South Bridge Rd.

## June

### GREAT SINGAPORE SALE

[www.greatsingaporesale.com](http://www.greatsingaporesale.com)

Runs from the end of May to the beginning of July (it seems to get longer and broader every year). Orchard Rd and the big malls are decked with banners, and retailers around the island cut prices (and wheel out the stuff they couldn't sell earlier in the year). Shoppers' paradise, or desperate tourist-board gimmick to bolster the city's weakening position among Asia's retail giants? Opinions are divided.

### BIRTHDAY OF THE THIRD PRINCE

During this Chinese festival, the child-god is honoured with processions, and devotees go into a trance and spear themselves with spikes and swords. Celebrations are held at various temples and on Queen St (Map pp52-3).

### DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL

[www.sdba.org.sg](http://www.sdba.org.sg)

Commemorating the death of a Chinese saint who drowned himself as a protest against government corruption, this

## ADVANCE PLANNING

Checking the Singapore Tourism Board online calendar ([www.visitsingapore.com](http://www.visitsingapore.com)), the Sistic website ([www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg)) and the Esplanade theatre site ([www.esplanade.com](http://www.esplanade.com)) will yield just about every upcoming concert, play or sports event in Singapore. Check a few weeks in advance and get your tickets booked.

If you're a jazz fan, take a look at the [www.southbridgejazz.com.sg](http://www.southbridgejazz.com.sg) and [www.blujaz.net](http://www.blujaz.net) for upcoming gigs.

If you're planning a fancy night out, some restaurants get booked out days, if not weeks, ahead, particularly at weekends. Au Jardin (p134) is a notable example. Singapore has enough restaurants for you to never be completely stuck, but phoning a week ahead is advisable to avoid disappointment.

festival is celebrated with boat races at Bedok Reservoir. Check the website for other races held throughout the year.

## SINGAPORE ARTS FESTIVAL

[www.singaporeartsfest.com](http://www.singaporeartsfest.com)

Organised by the National Arts Council, this is Singapore's premier arts festival with a world-class program of art, dance, drama and music.

## July

### SINGAPORE FOOD FESTIVAL

[www.singaporefoodfestival.com](http://www.singaporefoodfestival.com)

A month-long celebration of all things edible and Singaporean. Well-known restaurants lay on events and there are cooking classes, food-themed tours for visitors and plenty of opportunities to sample classic Malay, Chinese and Indian dishes – though if there are discounts or freebies on offer expect to be trampled in the stampede.

## August

### SINGAPORE NATIONAL DAY

[www.ndp.org.sg](http://www.ndp.org.sg)

Held on 9 August (though dress rehearsals on the two prior weekends are almost as popular), this huge nationalist frenzy takes the whole year to prepare and sees military parades, extravagant civilian processions, air force fly-bys, frenzied flag-waving and a concluding fireworks display. Look out for the slightly unsettling rows of white-clad People's Action Party members surveying the proceedings. Tickets sell out well in advance.

### WOMAD

Marking the end of National Day celebrations, this festival of world music usually takes place on Fort Canning Green (p55).

## HUNGRY GHOST FESTIVAL

Marks the day when the souls of the dead are released to walk the earth for feasting and entertainment. The Chinese respond to this morbid notion by placing offerings of food on the street and lighting fires. Chinese operas and other events are laid on to keep these restless spirits happy.

## September

### FORMULA ONE GRAND PRIX

[www.f1singapore.com](http://www.f1singapore.com)

We're jumping the gun predicting this will be an annual event, but F1's first ever night race held in 2008 on the scenic street circuit around Marina Bay is vying to cement its place on the calendar.

### BIRTHDAY OF THE MONKEY GOD

T'se Tien Tai Seng Yeh's birthday is celebrated twice a year at the Monkey God Temple (Map pp62–3) on Seng Poh Rd near the Tiong Bahru Market. Mediums pierce their cheeks and tongues with skewers and go into a trance, during which they write special charms in blood.

### MOONCAKE FESTIVAL

Celebrated on the full moon of the eighth lunar month, and also known as the Lantern Festival. Mooncakes are made with bean paste, lotus seeds and sometimes a duck egg, though a endless variety of flavours are now available to suit modern tastes.

### NAVARATHRI

In the Tamil month of Purattasi, the Hindu festival of 'Nine Nights' is dedicated to the wives of Siva, Vishnu and Brahma. Young girls are dressed as the goddess Kali; this is a good opportunity to see traditional Indian dancing and singing. The Chettiar Hindu Temple (p57),

Sri Mariamman Temple (p61) and Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple (p70) are the main areas of activity.

## October

### DEEPAVALI

Rama's victory over the demon king Ravana is celebrated during the 'Festival of Lights', with tiny oil lamps outside Hindu homes and lights all over Hindu temples. Little India is ablaze with lights for a month, culminating in a huge street party on the eve of the holiday.

### PILGRIMAGE TO KUSU ISLAND

Tua Pek Kong, the god of prosperity, is honoured by Taoists in Singapore, who make a pilgrimage to the shrine on Kusu in the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, sometime between late September and November. At weekends the island almost sinks under the weight of pilgrims.

### HARI RAYA PUASA

Also known as Hari Raya Aidilfitri, this festival celebrates the end of the Ramadan fasting month (it can also occur in September). Head to Kampong Glam (the Arab Quarter) for nightly feasts during Ramadan.

## November

### HARI RAYA HAJI

An event celebrating the conclusion of the pilgrimage to Mecca. Animals (mostly sheep shipped from Australia) are ritually slaughtered in the mosques, after which the Koran dictates a portion of the meat must be handed out to the poor. (The event will take place in November in the years 2009, 2010 and 2011.)

### THIMITHI

At this fire-walking ceremony, Hindu devotees prove their faith by walking across glowing coals at the Sri Mariamman Temple (p61).

### SINGAPORE BUSKERS FESTIVAL

Southeast Asia's largest showcase of street performing talent, from acrobats, artists, magicians and contortionists to the inevitable jugglers and mime artists, takes place principally along Orchard Rd and the Singapore River and in Marina Sq.

## December

### CHRISTMAS

Singapore has enthusiastically embraced everything we all love about Christmas: rampant commercialism, vacuous sentiment and gaudy municipal decoration. But no matter how cynical you are (and we are pretty cynical), the light display that stretches for a kilometre or more down Orchard Rd starting in late November is breathtaking.

## COSTS & MONEY

Singapore can cater to all budgets, but compared with its Southeast Asian neighbours it's far from cheap, particularly since hotel rates skyrocketed in 2007.

On the tightest possible budget, it's possible to scrape by on \$50 to \$60 a day (assuming you actually want to do something other than sit in a hostel watching TV and eating instant noodles). A hostel bed costs from \$16 at the grungy end to \$30 for the best. Eating at hawker centres costs between \$2.50 and \$6 for standard fare, while meals at food courts in downtown shopping malls generally cost a little more – add an extra \$2 as a rough estimate. Visiting museums during free times can cut your costs even further.

Midrange accommodation ranges from around \$90 a night for a clean, functional room in one of the less swanky city neighbourhoods to \$300 for a three-star hotel room. Add a few sights, some restrained shopping, a modest lunch and dinner in a good restaurant, plus a few taxi rides and you should budget for an extra \$200 to \$300 on top of your room.

Occupying a top-end hotel, splurging on shopping and going out to the city's fanciest restaurants and bars, you can drop more than \$1000 in a day without much effort.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

[www.disgruntledsingaporean.blogspot.com](http://www.disgruntledsingaporean.blogspot.com) Series of articles and musings from an opposition standpoint, plus links to dozens of other similarly dissenting blogs.

[www.mrbrown.com](http://www.mrbrown.com) Website of blogger and podcaster Lee Kin Mun, who achieved infamy when his column in the *Today* newspaper was canned after he wrote too frankly about rising living costs in Singapore. The podcast, accessible through the website, is still popular.



[www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg) One-stop site selling tickets to pretty much every concert, play or other performance taking place in Singapore, with a useful events calendar.

[www.stomp.com.sg](http://www.stomp.com.sg) Community site run by the official mouthpiece media company SPH, embodying the kind of carefully monitored 'open society' the government is trying to foster. For an insight into issues that preoccupy Singaporeans, check the 'Singapore Seen' section.

[www.talkingcock.com](http://www.talkingcock.com) The original satirical website that was actually debated in parliament. Ironic takes on the news of the day, plus the priceless Coxford Singlish Dictionary.

[www.uberture.com](http://www.uberture.com) Nightlife, entertainment, shopping, society and pics of people smiling in nightclubs.

[www.visitsingapore.com](http://www.visitsingapore.com) Singapore Tourism Board information on the city's top attractions, plus a useful events calendar.

## SUSTAINABLE SINGAPORE

Singapore is well equipped for visitors wanting to reduce their impact on the environment. If travelling from Malaysia, or even Thailand, consider coming by train. It's no more expensive and a lot more scenic.

Once in the city, use trains and buses as much as possible. The central city is also very

### HOW MUCH?

Litre of petrol \$2.01

Litre of bottled water \$1.20

Bottle of Tiger beer (in a hawker centre) \$5.50

Bottle of Tiger beer (in a city pub) \$12-plus

Souvenir T-shirt \$5

Bowl of Katong laksa \$3.50

Latte at Coffee Bean \$5.50

Kopi (coffee) at a kopitiam (coffeeshop) \$1.25

Peak-hour taxi from Orchard to Chinatown \$12

Most expensive MRT trip \$1.90

compact for walking, but we wouldn't recommend hiring a bicycle to get around. Drivers can be highly aggressive and particularly unsympathetic to cyclists' space.

Air-conditioning is ubiquitous in Singapore – most hotels have it. However, it might be possible to switch it off and get a fan, or sleep with the windows open if there's a decent sea breeze blowing.

The island has slowly woken up to recycling – there are bins scattered around the city – but the average shop assistant and check-out worker retains a pathological obsession with handing out as many plastic bags as possible.

# THE AUTHORS

## Mat Oakley



Mat was born and raised in Watford by a Scouse dad and a Yorkshire mum, and has never forgiven either of them (though he is thankful his Dad persuaded his four-year-old self to support Liverpool, rather than his mum's home

town of Leeds). Since escaping England in 1993, he has lived and worked as a journalist and author in Thailand, Laos, Australia and Fiji, and has spent the last four years in Singapore with his wife and three cats. Apart from the infinite possibilities of finding new places to eat in Singapore, he enjoys exploring the oases of greenery in the city, and hopping on his motorbike in search of a clear stretch of Singapore road (hard to find, but they do exist). Mat was the coordinating author and wrote the *Introducing Singapore, Getting Started, Background, Shopping, Eating, Transport and Directory* chapters.

### MAT'S TOP SINGAPORE DAY

I'd start the day on the veranda of the Rider's Café (p135), part of the Bukit Timah Saddle Club, and probably the most peaceful, rural breakfast spot in Singapore. If it's a weekday,

I'd ride to East Coast Park (p80) and have a few spins around the Ski360° (p157) lagoon on the waterskis for a couple of hours, then wander over to the East Coast Lagoon Food Village (p134) for a bowl of laksa for lunch.

In the afternoon I'd go into the city, spend a few hours browsing books and antiques at Tanglin Shopping Centre (p112), then wander through the National Museum (p56) and the Colonial District, hitting the Elgin Bridge just after dark, looking across the river at Boat Quay (p57) as it lights up, with the skyscrapers towering behind it. It's a magnificent sight.

Thirsty work, this walking, so where next? The Archipelago brewpub? Oosters for some Belgian beer? The upstairs lounge by the window at Harry's (p141)? Whatever the choice, it has to be Little India for dinner: Gayatri (p129), Anjappar (p129) or Andhra Curry (p129), washed down with a beer at the Prince of Wales (p144).

## Joshua Samuel Brown



Joshua Samuel Brown is a writer and photo-journalist who has tramped the globe since late adolescence, writing features articles for publications both illustrious and obscure. An on-again off-again expatriate, Joshua has been com-

ing to Singapore since the late '90s. He currently divides his time between Asia and North America, with occasional forays into Central America. When not writing for Lonely Planet, Joshua lives with his wife, four dogs and six cats on an organic farm in rural Texas, where he writes political essays, short stories and endless emails, trying in vain to avoid manual labour. His blog, Snarky Tofu, is erudite, opinionated, bizarre and online at [www.josambro.blogspot.com](http://www.josambro.blogspot.com). Offering tales of betel-nut beauties and tips on avoiding jail time by impersonating a Mormon, his first solo book is *Vignettes of Taiwan*. Joshua wrote the Neighbourhoods, Drinking & Night-life, Arts & Leisure, Sleeping and Excursions chapters and the Arts section of the Background chapter.

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