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CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

The *CultureShock!* series is a dynamic and indispensable range of guides for those travellers who are looking to truly understand the countries they are visiting. Each title explains the customs, traditions, social and business etiquette in a lively and informative style.

CultureShock! authors, all of whom have experienced the joys and pitfalls of cultural adaptation, are ideally placed to provide warm and informative advice to those who seek to integrate seamlessly into diverse cultures.

Each *CultureShock!* book contains:

- insights into local culture and traditions
- advice on adapting into the local environment
- linguistic help, and most importantly
- how to get the most out of your travel experience

CultureShock! Singapore is essential reading for any foreigner who is going to live and work in the city. It is packed full of practical information as well as interesting trivia on the colourful customs and culture of the people. Learn how to get around the city by public transport and how to assimilate quickly and shop for groceries in the mom-and-pop stores, like the locals. Join in the celebrations such as Chinese New Year and Deepavali, and find out the best places to savour Singapore food such as *laksa* and *nasi briyani*. Packed with a resource guide, glossary, contact numbers, website addresses and useful advice, *CultureShock! Singapore* has the answers for anyone wanting to fit in and enjoy life in the Little Red Dot.

US \$15.95 / UK £12.99

TRAVEL/CULTURE

ISBN 978-981-4677-11-0



9 789814 677110

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CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

SINGAPORE

Kelly Jackson-Nash

For Review only

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ABOUT THE SERIES

© 2016 Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited
Text © Kelly Jackson-Nash

This 4th edition published by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited
1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196.

First published in 2006 and reprinted 2007, 2nd edition published in 2009 by Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited; 3rd edition published in 2012 and reprinted 2013 and 2015 by Marshall Cavendish Corporation.

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Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd. 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road,
Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd,
Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor
Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Jackson-Nash, Kelly.

Title: CultureShock!. Singapore : a survival guide to customs and etiquette /
Kelly Jackson-Nash.

Description: 4th edition. | Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, [2016] | Series:
Culture shock! | Includes index.

Identifier(s): OCN 950878967 | ISBN 978-981-4677-11-0 (paperback)

Subject(s): LCSH: Singapore--Social life and customs. | Etiquette--Singapore.

Classification: DDC 959.57--dc23

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

Photo Credits:

All photos by the author except for 'Malay couple' on page 73 by Ramlah Anwar
• Cover photo by the author

All illustrations by TRIGG

Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and covers a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

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It seems it takes a village to write a book.....

My thanks must first and foremost go to Justin Lau, Rachel Heng, Melvin Neo and everyone at Marshall Cavendish for this amazing opportunity. Thank you for your advice, reassurance, and guidance along the way. Apologies for the random apostrophes, missing words, and overly long sentences.

A big thank you to all of the people who knowingly (and unknowingly) have contributed to the writing of this book. I doubt there is a person I've encountered in Singapore this past year who hasn't helped in some way, even though they might not have even known!

The greatest pleasure in writing this book was the opportunity to learn more about Singapore and Singaporeans. I am eternally grateful to the Singaporeans who gave so freely and graciously of their time and knowledge, and never resented my 'just one more question!' emails. Rosalind Ong, Eisen Teo, Elisa Chia, Precious Marimuthu, Siti Mariam Binte Abu Bakar, Muru Pillay, Karen Lee, and Manisah Shariff—I couldn't have done this without you!

Heartfelt thanks to my family and friends who encouraged and supported me throughout this process. Extra special thanks to the four friends—Kirsten, Jen, Nora and JoDee—who talked me into saying “yes” to the book and saving me from a lifetime of regret!

Last, but not least, to my fellow expat adventurers—Mark, Caitlin and Hayley—for your love and support. I love you 96 million thousand and six. Ditto.

*For Caitlin and Hayley —
my inspirations*

If you're reading this book then you are either living in Singapore already or considering living in Singapore, or you know me (Hi Mum! Hi Dad!). So, let me make it apparent early in this book that I think living in Singapore is an amazing experience. Although every city and country in the world has its pros and cons, the dangers that come with many other locations are minimised in Singapore. As a mother, this gave me great comfort and assurance both before and after we relocated to Singapore.

We had already committed to moving to Singapore when I paid my first visit in 2010 on a stopover on the way home from Europe. Alone with my two daughters, I was taken ill in the middle of the night. With the help of some wonderful hotel staff and an incredibly efficient (and affordable!) hospital emergency department, both my daughters and I were incredibly well looked after. I knew from that experience that living in Singapore was an adventure that I wanted to take.

What people know about a particular country depends very much on where and when they grew up. For Australians like me, Singapore has had a relatively prominent place in our culture, partly due to the horrors of World War II and partly because of Singapore's handy location as a stopover destination on our way to other places. Whilst most Australians aren't completely knowledgeable on Singapore's intricacies, they are at least familiar with many of the country's pros and cons. For those from nations further afield, Singapore may be more of a surprise.

Either way, it's highly likely that you will experience some form of culture shock during your first months in Singapore.

Whilst this book doesn't aim to obliterate culture shock, it does provide you with information that will help you navigate your way to the other side of the culture shock ride. Having an early understanding of the Singapore culture will help you more easily make sense of, and enjoy, your new country.

MAP OF SINGAPORE

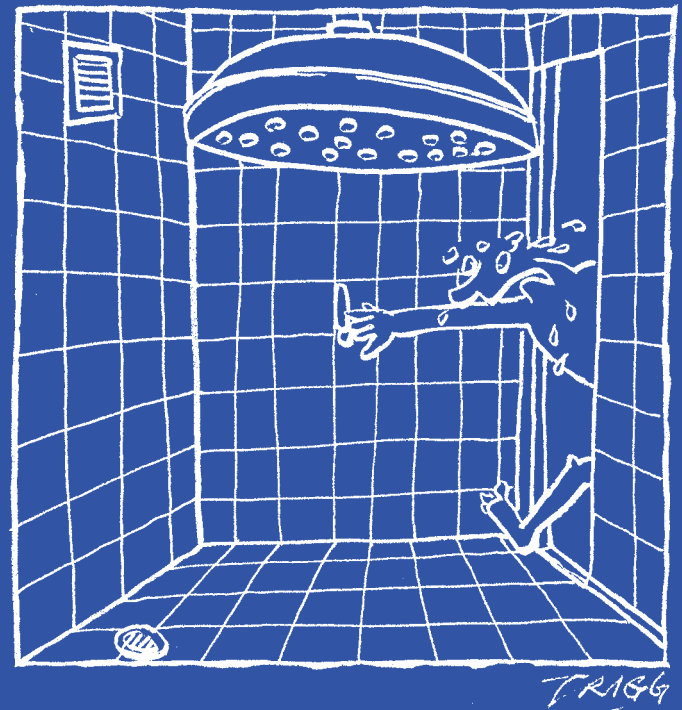
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The Republic of Singapore is made up one main island and 63 smaller islands and islets. Pulau Tekong, one of the largest of these smaller islands, which lies to the northeast of the main one, is not shown.



CHAPTER 1

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



❗ I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but first impressions are often entirely wrong. ❗

— **Lemony Snicket,**
'The Bad Beginning'

If you ask a group of people what they know about Singapore, they will more than likely mention some of the following:

- It's squeaky clean
- It's full of high-rise buildings
- The transport system is excellent
- Drug dealers get the death penalty
- Hawker food is delicious and cheap
- People who are found guilty of graffiti are caned
- The weather is humid and hot
- Chewing gum is banned
- The shopping is excellent
- The airport is one of the best in the world
- Raffles Hotel

If the group contains expats you'll possibly hear that the country is considered to be 'Asia for beginners' or 'Asia light'.

Singapore undoubtedly creates an excellent first impression. Changi Airport is a true masterpiece of organisation and efficiency, which has resulted in many awards lauding it as 'World's Best Airport'. Immigration and luggage collection are more likely to be easier in Singapore than in most other airports around the world. Set one foot outside the airport doors and—BANG—Singapore's famed humidity will whack you in the chest. Sweating begins immediately.

In our first weeks living in Singapore my husband asked a colleague when he would acclimatise and stop sweating. "About five minutes after you're on the plane home" was the response. So, if you're moving to Singapore, or thinking of moving to Singapore, be warned that sweating is part of the deal! From my experience you never really acclimatise but you do learn to accept it as part and parcel of living in Singapore. You learn what sort of fabrics to wear, you carry an umbrella everywhere and try to avoid being outside during the hottest times of the day.

And take showers. Lots of showers.

During your first weeks in Singapore you'll get to see almost everything on that preconceptions list, although I sincerely hope you don't encounter corporal and capital punishment. If you opt for a taxi ride to where you're staying, you'll see that the preconception of being a country filled with high-rises is mostly true. What you can't see from the taxi are the other types of housing tucked away from the freeways. If you choose to catch the MRT to wherever you're staying on your first night then you'll get to experience a whole new level in public transport efficiency. A stroll to the hawker market will confirm that the food is both delicious and cheap. A trip along Orchard Road with all of its glitzy shopping malls and scarcely any litter will attest to the country's love of both shopping and cleanliness.

You won't see on first glance, and perhaps will never see, the workings of the Singapore criminal justice system but the feeling of safety and the absence of graffiti is testament to its effectiveness. As much as corporal and capital punishment seem distasteful to those of us who come from countries where these are outlawed, it results in a safe and respectful society that attracts many expats to live and work here.

The safety of Singapore and the criminal justice system are undeniably linked.

This safety and cleanliness does have a flipside and it's these elements which will often be the cause of the 'Asia for beginners' or 'sterile' labels from those that prefer a much grittier Asian experience. In 1993, writer William Gibson referred to Singapore as 'Disneyland with the death penalty'. Implicit in this backhanded compliment is that Singapore is Disney-perfect—a glossy veneer with no substance. Nothing could be further from the truth. Singapore is as complex as any other nation on earth; it just isn't as upfront about it. Gibson claims he went looking for the 'wrong side of the tracks' but that he couldn't find it as everything had been ripped down and rebuilt. I'd suggest Gibson didn't try hard enough. Perhaps if he'd move away from Orchard Road for a minute and volunteered for any number of organisations helping out with the problems found in any society (poverty, gambling, alcohol, domestic violence) he may have liked the place. If you limit yourself to what you see in the tourist brochures, then you may well find Singapore to be sterile. If you engage with the local population and move beyond the expat bubble, you'll find plenty to feed your need for a true Asian experience.

Singapore is all of those things in the list mentioned on the previous page.

For me, it wasn't the things on the list that created lasting first impressions. Rather it was the unexpected things that still stick in my mind from those early days almost five years later. Seeing workmen sitting unrestrained in the back of open trucks. The lack of power outlets in bathrooms (although the futility of blow-drying my hair in such a humid climate soon meant this lack was redundant!). The worship of electronic

devices, particularly on public transport. The speed of the whole country and particularly of spoken language. Police are rarely seen, which surprised me as Singapore is known as a city of rules and penalties.

Whilst these are a few of my own first impressions I know that a first impression is usually not a true impression. It's part of the story but not the whole story. With Singapore if you scratch the Westernised surface you'll find a true Asian city with all the good and bad points that belong to any city in the world. The Asian heart of Singapore isn't immediately noticeable like it is in many other Asian cities. If you're from an English-speaking country the signs in English and dealing primarily with English-speaking people you may think that Singapore is not so different from home. This is good and bad. It's good as it can make for an easier transition initially and calm the nerves of the anxious expat. However, it can also lull the new arrival into thinking that everything in Singapore will work exactly the same way it does at home. When things don't work in line with how you think they should, then it can send you into a spin. 'But it looks a bit like home, so why doesn't it work the same way!' So, the lesson is to enjoy the first impressions you have of Singapore but always remember that Singapore is in Asia!

CULTURE SHOCK

The term 'culture shock' is thrown around casually but it is a very real experience. Indeed, it almost brought me undone during our first fifteen months in Singapore, despite my enthusiasm and eagerness to move here. In much the same way that devouring every single book ever written about newborn babies can never fully prepare you for parenthood, no amount of reading and research will truly prepare you for



the transition from moving from your home country to your new one. You might talk the talk but you will trip over walking the walk. For some it will be a short trip but for others the trip lasts a while longer, and even then they may walk on shaky legs. As much as you may think you are prepared to embrace all of the new experiences of your new country, there will undoubtedly be days where 'novel and exciting' become 'too much and overwhelming'.

Culture shock is an emotional response to finding yourself in a new location with a new culture. You are disconnected from your surroundings. It doesn't necessarily have to involve moving to a new country. In hindsight, I can see that I suffered culture shock when I moved from a small, country town in one Australian state to a large capital city in another state. It's no coincidence that the year immediately following this move within Australia and also my first year living in Singapore, were

two of the biggest tests in my relationship with my partner. Culture shock can be hard. The plus side of having culture shock in a country like Singapore is that with such a large expatriate population you are not alone. There is a lot of support available to help you through the process.

Culture shock is a well-documented process. There is a fairly predictable set of stages that people move through as they adjust to living in a new culture.

The first stage is the 'honeymoon stage', which is similar to being on holiday as everything is shiny, new and exciting. You are bubbling with enthusiasm. All of the differences with your home country are thrilling, but sadly that won't last forever.

The next stage is dramatically titled 'disintegration' or 'crisis' stage, and the differences that so charmed you a short while ago will now irritate you beyond belief. The chatty taxi uncles that you initially found hilarious and interesting will now make you grind your teeth and long for a moment of silence. The thought of having to make a phone call and deal with the inevitable language and accent difficulties will make you weep. This phase is more than just irritation and a yearning for your old life as culture shock has physical side effects that can affect your quality of life. Personally, I had trouble sleeping during this time and also became withdrawn, cocooning myself at home away from all that was 'new'. Other responses to this phase can range from weepiness, moodiness, resentment and anger. Some people begin to list a never-ending stream of all the things that are wrong with their new country whilst idealising their home country. It's important to note that everyone will react differently. Culture shock isn't the same for everyone.

It's entirely possible that the behaviour you adopt through the disintegration phase could become a habit, so it's best

nipped in the bud. The best way to make this phase as short as possible is to force yourself out and about. Even the least social person needs to have a friend or two and hiding at home won't help you form new friendships. By seeking out friendships and connections with other people you will feel less alone and some of the initial enthusiasm of the honeymoon phase may reappear. I'm not advocating everybody to turn into social butterflies, but if you find activities that you enjoy, it is more than likely that you'll meet like-minded people (see Chapter 7 for some ideas).

Once you've pretty much mastered all of the basics of day-to-day life, you'll be in the autonomy stage. By now you can pretty much work everything out for yourself. You understand a lot of why your new country works the way it does, and if you don't understand the reasons you do accept them. Life in Singapore has a routine and things that once made you irrationally irritated are now just part of everyday life.

The final stage, independence, is one that not everyone will reach as it's typified by being integrated into the local community. In a place like Singapore that has such a large expat community, it is possible to live entirely separate to the local population. It's quite rare to find someone who fully meets this stage.

So, the good news is that you will adjust to your new culture. The bad news is that if or when you return 'home' you get to do the whole process again!

CHAPTER 2

GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY



For Review only

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kelly Jackson-Nash

relocated to Singapore from Melbourne, Australia, in May 2011 with her husband and two daughters. Although the job opportunity for her husband was the initial motivating factor for the move, the family saw the relocation as an adventure. Kelly has documented the ups-and-downs of expat life from the earliest planning days on her blog (www.ourbigexpatadventure.wordpress.com). Once the family were settled into life in Singapore, Kelly began to explore the Little Red Dot and particularly enjoyed exploring the lesser-known parts.

These adventures were often sparked by Kelly's lifelong love of history. A qualified secondary school History teacher, Kelly is currently completing two history degrees. Cemeteries and the stories they tell are one of her research interests and there is not a Singapore cemetery that she hasn't explored! *Culture Shock! Singapore* is Kelly's first book.