



Singapore

This month, our attention turns to Singapore, a wealthy city state in south-east Asia, an island between Malaysia and Indonesia. Once a British colonial trading post, today it is a thriving global financial hub and described as one of Asia's economic "tigers". It is also renowned for its conservatism and strict local laws and the country prides itself on its stability and security.

Singapore's well-developed infrastructure and amenities offer expats an exceptional lifestyle and it's no wonder that Singapore was named best expat destination in the 2016 HSBC Expat Explorer Survey. However, the government is attempting to restructure the economy by weaning itself off its dependence on foreign labour. Singapore, which has about 5.6 million people, has a workforce of nearly 40% made up of non-nationals.

The class system is non-existent in Singapore and generally people integrate very well. Women are well respected in society and play an integral part in the professional workplace. There is wider acceptance of different religions in Singapore. The people have embraced religious diversity and various religious holidays are followed by others not belonging to that religion.

One of the first words you'll hear in Singapore is "kiasu". Originating from the Hokkien dialect, it means "afraid of losing out", "afraid of not getting the best", "always wanting the upper hand or something for free". Kiasu implies negative qualities and behaviour such as greed, egoism and rudeness. Singaporeans have become obsessed with doing all that is possible to keep themselves ahead of their peers but now the government is calling for the eradication of the "kiasu" mindset, describing it as a "national habit of fear that poses a roadblock to transformation".

Singapore's work culture is generally group-oriented. Asserting individual preferences may be seen as less important than having a sense of belonging to a group, conforming to its norms and maintaining harmony. As with many Asian cultures, establishing a personal relationship before commencing business activities is of importance. Take time to get to know your colleagues by going out to lunch, having drinks in the evenings or accepting invites to show you around.

In Singapore's culture, 'saving face' is also critical. Causing embarrassment to another person, such as correcting him or her, disagreeing with an older person or a superior, may cause a loss of face for all parties involved and can be very detrimental for business negotiations. Reputation and social standing strongly depend on a person's ability to control one's emotions and remain friendly at all times. If you have to bring up an unpleasant topic with a person, never do so in public and always convey your message in ways that maintain the other's self-respect. Reserve and tact are very important. Keep your cool and never show openly that you are upset.

Good discussion topics when meeting with someone for the first time would be questions about family, health and family background (but when speaking with a man avoid asking specific questions about their wife). Also avoid asking questions about religion and politics.

When invited to dine out in Singapore, remember that if your host is a practicing Muslim, meat will be strictly halal, and no pork is eaten. Alcohol is prohibited and food is eaten with utensils or the right hand.

However, ethnic Indians tend to practice Hinduism or Sikhism, therefore beef is not served and vegetarianism can be widespread amongst this cultural group. Food can be eaten with the fingers, but again only with the right hand.

In contrast Chinese Singaporeans will use chopsticks to eat, and alcohol is not prohibited, but generally should not be ordered or drunk until the host or other guests begin to drink. Therefore, in the company of ethnic Chinese it would be considered proper etiquette to learn how to properly use chopsticks. It is also important to understand related dining etiquette, such as never leaving your chopsticks stuck facing upwards in your food.

Most likely, you will sit at a round table with an even number of guests if your host is a Singaporean Chinese (even numbers signify good luck). Your host will sit to the immediate right of the most senior guest.

Finally, the government has introduced very tight legislation governing the issues around gift giving – wishing to avoid the corruption scandals which have tainted other Asian societies in the past. It is, therefore, less common for gifts to be given and received in Singapore than in many other countries in the region. It is possibly better to give one gift to the group as a whole, but if individual gifts are to be given they should be merely tokens (pens with corporate logos etc.) As with other Asian countries, gifts should be wrapped and are unlikely to be opened in front of the giver.