

Singapore: Travel Information

From the opium dens of the past to the hi-tech wizardry of today.



Introduction

Singapore has traded in its rough-and-ready opium dens and pearl luggers for towers of concrete and glass, and its steamy rickshaw image for hi-tech wizardry, but you can still recapture the colonial era with a Singapore Sling under the languorous ceiling fans at Raffles Hotel.



Weather Overview

Singapore is one giant sauna anytime of the year. November to January are the wettest months but the other months are not exactly dry. The only real deterrent is the lack of refreshing winds during March and September. Generally expect average temperatures to reach around 31°C (88°F) during the day and linger around 24°C (75°F) at night.

History:

Pre 20C

According to Malay legend, a Sumatran prince encountered a lion - considered a good omen - on Temasek, prompting him to found Singapura, or Lion City. It mattered little that lions had never inhabited Singapore (more likely the prince had seen a tiger); what did matter was the establishment of the region as a minor trading post for the powerful Sumatran Srivijaya empire and as a subsequent vassal state of the Javanese Majapahit empire in the mid-13th century.

Singapore might have remained a quiet backwater if not for Sir Stamford Raffles' intervention in 1819. The British had first established a presence in the Straits of Melaka (now called Malacca) in the 18th century when the East India Company set out to secure and protect its line of trade from China to the colonies in India. Fearing another resurgence of expansionism in the Dutch - which had been the dominant European trading power in the region for nearly 200 years - Raffles argued for an increased British presence, which he was promptly given. Under his tutelage, Singapore's forlorn reputation as a fetid, disease-ridden colony was soon forgotten. Migrants attracted by a tariff-free port poured in by the thousands, and a flourishing colony with a military and naval base was established.

Modern

Singapore's inexorable growth continued into the 20th century. However, the outbreak of WWII brutally exposed the fallacy of British might: they suffered the ignominy of defeat when Japan invaded the colony in 1941. The British were welcomed back after Japan's surrender in 1945, but their right to rule was no longer assured.

By the 1950s, burgeoning nationalism had led to the formation of a number of political parties as Singapore moved slowly towards self-government. The People's Action Party, with the Cambridge-educated Lee Kuan Yew as leader, was elected in 1959. Lee became prime minister, a position he was to hold for the next 31 years. In 1963, Singapore formed a union with Malaya (now Malaysia) but by 1965, the nascent federation was in tatters. Singapore became independent soon after and was once again the economic success story of the region. Shrewd and pathologically pragmatic, Lee fashioned a government heavy on strict social order and the suppression of political opposition.

Lee Kuan Yew resigned as prime minister in 1990 and was replaced by Goh Chok Tong, a leader more inclined towards consultation and liberalism. In 2004, Lee Kuan Yew's son, Lee Hsien Loong, took over as prime minister, with Goh Chok Tong assuming the new role of Senior Minister and Lee Kuan Yew becoming Minister Mentor. The country's first presidential election was held in August 1993 - prior to that, presidents were elected by members of parliament. The most recent election was in August 2005, when SR Nathan was returned to the post. Opponents who wanted to run against him were deemed ineligible.

Recent

Economically, the Southeast Asian region's late-1990s downturn (a euphemism if ever there was one) hit Singapore as hard as anywhere else - in one three-month period in late 1998, unemployment in the country doubled. The city-state is slowly bouncing back, however, and on the street things are lively as ever, though the exodus of well-trained professionals seeking glittering international opportunities is a growing concern. Modern-day Singapore is well known for its clean, modern attitude but part of the efficiency involves a continued tough civil order stance, especially with regard to hard-line criminals. Since 1991 the Singapore government has executed over 400 murderers and (more commonly) drug-traffickers, giving the tiny nation the highest execution rate per population in the world.

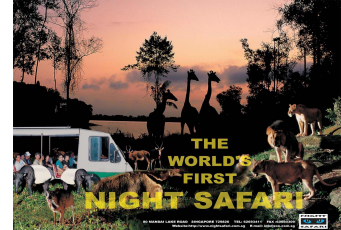
Places of Interest

Singapore Zoo & Night Safari

Tel: 656269 3411

The Singapore Zoo is world class. Set on a peninsula jutting into the Upper Seletar Reservoir, the zoo's 28 lush, landscaped hectares are home to more than 4000 residents. Newer attractions like the 'Australian Outback' exhibit and the 'Hamadryas Baboons - The Great Rift Valley of Ethiopia' convey entire ecosystems: animal, mineral, vegetable and human.

Web: www.zoo.com.sg



Asian Civilisations Museum

A Timeless Realm

Tel : 656332 7798

Built in 1865, the imposing Empress Place building (named in honour of Queen Victoria) lived through various incarnations before it was turned into a museum in 1988. The museum hosts touring and special exhibitions in addition to its 10 thematic galleries over three levels exploring traditional aspects of pan-Asian culture and civilisation.

Web: www.nhb.gov.sg/acm

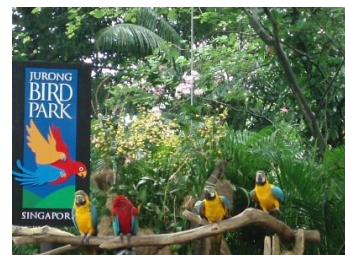


Jurong Bird Park

Squawker Centre

Tel: 656265 0022

Even those of us who don't like to wear khaki waterproofs and hide in bushes all day with binoculars strapped to our heads will love this place. Covering 20 ha in the west of the island, the



bird park is a feathery delight, particularly the Waterfall Aviary; a huge open-air forest dome featuring a 30m waterfall and thousands of beautiful 'free-ranging' birds. Check out the flamingo lake, pelican cove and underwater viewing gallery.

Web: www.birdpark.com

Travel advice:

Danger and Annoyance

Singapore is a very safe country with low crime rates. Pickpockets are not unknown but in general crime is not a problem. This is not surprising given the harsh penalties meted out to offenders and the fact that hundreds of suspected criminals are held in jail without trial simply because the government does not have enough evidence to convict them. The importation of drugs carries the death penalty, which is regularly carried out. Simply, drugs in Singapore should be avoided at all costs.

The nanny state of Singapore takes a tough line on antisocial issues - the most famous being its ban on chewing gum (well, it does mess up the pavement and could stop the MRT from working). While having gum for your own consumption is no big deal, bringing it in bulk into Singapore will attract a heavy fine - the standard way of stamping out un-Singaporean activities.

Smoking in all public places, littering, jay walking and eating or drinking on the MRT are all punishable with hefty fines.

Health Conditions

Hepatitis

Getting there

Overview

Most airlines fly into Singapore's heavily trafficked Changi International Airport. The best way to get from the airport to the city (20km/12mi away) is by train, but there is also a wide choice of bus and taxi services. Singapore is the southern terminus of Malaysia's rail system, and three trains go to Kuala Lumpur each day. If you're going to or coming from Malaysia, your options are myriad, ranging from comfy buses to ferries and even taxis.

Plane

A swag of airlines fly into Singapore's ultramodern Changi International Airport - often voted one of the best airports in the world. It's certainly one of the most heavily trafficked, with a glut of facilities ranging from 24-hour meditation centres to boutique shopping - and even a little-known rooftop swimming pool. The best way to get from Changi Airport to the city (20km/12mi away) is by train. There is also a wide choice of bus and taxi services.

Ferry

A passenger ferry operates between north Changi and Tanjung Belungkor, east of Johor Bahru. There are no direct passenger ferries between Singapore and the main ports of Indonesia, but it is possible to travel between the two countries via the Indonesian islands of the Riau Archipelago, immediately south of Singapore. Modern ferries link Singapore with the islands of Batam and Bintan in the archipelago. Speedboats link Batam with Pekanbaru in Sumatra, and several ships a week link Bintan with Jakarta.

Bus

Lots of visitors to Singapore combine their stay with a visit to Malaysia, which is just a kilometre away across the causeway over the Straits of Johor. You can travel between Malaysia and Singapore very easily by bus. Immaculate air-conditioned buses link Singapore to almost all large Malaysian cities; fares are generally inexpensive.

Taxi

You can travel between Malaysia (just a kilometre away) and Singapore very easily by taxi.

Car

A second road link has opened between Singapore and Malaysia to ease congestion - a bridge between Tuas in Western Singapore and Geylang Patah. It's known pragmatically enough as the Second Link. It can only be used if you have your own transport.

Train

Singapore is the southern terminus of Malaysia's rail system and there are three trains a day to Kuala Lumpur (four on weekends).

Getting around

Overview

Singapore's public transport is plentiful and varied. You have the option of using metered taxis (although rickshaws are really only in Chinatown and the back streets), the MRT subway system or the convenient bus services. You can get around on the water by ferry or bumboat.

Bus

Singapore has a comprehensive bus network with frequent services; it's cheap and simple to use.

Underground rail

Singapore has a convenient Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) subway system that won't cost you a fortune or tax your brain too much.

Taxi

There is a good supply of taxis and all are metered. Taxis can be flagged down on the street or found at taxi stands near major hotels and shopping centres. During heavy rain, peak hours or late at night, taxis can however be almost impossible to get in many parts of the city centre.

Small boat

You can charter bumboats (motorised sampans) to take various tours on the Singapore River, while luxurious junk tours can be taken around the harbour.

Car

There are branches of all major rent-a-car companies. Daily rates can be prohibitively high, but weekly rates are reasonable.

Ferry

Regular ferry services operate from the World Trade Centre to Sentosa and other islands, including Batam in Indonesia.

Cycle taxi

Rickshaws have all but disappeared from Singapore's main streets but can still be found operating for tourists in Chinatown and some central city streets; agree on a fare beforehand.

Fast Facts:**Time Zone**

GMT/UTC +8

Weight measures

Metric

Area Sqkm

683 sq km

Area Code

Local Area Code: There are no area codes in Singapore; just dial the eight-digit number

Population

4,500,000

Spoken Language

English (official)

English is widespread. Children are taught English at school but also learn their mother tongue to make sure they don't lose contact with their traditions. The only communication problem English-speakers are likely to have in Singapore is with older Singaporeans who did not learn English at school, though trying to understand the unique patois called Singlish - which uses a clipped form of English mixed with Malay and Hokkien words - can be taxing.

Malay (official)

Mostly restricted to the Malay community.

Chinese (official)

Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakka, are still widely spoken. The government's long-standing campaign to promote Mandarin has been very successful and increasing numbers of Chinese now speak Mandarin at home.

Tamil (official)

Tamil is the main Indian language, though Malayalam and Hindi are also spoken.

Currency

Singapore Dollar (S\$)