

ALUMNI RELATIONS

guide to

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO | WELCOME TO SINGAPORE

Singapore



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO



contents



GUIDE TO SINGAPORE

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introduction

» **WELCOME TO SINGAPORE!** We're proud to have you join a community of over 300 people living here who've attended Waterloo at some point in their past, as an undergraduate, post-graduate or on exchange with us. As you get a chance to explore the country and the region, you'll quickly realize why so many of us now make Singapore our home.

This guide will give you a great starting point as you roam around, and hopefully help ease the culture shock. A special thank you to Laura Tanner, the main author, for her thoroughness, wit and humour in putting this together.

Finally, don't forget to join our [Facebook page](#) and [LinkedIn group](#) to get the scoop on the different events we host each term.

Enjoy your time here, be safe, and eat lots!



JON (BMATH '01)

University of Waterloo Singapore Alumni Chapter



arriving in Singapore

» IMMIGRATION AND VISAS

In order to live, work, or study in Singapore, you must have the appropriate visa. In Singapore, government administration is straightforward, and information is available online, so that you simply need to follow the process. The official information on Student Passes is available [here](#), and an unofficial guide to the overall immigration process can be found [here](#).

Before you leave Canada, make sure that your passport is valid for an additional six months from the date you depart Singapore (for stays of a defined timeframe), since Singapore and many neighbouring countries do not allow entry if your passport expires within six months.

If you are an exchange student, your school will facilitate the application for your student visa. This process should be smooth, but make sure you follow instructions carefully as there may be an application fee to pay online before your departure. In this case, when you arrive through customs in Singapore, you will exchange an invitation letter for a receipt document upon entry. Subsequently, you can choose to have your student visa processed through your school, in which case they will take this document and you should not travel until you receive your student visa card a few weeks later. At the time of writing, students were also able to make their own appointment with the Immigration and Checkpoint Authority (ICA) in order to complete the process sooner. In any case, read the instructions provided, so as to have the correct documents and passport-sized photos ready.

» SINGAPORE CUSTOMS

Singapore Customs imposes restrictions on what goods can be brought into Singapore. These rules are clearly detailed [here](#) and [here](#). In particular, please note Singapore's [rules](#) on drug offenses, including the possession of small quantities of illegal drugs. When in doubt, note that Singapore is very good at detailing this information online. On the other hand, you will hear different versions of these rules from friends and colleagues, so it's always best to check. For example, the [Agri-food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore](#) will explain to you that, while importing mutton and seafood from Canada is legal, beef hasn't made the list, yet.

» PACKING CONSIDERATIONS

While Singapore is a hot country, it can be chilly in the air-conditioning, especially in offices, some restaurants, and movie theaters. Singapore has many large modern malls filled with the foreign brands that you would find back home, along with street markets where you can buy budget summer clothes, depending on your size. If you forget anything or have packed inappropriately, don't fret! The drugstores are comparable to what you would find back home, and grocery stores stock imported goods as well as local delicacies. You can buy just about anything here, but certain items, such as pharmaceuticals, toiletries, large-sized clothing and electronics are generally more expensive. If you have spare luggage space, you might want to use it. Past students have recommended bringing sunscreen, a compact umbrella, a scarf for cool air-conditioning, and at least one formal outfit for bars with dress codes.

» CANADIANS IN SINGAPORE

As you will see below, Singapore is not a new location for Canadians. Here are some of the resources available to Canadians in Singapore.

The University of Waterloo Alumni Association runs regular events in Singapore, providing you with an opportunity to meet other students, as well as UWaterloo alumni in the region. Joint events are sometimes held with other Canadian university alumni chapters. Please join the Facebook group [here](#), as well as the LinkedIn group [here](#).

There are several organizations linking Canadians in Singapore, including the [Canadian Association](#), the [Canadian Alumni Group](#), and the [Canadian Chamber of Commerce](#). Linking all of these is the High Commission, whose [Facebook page](#) will alert you to upcoming events. You should also register your whereabouts with the Government of Canada [here](#).

» A NOTE FROM THE HIGH COMMISSION

The High Commission of Canada is pleased to welcome you to Singapore for your exchange/co-op term. Studying and working abroad will provide you with a life-changing opportunity to learn about a new place, meet new friends and have wonderful experiences. We are glad to see that the University of Waterloo has prepared this invaluable booklet to help you settle into your new home away from home.



HEATHER GRANT
High Commissioner of Canada in Singapore

» THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO WELCOMES YOU

On behalf of the University of Waterloo, I wanted to wish you the very best during your time abroad. I hope that your adventure is filled with countless memorable moments and experiences.

Throughout your time in Singapore, I encourage you to stay connected to the University in as many ways as you can and help us to represent our University around the world. We have a strong global network of engaged partners and alumni and with your participation, that network will continue to expand.

I hope you will join me in helping to shape Waterloo's future by sharing your experiences, knowledge, and passion with others. Most of all, be safe, wear sunscreen and have fun!

Sincerely,



PAUL SALVINI (BMATH '92)
uwaterloo.ca/alumni/events/location/SG

health and safety in Singapore

» HEALTHCARE AND HEALTH INSURANCE

Singapore has a world class private healthcare system, which offers various different levels of care. Most importantly, this means that you will need to pay for medical treatment at the time that you are receiving it. Fees can run from \$20 for a GP consultation at a low cost clinic, to several hundred for a medical scan or specialist treatment, to tens of thousands of dollars for emergency treatment and surgery. This means that you will either need to pay personally, or you will need your health insurance to provide a guarantee of payment to the healthcare provider. In addition, while specialist consultations and treatment are readily available, you may be offered optional services such as additional scans or cosmetic services.

To best manage your health insurance, here is a quick checklist:

- » Ensure that you have health insurance that covers you while in Singapore. You may already be covered via credit cards, Waterloo health insurance, as a dependent or via travel insurance. More information is [here](#).
- » For students studying at NUS, check what coverage is provided by the university. There is a clinic on campus with a low cost for consultations for basic needs and prescriptions.
- » Understand how your coverage works (coverage for non-emergency health needs, how to make a claim, etc.)
- » Program your insurance's emergency number into your phone, and make sure it's not a "1-800" number that won't work here.
- » Get health insurance that covers you in other countries if you wish to travel.
- » Alert, if necessary, Services Ontario to maintain your OHIP coverage [here](#).

If you do feel unwell in Singapore, there are many options available to help. [Here](#) is a guide to healthcare services in Singapore. In an emergency, call an ambulance. The public ambulance number in Singapore is 995. Private hospitals have their own, separate ambulance services.

»» HEALTH RISKS AND VACCINATIONS

Singapore is a low risk place to live, work and study. The water and food are safe, and healthcare is readily available. There are a few health risks in Singapore that are different than in Canada. Prepare ahead of your travels by getting the recommended vaccinations for the locations where you intend to travel (for example, hepatitis A and B and typhoid). The Canadian government's recommendations are [here](#), and the American CDC information is [here](#).

DENGUE AND CHIKYUNGAYA

In recent years, Singapore, along with other Asian countries, has seen an increase in the mosquito-borne diseases of Dengue and Chikyungaya. Dengue, the more common of the two, can cause illness ranging from flu-like symptoms to much more serious hemorrhagic symptoms. Singapore has extensive programs in place to limit mosquito breeding sites and to track and manage Dengue outbreaks. The Canadian government offers advice on how to avoid mosquito bites [here](#).

MALARIA

While there is no malaria in Singapore, note that it does exist in the surrounding countries, especially in rural areas. Malaria is largely preventable through avoiding mosquito bites as well as through anti-malaria drugs which can be prescribed by a doctor. Note that these need to be taken ahead of time, and may be cheaper to obtain in Canada than in Singapore.

FUNGAL INFECTIONS

Athlete's foot, ringworm, white spots and other fungal infections are more common in the humidity. Luckily, creams and powders to treat these are readily available at pharmacies.

»» SAFETY AND SECURITY

Singapore is an extremely safe country, and rates of crime are very low. It is generally safe to walk alone, regardless of gender, even at night. That being said, petty and other crime does still exist so take precautions as you would anywhere else.

Hazards in Singapore include the heat and heatstroke, so drink lots of water. Traffic rules are different than in Canada, and cars do not yield for pedestrians on driveways and side streets, which can pose a risk for the unaccustomed. Note also that cars drive on the left side of the road. Singapore's tropical climate includes heavy storms and large rain gutters, some of which can be uncovered and deep.

It is also important for foreigners to be aware of Singapore's unique regulations in certain areas — please see "A Fine City," below.

banking

» BANKING IN SINGAPORE

Credit cards are widely accepted in Singapore for purchases such as at malls, sit-down restaurants, tourist destinations, to pay for residence at school, and of course, anything you purchase online. Note, however, that your card may charge a poor exchange rate (adding 2% on foreign transactions is normal), and in addition may have foreign transaction fees.

You will need cash for smaller transactions, such as food courts, taxis, subway pass refills, drinks and cover at bars, and small goods in local stores. There are many ATMs in Singapore, so if you're using your foreign account, it would be ideal to talk to your home branch to secure a low fee international withdrawal fee.

In Singapore, you may need to open a local bank account, depending on the duration of your stay. Most students use DBS, since it has the largest number of machines on the island and may have offers for students. To set up a bank account, you will need a valid local phone number, address, as well as your passport. For students at NUS, there are banks on campus, or located across the island. While having a local account can be advantageous (and is likely required if you're a co-op student), it may require a minimum deposit, so note whether you will lose a percentage in the foreign transaction fee (ex: 2-3%) to make this deposit. Services such as Western Union and XE.com can help transfer your money from Canada to Singapore. Having a local bank card can be very helpful for paying local bills, and can also be used as an EZ-link pass on the subway system.

housing

» HOUSING IN SINGAPORE

Finding a place to live in Singapore, especially for less than two years, is no small feat. If you've already done so, kick back and crack open a beer. For students living in university residences (called hostels), this also doesn't apply to you. If you haven't got a place to stay yet, start by learning about the housing scene. Property rental in Singapore is more expensive than in Canada, and getting a lease usually involves working with a real estate agent. For this reason, many students live in shared housing, and rent a room rather than an apartment. Furthermore, since 80% of Singapore residents live in Housing Development Board public housing, known as HDBs, the proportion of housing which is rentable is low. Some HDBs are for rent, however, and some may be offered as shared housing.

In addition to HDBs, Singapore has many condominium buildings, which are apartment buildings with varying levels of facilities such as swimming pools, tennis courts, etc. These apartments are generally leased on two year agreements, but again shared units might be available. Other forms of housing, such as landed houses, are less common in Singapore.

While Singapore has a great public transport system, you'll still want to learn about the area where you'll be working/going to school, so as to figure out where you might live. You can check out the districts of Singapore [here](#), and look at potential rental properties for each one [here](#).

At the same time, you'll want to check out your commute, so check out the Transport section.

Now that you're oriented, check out some of these resources to look for a home:

- » Craigslist has listings of shared rooms and apartments [here](#).
- » Gumtree is another resource for sharing flats, available [here](#).
- » Property guru has excellent [property listings](#), as well as guides on how to rent in Singapore [here](#) and [here](#).
- » Singapore Expats has fewer property listings, but has a good guide on how rentals work [here](#), and also has good pictures of condo properties.

»» UNIVERISTY HOSTELS

Exchange students will often be staying at University residences, which are called hostels. These are low cost, convenient, and social. However, some rooms do not have air conditioning. This is not as alarming as it may seem at first! All rooms come with a fan, and you will get used to sleeping with it on at night. Many Singaporeans are accustomed to showering both at night and in the morning, and if you follow suit, this will help to keep you cool. You will acclimatize to the hot weather before you know it. You can stay in air conditioned study lounges until very late at night if your non-AC room does not suit you. Finally, if you still find that it is unbearable, you can always request to switch rooms later on in the semester when there are more vacancies. You will get used to higher temperatures both indoors and out.

»» UNIQUE FEATURES OF SINGAPORE HOUSING

Your home in Singapore may come with some features that you didn't expect:

- » I came home with a frozen pizza one day and yelped when I went to stick it in the oven. No oven! Baking is not traditionally done in East Asian homes, so ovens may be MIA. To avoid my pizza woes, eat out or get a cheap toaster oven at lazada.sg or at Mustafa centre.
- » Tap water in Singapore is not cold, it's lukewarm. You'll perhaps use ice in your drinking water at first, and then stop noticing altogether. The extra light switch outside the bathroom turns on the hot water heater, which warms the water in a few minutes. In some homes, there is no hot water in some rooms, or the water heater is connected only to the bath/shower. Something to note when you're house hunting.
- » Many condos come with a small room for a maid. Many Singapore residents hire domestic helpers, mainly from the Philippines and Indonesia. Some maid's rooms are small and not air conditioned, which may come as a surprise.
- » Bathrooms are generally designed so that they can be hosed down, and there is often a hose connected to the toilet. The latter, in theory, can also be used for cleaning yourself after using the toilet. However, unless you've already learned this skill, I suggest that it might be too late for you, unless you want to go through numerous failed attempts.
- » Like bathrooms, some kitchens are designed as "wet" kitchens, which means that they can be hosed down and may have wet floors. Others are divided into wet and dry sections. This is something to note while house-hunting, since wet kitchens are sometimes not air conditioned and may be largely outdoors.

»» OH NO, I BROKE IT

If you need to fix something in a rental place, you may have a deductible in your lease. That is, you may want to get it fixed yourself if it is under this amount (often \$150).

Here is our list of helpful, trustworthy repair people:

Air Conditioning: Eng Sang +65 6286 3295

Fridge/Electrician: Kai +65 9090 3039

Locksmith: 6255 6255 (or really any locksmith you Google. The fee should be a flat \$50).

Plumber and Electrician: Wilson Tan +65 9180 9722

»» AIR CONDITIONING

Yes, you really do need to get your air conditioners maintained every three months. I know you think this is crazy because you didn't need this in Canada. Here, however, mould and debris build up in the pipes, which will start to back up and drip on your walls or pool on your floor. Most likely, this will happen while you're away, causing more damage, mold, and ruining your favourite leather pants.

»» THINGS ALIVE

Singapore's humidity, which may be good for your lungs, also allows mould (and other fungi) to thrive. You'll find that if your laundry or towels are damp for too long, they'll become pungent. Clothes in the bottom of the shelf or made of leather are also likely victims. In fact, over time mould can build up on anything from walls to power cables, pillows, cupboards and air conditioners. Some of us notice this sooner than others as it gives us a fit of sneezes.

MOULD PREVENTION TIPS

1. Keep your place clean. Wash surfaces with soap. Air out your bathroom and kitchen.
2. Your gym clothes are disgusting. Keep them and other clothes laundered and as dry as possible.
3. For storing items like clothes, use vacuum-sealed bags, found at Daiso or lazada.sg.
4. For items like mattresses and furniture that are hard to clean, try anti-bacterial febreze, which seems to work.
5. In Singapore they sell disposable dehumidifiers called hippos which you can use everywhere.
6. Consider wearing less leather.

» VERMIN

Let's start like this: Cockroaches here are huge and can fly. Yes, your worst nightmare. But there has to be some kind of trade-off for living in the tropics, right? So suck it up and Instagram the weather report to make your friends jealous again.

In addition, ants exist here as if they're part of the air. They love us, so what can you do? Well, things that you would keep on the counter in Canada may be safer in the fridge here (butter, peanut butter, bread, fruit, chocolate, etc.). Other stuff is safer kept in a sealed container (sugar, baking supplies, anything sweet). And of course, getting your roommate to wipe the counter and do the dishes is key.

Note: Cockroaches are hard to kill without physical warfare, while some types of ants seem to die with ant traps and poison sold here. Be an alchemist and experiment.

You may occasionally get a house gecko visiting you. The most annoying thing they do is stain your walls with an occasional donation, and chirp. But they also eat bugs, so it's a good tradeoff.



food and drink

» FOOD AND DRINK IN SINGAPORE

In Singapore, you certainly won't go hungry. From cheap food stalls to international cuisine, Singapore has a vast selection for every taste bud and price range. For an introduction to Singapore cuisine, see [here](#).

» GROCERIES

You can find just about anything you might want to eat in Singapore. This doesn't mean, though, that finding it will be a breeze. You can't stop into your local Chinese grocery store for cereal and Kraft dinner, but they will have chrysanthemum tea and squid snacks. Singapore grocery stores vary widely in size, selection, and food prices. Below is an introduction to some main grocery options.

The main grocery store chains are Cold Storage and Fairprice. Cold Storage has been known to have more western food, while Fairprice has generally had lower prices. Nowadays, however, Fairprice has launched some larger stores (Fairprice Xtra) with more selection, so the size of the store will be a more important consideration. In addition to these, you will find smaller, local grocery stores which may be cheaper but will have less western food. Fruit, vegetables and meat is also available from local wet markets (so named because of hosing down the floors), where low prices can be found but you'll need to negotiate a little.

Prefer not to get off the couch to get groceries? Me neither. Luckily, [Cold Storage](#) and [Fairprice](#) both deliver (for a small fee), and there are more options too! [Redmart](#) is an online-only grocery store. [Sgvegetables](#) is a good option for fresh food, and specialty options exist such as [Le Petit Depot](#) for French food. For all of these, please make note of delivery times, and potential substitution options.

» If that wasn't enough, there are ethnic grocery stores available too, which can be fun to browse and try new dishes. Check out Meidi-Ya for Japanese and a wide range of other food, Shine Korea for Korean specialties, or dare to explore the spicy options at Yen Thai Supermarket in Golden Mile Centre. Finally, no trip to Singapore is complete without a visit to Mustafa Centre, a huge 24 hour department store in Little India with a large Indian grocery store.

HAWKER CENTRES

Eating out is another area where Singapore provides a huge variety. Your first bet is Hawker Centres. If you don't learn to love these places, then Singapore may not be for you. Tasty, quick meals at small prices can't go wrong. Here are the Hawker Centre Dos and Don'ts, just like in fashion magazines.

DO	DON'T
✓ Bring a portable pack of tissues. Here, these are napkins, and are in scarce supply in some food outlets and washrooms.	✗ Be without tissues and suffer the hygiene consequences.
✓ Use said pack of tissues to reserve your table. This is your first hawker centre move, and it's called chopping. If the table has a number, remember it.	✗ Order some crazy hot noodle dish, or one with a flaming warmer, and then walk around looking for a table. You could disfigure someone!
✓ Order from different stalls, and note whether it's "self-service," which means you go get your own food, or not, which means you tell them where you're seated.	✗ Worry, they'll find you.
✓ Try everything, it's great! For an introduction to get you started, check out this link . Don't be afraid of new dishes like BBQ stingray, chili crab or fish head curry.	✗ Wimp out and order the fries and baked beans from the Western stall.
✓ Relax if you can't tell the difference between the wonton noodles from the ones from the stall with the huge queue. Neither can I.	✗ Be afraid to take it one step further and impress your friends with fear factor eating. Try frog porridge, turtle soup, and bright red bone marrow curry called Tulang Sop.
✓ Learn how to eat your xiao long bao (soup dumplings) properly after a little practice.	✗ Spill the broth all over your shirt!
✓ Consider learning how to drink from a little baggie, in which sometimes coffee and lime juice are sold.	✗ Forget about breakfast! A kaya toast set with egg and kopi can revitalize you, especially after a late night.
✓ Learn a bit of Malay (Bahasa) and Hokkien to better order your food. For example, "nasi" is rice, "mee" is noodles, and "kopi" is coffee.	✗ Screw up your kopi order. Learn the wording here .
✓ Realize that in some hawker centers it is not expected that you clear your tray. But be a good Canadian and help the cleaning staff.	✗ Worry if you can't find anywhere to clear your tray. Just leave it relatively tidy.

» RESTAURANTS

The good news in Singapore is there are plenty of restaurants. You could eat at a new restaurant twice daily all year and not even be able to cover the new openings. The bad news is, some types of food can be pricy — there is a full range. Luckily, you can do your homework beforehand. Check out [Hungry Go Where](#), which is Singapore’s main restaurant review guide.

Be aware that service is not the same in Singapore as in Canada, so food may arrive all together (appetizers to dessert) or one person may be finished before the other even sees their food. It’s pretty easy to adjust, just eat when the food is hot and let your friend talk until their food arrives.

» BARS AND DRINKING

While Singapore has a thriving bar scene, alcohol is expensive in Singapore as it is heavily taxed. This means that you’ll want to take advantage of your [duty free allowance](#) entering the country, and look for deals. Grocery stores have regular sales on wine, and some bars have much better happy hour prices than others. The legal drinking age in Singapore is 18.

Here some ideas to enjoy Singapore’s nightlife:

- » Check out [Clarke Quay](#), a complex of bars and restaurants: laze on a river patio, or dance the night away in the city’s most popular clubs. More [here](#).
- » See Singapore from the sky. In addition to the rooftop of Marina Bay Sands, you can grab a drink at [1 Altitude](#), which has the highest view of the city (note the dress code).
- » Beach it up at Sentosa’s Siloso Beach, with beach clubs such as [Mambo](#) and [Azzura](#).
- » Be happy during happy hour. Find deals such as at no-frills Dutch run [Wine Bos](#), with free flow (read: all you can drink) red, white or sparkling wine from 6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. for \$20-\$25 and food deals too.
- » Ladies can take advantage of Ladies Nights on Wednesday nights, where many establishments have drinks for ladies for free! Check out [The Exchange](#) in the heart of Financial District for free happy hour.
- » Singapore’s flagship beer, [Tiger Beer](#), is brewed at the very west end of the island at the Tiger Brewery. For \$16, you can have a tour of the brewery and 45 minutes or more in the bar with unlimited Tiger Beer. Book ahead and plan transportation carefully, given the location is not central.

- » For a fun night out and some hilarious (and sometimes very Singaporean) humour, check out [Comedy Masala](#), a weekly stand-up comedy show.
- » There are lots of promoters in Singapore with free guest lists that just involve joining a Facebook group and posting on an event wall or filling out a simple form, just like at home. Stay connected with [Hazel's Guestlist](#).
- » Don't forget to try out local bars, which are often cheaper and more convenient than going downtown. Or, you can also enjoy beer at your local hawker centre, along with cheap delicious eats.

Singapore recently enacted a law that prohibits drinking in public from 7 p.m. – 3 a.m. While past Singapore travelers may tell you about drinking beers on the Clark Quay bridge, this is no longer possible and do not be fined making this mistake!



SERVICE AND TIPPING

Regardless of where you eat, you will not be expected to add a tip to the bill. Indeed, waiters will come running after you if you leave money on the table, thinking you've made a mistake. At some restaurants, a service charge is added to the bill, and in any other case, tipping is neither normal nor expected. (Of course, you still can tip if you want to). The same applies for other services, such as taxis, haircuts, etc. There is simply no tipping culture in Singapore.



culture and customs

» CULTURE

Singapore is a multicultural society with a short and interesting history. Living here is a great opportunity to learn about the history and rapid development of this country, which you can do through reading, museums, food, religious locations (temples), and other cultural experiences.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- » Get a quick overview of the [history](#), [way of life](#), [people](#) and [culture](#) from the Singapore Tourism Board.
- » Take the time on your long plane ride to [read the full story](#), as told by Singapore's recently deceased founding father Lee Kuan Yew. "From Third World to First" is my favourite, and a must read for anyone into development economics. If fiction is more your genre, check out some Singaporean authors.
- » Tour the major museums, especially the [National Museum of Singapore](#), the [Chinatown Heritage Centre](#), or the less serious [Images of Singapore](#). The Urban Redevelopment Authority's [City Gallery](#), with models of the island, is surprisingly interesting, given that it's an urban planning museum.
- » Check out Singapore's ethnic enclaves (Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam) and temples.
- » Of course, talk to Singaporeans about their lives and experiences.

» SINGLISH

As with anywhere you live or travel, it is always best to learn a smattering of the local language. Singapore, although it's a multilingual English-speaking country, is no different. Singaporeans often have particular ways of saying things in English, along with unique slang, which together is called Singlish. You'll find it easier to manage if you learn some of the basic expressions. Also, noting that English is a second language for many Singaporean residents, it's always good to speak clearly and use straightforward wording.

Please see an introduction to Singlish [here](#) (click on "The things we say"), and the full dictionary [here](#).

» A FINE CITY

When you mention Singapore, many people will tell you that chewing gum will get you caned, and that jay walking is a serious crime. These tales of Singapore's regulations are often exaggeration, and indeed there are areas in which Singapore is less strict than Canada.

Here is a summary of key regulations, also searchable [online](#):

- » Jaywalking, defined as crossing the street within 50m from a pedestrian crossing, is illegal and can be fined starting at \$20. Incidentally, this is similar to rules in other countries.
- » Smoking is [illegal](#) indoors in public locations and in some outdoor locations (bus stops, markets), within 5m of a building, and if you're under 18.
- » Littering and not flushing public toilets are also finable offenses. But seriously, you don't do those things.
- » The importation and sale of chewing gum not for medical purposes is [illegal](#). Chewing gum is not illegal, but spitting gum is a finable offense of up to \$500. The origin of this regulation is vandalism of subway car doors with chewing gum.
- » The original case which drew attention to the nature of Singapore's laws was the caning of an American, Michael Fay, who was given six strokes of the cane for vandalizing cars. This caused a diplomatic crisis wherein Americans objected to the punishment. The moral of the story? If you feel destructive, choose video games instead of vandalism.
- » As you can see from the above, men under the age of 50 found guilty of serious crimes in Singapore may be [caned](#).
- » Drug possession and other drug offenses carry [harsh penalties](#) in Singapore, up to the death penalty.

SINGAPORE FESTIVALS

With its diverse society, Singapore has festivals from different religions and cultures. A great way to have fun, while learning more about Singapore, is to immerse yourself into these events. For example, Chinese New Year, the largest celebration for Singapore's majority Chinese population, sees Chinatown decorated with the year's animal, and hosts a free fair called the [River Hongbao](#). You can also enjoy Singapore's special Chinese New Year dishes at local restaurants, and even for take-away!

My favourite festival is Thaipusam in February, a Hindu festival in Little India that sees participants wearing colourful "kavadis" and walking along a 4km procession. Most of these people are pierced with the decorations in order to show devotion, so you'll see pierced tongues, backs with hooks in them, all accompanied with music and dancing!

For more information on Singapore's festivals and holidays, please see [here](#). Check out the [Ministry of Manpower](#) for dates of statutory holidays in Singapore.

climate

» CLIMATE IN SINGAPORE

In Canada, we talk about the weather all the time, because it's crazy, and causes a range of emotions. Here in Singapore, not so much on either point. There are no real seasons, just "raining," "not raining," "hot," and "oh, it's been a bit less hot lately." You won't notice that last one initially, so just remember your umbrella. You will be impressed by the sudden and dramatic nature of the rain storms. Don't make the mistake of wishing people a good summer or winter break at the end of your semester.

Things to tell your friends back home:

- » It's the same temperature as theirs, just positive instead of below zero.
- » The lowest recorded temperature ever in Singapore is 19 C.
- » No, seriously, sometimes it gets breezy, especially outside on the patio at night.
- » That whole humidex thing is not something people in the tropics use.



transportation

» TRANSPORTATION IN SINGAPORE

Singapore has excellent transportation infrastructure, and it's inexpensive to get around by subway (called the MRT here for Mass Rapid Transit) and bus. Taxis are also plentiful, and less expensive than in Canada. For a good introduction to Singapore's transportation system, click [here](#).

It is less common to own a car in Singapore, and there are numerous additional costs associated with driving a car here, making it several times more expensive than in Canada. There are car sharing services available, such as [smove](#). Note that if you plan on being in Singapore longer term, you will need to [convert](#) your driver's license.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION: MRT AND BUSES

As you're house-hunting, you'll want to check out the location of the closest MRT stop, and how quickly you can get to where you need to be. Remember that, although it's always warm, it rains regularly, and it can be too hot to walk long distances without getting sweaty. While MRT are the fastest way to get around, buses are also very useful, especially for shorter distances and less central locations. They both get crowded during rush hour, but are air-conditioned and pleasant.

For the MRT and buses, you buy an [EZ-link card](#), from which your fare is deducted each time you swipe it upon leaving the bus or subway station. (Don't forget to swipe upon exiting the bus, or you'll pay the maximum fare).

The MRT and buses run from about 6 a.m. until midnight, with timing varying by route. Route information is available online or at bus stops. To be a bus keener, you can use one of several apps which tell you when your bus will arrive and more. Check it out at [SBS Transit](#) and [SMRT](#).

» TAXIS

Taxi fares in Singapore are designed to keep your math skills sharp. You add the different surcharges, each of which are shown on the meter, to get the total fare. Surcharges are added to the base fare for pre-booking, pick-up in the Central Business District (CBD, i.e. downtown), night travel, airport pickup, and congestion (“ERP”, or Electronic Road Pricing) charges. So, your base fare could easily double depending on these factors.

While taxis are generally available for hailing on the street, this reduces significantly during rush hour, rain, or when you’re late for an appointment. You can hail a taxi on the street, except for in a no-stopping zone, such as near a bus stop, or during the day where there is a double yellow line. If there is a nearby taxi stand, then you need to wait for a taxi there. You can pre-book or arrange a taxi via several apps or via SMS to the different taxi companies. Comfort Taxi is the largest company, and the only one to consistently allow you to pay with NETS (Network for Electronic Transfers, i.e. Interac). For the rest, you’d best have cash, and you will suffer heartache and pain if you only have a \$50 bill.

Uber has recently joined the Singapore taxi scene, operating via its app as in other cities. Of course, the prices increase in times of high demand.

You will want to work on your language to avoid being a taxi chump. Here is a demonstration. By the way, you can politely call the cabbies “Uncle.”

Taxi Chump: Good morning, how are you today?

Taxi Uncle: hi

TC: I was wondering if you could take me downtown, to a bar called Attica, if you don’t mind.

TU: Eh? You go where?

Same conversation, after adaptation into Singapore:

Former Taxi Chump: Hi Uncle. I go to Clarke Quay please.

Taxi Uncle: Which way you want to go?

FTC: Please go by AYE, if there is no ERP now.

The lesson here is all about learning the lingo to make your taxi ride as pleasant as possible.

Taxi drivers are usually multilingual, and are driving, so using straightforward English is best.

» CYCLING

While it is certainly possible to get around by bike in Singapore, it is not as easily done as in Canada. First, the weather is such that you’ll likely need to shower when you arrive at your destination. Second, cars in Singapore are far less accustomed to cyclists and cycling paths are rare, so cycling requires extra caution. Cycling for leisure is best done on the park connector or East Coast cycle paths (where you can rent bikes). However, note that these paths are not dedicated to bikes, so be careful of pedestrians. For more serious cyclists, consider joining a cycling group such as [ANZA Cycling](#).



sightseeing

»» SIGHTSEEING IN SINGAPORE

There is plenty to see in Singapore, and you can enjoy a variety of sites and activities during your time here. For an introduction, check out [Singapore's tourism website](#), as well as [Trip Advisor](#). Singapore has numerous museums, monuments, a zoo, aquarium, and interesting ethnic neighbourhoods; too many to list here.

While the web will provide a plethora of ideas about mainstream sites, here are a few off-the-beaten track suggestions.

- » Need a few laughs? Head to [Haw Par Villa](#) for some entertaining dioramas portraying moral lessons. Don't forget the gates of hell, it only costs \$1.
- » If you're in Kampong Glam, check out the old Muslim Graveyard on Victoria Street behind the [Malabar mosque](#) at Jalan Sultan. The gravestones and grounds have seen better days, but that's the spooky beauty of it.
- » Tired of bringing your friends to the view at the top of Marina Bay sands for \$20? For \$10 more, you can take them to [1Altitude](#), which has a panoramic view of downtown and MBS, and a drink is included in the admission (dress code applies, call for availability and to confirm cover charge).
- » If you've got the heart for it, walk through the small back alleys of [Little India](#). Here, you'll see kitchens cooking huge pots of curry, some derelict housing, and some red light districts. The grittiness is a good contrast to Singapore's tidy central areas.
- » Don't shelter yourself in Singapore's more affluent neighbourhoods. Head to the heartlands, or less central regions in Singapore. Wander through the HDBs and eat at the more remote hawker centres to see how most Singaporeans live.
- » Looking for a different kind of nature walk? Visit [Bukit Brown](#), a historic cemetery, with large war-era tombstones in an overgrown hilly area with walking paths.

» TRAVEL

There are no direct flights from Canada to Singapore, so most travelers will find themselves transiting in North Asian locations such as Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai or Hong Kong, for a total journey time of over 20 hours. While there is no pain-free way to travel this far, it's worth spending some time to find the cheapest travel deal, and checking with multiple airlines and varying the dates. A return ticket is usually cheaper than two one-way tickets, and sometimes it might be cheaper to buy a ticket to Hong Kong or China (note visa requirements), staying overnight (or longer if you like), and then continuing on your journey on a lower cost airline.

Singapore is not only a fabulous destination in its own right; it is also a central hub from which you can travel around South East Asia. Many countries are within easy reach via low cost airlines leaving from award-winning Changi airport. With world class cities like Bangkok and Hong Kong, amazing temples in Siem Reap and Yangon, and fabulous beaches in Thailand and Bali, the challenge is prioritizing. South-East Asia is easy to navigate, and has travel options and accommodations for all budgets. To get started, check out the local low cost airlines: [Tiger](#), [JetStar](#), [Air Asia](#) and [Scoot](#). Note the multi-airline sites such as Kayak don't always include the low cost airline fares, so it's worth double checking. Don't forget about travel insurance, possible vaccinations, and local currency and/or US dollars.

For travelling to neighbouring countries, please note that many of them will require you to get a visa ahead of time. Since these requirements change regularly, please check ahead of time. If you have a valid student or work pass, you will be able to get the visa in Singapore, either via the embassy or online.

sports and leisure

»» ACTIVE SINGAPORE

With Singapore's heat, you may have to adapt your sports regime. If you run or do other sports outside, the early morning or evening are generally preferred. If you're looking for a green running trail, try the [park connectors](#) or the [green corridor](#). Gyms are well air-conditioned and available in many locations and on campus, with exercise classes and trainers, but note that you'll still be hot on your way home. There are campus and community pools for swimming, which is a great choice in the climate. Singapore has a skating rink, and it is fun to rent skates during the open hours, because you'll feel like an expert along with many people who have never skated before. Finally, if you're an exchange student, check out the fitness events and teams available from the university.

»» SPAS

In Singapore, and indeed across Asia, spas are excellent and plentiful. Note that there is a huge range in price and quality, so do a bit of research. Asian spa services are slightly different than western; massages are usually full-body, for example, and facial treatments will often include whitening treatments. [Groupon](#) offers good discounts at many locations, if you hold the right immigration pass (normally PRs, EP, SP, DP and WP holders).

» NATURE

While Singapore is a very dense city, it has plenty of nature to see for its small size. For nature walks where monkeys are nearly guaranteed, [Bukit Timah](#) nature reserve (in which battles were fought in WW2) is a large primary rainforest hill with numerous paths and a mountain bike trail. [MacRitchie Reservoir](#) offers rainforest paths around the small lake. There is also [Sungei Buloh](#), which has mangrove trails, crocodiles, and even [nature tours](#) for more determined nature/bird lovers. Further afield, don't miss a day trip to [Pulao Ubin](#), an undeveloped island, with traditional houses, mountain biking, and nature trails including boardwalks and mangroves.

The [Botanical Gardens](#) and [Gardens by the Bay](#) offer more horticulture than walking trails, although the Botanical gardens have a forested area around the edge. On weekends, you can have a picnic at the Botanical gardens with live music.

» SHOPPING

Singaporeans are nuts about shopping, and consider it a [national hobby](#). Malls are places to gather, browse, and eat a meal (many restaurants are located in malls). Orchard road, for example, is an entire road of malls, so you'll never be at a loss for finding places to shop. Here are a few tips for shopping in Singapore.

HANDLE YOUR MONEY WITH RESPECT

In Singaporean culture, money is meant to be treated with respect. This means, that when you hand money to someone, a cashier for example, it is polite to do this with two hands. If you can't quite pull this off because you're carrying bags or such, use one hand, and support the arm with your other hand. You will notice the cashiers doing this at most places, so you can follow along. Money should not be crumpled or folded, and coins should be handed rather than placed on the table. It's your money, show it your respect.

WHEN TO NEGOTIATE

Bargaining/negotiating on pricing is not common in Singapore, especially when compared to other countries in Asia. You can bargain a little bit for electronics, services such as tailoring, and at informal markets where there is no indicated set price. Don't expect to get much of a discount, however.

MIND THE SIZES

In Singapore, you'll find a huge selection of stores. The same is not true on sizes, however, and you may be frustrated to not find clothing in your size, especially if you are a woman (and not necessarily a large one). Shoes, underwear, and pants can be challenging at some stores, but western stores and department stores generally have a wider range.

GET SOME SOUVENIRS

Looking for something to take home? Check out souvenir shops in Chinatown and Little India. For gifts and fun items, you might also like to check out the Japanese \$2 store called [Daiso](#), and [Lim's](#) for handicrafts.

ELECTRONICS

Contrary to popular belief, electronics in Singapore are not cheaper than elsewhere, and of course note the plug and voltage differences. There are two malls focused on electronics, namely [Sim Lim Square](#) and [Funan DigitalLife](#) mall. Some less-reputable dealers in these malls have been known to sell fake goods on rare occasion, so negotiate carefully.

CHECK OUT THE TAILORS

Want to impress your brother/dad? When they come to visit, steal a dress shirt and take it to the tailor's. They can make made-to-order shirts in the same size, with custom fabric, cuffs, collars and trim. Remember to negotiate the price a little.

Tailors are readily available in Peninsula Plaza or Far East Plaza, as well as in other locations across the city. Prices vary significantly, so shop around. Note as well, that if you're travelling further afield, such as to Bangkok in particular, that even lower price high-quality tailors are available.

**DOING THINGS ON THE CHEAP**

Singapore is not an inexpensive location, but there are ways to make your money go further. Eating excellent meals at hawker centres costs around \$5. Many tourist locations, such as the nature reserves, ethnic neighbourhoods and temples, are free. Check out Groupon for both activities (spas, tourist attractions) and restaurant meals (subject to the right immigration pass), and of course you won't spend much if you travel by MRT buses.

about the author

»» ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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