

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

PRE-COLONIAL SINGAPORE

Pretty much every museum you'll see in Singapore is devoted to post-colonial history, simply because there is not a great deal of undisputed precolonial history. It is known that the island waxed and waned in importance as empires to the north and south rose and fell – and archaeological digs have demonstrated there were substantial settlements there in the past – but there is little in the way of concrete historical material.

Malay legend has it that long ago a Sumatran prince visiting the island of Temasek saw a strange animal he believed to be a lion. The good omen prompted the prince to found a city on the spot of the sighting. He called it Singapura (Lion City).

Chinese traders en route to India had plied the waters around what is now Singapore from at least the 5th century AD, though the records of Chinese sailors as early as the 3rd century refer to an island called Pu Luo Chung, which may have been Singapore, while others claim there was a settlement in the 2nd century.

In 1292, Marco Polo visited a flourishing city that may have been where Singapore now stands, though it's by no means clear (and besides, Marco Polo's entire account of his travels has often been questioned). He called it Chiamassie, though the Venetian's only sure report is of the city of Malayu – now called Jambi – on Sumatra.

What is certain, however, is that Singapore was not the first of the great entrepôt cities in the region. By the 7th century, Srivijaya, a seafaring Buddhist kingdom centred at Palembang in Sumatra, held sway over the Strait of Malacca (now Melaka). By the 10th century it dominated the Malay peninsula as well. At the peak of Srivijaya's power, Singapore was at most a small trading outpost.

Raids by rival kingdoms and the arrival of Islam spelled the eclipse of Srivijaya by the 13th century. Based mainly on the thriving pirate trade, the sultanate of Melaka quickly acquired the commercial power that was once wielded by Srivijaya, becoming a cosmopolitan free port that valued money above any notions of cultural imperialism.

The Portuguese took Melaka in 1511, while the equally ambitious Dutch founded Batavia (now Jakarta) to undermine Melaka's position, finally wresting the city from their European competitors in 1641. In the late 18th century, the British began looking for a harbour in the Strait of Melaka to secure lines of trade between China, the Malay world and their interests in India. Renewed war in Europe led, in 1795, to the French annexation of Holland, which prompted the British to seize Dutch possessions in Southeast Asia, including Melaka.

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the British agreed to restore Dutch possessions in 1818, but there were those who were bitterly disappointed at the failure of the dream of British imperial expansion in Southeast Asia. One such figure was Stamford Raffles, lieutenant-governor of Java. Raffles soon procured permission to establish a station to secure British trade routes in the region and was instructed to negotiate with the sultan of nearby Johor for land.

TIMELINE

300

Chinese seafarers mark the island on maps, labelling it Pu Luo Chung, believed to have come from the Malay name Pulau Ujong, meaning 'island at the end'.

1200s

Prince of Sumatran Srivijayan dynasty founds a settlement on the island and calls it Singapura (Lion City), having reputedly seen a lion there. Later named Temasek (Sea Town).

1390s

Srivijayan prince Parameswara flees Sumatra to Temasek after being deposed. He later founds the Sultanate of Malacca, under which Temasek is an important trading post.

THE RAFFLES ERA

For someone who spent a very limited amount of time in Singapore, Sir Stamford Raffles had an extraordinary influence on its development. His name appears everywhere in the modern city – Raffles Place in the CBD, Stamford Rd, Raffles Hotel, the Raffles City shopping mall, the prestigious Raffles Institution (where Lee Kuan Yew went to school) – but his impact extends way beyond civic commemoration.

The streets you walk along in the city centre still largely follow the original plans he drew. The ethnic districts still evident today, particularly in the case of Little India, were demarcated by him. Even the classic shophouse design – built of brick, with a continuous covered verandah known as a ‘five-foot way’ and a central courtyard for light, ventilation and water collection – has been attributed to him. More importantly, Singapore’s very existence as one of the world’s great ports is a direct consequence of Raffles’ vision of creating a British-controlled entrepôt to counter Dutch power in the region.

Even Raffles’ delicate and adept diplomatic dealings with the Malay sultanate to the north, which dwarfed the tiny island, have echoes in the frequently fractious relations between the two countries today.

When Raffles landed at Singapore in early 1819, the empire of Johor was divided. When the old sultan had died in 1812, his younger son’s accession to power had been engineered while an elder son, Hussein, was away. The Dutch had a treaty with the young sultan, but Raffles threw his support behind Hussein, proclaiming him sultan and installing him in residence in Singapore.

In Raffles’ plans the sultan wielded no actual power but he did serve to legitimise British claims on the island. Raffles also signed a treaty with the more eminent *temenggong* (senior judge) of Johor and set him up with an estate on the Singapore River. Thus, Raffles acquired the use of Singapore in exchange for modest annual allowances to Sultan Hussein and the *temenggong*. This exchange ended with a cash buyout of the pair in 1824 and the transfer of Singapore’s ownership to Britain’s East India Company.

The sultan’s family retained a home in Singapore until 1999, when they moved out. The building now houses the Malay Heritage Centre (see p67).

Along with Penang and Melaka, Singapore formed a triumvirate of powerful trading stations known as the Straits Settlements, which were controlled by the East India Company in Calcutta but administered from Singapore.

Raffles had hit upon the brilliant idea of turning a sparsely populated, tiger-infested malarial swamp with few natural resources into an economic powerhouse by luring in the ambitious and allowing them to unleash their entrepreneurial zeal. While it was to be many decades before Singapore’s somewhat anarchic social conditions were brought under control, the essential Rafflesian spirit still underpins the city’s tireless drive to succeed.

COLONISATION & OCCUPATION

Singapore Under the British

Raffles’ first and second visits to Singapore in 1819 were brief, and he left instructions and operational authority with Colonel William Farquhar, former Resident (the chief British representative) in Melaka. When Raffles returned three years later, he found the colony thriving but displeasingly chaotic.

1613

Portuguese attack the town on the island and burn it to the ground. Singapura never regains its former importance while the Portuguese rule Malacca, and it slides into obscurity.

1819

Sir Stamford Raffles, seeking a site for a new port to cement British interests in the Malacca Strait, lands on Singapura and decides it’s the ideal spot.

1823

Raffles signs treaty with the Sultan and Temenggong of Johor, who hand control over most of the island to the British. Raffles returns to Britain and never sees Singapore again.

RAFFLES THE MAN

Sir Stamford Raffles, cultural scholar, Singapore colonist, naturalist and founder of the London Zoo, died at his home in Hendon, North London, the day before his 45th birthday in 1826, probably from a brain tumour. Having fallen out with the East India Company, his death was ignored by London society, and it was eight years before a marble statue of him, commissioned by friends and family, was placed in Westminster Abbey.

The original bronze statue of Raffles in Singapore, unveiled on the Padang on 29 June 1887, now stands in front of Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall. A white stone replica on Empress Place supposedly marks the spot where he first set foot on the island.

Raffles himself was an extraordinary man, in many ways at odds with the British colonial mould. While he was a firm believer in the British Empire as a benevolent force, he also preached the virtues of making Singapore a free port and opposed slavery. Raffles was also a sympathetic student of the peoples of the region and spoke fluent Malay.

His character was probably shaped by his humble upbringing. He began his working life at 14 as a clerk for the giant East India Company, but was a tireless self-improver. In 1805, he was appointed as part of a group to cement emerging British interests in Penang. Within six years, through several promotions, he became the governor of Java, where his compassionate leadership won him enduring respect. From there he travelled to Sumatra, where he became governor of Bencoolen on the island's southern coast.

His life was marred by tragedy, however. While in Southeast Asia he lost four of his five children to disease, his massive natural history collection in a ship fire and his personal fortune in a bank collapse. The East India Company refused him a pension and after his death his parish priest, who objected to his antislavery stance, refused him a headstone.

His achievements as a statesman have often obscured his brilliance as a naturalist. He made an intricate study of the region's flora and fauna and though much of his work was lost, it is still honoured at the National University of Singapore, which maintains the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (p95).

It was then that he drew out his town plan that remains today, levelling one hill to form a new commercial district (now Raffles Place) and erecting government buildings around another prominence called Forbidden Hill (now called Fort Canning Hill).

His plan also embraced the colonial practice, still in evidence, of administering the population according to neat racial categories. The city's trades, races and dialect groups were divided into zones: Europeans were granted land to the northeast of the government offices (today's Colonial District), though many soon moved out to sequestered garden estates in the western suburbs. The Chinese, including Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Teochew and Straits-born, predominated around the mouth and the southwest of the Singapore River, though many Indians lived there too (hence the large Hindu temple on South Bridge Rd). Hindu Indians were, and still are, largely centred in Kampong Kapur and Serangoon Rd; Gujarati and other Muslim merchants were housed in the Arab St area; Tamil Muslim traders and small businesses operated in the Market St area; and the Malay population mainly lived on the swampy northern fringes of the city.

In time, of course, these zones became less well defined, as people decanted into other parts of the island.

While the British ran the colony, they needed the cooperation of their subjects, particularly the Chinese, for whom the British echoed the admiration other European powers had for the Chinese communities under their rule.

Just as the infamously harsh Dutch East Indies governor-general Jan Pieterszoon Coen described the Chinese residents of Batavia (Jakarta) as 'clever, courteous, industrious and obliging

1824

Anglo-Dutch Treaty carves up the region into different spheres of influence, effectively removing any lingering threat to the island and cementing British sovereignty over Singapore.

1826

Penang, Melaka and Singapore combined to form the Straits Settlements, administered from India. Large waves of immigration wash over Singapore free port as merchants seek to avoid Dutch tariffs.

1867

Social problems and discontent at ineffectual administration and policing of Singapore persuades the British to declare the Straits Settlements a separate Crown Colony, no longer administered from India.

people', the Chinese of Singapore particularly impressed Victorian traveller Isabella Bird in 1879, when she described the city's 'ceaseless hum of industry' and 'the resistless, overpowering, astonishing Chinese element'.

Despite its wealth, the colony was a dissolute place, beset by crime, clan violence, appalling sanitation, opium addiction, rats, huge poisonous centipedes, mosquitoes and tigers. Life for the majority was extremely harsh; the Chinatown Heritage Centre (p60) is probably the best place to appreciate just how harsh.

Raffles sought to cooperate with, and officially register, the various *kongsi* – clan organisations for mutual assistance, known variously as ritual brotherhoods, secret societies, triads and heaven-man-earth societies. (Many of them had their headquarters on Club St, and a couple still hold out against the area's rapid gentrification.) Labour and dialect-based *kongsi* would become increasingly important to Singapore's success in the 19th century, as overseas demand for Chinese-harvested products such as pepper, tin and rubber – all routed through Singapore from the Malay peninsula – grew enormously.

Singapore's access to *kongsi*-based economies in the region, however, depended largely on revenues from an East India Company product that came from India and was bound for China – opium.

Farquhar had established Singapore's first opium farm for domestic consumption, and by the 1830s excise and sales revenues of opium accounted for nearly half the administration's income, a situation that continued for a century after Raffles' arrival. But the British Empire (which has been called the world's first major drug cartel) produced more than Chinese opium addicts; it also fostered the Western-oriented outlook of Straits-born Chinese.

In the 19th century, women were rarely permitted to leave China; thus, Chinese men who headed for the Straits Settlements often married Malay women, eventually spawning a new, hybrid culture now known in Singapore as Peranakan (see p29).

Despite a massive fall in rubber prices in 1920, prosperity continued, immigration soared and millionaires were made almost overnight. In the 1930s and early '40s, politics dominated the intellectual scene. Indians looked to the subcontinent for signs of the end of colonial rule, while Kuomintang (Nationalist) and Communist Party struggles in the disintegrating Republic of China attracted passionate attention. Opposition to Japan's invasions of China in 1931 and 1937 was near universal in Singapore.

But just as political rumblings began to make the British nervous, war overtook events.

Singapore under the Japanese

When General Yamashita Tomoyuki pushed his thinly stretched army into Singapore on 15 February 1942, so began what Singapore regards as the blackest period of its history. For the British, who had set up a naval base near the city in the 1920s, surrender was sudden and humiliating – and some historians have pinpointed the fall of Singapore as the moment when the myth of British impregnability was blown apart and the empire began its final decline.

The impact of the Japanese occupation on the collective political and social memory of Singapore cannot be underestimated, and it has partly inspired Singapore's modern preoccupation with security.

Japanese rule was harsh. Yamashita had the Europeans and Allied POWs herded onto the Padang; from there they were marched away for internment. Many of them were taken to the

1877

Britain establishes Chinese Protectorate in each of the Straits Settlements in an effort to tackle the 'coolie trade', the exploitative labour market system run by Chinese secret societies.

1939

Britain completes massive naval base in Singapore at a cost of around \$500 million, boasting world's largest dry dock, heavy defences and enough fuel storage to run the British Navy for months. Dubbed 'Fortress Singapore'.

1942

Fortress Singapore cruelly exposed when Japanese forces overrun the island from the north, preparation for northern invasion not having been completed properly. Allies surrender on 15 February.

infamous Changi Prison, while others were herded up to Siam (Thailand) to work on the even more horrific Death Railway.

The Japanese also launched Operation Sook Ching to eliminate Chinese opposition. Chinese Singaporeans were driven out of their homes, ‘screened’, then either given a ‘chop’ (a mark on the forehead meaning they had been cleared for release), or driven away to be imprisoned or executed (there’s a memorial to one massacre at Changi Beach). Estimates of the number of Chinese killed vary – some sources put the number at 6000, others at more than 45,000.

Malays and Indians were also subject to systematic abuse.

The Japanese renamed the island ‘Syonan’ (Light of the South), changed signs into Japanese, put clocks forward to Tokyo time and introduced a Japanese currency (known by contemptuous locals as ‘banana money’). As the war progressed, inflation skyrocketed and supplies of food, medicines and other essentials dwindled to the point that people were dying of malnutrition and disease.

The war ended suddenly with Japan’s surrender on 14 August 1945, and Singapore was passed back into British control. While the returning British troops were welcomed, the occupation had eroded the innate trust in the empire’s protective embrace. New political forces were at work and the road to independence had begun.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

While the British laid the country’s early foundations, and the Japanese forever affected its sense of security, Singapore’s postindependence international relations have been equally crucial in shaping its present.

From the moment it was thrown out of the Malay Federation in 1965, Singapore has been acutely conscious of the giant neighbours enveloping it in all sides, a sense of vulnerability enhanced by almost continual squabbles with Malaysia and Indonesia over anything from water supplies and resource exports to land reclamation and territory.

As recently as 2007, Indonesia banned sand exports to Singapore (the ban was almost certainly linked to Singapore’s reluctance to sign an extradition treaty with Indonesia), while in 2008 the International Court of Justice was called upon to settle the disputed ownership of a clutch of tiny islands, which Singapore calls Pedra Blanca and Middle Rocks, and Malaysia knows as Pulau Batu Puteh. The court divided them between the two nations.

From the outset, Lee Kuan Yew’s solution to this vulnerability was to form a close alliance with the United States and pour billions into Singapore’s military (with Israeli training assistance). Singapore hosts regular military exercises with Western powers and you can hardly spend a day in the city without seeing some form of military aircraft – Chinooks, fighter jets, or transport planes – flying overhead.

The formation of Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) also helped reinforce Singapore’s security, though many member countries are uncomfortable with the steady advance of Singapore’s business interests in the region. Its substantial investments in Burma, effective takeover of former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s communications giant Shin Corp – which sparked the mass protests that ultimately culminated in Thaksin’s overthrow – and stakes in Indonesia’s telecommunications industry have all caused recent controversy.

In recent years, the government has been at pains to develop close ties with China (and, less overtly, India), arresting Falun Gong protestors and ensuring the media do not print anything

1942–45

Singapore is renamed Syonan by Japanese. Chinese massacred and brutalised, Allied prisoners incarcerated at Changi or shipped off to the Death Railway. The economy collapses.

1945–59

British resume control of Singapore, but anticolonial sentiments grow. Straits Settlements wound up in 1946 and until 1955 Singapore was run by partially elected legislative councils, then a semi-autonomous government.

1959

First full legislative elections held. People’s Action Party, led by young Cambridge graduate Lee Kuan Yew, win landslide. Aggressive economic development and social programs launched.

too critical of Beijing. Singapore is often compared to a corporation and tends to be most vocal on foreign-policy issues when there are economic implications.

THE LEE DYNASTY

If one person can be considered responsible for the position Singapore finds itself in today, it is Lee Kuan Yew.

Born on 16 September 1923, this third-generation Straits-born Chinese was named Harry Lee (he's known locally by two nicknames: Uncle Harry and The Old Man) and brought up to be, in his own words, 'the equal of any Englishman'. His education at the elite Raffles Institution and later Cambridge, from which he graduated in 1949 with a first-class honours degree in law, equipped him well to deal with both colonial power and political opposition when Singapore took control of its own destiny in the 1960s.

The early years were not easy. Fatal race riots in 1964 and ejection from the Malay Federation in 1965 made Lee's task look even harder, but he displayed extraordinary vision and single-mindedness in dragging this fraught, divided port city up by its pyjama bottoms. Perhaps only those who remember the Singapore of the 1960s can truly appreciate the mammoth changes the city has undergone in those four decades.

Lee used generous tax incentives and strict new labour laws to attract foreign investment. This, combined with huge resources poured into developing an English-language education system that churned out a competent workforce, saw Singapore's economy rapidly industrialise.

Under Lee's rigidly paternal control, his People's Action Party (PAP) also set about eliminating any viable political opposition, banning critical publications and moulding the city into a disciplined, functional society built along Confucian ideals, which value the maintenance of hierarchy and social order above all things. The island's small size made this hothouse experiment easier to manage, enabling the effective enforcement of Singapore's famous social regulations on everything from spitting to chewing gum to jaywalking.

Lee was successful at containing what he evidently saw as the anarchic tendencies of Singapore's citizens, inspiring ever more ambitious attempts at social engineering. For example, a (now defunct) matchmaking club was established to pair off suitable couples – one of the dating clubs was restricted to graduates.

Lee's rapid industrialisation filled government coffers and enabled the PAP to pursue massive infrastructure, defence, health, education, pension and housing schemes, giving Singaporeans a level of prosperity and security that remains the envy of many countries in the region and around the world (many foreign governments have studied and tried to copy 'the Singapore model').

Housing and urban renovation, in particular, have been the keys to the PAP's success. By the mid-1990s, Singapore had achieved the world's highest rate of home ownership.

Despite resigning as prime minister in 1990 after 31 years in the job, and handing over to the more avuncular but no less determined Goh Chok Tong, Minister Mentor Lee still keeps an eye on proceedings and his comments on various issues frequently flag future government policy.

'Even from my sickbed,' said Lee in 1988, 'even if you are going to lower me into the grave and I feel that something is wrong, I'll get up.'

1963

After strong campaigning from Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore joins Sabah and Sarawak in combining with Malaya to form the single state of Malaysia.

1964

Two outbreaks of race rioting between Malays and Chinese see 36 people killed and more than 500 injured, fuelling the already testy relations between the PAP and the Malay ruling party UMNO.

1965

Singapore expelled from federation after unanimous vote in Malaysian Parliament in Kuala Lumpur. Lee Kuan Yew cries as he announces the news. The Republic of Singapore is born.

No one can deny his extraordinary achievements, but many argue he should have let go a long time ago and allowed the country to progress naturally. The continued unbending suppression of critical or opposition views, many argue, is anachronistic, at odds with the stable, prosperous society Lee has built.

'If after four decades the society remains so volatile that one can't even discuss sensitive topics openly, the government must have failed in its duty to build a harmonious society', wrote the editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in response to one of the many lawsuits the Lee family has filed against the foreign media.

Some argue that while modern Singapore's founding father retains such an influence, the government's belligerent approach to criticism can never change. But whether the government is being held back by him, or whether it still happily relies upon his stature to inspire fear and respect, is a question only time can answer.

RECENT PAST & IMPENDING FUTURE

Lee Kuan Yew's son, Lee Hsien Loong, who was deputy PM and Defence Minister under Goh Chok Tong, took over the top job unopposed in 2004. Goh took over the Senior Minister role from Lee Snr, who assumed the newly created title of Minister Mentor.

Lee Hsien Loong faces challenges as great as those his father dealt with, principally how to continue the momentum and maintain Singapore's astonishing success. The Asian financial crisis starting in 1997 and the SARS outbreak in 2003 both had a major impact on the country's economy and its sense of vulnerability to forces beyond its control. Though economically and financially Singapore is in a strong position, the migration of its manufacturing base to cheaper competitors like Vietnam and China has forced the government to embark on a radical makeover of the country as a whole in an attempt to turn it into a vibrant, modern metropolis.

The port, petrochemical-refining, shipbuilding, rig-manufacture and other key heavy industries will remain, but Singapore is also trying to remodel itself as a high-tech modern economy by attracting industries like biotechnology, 'new media' and financial services, as well as international higher-education institutions and medical services.

To bolster this effort, the government has been at pains (with sometimes painful results) to banish the country's parochial, insular, conservative image and recast it as fun, creative and hip, energetically promoting arts, entertainment and tourism. It is also urgently trying to overhaul the education system, having realised a touch belatedly that its rigid rote-learning methods, while generating accomplished exam results, are failing to produce the kind of independent, creative thinkers the country needs for its future.

These efforts have met with mixed success, but physically they are transforming the city beyond recognition. Apart from the two huge casinos (euphemistically called 'integrated resorts') at Marina Bay and Sentosa, there is the Singapore Flyer observation wheel, the new Marina Bay

NICE WORK (IF YOU CAN GET IT)

Lee Hsien Loong is the highest paid head of government in the world, pulling in an annual salary of nearly \$3.8 million (around US\$2.8 million) in 2008. In comparison, the British prime minister receives around US\$370,000 (a combination of MP and PM salaries), while the US president gets around US\$400,000 and the Australian prime minister around US\$315,000.

1971

British forces withdraw from Singapore, sparking economic crisis. PAP uses withdrawal to mount election to win mandate for tough laws curbing unions, which succeed in luring wave of foreign investment, mostly from US.

1975

Singapore becomes world's third-busiest port, after Rotterdam and New York, and third-largest oil refiner, as well as a rig and drilling-platform manufacturer and a huge oil-storage centre.

1981

Changi Airport opens for business, replacing Paya Lebar airport, and handles eight million passengers in its first year. By 2004 passenger traffic hits 30 million and Changi regularly named world's best airport.

A SEISMIC SHIFT?

At the most recent general election in 2006, the PAP won the expected landslide majority, claiming 82 of the 84 seats in parliament. Only the constituencies of Hougang and Potong Pasir remained stubbornly in opposition hands.

There was rather more to the election than the *Straits Times*, or any other Singapore newspaper, led its readers to believe. Perhaps the most telling statistic was that fully one-third of the electorate voted against the government, though the electoral system ensures those numbers are not reflected proportionately in the House.

Even more striking were the enormous crowds that turned out to opposition rallies, twice filling local sports stadia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Hougangwpcrowd.jpg>), and the not altogether surprising fact that the newspapers failed to mention them.

It was the first time since 1988 that the PAP was not automatically returned to power on nomination day.

It's unlikely that this is indicative of a groundswell of opposition serious enough to threaten the PAP's grip on power (the electoral rules alone will see to that), but the fact that around 330,000 of the 1.01 million voters are unhappy with the state of things is not insignificant.

lifestyle, leisure and water-sports area, a second botanic gardens, the St James Power Station entertainment complex, a large new sports complex, the transformation of the city's drainage canals into waterfront leisure areas...the list keeps growing.

In 2008 Singapore planted itself on the world sports calendar twice, first by staging the first Formula One night race, on a street circuit around the Colonial District and Marina Bay, then by winning the bid to host the first Youth Olympics in 2010.

Like the decision to build the two enormous casino projects, the bid to host a Formula One race represented a surprising reversal of government policy. Singapore had previously held races, along a circuit that once wound along Old Upper Thomson Rd ([Map pp48–9](#)), but in the most zealous phase of his social-engineering project, Lee Kuan Yew had banned motor sports, arguing that a ban would discourage dangerous driving. (Five minutes on an expressway are enough to demonstrate that it may have been one of his least successful ideas!)

This radical makeover is aimed at more than tourism. By increasing the city's 'liveability' and its global profile, the government is trying to attract more companies to set up in Singapore, in the process adding the extra 2 million people to the population that it reckons it needs to keep the country competitive.

Of course, there is a flipside to this development. Except for all the new labourers, service staff and other low-wage workers needed to run this new economy, most of these extra people will be highly paid foreigners. With living costs rising rapidly, wages failing to keep up and the income gap becoming ever wider, the danger is that most of the people left behind by the New Singapore will be Singaporeans, among whom there is already an undercurrent of resentment.

It didn't help that, just as low-income Singaporeans were starting to feel the pinch, government ministers awarded themselves ample pay increases – the PM alone got a handsome 25% rise to a staggering \$3.9 million (see [p27](#)). Local newspapers devoted hundreds of column inches to 'news' stories and editorials justifying the rises, a sign that the government knew just how unpopular it would be. The argument goes that the high salaries only mirror those of top corporations, and that they help maintain probity in high office by making ministers impervious to corruption.

1989

2004

2008

Lee Kuan Yew steps down as Prime Minister, handing over reins to Goh Chok Tong. Lee becomes Senior Minister and retains oversight of government policy.

Goh Chok Tong steps down as Prime Minister and is replaced by Lee Kuan Yew's son, Lee Hsien Loong, who announces decision to build two casinos, reversing decades of government policy on casino gambling.

Singapore stages Formula One grand prix.

An increase in private rents of more than 100% between 2006 and 2008 will have kept local landlords happy, but large numbers of Singaporeans are struggling to make ends meet, and this may have a long-term impact on the government's popularity, especially if its top-down economic policies fail to propel Singapore through the next few decades.

CULTURE

As prosperous Singapore forges ahead into the 21st century, it is keenly examining what it means to be a Singaporean. Is there such a thing as a Singaporean identity? The government is keen to promote one, but beyond the almost universal use of the Singlish dialect (see p41) and the obsession with food, it is questionable whether the different communities feel a deep, shared sense of Singaporeanness.

The Malay, Tamil and Chinese (and Peranakan – see below) communities retain strong individual religious, cultural and moral values. Despite the astonishing pace of change and the city's Westernised veneer, or maybe because of it, many traditional customs, festivals and ceremonies survive and even flourish.

If there is any shared sense of values, it is the neo-Confucian ideals espoused by the government. These ideals are based on subservience to family and authority, hard work, discipline and the desire to succeed. The sanctity of the extended family unit and respect for parents is reinforced both socially and through legislation.

It is not unusual for Singaporeans to continue living with their parents until they are well into their 30s, partly because of cultural mores, partly because housing legislation makes it next to impossible for young people to move out of home until they are married, unless they can afford a private house or condo. Single people cannot buy or rent Housing Development Board (HDB) flats until they are 35, and even then they have to apply together with another single person.

It is expected, in Chinese families particularly, that children care for ageing parents much as parents care for young children. By and large this is still the case, but there are signs of change,

THE PERANAKANS

'Peranakan' means half-caste in Malay, which is exactly what the Peranakans are: descendants of Chinese immigrants who from the 16th century onwards settled in Singapore, Melaka and Penang and married Malay women. The term does not in fact strictly denote Chinese – there were also Peranakan Yahud (Jews), Ceti Peranakan (Hindus from southern India) and Peranakan Yawi (Arabs).

The culture and language of the Chinese Peranakans is a fascinating melange of Chinese and Malay traditions. The Peranakans took the name and religion of their Chinese fathers, but the customs, language and dress of their Malay mothers. They also used the terms 'Straits-born' or 'Straits Chinese' to distinguish themselves from later arrivals from China, who they looked down upon (nowadays pretty much all Chinese Singaporeans look down on the mainlanders!).

Other names you may hear for these people are Babas or Nonyas, after the Peranakan words for male (*baba*) and female (*nonya*). The Peranakans were often wealthy traders and could afford to indulge their passion for sumptuous furnishings, jewellery and brocades. Their terrace houses were gaily painted, with patterned tiles embedded in the walls for extra decoration.

Peranakan dress was similarly ornate. Nonyas wore fabulously embroidered *kasot manek* (slippers) and *kebaya* (blouses worn over a sarong), tied with beautiful *kerasong* brooches, usually of fine filigree gold or silver. Babas, who assumed Western dress in the 19th century, reflecting their wealth and close association with the British, saved their finery for important occasions such as the wedding ceremony, a highly stylised and intricate ritual dictated by *adat* (Malay customary law).

The Peranakan patois is a Malay dialect containing many Hokkien words – so many that it is largely unintelligible to a Malay speaker. The Peranakans also included words and expressions of English and French. There are very few monolingual Peranakans left – and they are very old – and the culture has endured a long, slow decline.

In recent years, there have been vigorous efforts to keep this heritage alive. The [Peranakan Association](http://www.peranakan.org.sg) (☎ 6255 0704; www.peranakan.org.sg) reports growing interest in Peranakan traditions, the cuisine remains extremely popular, and the opening of the fabulous Peranakan Museum (p56) has cemented the community's importance to Singapore's history and culture.

IN PERFECT HARMONY?

In 1964, when Singapore was still part of the Malay Federation, the city was twice shaken by race riots between Malays and Chinese. The first took place in July, on Prophet Muhammad's birthday and subsequent days, during which more than 20 people were killed and around 450 injured.

Then, in September, a Malay man was found murdered – allegedly by a group of Chinese – in the traditional Malay district of Geylang Serai, sparking fresh riots that engulfed Geylang and Joo Chiat. A further 13 people were killed and more than 100 injured.

The riots inspired decades of government attempts to foster religious and racial tolerance, which continue unabated. Racial discrimination remains the country's second-most taboo subject, after criticising the government.

Religious instruction is not permitted in school, HDB flats must maintain strict quotas of racial mixing and there are harsh punishments for those who publicly air racist opinions in blogs or elsewhere.

Has it worked? Well, there haven't been any riots since, so in essence the answer is yes. Singapore has worked extremely hard at maintaining a multicultural society; its economic success has depended upon it. But it's also true that many Singaporeans are acutely mindful of racial differences – perhaps as a consequence of being continually reminded about race – and you don't have to dig too far beneath the surface to uncover lingering prejudice, though of course the same could be said of dozens of societies.

Surveys have indicated that there is very little interaction between races, despite the enforced mixing, and the evidence on the street seems to support that conclusion. Seeing mixed-race groups of friends is not particularly common, and mixed race couples draw stares.

Privately, many Indians and Malays say they believe pro-Chinese discrimination is universal, though you'll never see any such sentiments expressed in the media. While employment classifieds cannot specify a preferred race, many simply get around this by saying they require 'Mandarin speakers'.

While Singapore remains economically stable and successful, racial differences are likely to remain hidden, but as the experiences of countless countries show, if the hard times hit, ugly sentiments are the first to surface.

as newspaper stories about elderly people being abandoned in nursing homes periodically remind the population.

Until a recent abrupt reversal, the government education system sternly discouraged individuality and gave little merit or attention to most nonacademic pursuits. From a very young age, children are 'streamed' according to their academic abilities, and once placed in an academic stream it is difficult to break into a higher one. The system, now being reformed, was derided in the popular local movie *I Not Stupid*.

The value placed on order and conformity means that the familiar East-West cultural clashes found elsewhere in Asia are also common in Singapore. Westerners often complain that Singaporeans are process-driven, either unwilling or incapable of thinking laterally or creatively. Conversely, Singaporeans are often uncomfortable with Westerners' outspokenness and willingness to challenge authority or accepted norms, seeing it as brash, arrogant and disruptive. These differences can make themselves evident to the visitor in small ways, whether you're trying to get a coffee chain to serve breakfast two minutes after the allotted breakfast period has ended, or a bank clerk to perform an unfamiliar transaction. Foreigners trying to carry out any task in an unusual or nonprescribed manner often hit a logjam they find baffling, which also creates the potential for problems between expatriate workers and local staff.

However, you won't find many Westerners complaining about how safe Singapore is – unlike many cities in the West, you don't have to think twice about walking past groups of young men late at night.

But while the strong sense of discipline has engendered an often punishing lifestyle involving long hours and hard work, affluent citizens make full use of their leisure time. Singaporeans are keen travellers, whether popping off to Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok or Hong Kong for weekend shopping trips, to Genting Highlands for weekend gambling orgies, or to Australia, Europe and the US for long holidays. Likewise, younger Singaporeans are gradually becoming more interested in independent travel, while you'll find plenty of young Singaporeans educated overseas who have a radically different mindset from those who passed through the local education system.

ARTS

Singapore's art scene is flourishing like never before, and the city-state offers scores of galleries filled with works by both local and foreign artists, theatres featuring locally produced plays, and increasingly successful directors putting Singaporean scenes onto the big screen. The combination of diversity and stability that's made Singapore into a financial powerhouse has helped create a fairly vibrant arts scene.

There are, of course, some who say that the scene in Singapore is somewhat lacking in grit. Singapore's social stability and overall comfort level provides little to rebel against, and this in turn may have created an environment more sterile than perhaps Beijing or New York, cities with long histories of social rebellion. Singapore, lacking this tradition, produces art and artists somewhat less radical in nature.

In *The Wild One*, Marlon Brando, in response to the question 'What are you rebelling against?' answered 'What have you got?' Had this been a Singaporean film, his answer might well have been 'Against what am I permitted to rebel?'

This pretty well describes the complaint some critics level at the overall art scene in Singapore.

Still, from a strictly aesthetic perspective, Singapore produces beauty far more copious than its tiny size might suggest, all the while playing host to artists in all mediums from around the world. Visitors can reasonably expect to experience anything from Chinese opera and Indian classical dance to British Pantomime and stand-up comedians. The number of galleries hosting local and nonlocal artists has increased exponentially over the last decade, and of course Singapore is a major stopover for touring theatre companies from the West, and major international pop artists.

Singapore's place in world cinema has never been stronger, and the city's annual international film festival offers both a venue for local and international filmmakers. Theatre, too, is blossoming. A number of local theatre groups have, over the last decade, pushed the boundaries of what's considered 'speakeable discourse', and while Singapore still can't be considered a free-for-all artistic environment, nowadays shows are more likely to close because of poor ticket sales than government interference.

Shoppers looking to pick up local art and sculptures will find plenty to choose from, but the far better bargains can be had in Hanoi, Bangkok or Bali.

A mix of architectural styles makes wandering the streets an eclectic delight, with Indian temples in Chinatown, and the Foster & Partners-designed Supreme Court looming like a spaceship over the old colonial quarter. Art and architecture go hand in hand, as the spiky, encasing Esplanade shows, and many colonial buildings are reinventing themselves as arts venues, such as the Arts House at the Old Parliament House.

Music and dance performances, such as the Womad (World of Music and Dance) festival and Ballet under the Stars in Fort Canning Park, are often held in open spaces and shopping malls to appeal to a wider audience. The annual Arts Festival (June/July) ranges from larky street theatre to the impenetrably avant-garde.

Extensive listings for galleries, theatre groups and cinemas can be found in the Arts & Leisure chapter (p150).

PAINTING

The School of Singapore hasn't established itself in quite the same way as Indonesia, Vietnam or China – apart from the Nanyang School of the Sixties, which went on to found the Nanyang School of Fine Art. Among its founders, collagist Goh Beng Kwan is still working hard today. Artists Tan Swie Hian, Heman Chong and Francis Ng all took part in the Venice Biennale in 2003. Tan also became the first Singaporean to receive the World

top picks

ART GALLERIES

- **Singapore Art Museum** (p56) Eclectic Asian.
- **Gajah Gallery** (p151) Chic Asian.
- **Red Sea Gallery** (Map pp52–3; 232 River Valley Rd) Well-priced Vietnamese.
- **Utterly Art** (p108) Modern local.
- **Opera Gallery** (Map pp74–5; Ngee Ann City 02-12, Orchard Rd) Expensive European.

Economic Forum Crystal Award in 2003. Ong Kim Seng is a well-regarded local water-colourist while Chua Ek Kay works beautifully in Chinese ink. Visiting local galleries (there are many, both older and newly opened) is a great way to learn about the local painting scene. Check out the Arts & Leisure chapter on p150 for gallery listings.

The MICA Building (Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts) has a handful of galleries, while boutique galleries like Red Sea Gallery on River Valley Rd and Utterly Art on South Bridge Rd showcase art from the region.

The grand old man of pottery is Iskandar Jalil, who fell foul of the authorities when his ancient kiln turned out to flout planning regulations (though admirers gave him a newer, safer one).

SCULPTURE & PUBLIC ART

Sculpture Square (Map pp52–3), on Middle Rd, was launched in 1999, and public art is springing up everywhere. While New York's Wall Street has the bull, Singapore's financial district has a chubby, somewhat whimsical sculpture called *Bird* by Colombian artist Fernando Botero. The area on both sides of the river is dotted with sculptural works, including a series entitled *The People of the River*. Showing scenes from Singapore's history, the series includes bronzes of little boys frozen in action jumping joyously into the river, pigtailed Chinese businessman negotiating with a 19th-century colonial over the price of a bale of cotton, and some rather curious (and undeniably cute) cats at the Fullerton Hotel end of the Cavenagh Bridge. Fans of surrealist master Salvador Dali won't want to miss the sculpture *Homage to Newton*, a typically bizarre work that feels somewhat out of place in a city not known for its appreciation of the hallucinatory.

MUSIC & DANCE

The Singapore rock scene is surprisingly lively. Local rock band Electrico is still going strong, having just released its third album *We Satellites* in the summer of 2008. Other bands include Ugly in the Morning, Mi Lu Bang, the Observatory and the oddly named I Am David Sparkle (an electronica band whose sound has been compared to another oddly named group, Godspeed You Black Emperor!). Going lighter, pianist Jeremy Monteiro, his sister Clarissa, and others like guitarist Eugene Pao keep the Singapore flag flying proudly on the international jazz scene.

The superb Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), set up in 1979, was Singapore's first professional orchestra and now performs over a hundred times per year at the Esplanade, while the well-respected Singapore Chinese Orchestra, set up in 1997, performs about 20 traditional and symphonic Chinese pieces each year, as well as Indian, Malay and Western pieces.

There are more than 30 dance companies and societies. Singapore's leading dance company, the Singapore Dance Theatre, puts on about 28 performances a year – the annual Ballet under the Stars season at Fort Canning Park draws an audience of 10,000. Odyssey Dance Theatre represented Singapore at the ASEAN Festival of Arts, while groups such as EcNad and Ah Hock & Peng Yu all add to a growing scene. The minority groups are well represented: Bhaskar's Arts Academy and the Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society for Indian dance, and Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts for contemporary and traditional Malay dance.

Chinese Opera

In Singapore, *wayang* (Chinese opera) is derived from the Cantonese opera, which is seen as a more music-hall mix of dialogue, music, song and dance. What the performances lack in

THE SCULPTURE TRAIL

Start at Raffles Place (Map pp52–3) and tick off the following sculptures.

- Aw Tee Hong's boat-shaped *Struggle for Survival* at the south end of Raffles Place
- the Singapore streetscape *Progress & Advancement* by Yang Ying-Feng at the north end of Raffles Place
- Henry Moore's *Reclining Figure* in front of the OCBC Centre on Chulia St
- the surreal *Homage to Newton* by Salvador Dali in the atrium of the UOB Plaza on Chulia St
- Fernando Botero's giant, fat *Bird* on the river in front of UOB Plaza
- the river-diving boys of *First Generation* by Chong Fat Cheong on the right-hand side of Cavenagh Bridge
- the family of tiny Kucinta cats on the left-hand side of Cavenagh Bridge

literary nuance they make up for in garish costumes and crashing music. Scenery is virtually nonexistent, but action is all-important. Performances can go for an entire evening, with the audience drifting in and out, eating and chatting. It's usually easy for the uninitiated to follow the gist of the action. The acting is stylised, and the music searing to Western ears, but seeing a performance – or at least part of one – is worthwhile.

Street performances are held during important festivals such as Chinese New Year, the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts and the Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods – head to Chinatown for the best chance of seeing performances.

CINEMA

In 2008 the Singapore International Film Festival (SIFF) celebrated its 21st year as a major event on the Singapore arts calendar; whether this is indicative of the city-state's coming of age in the world of film is debatable, but Singaporean filmmakers seem to be producing films of increasingly mature subject matter.

Many explanations have been cited for Singaporean cinema's patchy achievements in the past – including lack of money, lack of interest, dearth of creative talent, lack of official encouragement – but now there is certainly no lack of money or official encouragement.

Recently, money has been poured into local movies, through the conduit of the Singapore Film Commission and local deep-pocket production houses like Mediacorp-owned Raintree Productions, with mixed success.

Probably the best local director is Eric Khoo, whose *12 Storeys*, *Mee Pok Man* and *Be with Me* are set in the island's 'heartlands' and have been well received. The latter two were hits at the Cannes Film Festival.

Jack Neo boasts Singapore's three highest-grossing local productions. *Money No Enough* focused on the dark side of the heartlands in the shape of the loan sharks who patrol these vast estates and feed on the impoverished. *I Not Stupid* is an amusing and biting look at Singapore society through its pushy hot-house education system, while sequel *I Not Stupid Too* was more successful commercially, though not as satirical.

Young director Royston Tan came to prominence in 2005, when his film *15: The Movie*, which dealt with drug abuse and wayward youth, was cut by the censors, winning at-

top picks

MOST IMPORTANT SINGAPOREAN FILMS

Representing the next generation of cinema in Singapore, filmmaker Wesley Wong, whose real-life concerns mirror those of his alter-ego 'ah-tan' in the short film *Zo Gang* (<http://hosaywood.com/2007/12/05/zo-gang-online-now/>), has been working in local independent film since graduating from film school in Perth. These are Wesley's picks for most important Singaporean films.

- **Bujang Lapok** (Confirmed Bachelor; 1957) The first comedy of P Ramlee, one of the most versatile and prolific artistes-turned-filmmaker. The film jumped-started a whole series of *Bachelor* comedies, simultaneously making Ramlee a household name, even today.
- **They Call Her...Cleopatra Wong** (1978) Singapore's take on the blaxploitation films of the '70s, the film proved to be a good formula to copy as it swept through the region and made it to cult status beyond the region.
- **Medium Rare** (1991) A real anomaly, this was both a good and bad thing for Singapore films. It marked the revival of locally made films, but it also became a report card to explain the dearth of local films and filmmaking. The unfortunate experiment will also forever be remembered, as a local magazine put it, as 'Tedium-rare'. Hardy Singaporean filmgoers bounced back from this, which led us to...
- **12 Storeys** (1997) Eric Khoo's name pops up more often than any other local filmmaker. His second feature is probably his most accessible and realistic portrayal of Singapore. It explores Singaporeans and their neighbours in public housing projects, which are, by now, world renowned.
- **Money No Enough** (1998) Directed by Jack Neo, one of the leading actors in *12 Storeys*, this soon became an all-time top-grossing locally made film. Its success was both boon and bane, much like *Medium Rare*. On the one hand, it made Singaporean film once again competitive; on the other, it became the unspoken template for maximising profit from locally made movie ventures.
- **Perth** (2004) Djinn Ong's sophomore feature is at once a homage to Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and a critique of the typical Singaporean dream: to retire in a slower-paced city like Perth, Australia. It features excellent acting from the supporting cast along with a fairly over-the-top performance from a veteran lead who, some say, tried just a bit too hard to channel Travis Bickle. A very gritty film.

tention for both the film and Tan, who lampooned the censors in a musical sequence called *Cut* (watch it on YouTube).

Among the locally produced films presented in the festival's Singapore Panorama were Kan Lumé's *Dreams from the Third World* (concerning the spiritual journey of a man making a porno). Though tame by Western standards, it's worth noting that its doubtful the film would have been screened locally as recently as 10 years ago.

THEATRE

Singapore's theatre groups have been at the forefront of pushing the boundaries of what is and isn't 'permissible discourse', offering intellectually challenging plays with socially – and sometimes politically – taboo subject matter. Creative, inventive luna-id Theatre specialises in plays by overseas playwrights that 'contain universal relevance'. Producing cutting-edge works by resident playwright Haresh Sharma, Singapore's the Necessary Stage aims for 'challenging indigenous and innovative theatre that touches the heart and mind'. Other theatre companies include WildRice, Theatretworks and Action Theatre.

ARCHITECTURE

Like many cities around the world, Singapore endured its own architectural Dark Ages in the 1960s and '70s, when legions of city planners and architects decided the concrete box was the way of the future and sent the wrecking ball scything through acres of architectural heritage.

Fortunately sense prevailed before they got too far. Areas of Chinatown, Little India and Katong contain beautifully preserved or restored shophouses, and the city centre is a treasure trove of tropical colonial design, interspersed with some outstanding modern buildings (see p36).

Singapore's notable architecture can be divided into several broad categories.

COLONIAL

Irishman George Drumgoole Coleman, who became Singapore's town surveyor and superintendent of public works in 1826, is the pre-eminent colonial architect. He was a skilful adapter of the Palladian style (Doric columns, high ceilings, wide verandas) to suit the tropical climate. His buildings include the Armenian Church (Map pp52–3), Caldwell House in CHIJMES (Map pp52–3) and Old Parliament House (Map pp52–3); he was also responsible for the city's original central road network, which was drawn by Sir Stamford Raffles.

Other colonial buildings of note from the mid-1800s include St Andrew's Cathedral (Map pp52–3) and the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd (Map pp52–3), as well as the Thian Hock Keng Temple (p61) and the Hajjah Fatimah Mosque (p67).

SHOPHOUSES

Before HDB flats, the definitive Singaporean building was the shophouse, whose long, narrow design was also a distinctive feature of other port cities like Penang and Melaka.

They were designed to have a shop or business on the lower floor and accommodation upstairs. Often projecting over the footpath is a solid canopy, known as a five-foot way. The canopy was in use in Southern China and parts of Southeast Asia, and were mandated by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1822, when in a set of ordinances he stated that 'all houses constructed of brick or tiles have a common type of front each having an arcade of a certain depth open to all sides as a continuous and open passage...'

Raffles wanted to ensure pedestrians were protected from the sun and rain. But shopkeepers had other ideas and before long they all became extensions of the shops inside. Most five-foot ways are now clear of commerce, but walk along Buffalo Rd in Little India, or the northern end of Telok Ayer St in Chinatown, and you get an idea of how difficult it became for pedestrians to negotiate these passageways.

The load-bearing walls separating the buildings are heavy masonry, which was a departure from the traditional timber, and not only provided strength and privacy from neighbours, but also deterred the spread of fire.

PUSHING THE LIMITS OF DISCOURSE: THE NECESSARY STAGE

Mr Tan, I've heard it said that you're the mind, (resident playwright) Haresh is the heart, and the theatre itself is the body. How do you feel about this analogy? (Laughs)

There's some truth to the analogy, but I don't know where to go with it! I guess I am a little more cerebral, while Haresh is somewhat more emotional.

How important is the social message component in the work you do? Very important. There are some artists who say our work is not 'art' enough because it is too much of a platform for social messages. But we are most concerned with creating works that have multiple dimensions, in putting paradox on stage.

When the play *Off Centre* came out in 1994, it was considered controversial. Why?

There are two protagonists in the story, one of whom is a military officer who happens to be a bully. The Ministry of Health said you couldn't commission a play that puts another ministry in a bad light. Also, at the time we were accused of being Marxists, and the theatre was shut down in 1995. We were later vindicated as being idealists, not Marxists.

Fast forward to 2008, and the same play has been chosen by the Ministry of Education to be part of the high-school literature syllabus. This must be a great vindication. Very much so. Today, of course, we're doing things that are far more controversial, covering topics ranging from paedophilia to the death penalty, topics that would have been unthinkable in 1994.

Your latest play, *Good People*, also seems controversial, because of its dealing with the issue of medical marijuana. Could you even have done this play 15 years ago?

No, of course not. In Singapore there is tangible, real relaxation. Right now Singapore is in a really interesting space.

Is one of the jobs of the *Necessary Stage* to define the limits of what can and can't be spoken about? We like to think that. How can we make visible what is usually swept under the rug? This is what we're talking about.

How do you feel about the current degree of artistic censorship in Singapore? I don't believe in censorship, but I do believe in regulations. If we all set our rules together, it's fine. But it isn't something that we worry about at this point. The *Necessary Stage* is no longer doing plays that challenge the government. Now we are doing plays that disturb the audience.

For over two decades, theatre group the Necessary Stage (www.necessary.org) has put on plays designed not merely to entertain, but also to enlighten and create greater discourse on important social issues. Along the way, the group has pushed the envelope of what is 'speakeable discourse' in the normally conservative city. Alvin Tan is the artistic director at the Necessary Stage.

The first shophouses dating from 1840 are plain, squat, two-storey buildings. These Early shophouses, in the vernacular, were followed by First Transitional, Late, Second Transitional and Art Deco style. Classical elements such as columns are often used on the facades, along with beautiful tiles and bright paint – the Chinese, Peranakans and Malays all favoured lively colours.

Shophouses typically featured a central courtyard, which was often open to the skies, allowing natural light to penetrate the building and, in the early days, acting as a useful water collection method (the courtyards usually had open cisterns). In some designs, a high rear wall acted as a kind of wind deflector, diverting breezes downwards and channelling them through the house.

A peculiarly Singaporean variation was the 'chophouse' – recreated examples of which can be seen at the Chinatown Heritage Centre (p60). Built to the same basic design as the shophouse, they were constructed to hold many dozens – sometimes hundreds – of residents. Floors were divided into tiny, dark, miserable cubicles and the high concentration of people meant conditions were squalid in the extreme. A few chophouses remain in Little India, along Desker Rd, for example, but most of them were torn down.

BUNGALOWS

Not the single-storey retirement homes of the West, bungalows here are named after Bangalore-style houses and are usually two storeys high. Most were built in the style now locally known as 'black and whites', after the mock-Tudor exposed-beam style adopted from 1900 to the late 1930s, and are much sought after by expatriates chasing colonialism's glory days three

generations ago. You'll find many black and whites lurking in the leafy residential areas off Orchard Rd, such as along Nassim Rd and the stretch of Scotts Rd near the Sheraton Towers hotel. They also cluster in the exclusive areas such as Alexandra Park and Ridley Park, where you can practically taste the gin-slings and elegantly discreet liaisons.

Down at Mountbatten Rd in Kallang (Map p80) are examples of both the highly decorative Victorian bungalow and the concrete Art Deco bungalows dating from the 1920s and '30s, typically with flat roofs, curved corners and a strong horizontal design.

HDB FLATS

Only in Singapore could you walk safely through a tower-block estate at night and find a cold-drinks vending machine full, working and unvandalised. While public high-rise housing estates are being torn down elsewhere, in Singapore they work. They have to: land is limited, so the government had little choice but to build upwards. The state-run Housing Development Board (HDB) is locked into a mammoth construction project, erecting areas of well-built, well-maintained and affordable housing. So far, they have built around a million units.

HDB 'towns' such as Toa Payoh, Pasir Ris and Tampines provide homes for nearly 84% of the population. HDB developments have markets, schools, playgrounds, shops and hawker centres hardwired into them; the older ones (from the 1960s and '70s) have mature trees keeping them shady and (relatively) attractive. Many blocks also have 'void decks', empty areas on the ground floor that allow a breeze to circulate, and where old men play chess in the shade.

The HDB is also locked into a continuous renovation and upgrading program, even though the majority of the flats are privately owned, making them perhaps unique among the world's public housing projects. Every few years, they get licks of paint and new features added. There is a huge project currently underway to install lifts on every floor of these blocks, where previously the lifts stopped every three floors, which could be a nightmare for the elderly.

The MRT system makes it simple to visit the HDB heartlands. Just jump on a train and pop up somewhere like Toa Payoh. You won't see stunning architecture, but you will get a glimpse of what life is like for most Singaporeans.

MODERN

The area around Bras Basah, which links Orchard Rd and the Colonial District, is filling up with new educational establishments, all showcasing extraordinary design and pointing to the more experimental line Singapore is now taking with its cityscape – a process heralded by the outrageous Esplanade theatres.

The Singapore Management University (Map pp52–3) looks chunky and functional, but saves itself with frills of greenery, while the Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts (Map p80) is a

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MODERN BUILDINGS

- **Supreme Court** (Map pp52–3) Foster & Partners' contributions to the Singapore skyline tend to involve large silver discs, which are prominent on both the Expo Station near Changi Airport, and now on the gleaming, ultramodern new Supreme Court, which opened in June 2005.
- **The Esplanade** (Map pp52–3) Designed by Briton Michael Wilford and affectionately known as the Durians, this bulbous, spiky double concert hall intends to be the iconic equivalent of Sydney's Opera House. It's a magnificent sight, particularly at night.
- **National Museum of Singapore** (Map pp52–3) A masterpiece of melding traditional and modern, the new annex sits behind the original classic Palladian 19th-century building. Bathed in natural light but kept cool by large natural air-conditioning vents, it features large double-skinned glass rotundas, a glass passage linking it to the old building and whimsical features like swinging chandeliers.
- **Parkview Square** (Map p68) A study in 1930s Art Deco kitsch, Parkview Square, designed by American James Adam, is a Gotham City-style throwback, with a cathedral-domed entryway, terraced courtyard, a phalanx of statues of notable men of history, plus eight bronzed colossi kneeling at the building's corners.
- **Gateway** (Map p68) The clean lines of the Gateway provide a stark contrast to the frivolity of Parkview Square. These sleek glass-and-steel twin towers, designed by IM Pei as identical parallelograms, appear two-dimensional at almost any angle you view them from.

remarkable, irregular, crystalline building, designed to look as if a block of ice has been dropped and shattered into six parts.

The National Library (Map pp52–3) is one of the government's showpiece eco-buildings, designed for minimal energy use and wastage. The new annex of the National Museum of Singapore (p56), meanwhile, brilliantly melds some daring and whimsical design features with the original Victorian structure.

In the central business district is a cluster of gleaming towers by famous Japanese architects including Kurokawa Kisho's 66-storey Republic Plaza, and Tange Kenzo's OUB Centre and UOB Plaza. Tange also designed the URA Centre in Chinatown (Map pp62–3), an interesting place to drop by if you want to find out more about the future of Singapore's built environment.

As in most cities, public opinion is fiercely divided over architecture but so far Singapore has been spared the more horrendous modern follies that blight other cities.

ENVIRONMENT

THE LAND

Singapore is very flat, very hot and often very wet.

The main island of Singapore is 42km long and 23km deep, and sits a degree above the equator. There are a further 63 outlying islands, some industrial, some military, some for pleasure and some little more than wave-washed rocks. Altogether, Singapore has a land mass of nearly 700 sq km, though land reclamation is making it ever larger (see below).

The other main islands are Pulau Tekong, which is a military area, the largely rural Pulau Ubin, and Sentosa, Singapore's rapidly developing pleasure isle. Around half the island is built up, and the rest is given over to parkland, reservoirs, some small farms, large military areas and a few remaining pockets of jungle. Altogether, less than 3% of the country is farmland.

The absence of significant hills makes Singapore easy for walking, though that is counteracted by the relentless heat and humidity. Bukit Timah (which means 'hill of tin' in Malay) is the highest point, at a dizzying 166m. The central area has most of Singapore's forest and open areas, but the entire city is sprinkled with large parks. The western part is a sedimentary area of low-lying hills and valleys, while the southeast is mostly flat and sandy. Singapore is connected to Peninsular Malaysia by a causeway in the north and a bridge in the west.

WILDLIFE

The tigers that roamed the forests have long since been shot into oblivion, and elephants no longer swim across to Pulau Ubin, but nature spotting is still possible in Singapore's remaining forests.

The animals you're most likely to spot on a walk through the Central Catchment Nature Reserve (p88) are long-tailed macaques, monitor lizards and squirrels. The forests are also home to flying lemurs, pythons, cobras and other snakes, bats and even anteaters, but these are difficult to spot.

THE GROWING ISLAND

It's a long time since Beach Rd was anywhere near the sea. The island state has increased its landmass from 581 sq km at independence in 1965 to 682.7 sq km today and plans to add a further 100 sq km to itself in the future – much to the disquiet of neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia. This is nothing new: Singapore's first land reclamation project was during Raffles' time, when earth was removed from a hill to fill a swamp.

Reclamation has drastically changed the geography around the city centre, particularly in the Marina Bay area, where more than 550 hectares have been added. In the Tanah Merah and Changi Airport area in the east, and Tuas in the west, land is creeping into the sea. Some reclamation projects have trodden on the toes of Malaysia next door.

One of the most ambitious projects was the joining up of seven islands to make Jurong Island, now the biggest island after Singapore itself. The new land is mainly used for oil storage.

Singapore has been recognised as an important node on the East Asia Flyway, inspiring the government to gazette the bird-rich Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve as a protected area. A bird-watcher's paradise, the reserve is also home to otters, massive monitor lizards and even a few saltwater crocodiles. Other protected mangrove areas include Pasir Ris Park and Chek Jawa on Pulau Ubin.

Though constant vigilance has kept the island's urban mosquito population under reasonable control, Singapore has an astonishingly rich six- and eight-legged population. There are 935 species of insect, and new ones continue to be discovered.

Underwater, the magical 'forests of coral' described by traveller Isabella Bird in the 19th century have been largely destroyed, and whatever marine life flourished in the Singapore Strait has been pummelled by shipping, pollution and land reclamation. However, *kelong* (fishing platforms) still exist, especially off Pulau Ubin (though Singaporeans usually go to Malaysia for *kelong* fishing trips) and there are an estimated 451 species of crab and shrimp living in Singapore waters, including the prehistoric blue-blooded horseshoe crab.

FLORA

Singapore consisted of mangrove and lowland dipterocarp forest and freshwater swamp forest. Most of it is now gone, but pockets remain in Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, MacRitchie Nature Reserve (though this is secondary forest) and on Pulau Ubin.

Nevertheless, Singapore has earned its Garden City moniker, and few cities around the world can match it for the range, size and variety of its green spaces, from the smallest city parks like Telok Ayer Green in Chinatown to large pockets of urban forest like Labrador or Kent Ridge Parks to large suburban green oases like Pasir Ris or Bishan Parks, to the superb Botanic Gardens.

Not surprisingly, Singapore's hot, humid climate nurtures a bewildering variety of flora, to the extent that one botanist estimated the island contains more plant species than the whole of North America.

GREEN SINGAPORE

A 10-year blueprint for environmental sustainability, called the Singapore Green Plan 2012, was launched in 2002, focusing on waste management, clean air, water supply and ecology. Updated every few years, the plan aims to make this already spotless and well-organised island even cleaner and greener.

However, on the ground, attitudes have been slow to change. Potentially, Singapore is the ideal test-bed for green vehicles, but the government has been reluctant to introduce the kind of incentives that might encourage mass adoption of hybrid or electric cars, perhaps because of its status as the world's third-biggest oil refiner. While new emissions standards have been introduced, congestion on the city's roads has dramatically worsened in recent years.

Recycling has been slow to take off, which is surprising given the pressure waste disposal puts on Singapore's scarce land resources. Most stores still hand out mountains of plastic bags (though some global retailers such as Ikea are setting the pace and weaning customers off) and Singaporeans appear largely reluctant to give up the bag habit. Change, though, will come. You'll find recycling bins dotted around the city centre, particularly along Orchard Rd.

But while the island tries to tackle environmental issues at home, it has no control over its neighbours. From June to September, fires in Indonesia (mostly from massive plantations) can send a brown haze over the island, so that it smells heavily of wood smoke, a gloomy reminder of its environmentally vulnerable position in the region.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

In theory, Singapore has a democratically elected government based on the Westminster system. In practice, however, the electoral laws are biased in favour of the ruling PAP, to the extent that though 33% of the electorate voted for one of the three opposition parties at the 2006 general election, the government won all but two of the 84 seats up for grabs. Even so, most Singaporeans quietly accept the status quo, figuring that political freedom is a fair trade-off for the high standard of living they generally enjoy.

top picks

POLITICAL BOOKS

Naturally, you won't find any books on the dark side of Singapore's politics inside the country, though they are available from online bookstores – and many shops in Malaysia happily sell these dissenting volumes.

- **Singapore Story** (Lee Kuan Yew) To get the official story on the Singapore Miracle, skip all the sycophantic tomes handed out by local hacks and go straight to the source – the man who master-minded the whole thing.
- **Lee's Law** (Chris Lydgate) A disturbing and sad account of the rise and systematic destruction of Singapore's most famous dissenter and most successful opposition politician, lawyer JB Jeyaretnam.
- **No Man Is An Island** (James Minchin) A broad critical study of Lee Kuan Yew.
- **To Catch A Tartar & Beyond Suspicion? The Singapore Judiciary** (Francis Seow) The first book by the former Law Society president tells how he was plunged into a nightmare of persecution and professional ruin after he began to openly oppose Lee Kuan Yew. The second book questions the independence of the country's legal system.

The current unicameral parliament has 84 elected members, with nine of the MPs from single-member constituencies and the 75 others from group representation constituencies, which are supposed to ensure the representation in parliament of members of the Malay, Indian and other minority communities. A side effect of having several MPs for a single seat is that it's harder for opposition parties to field enough candidates to contest the seat.

Voting in elections is compulsory and governments are elected for five years, but a ruling government can dissolve parliament and call an election at any time.

Singapore also has a popularly elected president, who at the time of writing is SR Nathan. The position is largely ceremonial.

The PAP argues that since it listens to all opinions and is happy to take on good ideas no matter where they originate from, there is less need for political plurality.

It also asserts that, relieved of the tiresome task of answering to a strident opposition in parliament, it has more time to focus on running the country, citing the chaotic democracies of countries like India, Thailand and Indonesia to (somewhat convincingly) support its case. TV news reports display punch-ups in the parliaments of South Korea and Taiwan with a certain satisfied relish.

Vocal opposition does exist, but those who have chosen to follow that path, like Chee Soon Juan, JB Jeyaretnam and Francis Seow (see boxed text, [above](#)), have found themselves subject to vilification, legal harassment and ridicule, and ignored by the media, unless there is something

JBJ

JB Jeyaretnam is Singapore's most famous dissenting voice, and his experiences are burned into the country's collective unconscious as a kind of cautionary tale.

A lawyer by profession, JBJ led the Worker's Party in an effort to challenge the all-powerful PAP. In 1981 he became the first opposition candidate in 13 years to win a seat, taking the Anson constituency in a by-election.

He was re-elected in 1984, but shortly afterwards was dragged into court to face charges relating to the party's accounts. Found not-guilty on all but one charge, he was sentenced to three months in prison and fined \$5000, enough to have him disqualified from elections for five years and disbarred from legal practice.

JBJ appealed to the British Privy Council, which overturned his disbarment (leading the government to change the law relating to such appeals). He then asked the President of Singapore to overturn his conviction, but was refused.

Banned from the 1988 election, he nevertheless campaigned for the Worker's Party, but uttered comments about Lee Kuan Yew that, with a little creative legal interpretation, enable the prime minister to sue him. Lee Kuan Yew was awarded \$260,000. Another 1995 lawsuit saw him hit for \$465,000 in damages. Then, after he was appointed to parliament as a 'nonconstituency MP' in 1997, a further 11 defamation suits were filed against him for referring to police reports made against PM Goh Chok Tong.

The judge said the PM had overstated his case, but nonetheless awarded him \$20,000. On appeal, this was raised to \$100,000 – and the judge was later dismissed.

JBJ resigned as party leader in 2001 and in his last days scratched a living selling his two books – *Make it Right for Singapore* and *The Hatchet Man of Singapore* – on the street. He died on 20 September 2008, a few weeks after launching a political comeback under his newly created Reform Party, and his passing was marked by tributes and obituaries in media around the globe. Even in death, he remained a thorn in the government's side.

negative to report. The government's favoured means of dealing with these intrepid souls is to run them through the courts and ruin them with lawsuits. This is a tidy means of removing them from the political process, since bankrupts are forbidden from running in elections.

The legal system is based on the British system and the judiciary's independence is enshrined in the constitution, but in practice many judges are appointed on short tenure and their renewal is subject to party approval. Rulings that have gone against the government have seen new laws enacted by parliament to ensure the government's victory.

Singapore's Internal Security Department keeps records of its citizens, and there is a widespread (albeit unverifiable) fear that criticising the authorities will cost people their jobs, promotional opportunities or contracts.

As elsewhere, the internet has effected a sea change in the area of political and social debate and there has been a minor explosion in blogs expressing dissent and criticism of the government (see [below](#)).

Singapore does have an extensive local council machinery, which organises public meetings to listen to ideas on various issues of neighbourhood concern and domestic policy. The massive 'e-government' network, which enables citizens to perform all sorts of transactions online – from booking football pitches to filing income tax – also has a channel through which people can express opinions on certain issues.

The most notable recent example was the year-long debate over the building of the two casino resorts, which involved ordinary citizens, religious and grassroots leaders, charities and social services. Though there was a widespread belief that the government had made its mind up well before the 'public consultation' period, it was marked by some surprisingly outspoken views.

MEDIA

In theory, the news media in Singapore is free to express its opinions, but in reality this is far from the case. Self-censorship combined with stern government oversight and complicit editors keeps dissent and damaging stories away from the pages of the local press. Any local journalist intent on breaching the unwritten boundaries known to the local media as 'OB markers' will not keep their job very long, as former *Today* columnist and current blogger [mr brown](#) (www.mrbrown.com) found out.

The largest media company is the giant Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which has become exceedingly wealthy on decades of effective monopoly. It publishes the country's flagship paper, the dreary *Straits Times* broadsheet, which is effectively a branch of the civil service. Its coverage of Asia is not bad, but even that is heavily skewed when Singapore's national interests are involved. Indeed, so well-practised is it at conjuring the illusion of free media that, according to local academic sources, governments such as Burma and China have sent teams over to Singapore to study its model.

SPH also publishes the tabloid *New Paper*, which offers up a lurid and mildly entertaining platter of crime, scandal, sensation, moral outrage, English football and atrocious graphics.

SPEAKING OUT IN SINGAPORE

On the surface, Singaporeans enjoy a substantial level of social freedom. But, as opposition figures like JB Jeyaretnam (see boxed text, [p39](#)) and Chee Soon Juan have discovered, once you start making yourself a nuisance to the Singapore government, life can change dramatically. Both men were hauled through the courts and bankrupted by lawsuits and Chee was fired from his job as a university lecturer.

The government, keen to be seen as democratic, established [Speaker's Corner](#) ([Map pp62–3](#)) in Hong Lim Park in 2000, but imposed firm restrictions on the subjects speakers could cover. After an initial burst of enthusiasm, the novelty quickly wore off and, perpetually deserted, Speaker's Corner became a something of a local joke – though several hundred people did gather there in 2008 to express their dismay at having lost massive investments in the collapse of Lehman Brothers bank. . . Whether this outpouring of discontent emboldens more Singaporeans to openly challenge the status quo is another matter, but clearly the ground is shifting, and in the long-term this could have serious implications for the ruling PAP.

Starting in the late 1990s, the government briefly experimented with media competition between SPH and Mediaworld, both of which operated rival daily freesheet newspapers and TV stations for a few years, but it was a commercial failure. Mediaworld's surviving freesheet *Today* (pick it up at the MRT stations in the morning) is the most entertaining read of any of the dailies, but its reputation as a paper willing to confront uncomfortable issues has largely been lost since the appointment of more government-friendly senior editors.

International English-language publications such as *Time*, the *Economist* and *Newsweek* are readily available, but you won't find the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, which has been banned and sued by the government over a story it published on opposition leader, Chee Soon Juan.

While there is a gaping lack of 'serious' local media, bookstore shelves groan under the weight of lifestyle and special interest publications like *Her World*, *Expat Living* and *Tatler*. Men's and women's magazines like *Maxim*, *FHM* and *Cosmopolitan* are permitted to brandish their customarily sensational sex cover lines and soft porn, within limits.

For entertainment listings, see *8 Days*, *Time Out* or *I-S* magazines. See also p198.

Local TV, which is divided into English, Chinese, Tamil and Malay language stations, features a mixture of local and imported soaps and dramas (which are sometimes censored), magazine shows (many of them about food), reality TV and the ubiquitous talent contests. The quality, to be frank, leaves much to be desired.

Of all the media, radio is probably the biggest risk-taker and is certainly the medium that leads itself in hot water with the authorities most frequently. The music stations are still, though, dominated by bland, identikit DJs with American accents.

LANGUAGE

Having a population with a broad range of native languages naturally presented the country with a few problems. The answer, of course, was to have everyone know at least two languages, their mother tongue and a national lingua franca, which is of course English. All schoolchildren must study English and a 'mother tongue': Malay, Tamil or Mandarin.

Chinese dialects are still widely spoken, especially by older residents – the most common being Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese. And where once the government pestered its citizens to learn English, or speak it better, nowadays with the rapid growth of China there is an equally insistent campaign to get more Chinese Singaporeans learning Mandarin.

This rather inconsistent approach has left many Singaporeans in a kind of linguistic limbo, having mastered neither English nor Mandarin.

SINGLISH

Perhaps the first thing many visitors will notice, after the city's immaculate cleanliness, is that most Singaporeans speak English fluently, sometimes so fluently you can barely understand a word they are saying. This patois, which is basically English peppered with Malay, Hokkien and Tamil slang and spoken in a distinctive sing-song staccato manner, is proudly known as Singlish.

Singlish mortifies the government, which runs the sternly named Speak Good English campaign, and even once banned a song with Singlish lyrics, 'Fried Rice Paradise', from the radio.

It was akin to trying to ban Cockney or some other local dialect. In essence, Singlish is no different from the pidgin of Melanesia, or the creoles of the Caribbean, or any other dialect. Sure it is virtually unintelligible to most visitors, but it is also a vernacular in its own right, and language is the ultimate manifestation of the national identity the government is at pains to foster.

Happily, the government has quietly realised the sheer futility of fighting Singlish and given up. Besides, you'll find that many Singaporeans carry a kind of spare English speaking accent and can effortlessly swap between the baffling machine-gun assault of Singlish they use with their friends and a more understandable Standard English they use with foreigners.

Even so, you're unlikely to spend much time in Singapore without finding yourself at some point staring dumbly at someone, trying to work out what on earth they are on about. Unnecessary prepositions and pronouns are dropped, word order is flipped, phrases are clipped short, and stress and cadence are unconventional, to say the least.

There isn't a Singlish grammar as such, but there are definite characteristics, such as the long stress on the last syllable of phrases, so that the standard English 'government' becomes 'guvva-men'. Words ending in consonants – particularly 'l', 'k' and 't' – are often syncopated and vowels are often distorted.

And of course no discussion of Singlish is complete without referring to those expressive, but ultimately meaningless, particles Singaporeans attach to the end of sentences for emphasis. The most well-known is 'lah', but you'll also hear 'mah', 'meh', 'lor', 'hor' and 'leh'.

These particles have created memorable phrases, such as the romantic overture we overheard passing from a young fellow to his beloved: 'I love you hor'.

For a list of slightly more common Singlish expressions, see the Language chapter ([p202](#)).

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