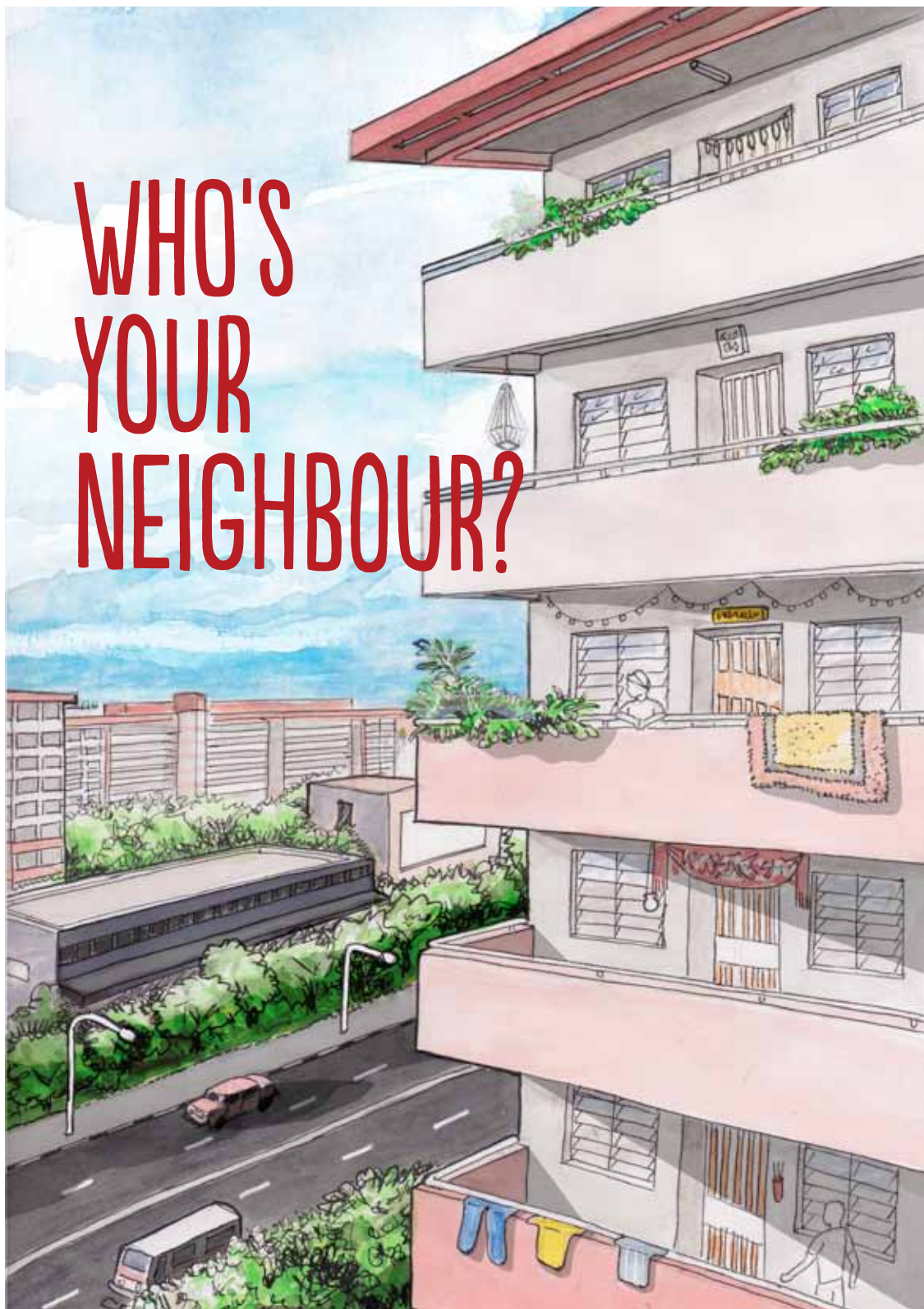


# WHO'S YOUR NEIGHBOUR?





A COMMUNITY  
ENGAGEMENT PROJECT BY



IN COLLABORATION WITH

National  
Integration  
Council



## WHO DO YOU SEE WHEN YOU STEP OUT OF YOUR DOOR?

## WHAT DO YOU DO OR SAY WHEN YOU MEET THE PEOPLE WHO LIVE NEXT TO YOU?

For many Singaporeans, the world beyond their doorsteps is a community of neighbours, a high-rise village of people of different origins, traditions and mother tongues who have learned to live together in harmony. We no longer live in *kampongs* (villages) or shophouses, but life in modern Singapore retains much of the *kampong* spirit of old, when children of different races and religions grew up together and learnt to give and take as they marked life's milestones, performed rites of passage and celebrated moments of festivity.

Walk down the corridors, landings and void decks of HDB flats across the island and you will find neighbours who are happy to greet you with a smile, offer a hand in friendship and play a part in making one another feel at home. Neighbours become friends and children become playmates. Families living next door to each other learn to share in the joy of seasonal festivities, chip in when help is needed, and together build ties that strengthen their faith in the community and their sense of belonging to the nation.

*This handbook offers a quick guide to the roots of Singapore's multicultural heritage as well as an introduction to life amid neighbours with diverse origins and beliefs. Through brief insights into the communities who call Singapore home and their respective ways of life, we hope this handbook will help you to explore and reacquaint yourself with the many customs and traditions that make up Singapore, and in doing so, even pick up a few new nuggets of information and engage your neighbours with sensitivity and confidence.*

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*We begin by recalling Singapore's history in a nutshell and the rise of the public flats that most Singaporeans call home. We then focus on the practical aspects of living next door to neighbours from Singapore's most prominent ethnic communities, namely the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians.*





## LIVING TOGETHER AS A NATION

Modern Singapore was a multicultural society from the very start, when Sir Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) arrived on 28 January 1819 and signed a treaty with the local ruler, Temenggong Abdul Rahman (d. 1825), that gave the British trading rights on the island. Apart from sizeable Malay and *Orang Laut* (Sea Nomads) villages, Singapore then was also home to Chinese settlers who ran about 20 gambier estates. Along with Raffles came a company of Indian soldiers or Sepoys who defended the harbour, as well as cooks and servants of Indian origin.

### A MAGNET FOR MIGRANTS

News of Singapore's new status as a free port spread far and wide. Thousands of merchants, labourers and planters soon arrived, turning the island into a mosaic of communities from all over the region. In modern Singapore's early years, as a result of Raffles' Town Plan of 1822, new arrivals often settled in designated enclaves such as Kampong Glam for the Malays, Bugis and Arabs; Telok Ayer (Chinatown) for the Chinese; and Chulia Street, Market Street and later, Serangoon Road, for migrants from South Asia. But over time, many of these 'enclaves' acquired a more diverse make-up. Chinatown, for instance, is where you can find Singapore's oldest Hindu place of worship, the Sri Mariamman Temple, as well as the Jamae Chulia Mosque, built by Tamil Muslim migrants in the 1830s, and Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka, Singapore's oldest mosque. Meanwhile, the Serangoon Road area, popularly known as Little India, is home to several Hindu temples, mosques and churches as well as Buddhist and Taoist temples. Early migrants, for the most part, continued to practise their respective cultural and religious traditions while living and working alongside each other. Many also played active roles in society at large by giving to the poor, building sites of worship, funding hospitals, establishing schools or serving as community leaders who helped to mediate communal disputes or conflicts.

**FROM COLONY TO NATION**

Over the years, many who arrived from afar to seek their fortunes and explore fresh opportunities sank roots in Singapore. During the Second World War, the shared trauma of the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) contributed to a growing sense of nationhood and encouraged many Singaporeans in the post-war years to seek the rights and responsibilities of citizens in an independent country, rather than live as subjects of colonial rule.

Singapore's journey towards nationhood was, thankfully, a peaceful one. Under British rule, a governor and Legislative Council made the laws that shaped the lives of ordinary residents. This changed on 2 April 1955, when the first general elections were held for a partially elected Legislative Assembly that gave Singapore limited self-government. These elections were won by the Labour Front, whose leader, David Saul Marshall (1908-1995), a lawyer of Baghdadi Jewish origins, became Singapore's first Chief Minister. Later, on 30 May 1959, general elections were held for the first fully elected Legislative Assembly, which were won by the People's Action Party led by Lee Kuan Yew (b. 1923), a lawyer who became Singapore's first Prime Minister. On 3 December 1959, Singapore was proclaimed a self-governing nation with its own Head of State or *Yang di-Pertuan Negara*, Yusof bin Ishak (1910-1970). Later, after a brief merger with Malaysia between September 1963 and August 1965, Singapore declared full independence on 9 August 1965 and henceforth, charted its own destiny as a republic founded on the principles of democracy, justice and equality.



**LIVING IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SOCIETY**

Singapore became independent in a turbulent time. Communal tensions were then widespread and even resulted in racial riots that threatened to wreck the fabric of the nation. To preserve social harmony and improve the well-being of all citizens, many of whom then lived in urban slums with poor sanitation and facilities, the government embarked on a sustained programme to develop the economy and provide affordable housing through subsidised flats. This gave Singaporeans, who were encouraged to buy their own flats rather than rent or squat, a tangible stake in the country and a real sense of ownership for their homes and nation. There were also efforts to forge a strong sense of nationhood and common identity among Singaporeans of all races and religions. These initiatives included National Service, introduced in 1967, and Racial Harmony Day, which reinforces the importance of racial and religious harmony as a shared national value that cannot be taken for granted.

**THE NATIONAL PLEDGE**

*We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.*

**"One united people"**

*The ideals that unite the nation are perhaps best captured in the National Pledge, which was introduced to schools islandwide in 1966. The words of the National Pledge, written by S. Rajaratnam (1915-2006), a Ceylon-born former journalist who was then Minister for Foreign Affairs, remind Singaporeans that the nation's success and progress depends on the unity of all citizens, who must not allow differences in language, race or religion to divide them.*



## LIVING TOGETHER UNDER ONE ROOF

For many Singaporeans, living in Housing & Development Board or HDB flats is part and parcel of growing up in the Lion City. For the world at large, HDB estates, with their well-planned towns and safe and clean living spaces, have become a source of pride and a symbol of Singapore's success as a nation despite overwhelming odds.



### FROM URBAN SLUMS TO HIGH-RISE LIVING

Today, more than 82 percent of Singapore's population live in HDB flats. It was a very different scene back in 1960, however, when the HDB was established. Then, the city was overcrowded and dotted with shanty towns. An entire family might squeeze into a tiny shophouse cubicle, which was shared with many other households, while thousands lived in squatter settlements with no piped water, unreliable electricity and primitive sanitation and waste disposal.

Before 1960, the HDB's predecessor, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), had built low-rise flats in areas such as Tiong Bahru, Kampong Java and Queenstown, but could not keep up with the rapidly growing population. To tackle the severe housing shortage, the HDB took a high-rise approach and introduced simple, cost-efficient designs such as communal corridors and standardised interior layouts.

### ESTATES OF CONVENIENCE

To make life convenient and pleasant for residents, HDB estates also incorporate facilities and amenities such as markets, hawker centres, schools, clinics, libraries, sports facilities, parks and playgrounds, and were located close to areas where people work. The estates also have town centres with banks, post offices, shops and other amenities, which are linked to bus interchanges or Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations that make it easy for residents of HDB satellite towns to commute to other parts of the island.

### Did you know?

*The infamous Bukit Ho Swee fire, which broke out in a squatter settlement near Tiong Bahru on 25 May 1961 and left 16,000 people homeless, helped to spur a major building drive by the HDB. Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who visited the scene, had promised the victims that new flats would rise from the devastated neighbourhood within a year. Five new HDB blocks were then completed in nine months to house the displaced families.*

### Did you know?

*In the early years, residents preferred the lower storeys of HDB flats as lifts then were thought to be unreliable. But today, the uppermost floors are highly sought-after for the breezy heights they command.*



### MOVING UP! SHIFTING FROM KAMPONG SPACES TO COMMON CORRIDORS

For some Singaporeans, the move to HDB flats from rural villages or traditional shophouses was initially difficult, as they found it hard to adjust to high-rise living. A few even tried to bring their pigs and poultry up to their flats, while the public menace of 'killer litter' emerged as some people retained their old habit of chucking out trash and even unwanted furniture from their windows. But over time, HDB households learnt to make the most out of high-rise communities and establish fresh ties with the people around them. For instance, in the days when televisions were expensive and uncommon, residents who did not have a set of their own might drop by a neighbour's unit down their corridor to catch a favourite drama together.

In void decks, lift landings and other common areas, neighbours came to recognise each other and make friendly exchanges a daily habit. They may have a chat after a day of work, discover common interests and hobbies, or share what they were cooking for dinner. One family might ask the folks next door to help watch over their flat when they are away; in turn, they would offer to buy groceries if their neighbours were busy or working late. Children enjoyed the care and watchful eyes of many friendly 'uncles' and 'aunties'. And as they played with neighbours from various backgrounds, they picked up helpful phrases in different languages, sampled the cooking of their friends' families and came to see how other Singaporeans celebrated the rites of life and rituals of passage.



### DESIGNING HIGH-RISE HOMES FOR SINGAPOREANS

The very first HDB flats were described as "slab blocks with flats along a common corridor", as providing simple, acceptable homes for former squatters and slum-dwellers was the most urgent task then. But later, HDB produced designs that made the living environment more enjoyable. It did this by having estates with a mix of low-rise flats and higher blocks, with the former serving as buffers against roadside noise. Open spaces and green belts of trees and hedges also help to shield flats from traffic din.

### Void decks, vibrant spaces

Many HDB blocks have spacious, well-ventilated void decks on the ground level, where residents can relax, mingle and chat. Some void decks also have senior citizen corners, sundry shops or kiosks, and sheltered playgrounds for children. HDB introduced void decks in the 1970s to provide convenient venues for social events such as weddings and funerals, and to add a sense of spaciousness to the ground floor of the flats.

### Did you know?

Many HDB estates have distinctive architectural features that make them easily recognisable from afar. For instance, flats in Bishan have pitched roofs like houses, Potong Pasir flats have sloping rooftops, while marine or aquatic motifs are incorporated into the seaside estates of Sengkang and Marine Parade.





**Improved interiors**

Newer generations of flats were designed to give residents more room, improved bathrooms and toilets, dedicated areas for storage and laundry, wider corridors and greater privacy. The placing of washrooms by the kitchen was a convenient feature that allows residents to easily switch between tasks such as cooking and cleaning. Built-in racks on the kitchen ceiling and window holders for bamboo poles let residents hang their wet clothes both indoors and outdoors. Today, rows of bamboo poles with colourful laundry drying in the wind have become a defining feature of Singapore's urban landscape.

**Privacy amid shared spaces**

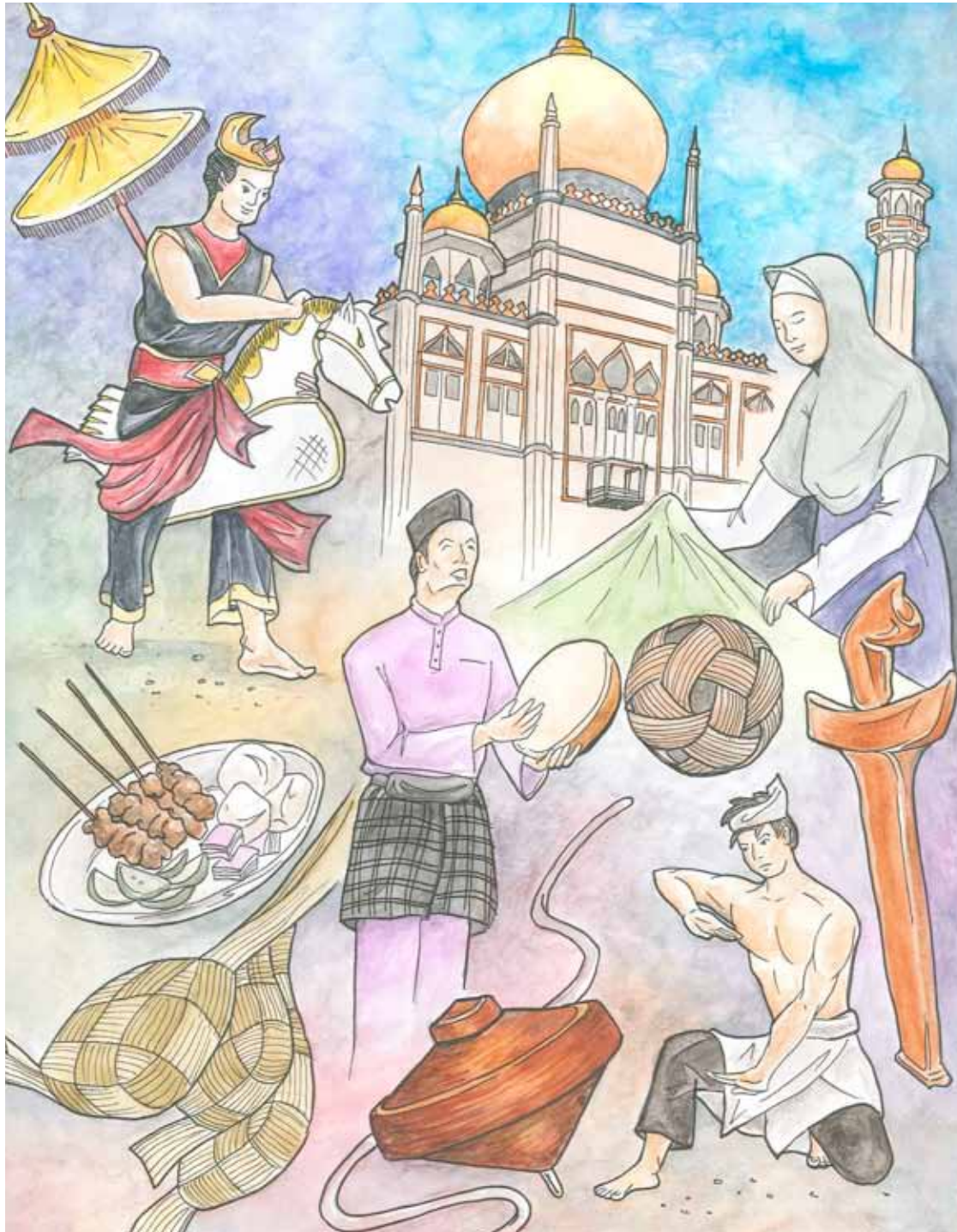
To protect residents' privacy, some flats had their floors raised above the corridor level so that people walking by will not be able to peek into rooms facing the common walkway. In some flats, the corridors are also segmented to offer more privacy while facilitating interaction between neighbours. At the same time, the arrangement and design of HDB flats helped to promote social interaction. In the old days when air-conditioning was rare, people often kept their doors open for better ventilation, a practice that made it easy for neighbours to exchange greetings and kick-start conversations.

# LIVING TOGETHER AS NEIGHBOURS

Who's your neighbour? Who are the people who live next door to you?

In the following pages, we introduce the major ethnic groups who call Singapore home, their domestic cultural practices, including common greetings, everyday do's and don'ts, norms and taboos for guests and neighbours. Plus, we feature a quick and handy introduction to the many religions that Singaporeans profess and practise.





### THE MALAYS

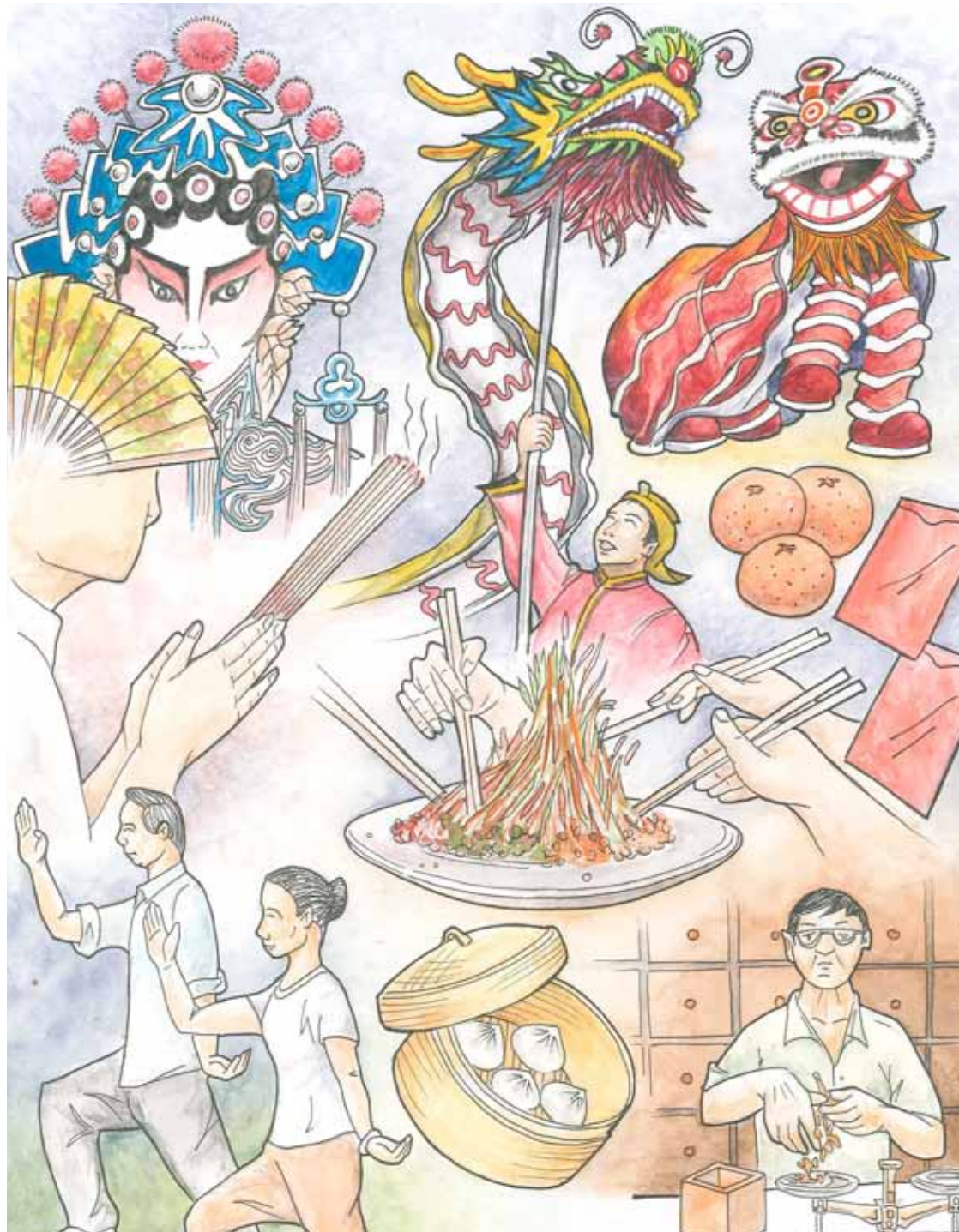
Singapore plays a major role in the *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals*, a semi-historical account of the Malay kingdoms active during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. When Raffles arrived in 1819, Singapore was part of the Johor-Riau Sultanate, which had succeeded the Malaccan Sultanate. Temenggong Abdul Rahman, who represented the Sultan, headed a Malay settlement by the Singapore River. After the modern port was founded, Singapore drew people from all over the Malay Archipelago, including Bugis traders from Macassar in South Sulawesi as well as Javanese and Boyanese from the island of Bawean (off Java) who worked as horse-carriage drivers and gardeners. Many Malays from Malacca, Johor and Sumatra also came to work and settle in Singapore.

In the past, many members of the Malay community dwelt in villages in areas such as Kampong Glam, Geylang Serai, Telok Blangah and Kampong Malacca (near Clarke Quay). There were also many coastal *kampongs* at Kallang, Bedok, Changi and the southern islands such as Pulau Sakeng, Pulau Bukom and Pulau Brani. When some of these villages were redeveloped between the 1930s and 1960s, the residents were relocated to new Malay Settlements in Jalan Eunus, Kaki Bukit, Pasir Panjang, Ayer Gemuruh (near Tanah Merah) and Sembawang. After independence, these settlements eventually gave way to new housing estates and infrastructure, and the former villagers moved to HDB flats. Today, Malay Singaporeans account for 13.3 percent of the population.

### Did you know?

Zubir Said (1907-1987), who composed Singapore's National Anthem, *Majulah Singapura*, was a Malay songwriter who moved to Singapore from Sumatra in 1928. Mr Zubir originally wrote *Majulah Singapura* in 1958 for the City Council. In 1959, Deputy Prime Minister Dr Toh Chin Chye (1921-2012) asked Mr Zubir to adapt the song into the present National Anthem.





### THE CHINESE

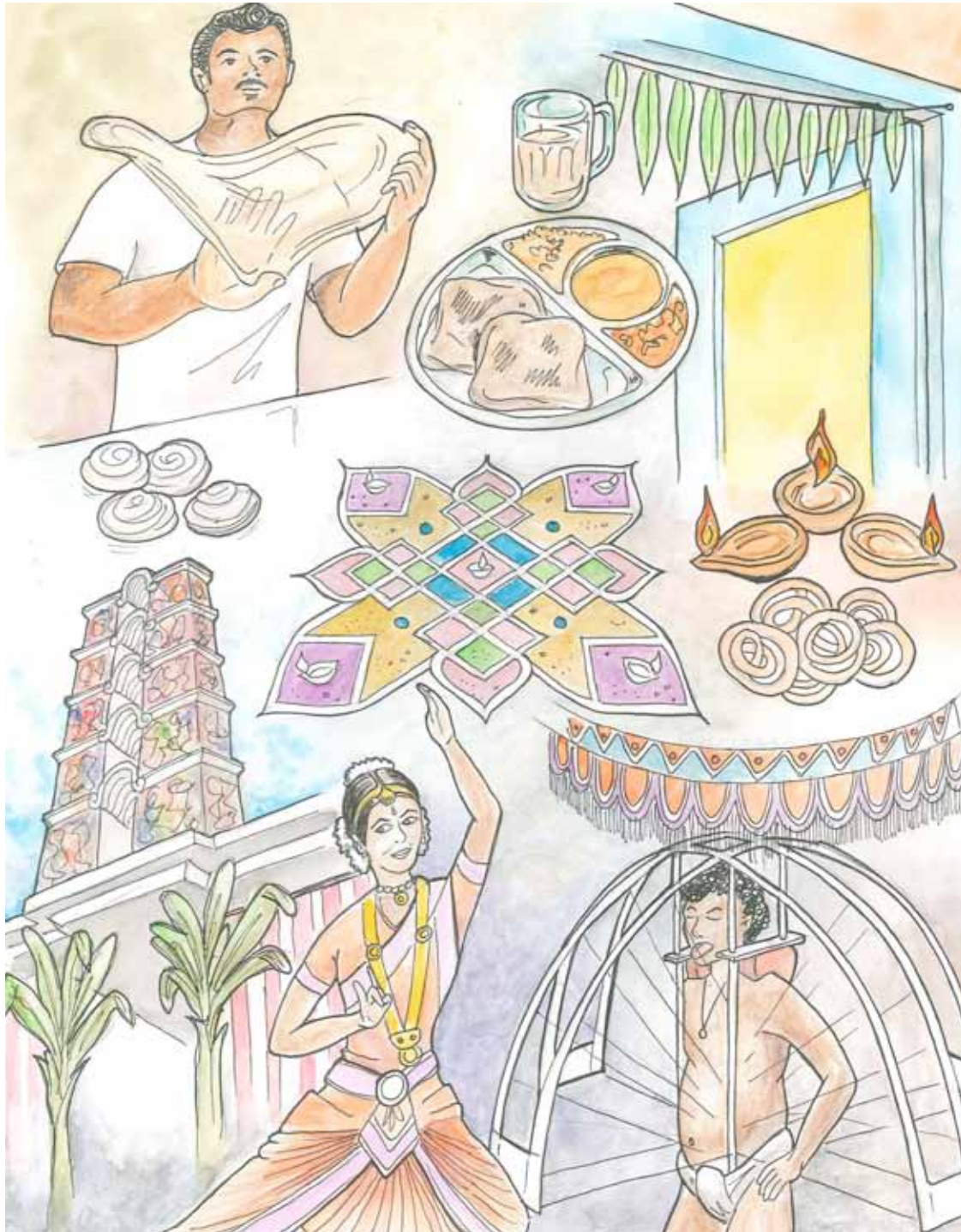
Singaporeans of Chinese origin, who make up about 74.2 percent of the population, trace their origins and dialect groups to various regions in China where their ancestors came from. They include, among others, the Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese, Hakkas, Hainanese, Foochows, Henghuas, Shanghainese and Hockchias. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, thousands of Chinese migrants journeyed to Singapore to work as port workers, boatmen, quarry workers, plantation workers, rickshaw pullers, petty tradesmen and hawkers. Some also established themselves as merchants, entrepreneurs, landowners or planters. Many who made their fortune in Singapore served as community leaders who helped the less fortunate through acts of charity. They also founded mutual-help or clan associations called *kongsi* to help fellow migrants who were in need.

Not to forget, Singapore also has a prominent community of Peranakans or Straits Chinese, the descendants of Chinese traders who settled in Southeast Asia centuries ago and married local womenfolk. Over the years, they developed a unique hybrid culture that blends, among others, Chinese and Malay influences. Peranakan cuisine, such as *ayam buah keluak* (stewed chicken with candlenuts), and Peranakan fashion such as the *sarong kebaya* are popular not just among Peranakans but with many other Singaporeans. 'Peranakan' means 'native-born' in Malay, while 'Baba' is a honorific (like Mr) used to address Peranakan men. Peranakan ladies are often addressed as 'Nonya' or 'Nyonya'.

### Did you know?

Chinese women from Canton (Guangdong) province once formed the backbone of Singapore's construction sector. Known as Samsui women (as many originated from Sanshui county), these ladies helped to build many of the city's landmarks and other infrastructure from the 1920s till the 1970s.





### THE INDIANS

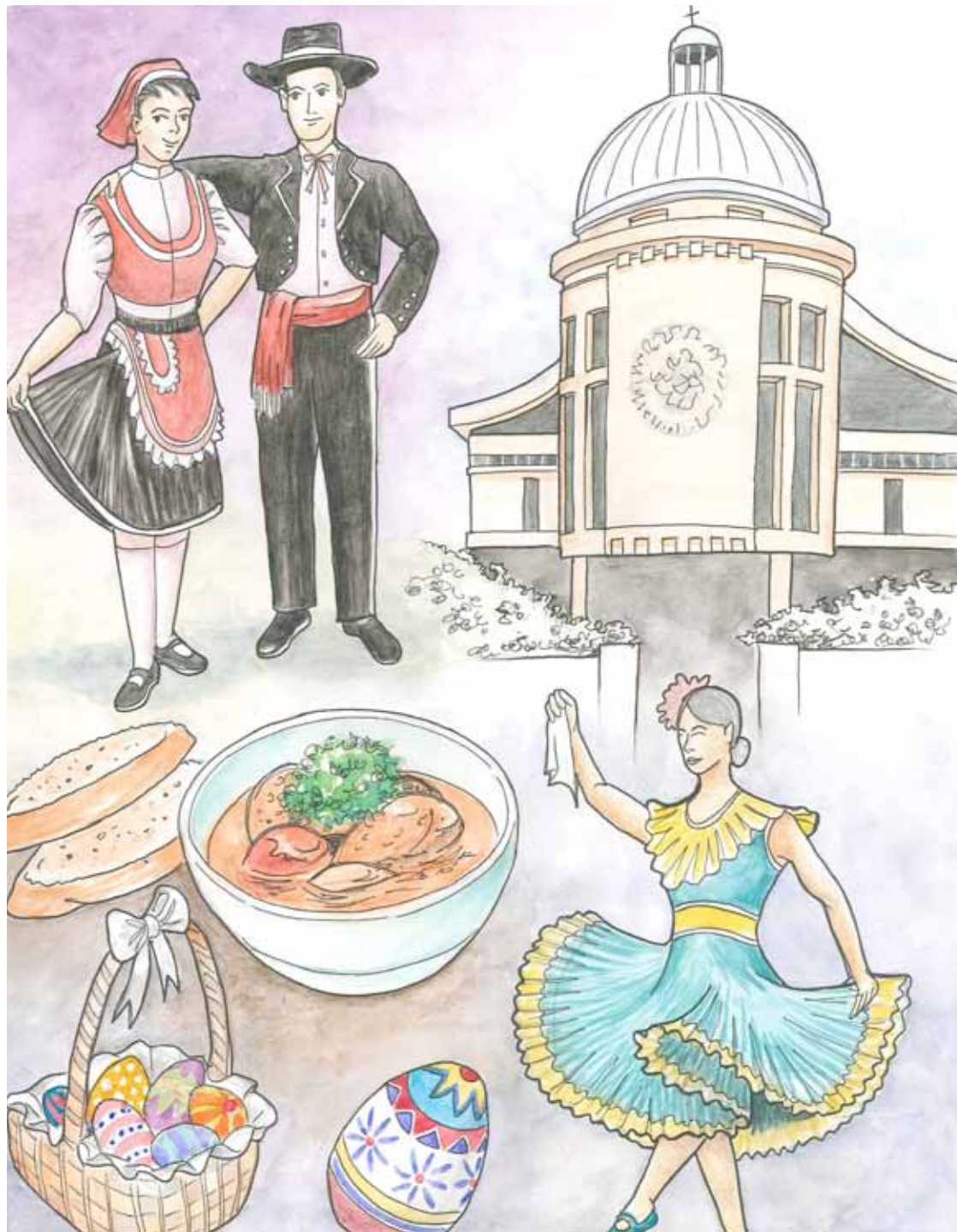
Migrants from the Indian subcontinent have lived and worked in Singapore since Raffles' time. Today, Singaporeans of South Asian origin make up about 9.2 percent of the population. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, migrants from South Asia included Chulias who manned boats on the Singapore River, Sepoy soldiers, textile and spice merchants, Chettiar moneylenders and merchant bankers, plantation staff and dock workers from various parts of the subcontinent. The British also sent many Indian convicts to Singapore, where they built many of the city's monuments such as the Istana and St Andrew's Cathedral. The use of convict labour ended in 1873, but some of these workers remained in Singapore as shopkeepers, cattle herders, dairymen or municipal workers.

Tamil speakers, who trace their origins to Tamil Nadu in South India and northern Sri Lanka, form the largest group of Indians in Singapore, but the local Indian community also includes the Bengalis, Gujaratis, Malayalees, Punjabis, Sindhis and Telugus as well as groups who speak the Hindi, Kannada and Marathi languages. Hybrid groups also emerged: Chitty Melakans are the descendants of South Indian Hindu merchants who settled in Malacca and married local womenfolk, while Jawi Peranakans trace their origin to South Indian Muslim traders who set up families in Malacca and Penang. Hinduism is the most common religion among Indian Singaporeans. But there are also Indian Singaporeans who are Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Zoroastrians or members of the Baha'i Faith.

#### Did you know?

One of the first Indians to arrive in Singapore in 1819 was Narayana Pillai, a trader from Penang who landed with Raffles. He set up a brick kiln, became a building contractor and built the Sri Mariamman Temple, Singapore's oldest Hindu temple at South Bridge Road, in 1828.





### THE EURASIANS

Eurasians form a small but distinctive ethnic community that is also one of the oldest in modern Singapore. The term 'Eurasian' indicates a person with a mix of European and Asian ancestries, but Eurasian Singaporeans trace their origins to many regions where such intermarriages took place in the past, including Malacca, India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Bencoolen, Macau and Penang as well as Portugal, Holland and Britain. The first Eurasians in Singapore, who arrived soon after Raffles founded the port, settled around Waterloo, Queen and Bencoolen Streets, where they built houses and churches. Later, other Eurasian enclaves sprung up in Serangoon, Siglap and Katong; today, the Eurasian Association building is located at Ceylon Road in Katong.

Due to their partly European heritage, many Eurasians were fluent in English and found employment in the colonial civil service. Others were active in journalism, banking, law and medicine. The community also formed associations such as the Singapore Recreation Club and Eurasian Association to serve their cultural and social needs. Eurasians have made significant contributions to Singapore in the social, cultural and economic arenas. Dr Benjamin Henry Sheares (1907-1981) served as Singapore's second president from 1971 until his death. Edmund William Barker (1920-2001) was a prominent Member of Parliament and cabinet minister, while Hedwig Anuar (b. 1928) is a pioneer in the literary and library scene as well as a co-founder of AWARE, a women's advocacy group.

#### **Did you know?**

*In the past, many Eurasians of Portuguese-Malaccan descent often spoke a creole (hybrid language) called Kristang, which contained many Portuguese words but used Malay grammar.*



# KNOWING WHO'S NEXT DOOR: A MULTI-CULTURAL GUIDE TO YOUR NEIGHBOURS




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## SIGNS AT THE DOORWAY

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The objects around your neighbour's doorway can give helpful clues as to their identity. But don't make assumptions about your neighbour's ethnicity based on the symbols at their door, though. For instance, Muslim households may be Malay, Indian or Chinese, while Christian families could be Chinese, Indian or Eurasian.

Muslim families may place above their front door a *hilal* (a crescent moon and star), which symbolises Islam, or a small framed plaque featuring an excerpt from the *Quran* (the Muslim holy book). Christian households may place a cross, a crucifix or an icon of a saint over their doorway. Taoist families may stick small charms or a *bagua* (an eight-sided symbol of Taoism) on the wall by or above the door; there may also be a small altar by the doorway or a suspended thurible where incense is offered to *Tian Gong* (the Lord of Heaven).

Hindu homes may have a picture of a deity and/or hang mango leaves, which are believed to ward off evil and purify the air, above their doorway. The family will let the mango leaves dry naturally until the next auspicious occasion when they will be replaced by fresh leaves. On some doorways, you may also see a *thoranam* (mango leaves strung with flowers), a symbol of welcome. At the entrance of Sikh homes, you may see an image of a *Khanda*: two single-edged swords crossed at the bottom and flanking a double-edged sword and circle. A symbol of the Sikh religion, the *Khanda* represents the need to balance obligations to society and spiritual aspirations.

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### Art at the doostop: The Kolam

You may see on the floor before the doorways of your Hindu neighbours an artwork called the *kolam*. Made from rice flour, the *kolam* is a symmetrical pattern of lines and dots featuring natural motifs such as flowers, fruit, animals or shells. The *kolam* is a sign of welcome to Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity, and also a food source for animals, which fulfils Hinduism's call to care for all life forms. Hindus who originate from North India use lentils, beans and other coloured materials to create the *rangoli*, a *kolam*-like decoration.

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### Remember!

The items you see at your neighbour's doorway are often sacred objects. So don't touch or move them without your neighbour's permission and remind your children to be careful, lest they knock or break your neighbour's things while running or playing nearby.



## GREETING YOUR NEIGHBOURS

Your neighbours are likely to be fluent in English, which is Singapore's lingua franca. Some older folk, however, may be more comfortable with their mother tongues or dialects and will certainly appreciate your efforts to converse with them in their mother tongue. Following are some common phrases and means of greeting you may encounter and use when you meet your neighbours.

**Apa khabar? Khabar baik.**



### Common Malay greetings

Simple phrases you can use to greet your Malay neighbours include 'Selamat pagi' (Good morning), 'Selamat petang' (Good afternoon), 'Apa khabar?' (How are you?) and 'Sudah makan?' (Have you eaten?). To these, one would reply with 'Khabar baik, terima kasih' (I am well, thank you) or 'Sudah, terima kasih' (I have eaten, thank you). Other useful phrases include 'Nama saya...' (My name is...), 'Saya tak faham' (I don't understand), 'Selamat datang' (Welcome), 'Selamat jalan' (Goodbye) and 'Selamat malam' (Good night).

### Muslim greetings

Muslims often greet each other with the phrase 'Assalamu'alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh', meaning 'May the Peace, Blessings and Mercy of Allah be upon you', or simply 'Assalamu'alaikum'. To this, one replies, 'Wa'alaikumus salaam wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh' ('And the same to you too and may Allah grant you His Blessings), or simply 'Wa'alaikumus salaam'. If you are a Muslim, you may exchange greetings with your fellow Muslim neighbours this way.

**Eppadi Irukiraai Nandraaga Irukiren**



### Common Mandarin greetings

Common Mandarin greetings (rendered in Hanyu Pinyin or Romanised syllables) include: 'Zhao an' (Good morning!), 'Wu an' (Good afternoon) and 'Ni hao ma?' (How are you?), to which you could reply with 'Hen hao' (I am well), 'Xie xie' (Thank you) or 'Bu ke qi' (Don't mention it). When departing, people usually say 'Zai jian' (Goodbye) to each other. Other useful phrases include: 'Dui bu qi' (I am sorry), 'Wo bu ming bai' (I don't understand) and 'Wan an' (Good night!).

### Common Indian greetings

Following are some common Tamil phrases: 'Kaalai Vanakam' (Good morning), 'Vanakam' (Good day), 'Eppadi Irukiraai' (How are you?), 'Nandraaga Irukiren' (I am fine), 'Nandri' (Thank you), and 'Ungalai Meendum Sandhikiraen' (Good bye/See you again). The greeting 'Vanakam' can also be used to say goodbye. Sikhs greet each other with the phrase 'Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh', which means 'The Khalsa of God, Victory is of God.' A shorter greeting is *Sat Sri Akal* or 'God is the ultimate truth'. If you are not a Sikh as well, simply greet your Sikh neighbours in English.

### Shake hands or salam?

Don't be surprised if your Malay neighbour greets you with a traditional *salam* instead of a handshake. The *salam* is a light palm-to-palm greeting involving a light brush of one or both hands or even just the fingertips. What matters most is the following gesture, in which one brings the hand towards the heart to indicate that the greeting has been accepted with sincerity.

### Remember!

Shaking hands or exchanging *salam* typically takes place between people of the same gender. So don't be offended if a Malay neighbour of the opposite sex declines your hand, as he or she may not be comfortable doing so. Also, try to use your right hand to exchange greetings and handle food, as the left hand, which is used to wash oneself in the toilet, is considered unclean.

**Remember!**

Pointing at someone or something using your index finger is considered rude by all communities in Singapore. If you need to indicate at something, make a fist with your hand and direct the tip of your thumb at the object instead.

**Indian traditions in greeting**

The traditional way of greeting is to smile and nod your head while placing your palms together at chest level in a pose known as *Vanakam* in Tamil and *Namaste* in Hindi. Younger people may shake hands in the Western style, but some Indian ladies may prefer not to. If you are meeting a female Indian neighbour for the first time, shake her hand only if she offers to. Otherwise, simply smile and nod your head in greeting.

**Eurasian greetings**

Most Eurasians in Singapore are very conversant in English. Eurasians of Portuguese-Malaccan extract, especially older folks, may use a creole (hybrid language) called *Kristang*, which has a Malay-like grammar and includes various Portuguese words and phrases.

**Have you eaten? Where are you going?**

*Your neighbours, regardless of race or religion, may greet you with the phrase "Have you eaten?" or "Have you had your lunch or dinner?" in English or their mother tongues. It's not meant to be intrusive but simply a polite way of greeting and showing neighbourly concern. If someone greets you this way, to be polite, you may simply reply with "Yes, thank you, and what about you?". Similarly, a Malay neighbour may greet you with 'Awak pergi mana?' or 'Where are you going?' if he or she meets you along the corridor or downstairs. The question is not meant to be intrusive either, and you can reply with a general answer such as 'Jalan jalan' (going for a walk) or 'I'm going to the market/shops/park'.*

**MAKING SENSE OF NAMES**

Singaporeans do not always follow the western convention of a first or given name followed by a family name. Following is a simple guide to making sense of local names. But if you are still unsure how to address your neighbour and members of their family, don't be afraid to politely ask, 'How should I address you?'

**MALAY NAMES**

Surnames are not used. Instead, a child is given a first name followed by the father's name, for instance, Ahmad bin Ibrahim or Siti binte Abdullah. 'Bin' and 'binte' mean 'son of' and 'daughter of' respectively and may be left out in some names, or when a woman gets married. You can address your neighbours by their first names, using the honorific 'Encik' (or 'Pakcik' for older men) for gentlemen or 'Puan' ('Makcik' for older ladies) for women, i.e. Encik Ahmad or Puan Siti. Unmarried ladies may also be addressed with the honorific 'Cik' (Miss). Married ladies will usually retain their maiden name. If your neighbour has performed the religious pilgrimage to Mecca, he or she should be addressed with the title 'Haji' or 'Hajjah' (for ladies) instead of 'Encik' or 'Puan'.

Family members (but not strangers or neighbours) may address each other with informal terms of affection such as 'Kakak' (older sister), 'Adik' (younger brother/sister), 'Abang' (older brother), 'Ayah/Bapa/Abah' (father), 'Ibu/Emak/Mak' (mother), 'Datuk' (grandfather) and 'Nenek' (grandmother).



### CHINESE NAMES

Chinese names usually consist of a family name or surname, such as Chan, Lee, Lim, Ng, Tan or Wong (Owyang/Ouyang is rare two-character surname), followed by a given name consisting of two characters (rarely one character), such as Mei Lin or Kok Sheng. Between strangers or in formal situations, people usually address each other by their surnames, e.g., Mr Loh, Madam Neo, while close friends and family members would use a person's given name. Many Chinese Singaporeans also have Western names, which are placed before their surnames, e.g. John Tan, Mary Ng, even though they may not be Christians. When a lady marries, she often takes on her husband's surname, but not always. Some married women may also adopt a combined surname, such as Mrs Tan-Lim (Tan being the husband's surname).

Sometimes, you may hear a neighbour, especially a child, being addressed by a nickname. The child's family may have chosen this nickname, which may not be his or her real name, out of the superstition that this would confuse evil spirits seeking to harm the child. This is sometimes practised by some Chinese as well as Malay families.

### INDIAN NAMES

Indians of South Indian origin usually do not use surnames, but have a given name that comes after the name of their father, e.g. Premkumar Sivasothi or Sivasothi s/o Premkumar, with s/o and d/o meaning 'son of' and 'daughter of' respectively. Often, the father's name is initialised, so a person may introduce himself as P. Sivasothi, and you should address him as Mr Sivasothi accordingly. Married women typically replace their father's name with that of their husband. If you are not sure how you should address an Indian neighbour, ask him or her politely. For your neighbours who are Sikhs by faith, men should be addressed as Mr Singh and married women as Mrs Singh. You can address single ladies as Miss Kaur. (Do note that not all men with the surname 'Singh' are Sikhs, and some Sikh men may not wear turbans).

#### Why does my neighbour's child call me 'uncle' or 'auntie' even though we are not related?

*Children in Singapore of all races are often taught to address adults they meet, even non-relatives, as 'uncle' or 'auntie', rather than Mr or Mrs So-and-So. This is meant to be a polite and easy-to-remember way of addressing one's seniors, so don't be offended.*

### BEING GOOD GUESTS

Your neighbours, after getting to know you, may invite you to their homes for tea or a meal, and you are welcome to reciprocate with an invitation to your own home at a later time. Following are some simple pointers on being a polite and culturally sensitive guest and a guide to what you may see in your neighbour's home.

#### Off with your shoes!

Don't forget to take off your shoes before entering your neighbour's home. This practice is almost universal in Singapore, regardless of race. Visitors remove their footwear before stepping indoors in order not to dirty the floor and as a sign of respect for their host. This act also prevents one from soiling religious objects such as Muslim prayer rugs or the altars of Hindu and Taoist families.





### VISITING YOUR MALAY NEIGHBOURS

If you plan to drop by your Malay neighbour's home, do remember to avoid the Muslim evening prayer times: *Maghrib* (after sunset, around 7 pm) and *Isyak* (shortly after 8 pm). Visiting at these times may cause inconvenience as your neighbours could be in the midst of pre-prayer ablutions or performing their prayers. It is better to drop by after *Isyak*.

Traditionally, Malay households have separate areas for the men and women when entertaining guests. If your neighbour maintains this custom, the men and women may be seated in different rooms. If there are many people in the flat, you may find yourselves sitting on the floor. Don't sit on the prayer rug or squat though! For the sake of decorum, ladies should sit with their legs tucked against the body, with the feet facing away from people. Showing the soles of one's feet to another person is considered rude in Malay culture. For similar reasons, men should sit with their legs crossed rather than with stretched out or spread apart.

Your neighbours will usually offer you some snacks and drinks when you are visiting. Accept the food graciously and nibble a little, even if you are not hungry, to be polite. In conversation, the Malay community prizes gentleness, tact and refinement. You should avoid using words that are offensive, vulgar or insulting to others. Talking about sensitive topics such as sex, religion and politics, if you are not close friends, is also best avoided. Also, if you see a copy of the *Quran*, the Muslim holy book, in your neighbour's home, do ask for permission if you wish to touch or read from it as this is a sacred book, and treat it with utmost respect.

#### Remember!

*If you have pets, it is generally polite to ask if a neighbour is comfortable with the animal before letting it approach the person. Dogs are regarded as ritually unclean by Muslims, so don't allow your pet to wander into their homes and avoid letting your dog loose if you have Muslim guests.*

#### Remember!

*The head, from the neck up, is considered sacred and vulnerable, so don't touch the head or neck of your Malay neighbours, including children, without permission. Also, your neighbours may feel uncomfortable if you perform intimate acts like touching and kissing with your friends or family members while visiting.*





## VISITING YOUR CHINESE NEIGHBOURS

Chinese families are usually Buddhist, Taoist or Christian in faith. If your neighbour is Taoist, you may see an altar in their home, which serves as a shrine for ancestor worship. A Taoist family will make regular offerings of food, tea and incense and pray before sandalwood tablets believed to be inhabited by the spirits of their deceased ancestors. There may be also small statues or images of deities such as *Guan Yin* (the Goddess of Mercy) and *Guan Gong* (the Martial God of Wealth) on the altar. You should not touch the items and offerings on the altar or place your belongings on it. Remind your children too, in case they get curious.

You may see in your neighbour's home paintings, scrolls, carvings or other decorations depicting auspicious symbols such as dragons, phoenixes, horses, *qilin* (Chinese unicorn), carp, tortoises, guardian lions, cranes, lotuses and peonies. Some households also have their furniture arranged according to *fengshui* or geomancy principles. Water features such as small fountains and aquaria are also popular domestic features as they are believed to be good for *fengshui*.

Do greet the family members, starting from the eldest. A polite host will usually offer you some refreshment and tidbits. Even if you are not thirsty or hungry, it is gracious to show your appreciation by accepting and sipping the drink or nibbling a little. Also, if your host offers you a cup or glass, accept it with both hands. If you don't know a member of the family well, avoid asking personal questions such as age and salary. You can make polite enquiries about their health, children, studies or hobbies instead. It is also considered impolite to point at someone with your index finger. Don't call people by 'hey!' or 'eh!'. Address them by their proper names and titles.

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### Visiting a Christian household

If your neighbours are Christian, you may see in their homes objects such as a cross or crucifix, as well as a Bible or pictures featuring biblical scenes and passages. Catholic families may also have an altar with small statues of the holy family (the Lord Jesus Christ with his earthly parents, the Virgin Mary and Joseph), bottles of holy water (which is sprinkled on family members as a blessing), rosaries (a garland of beads used during prayer) and a Bible. Do treat these items with respect. Sometimes, you may also see artefacts of different religions in the same household, as individual members of the same family may profess different faiths.

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### VISITING YOUR INDIAN NEIGHBOURS

Amongst the Indian community, families and friends usually visit each other during weekends or in the evenings, and bring with them gifts such as sweets, snacks and fruit for their hosts, especially the children. Your Indian neighbours, after getting to know you, may invite you to their homes and you can do likewise. If you plan to visit your Indian neighbours for the first time, though, it is best to avoid Thursdays, which are regarded as inauspicious. Some traditional families believe that a first visit made on a Thursday will result in friendships that do not last.

Unlike traditional Chinese families, the family altar in a Hindu household is usually kept out of sight from visitors. Statues and icons of deities are usually found in a separate place that is out of view, which may be a simple cabinet with curtains or doors, or an entire room converted into a prayer room. Some families may use their flat's store room for this purpose. Indian Muslim households may have prayer rugs or a copy of the *Quran* in their flats. You should avoid stepping on or touching these sacred items. In Sikh homes, there may be a room set aside for prayers as well as a dedicated place for *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book.

Your hosts will serve you some drinks and may offer to prepare a meal before the visitors leave. If you are not in a rush, it is polite to accept. Some older, more traditional women in Indian families may prefer to remain in the background and not take part in open conversation with guests. They may also refrain from shaking hands with visitors. Do respect their decision. Also, when visiting, avoid praising a person or his possessions too much. Some believe this will attract the Evil Eye and cause harm to the one being praised. Touching another person, especially their head, is also taboo if you are not a relative or close friend.

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#### The Hindu family altar

This separation of the sacred and worldly is done on purpose as Hindus believe that sacred objects should not be placed near impurities or be seen by individuals in a 'polluted' state. Worshipers must hence take a ritual shower and pray before approaching an altar. Hindu families may hold a special house-warming ceremony when they move to a new flat. A priest will offer prayers and sprinkle holy water to purify the house before the family sets up their altar. Essential items on the altar include a *kutthuvilakku* or standing oil lamp, flowers, incense, incense sticks, fruits and coconuts.

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## GIFTS AND GIVING

Gifts are not really necessary when you visit your neighbours, but they are a nice gesture of goodwill and welcome, especially if you or your neighbours have just moved in.

Among the Malay community, there are few taboos with regard to gifts, but if you wish to present foodstuffs to your Malay neighbours, remember that alcohol and pork products are *haram* or prohibited to Muslims. Usually, packaged foodstuff that Muslims are permitted to consume will have a *halal* (meaning 'permissible') symbol on the label, which indicates that the product has been certified as fit for consumption by Muslims by the religious authorities. Also, avoid items such as wineglasses, knives (which are weapons) and objects that symbolise other religions or which may be seen as idols to Islam. For children, toys should not be in the form of a dog or pig, which are animals Muslims are forbidden to touch.

For Chinese neighbours, acceptable gifts include foodstuffs, fruit, fabric, handicrafts or

common household items. Out of politeness, your host will usually try to decline the gift before eventually receiving it. If a gift is wrapped, it is considered rude to open it in front of the guest. Avoid these items: handkerchiefs (which imply partings), scissors (which suggest the cutting of ties), umbrellas (a symbol of separation), shoes (the word for shoe, 'xie' sounds like the word for 'evil') or clocks (which speak of mortality). Some Buddhists do not eat beef or are vegetarian, so do enquire about their diet before you bring edible gifts.

If you are bringing gifts for your Indian neighbours, suitable items include sweets, fruit and flowers, especially jasmine, which is a symbol of happiness. If your neighbours are Hindu, avoid beef and leather, as the cow is a sacred animal to Hindus. If they are Muslims, do not give alcohol, pork or non-*halal* food products. For special occasions, gold jewellery or cash in an envelope with turmeric smeared on the corners are acceptable. Money should be given in odd, not even, sums, as the latter in Hindu belief suggests finality and endings, whereas an odd number signifies continuation and growth.

## ATTIRE AND DRESSING

When visiting your neighbours, remember to dress modestly, as some older folk may take offence at clothing that is too revealing or have inappropriate or obscene images or words.

Your Malay neighbours may, depending on the occasion, wear Western attire or don traditional Malay costumes. Some women wear a *tudung* or headscarf covering the hair, ears, neck and bosom, which is worn over a loose tunic called a *baju kurong* or over their working attire. For festive occasions, many ladies choose the *sarong kebaya*, an elegant blouse with a form-fitting wrap skirt. Malay men may wear a *Baju Melayu*, a stiff-collared long-sleeved shirt worn over trousers and a *kain sarong* or *kain samping* (a wrap-around sarong). Completing this formal set is a velvet cap called the *songkok*. A shirt made with batik patterns is also appropriate for

formal occasions. A Haji usually wears a white skullcap called a *kopiah*, while a Hajjah may wear a *baju kurung* with a white headscarf.

Generally, Chinese Singaporeans wear Western attire for everyday occasions. Some ladies may don the *qipao* or cheongsam for formal or special events, while a *sarong kebaya* (which is based on the Malay *kebaya* but incorporates Chinese- and Western-style motifs and embroidery) and *kasut manek* (beaded flat shoes) may be worn by Peranakan ladies during festive or formal outings. Some older Chinese women may wear a *samfu*, a pantsuit consisting of a short-sleeved blouse and trousers that allows the wearer to move about comfortably. During festive occasions, traditional Chinese also favour bright red clothing and frown upon dark-coloured or all-white attire, which are associated with mourning.

Among the Indian community, many ladies continue to wear their traditional attire on a regular basis. The most well-known item is the *saree* (or *sari*), a long cotton cloth draped around the body in different styles, depending on the practices of each Indian community. One free end may be draped over the head, a style favoured by some Indian Muslim and North Indian ladies. The *saree* is worn over a *choli*, a short blouse. Married Hindu women wear a *mangalsutra* or *thali*, a gold pendant that symbolises matrimony. Some women also wear a string of jasmine flowers in their hair. Also popular, especially but not only with Sikh women, is the *salwar kameez* or Punjabi suit, which consists of a long upper tunic worn over a pair of loose trousers. Some Indian men, if they are not in Western attire, may wear a *dhoti*, a white cloth tied at the hips, with a shirt over it. Sikh men usually (but not always) wear a turban, which can be in different colours.

#### Signs on the forehead

You may notice lines of grey powder on the foreheads of some Hindu neighbours. This is the *viboothi* or *thiruneeru*, holy ash that serves as a reminder that every individual ultimately returns to dust. Hindu women may apply a round mark, called a *pottu* in Tamil and *bindhi* in Hindi, on their foreheads. A red *bindhi* indicates a married woman; Single women traditionally apply a black *bindhi*, but fashionable ladies may choose a colour that matches their attire.

#### Hands of henna

You may notice elaborate, brown patterns painted on the hands and feet of some Indian women. This is henna, a plant paste applied during special events such as engagements and weddings. Henna is believed to help heal the skin, prevent thinning hair and cool the skin in hot weather. Many Malay ladies also adorn their hands with henna prior to their weddings and some Chinese Singaporeans have discovered and adopted the practice as well.

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## FAITH IN HARMONY: WHAT SINGAPOREANS BELIEVE IN

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With a long history of immigration from all over the world, it is not surprising that Singapore is home to a diverse number of world religions. Today, ten major religions are represented in the Inter-Religious Organisation, Singapore or IRO, which was formed in 1949 to promote religious harmony and foster mutual respect among believers of different faiths. For more information about the IRO, visit [www.iro.sg](http://www.iro.sg)

#### Baha'i Faith

The Baha'i Faith was founded in Persia by Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), who taught that there is only one God, one human race and that history will progress until humanity is united into a peaceful and integrated global society. In line with these beliefs, followers of the Baha'i Faith support equal rights for all men and women, universal education and sustainable development, and regard true religion to be in harmony with reason and science. The Baha'i community in Singapore, which is multiracial in composition, gathers for devotional sessions at a Baha'i Centre in Cantonment Road.

#### Buddhism

Buddhism was founded about 2,500 years ago by Siddhartha Gautama, a prince who became Lord Buddha and taught the Four Noble Truths about the nature, causes and end of suffering. Major Buddhist temples in Singapore include the Phor Kark See Temple at Bright Hill Road, Shuang Lin Monastery in Toa Payoh and the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple in Chinatown. An interesting instance of cross-cultural exchange can be seen at Waterloo Street, where devotees who visit the popular Buddhist Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple will also pray at the Hindu Sri Krishna Temple next door, where an altar and urn for joss sticks have been set up.



### Christianity

Christians follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Messiah who came to earth to save man from his sins, which are recorded in the Bible. In life, Christians follow Christ's admonition to love God and love one another just as God has loved them. Christians worship at churches and take part in regular Holy Communion or Mass services, in which believers consume bread and wine to remember Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The local Christian community includes Roman Catholics, several Protestant denominations as well as Eastern Orthodox, Coptic and Syrian Orthodox congregations.

### Hinduism

Hinduism arose not from a single founder but from the spiritual experiences of many sages, saints and seers over the centuries. Hindus believe in one God who manifests himself in different aspects or forms, for instance, Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Siva the destroyer. Other commonly worshiped deities include Ganesha, Krishna and Murugan. Hindus believe that man's destiny is shaped by *karma* and all life is sacred, to be loved and revered. Thus, some Hindus adopt a strict vegetarian diet. In Singapore, there are more than 25 temples where Hindus gather to worship at regular prayer sessions called *pooja*.

### Islam

Islam, which means peace and submission to God's will, was revealed by God to the last prophet, Muhammad (570-632 CE), who conveyed the divine revelations he received in the holy *Quran*. A Muslim is one who submits to the One God called *Allah*. In Singapore, Muslims include members of the Malay, Indian, Pakistani and Arab communities. Across the island, there are more than 70 mosques, where Muslims gather for communal prayers every Friday. If you live near a mosque, you may hear the *muezzin's* distinctive cry on Fridays as well as special occasions such as Hari Raya Puasa. As a mark of consideration to nearby residents, the mosques typically have the *muezzin's* loudspeakers turned inwards.

### Jainism

Jainism does not involve belief in a creator God. There are three main principles in Jainism: *Ahimsa* (non-violence), *Anekantvad* (plurality of views) and *Aparigraha* (non-possessiveness). Jains practise *Ahimsa* by showing compassion for all life. Hence, Jains consume no meat and abstain from animal products. In Singapore, early Jain migrants gathered at a house in Waterloo Street until 1972, when the Singapore Jain Religious Society was registered. The community then moved to a two-storey prayer hall called Jain Sthanak at Yasin Road in 1978.

### Judaism

Jews believe that man was created to fulfil God's will and that God has made a covenant to never abandon His Chosen People as long as they worship and serve Him. Devout Jews observe the Sabbath, a day of rest that begins from Friday evening till Saturday night, and consume only food that is kosher or 'clean'. The first Jews to settle in Singapore were Baghdadi Jews from India, who worshiped at Synagogue Street until 1878, when the Maghain Aboth Synagogue at Waterloo Street was opened. A second synagogue, Chesed-El, was established at Oxley Rise in 1905. Both synagogues are National Monuments.

### Sikhism

Sikhism was founded in the Punjab region by Guru Nanak in 1469 CE. 'Sikh' means a disciple who believes in One God and follows the teachings of the Ten Gurus as enshrined in the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. The religion calls on believers to adopt a practical life of tolerance and service to humanity. Singapore has seven Sikh temples or Gurdwaras, such as the Silat Road Temple at Jalan Bukit Merah, the Central Sikh Temple at Towner Road and Khalsa Dharmak Sabha at Niven Road. Gurdwaras regularly serve food to visitors and the needy in the community; vegetarian meals are prepared so that the food is acceptable to all.

### Taoism

Taoism refers to the *Dao* or 'the Way' and is believed to have been established in the reign of the Yellow Emperor in 2,697 BCE. Taoists believe that everything in the world obeys unchanging natural laws, knowledge of which can help one attain a life in harmony with the *Dao*. There are more than four hundred Taoist temples in Singapore; these include the Cheng Huang or City God Temple at Toa Payoh, Yueh Hai Ching Temple at Philip Street (a National Monument) and Thian Hock Keng Temple at Telok Ayer Street (a National Monument). Taoists visit these temples to offer incense to the deities as a way of giving thanks for blessings and to convey messages and requests.

### Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest world religions and the first monotheistic one, traces its roots to the teachings of Zoroaster Spitama, a Persian prophet who taught of one Almighty God, Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom. Zoroastrians focus on three key principles: good thoughts, good words and good deeds, which translate to a life of honesty, integrity, compassion and charity. Zoroastrians in Singapore are also known as Parsis, as they are descended from believers who originated in Parsa in Persia. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some Parsis moved to Singapore from India to work as merchants and professionals.



## HEARTLAND RITES & CELEBRATIONS

Weddings and births to birthdays and funerals - in this chapter we explain how Singapore's communities mark these milestones of life, and how you can join in to share in the joy of the occasion or convey your condolences as a neighbour in a sensitive manner. These heartland rites often take place in homes, corridors and void decks in HDB estates, and the sounds of the accompanying celebrations are rituals are taken in stride by neighbours who have learnt to accept and appreciate the significance of these brief but meaningful moments.

### MARRIAGE & WEDDINGS

Marriage is an important milestone for Singaporeans of all cultures. Weddings are hence often celebrated in a major way, with much preparation taking place long before the actual big day.





## MALAY WEDDINGS

### Proposal and engagement

When they intend to wed, many couples practise a customary proposal involving their family members. After the proposal comes the *tunang* or engagement ceremony, in which the families exchange gifts and discuss the *mas kahwin* or marriage fee. If you are invited to this event, usually held at the bride's home, suitable gifts for the couple include cash, jewellery or quality fabric.

### Akad Nikah and Majlis Persandingan

The *akad nikah* is the actual marriage ceremony during which the couple are declared husband and wife by a *kadhi* or an authorised religious official. In Singapore, Muslim Marriages are not registered at the Civil Marriage registry but at the Registry of Muslim Marriages and are governed by

Islamic or *Syariah* laws. The *akad nikah* may take place at the bride's home, the couple's new home or a mosque or function hall.

Usually held on the day after the *akad nikah*, the *majlis persandingan* or wedding reception is the public celebration of the marriage. In the morning, the groom arrives at his bride's home, often accompanied by *kompang* (handheld drums) players and friends and relatives bearing *bunga mawar* (flowers in a palm tree-like arrangement).

Malay couples who live in HDB estates often hold their *majlis persandingan* at void decks or under large tents at a nearby common space. *Bunga manggar* or bamboo poles with colourful sprays of paper on the tip are often tied to nearby structures such as pillars, lamp posts and bus-stops; these serve as handy signs to lead the guests

to the *persandingan* venue, which may be lavishly decorated to resemble an outdoor 'ballroom'. Throughout the wedding reception, which may last an entire afternoon till evening, guests and well-wishers will arrive and depart at their convenience, and food is freshly prepared and served by an army of cooks or caterers.

Taking centrestage is a decorated *pelamin* or raised platform on which the couple sits to preside over the reception. Malays refer to the newlywed couple as *Raja Permaisuri sehari* or King and Queen for the day, as the bride and groom are treated like royalty during the *majlis persandingan*.

## JOINING THE CELEBRATION

If you are invited to a *majlis persandingan*, dress formally for the special occasion. When you arrive, congratulate the parents of the couple, then exchange greetings with the newlyweds. For wedding gifts, many Malays have borrowed the Chinese practice of giving cash in *hongbao* but using money packets instead. You can find these money packets in neighbourhoods such as Kampong Glam and Geylang Serai. If you are invited to take part in the couple's blessing ceremony, take a handful of scented leaves and petals and scatter them onto the open palms of the couple. Next, sprinkle some rice flour mixed with water onto the couple's hands. Finally, scatter some rice over their shoulders and sprinkle some scented water onto their open palms. After completing the blessing, you will receive a *bunga telur* or hardboiled "flower-egg" as a token of appreciation. Before leaving, remember to exchange *salam* with the newlyweds.



## CHINESE WEDDINGS

### Before the wedding

When a couple and their families have agreed to a union, you may witness the *nacai* or exchange of gifts which takes place a few days before the wedding. Don't be surprised to see an assortment of gifts being sent next door if the bride-to-be is your neighbour. The gifts include *hongbao* (red packets containing cash), red candles with phoenix and dragon symbols, and gold jewellery.

### The importance of dates

This refers not to dating couples, but wedding dates. For the Chinese, the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month (July-August) which coincides with the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts is a taboo period for weddings as well as other important events such as starting a business. Many couples select auspicious dates such as 1 March 2014, as numerically, this date (1.3.14) sounds like the Mandarin phrase

'one life, one lifetime', a saying associated with wedding vows. The 9<sup>th</sup> is also a popular choice, as 'nine' (*gau*) sounds like 'long-lasting' in Cantonese. The 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month is also popular, as this is when the moon, a symbol of faithful love, is particularly bright. During this period, hotels and restaurants are often fully booked for wedding dinners.

### The Big Day

If the bride lives next door to you, expect a riot of activity on the wedding day. The bride and her family will be up very early in the morning to prepare for the arrival of the groom. Come morning, the groom will arrive and be teased by the bride's 'sisters' (close female friends and kin) before he is allowed in. The couple will then kneel and offer tea to their parents, a ceremony which formally seals the marriage according to tradition and is performed by most Chinese families regardless of religion as a separate rite from the legal signing of the marriage register.



## WEDDING BANQUETS

Many Chinese families hold lavish wedding dinners at a hotel or restaurant. If you are invited, do remember to wear formal attire and pack a *hongbao* and pass it to the couple or their family at the welcome table. The money in the *hongbao*, which should be an even sum (odd figures are reserved for funerals), serves as a gift to the newlyweds to help them offset the cost of the dinner, which can be high.

Don't be surprised if the actual dinner doesn't start on time, though. Many Singaporeans will arrive fashionably late, not because they are tardy but because they do not want to be seen as greedy for a meal, and the hosts wish to have everybody seated before serving the food. You could use this time to get to know the couple's friends and relatives.

During the dinner, the newlyweds will go to all the tables to thank the guests and have their photos taken with everyone. It is customary for the guests to rise and join in a few lusty rounds of 'Yum Seng!' or 'Bottoms up' to toast the couple and express their best wishes. And when the dinner is over, the newlyweds and their families will thank every guest at the doorway for gracing the occasion.





## INDIAN WEDDINGS

Different Indian communities in Singapore will have their own variations in wedding traditions. But the following account provides a general guide to these rituals.

A few days before a wedding, couples will hold a *Mugurtha Valaiyal* or bangle ceremony. The groom's family present the bride with bangles and she has her hands decorated with henna. Later, on the actual wedding day, a Tamil bride and her family may set out for the wedding venue half a day ahead to prepare for the ceremony. But sometimes, the weddings may be held very early in the morning.

The marriage ceremony or *vivaham* begins with prayers to Lord Ganesha, hymns and the breaking of a coconut. The garlanded

couple will sit on a raised dais before trays of fruit and flowers, oil lamps and a ceremonial fire. Loud music accompanies the ritual as this believed to help drown out ill-feelings or inauspicious words. A gold chain and pendant called the *thali* is the most important item in Hindu weddings. The *thali* is blessed by the priest before the groom ties it around the neck of his bride to formally seal the marriage. Dates, rock sugar and saffron rice are distributed to the guests who then throw saffron rice on the couple, who will circle the ceremonial fire thrice before kneeling before the priest, their parents and elders to seek their blessings.

### Ceremonial norms

If you are invited, avoid sombre or dark clothing and remove your shoes before entering the temple. Ushers will sprinkle

you with rosewater and offer you flowers, sandalwood paste and a red *bindhi* paste called *kunkumam*. Use your right middle finger to dab the sandalwood paste on your wrist or the middle of your forehead; then dab the red paste over the sandalwood. Pin the flowers to your hair or dress. After the ceremony, you can congratulate the newlyweds and present them with gifts (cash in odd sums, jewellery or household items). Before leaving, you will be given a traditional sweetmeat as a blessing.

## SIKH WEDDINGS

Sikh weddings are highly festive and colourful celebrations. The bride is decorated with henna, and there is much dancing and singing of traditional folk songs. On the

morning of the wedding, everybody gathers in a temple before the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book, with the bride sitting to the groom's left. A master of ceremonies or priest then leads the families in prayers and hymns. The *Palleh di Rasam* is a key rite, in which the bride and groom each hold one end of a cloth called the *pallah*. Four sacred hymns are recited, while the couple circles the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* clockwise. The couple is then blessed and offered gifts before they proceed to their matrimonial home.

If you are invited to a Sikh wedding, wear attire that will let you sit down comfortably on the temple floor. Also, all visitors to Sikh temples must remove their shoes and cover their heads with a scarf or handkerchief before entering as a sign of respect to the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*.



## EURASIAN WEDDINGS

Eurasians traditionally do not practise formal matchmaking, as young people usually have many chances to mingle and get to know each other during occasions such as church services, gatherings and parties involving different families. A young man intending to marry a young lady, however, would be expected to make a formal request to the girl's father for her hand in marriage. If the father consents, both families then meet to discuss the wedding proceedings.

Some families may hold an engagement party, with a priest blessing the engagement ring before it is given to the bride-to-be. Thereafter, the marriage banns (public announcements) will be made during Sunday

church services three weeks before the wedding day. By custom, the couple, together with their parents, will personally deliver wedding invitations to all guests.

A week before the actual wedding, the bride's home may be a flurry of activity as friends, relatives and other well-wishers turn up to help her in her preparations and dine with her family. On the morning of her wedding, female friends and relatives will help the bride dress up, while her parents will put the bridal veil in place before she departs for the church. Weddings are usually held on a Saturday, with hymns, prayers and an exchange of vows and rings before a priest, and sometimes a post-ceremony Mass. This is often followed by a guest reception, which may be at a nearby restaurant or hotel.

## Celebrating an Eurasian wedding

If you are invited to an Eurasian wedding held at a church, remember that this is a formal occasion and dress accordingly. You can sing along with the congregation if you wish, but if you are not a believer, you should abstain from the Mass or Holy Communion if this sacrament is held; simply decline the bread and wine and stand or sit quietly until the sacrament has been performed.

Wedding receptions are celebratory occasions. Guests will make speeches, toast the couple and tease them with stories of their youthful (mis)endeavours. There may be a live band and many guests will take the opportunity to dance to popular music. One particularly well-known song is *Jingkli Nona*, a Portuguese tune about true love between

a poor young man and a dancing lady. Join in if you wish, and at the end of the reception, grab some paper confetti or rose petals to throw at the couple as they depart for their new home.

Suitable gifts for Eurasian weddings include useful household items such as irons, toasters and silverware. To avoid multiples of the same item, some couples may use a wedding registry listing preferred items, which individual guests can purchase so that duplicate gifts are avoided. Traditionally, cash gifts were not regarded to be in good taste, but *hongbaos* are usually acceptable or even welcomed by young couples today.



## PREGNANCY AND BIRTHS

The arrival of a new member of the family is a cause for celebration in all cultures. Various beliefs and traditions pertaining to both the infant and mother are still actively practiced by Singapore's communities.

### MALAY CUSTOMS

A pregnant lady should not see, hear or talk about negative things, so that the baby will be cheerful. She must also watch her speech and diet to avoid misfortune or illness. Other taboos include: not bathing after the evening prayers, avoiding scary stories and films and not blowing at burning embers. The woman should also not make fun of others' shortcomings. You may see a *bidan* or traditional midwife visiting your pregnant Malay neighbour. She performs traditional therapies such as *melenggang perut* (wrapping the tummy with a long fabric) and massages which provide physical and mental strength to the mother.

After the baby is born, the parents whisper the Muslim calls to prayer into its ears so that the first sound the child hears is the name of God or *Allah*. The mother then undergoes confinement for 44 days. Guests are welcome, but do keep your visit short so that it does not tire the mother. Gifts for the family may include flowers, items for the baby, or cash in a money packet. Some families also practise the prophetic tradition of *aqiqah*, a feast held seven days or more after the birth. Friends and neighbours are invited to the occasion, during which *pulut kuning* (rice with turmeric) is served. If you are invited, bring a gift for the child, which can be toys, jewellery, clothes or cash.

### CHINESE CUSTOMS

To ensure that an expectant mother is in good health, she is given tonic or 'heaty' foodstuffs such as chicken essence, ginger, fortified wine and herbs. These foodstuffs are also suitable gifts for the family. After childbirth, the new mother usually goes through a month of confinement, during which she is not supposed to bathe or wash her hair (although few women adhere strictly to this practice nowadays). In the past, no visitors save relatives were permitted, but nowadays, many families are more relaxed about this and allow well-wishers to visit. If you are visiting, avoid praising the child, as this is believed to attract the attention of evil spirits that might harm the infant. For gifts, other than tonic foodstuff, you can give toys, clothes for the baby, jewellery or a *hongbao*.

After the confinement period, families will celebrate the *man yue* or baby's full month. If you are invited, your neighbours will give you red hardboiled eggs, which symbolise wholeness and harmony. If you wish, you may want to give them a *hongbao* as an expression of your good wishes. Christian families may have a christening or baptism ceremony at their church. If you are invited, dress for a formal occasion. You need not join in the prayers, but your presence and a gift for the infant (e.g. a *hongbao*, clothes, toys) will certainly be appreciated.

**Sikh customs**

*For Sikh families, when a new mother has the strength to do so, she and her relatives go to a temple. Amrit or ambrosial nectar is prepared in a steel bowl, followed by prayers, hymns and readings from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. A few drops of the Amrit are sprinkled on the head and face of the child, and the rest given to the parents to be consumed. The child is also named during this ceremony.*

**INDIAN CUSTOMS**

Many Tamil families hold a ceremony called *Valaikappu* during the 7<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy, in which the mother-to-be is blessed, adorned with sandalwood paste and flowers, and presented with bangles. Her forehead will also be dotted with a powder called *kungkumum*. If you are invited, colourful glass bangles for the wrist are ideal gifts, as their ringing is thought to bring cheer to the unborn child. Some also believe that a pregnant lady should be surrounded by beautiful statues or images so that the child will be similarly attractive. For this reason, the mother will avoid ugly scenes or environments.

After a baby is born, the umbilical cord is cut in a private ceremony. After the 11<sup>th</sup> day of birth, some families may hold a ceremony in which the baby is placed before the family altar; an oil lamp is then lit and food offered to the goddess Periyachi, to whose care the baby is entrusted. If you are invited, suitable gifts include cash, toys, clothes or jewellery for the child. The confinement period for the mother and infant may last from a month to 44 days. If you plan to visit during this period, inform the family beforehand, keep your visits short and avoid wearing black or white attire. Your hosts will also give you a sweet to be consumed immediately to celebrate the child's birth.

**EURASIAN CUSTOMS**

Like many other communities in Singapore, Eurasian mothers-to-be are advised to avoid certain foods, scary or tragic films and pictures, or talking about negative things, all of which may affect the unborn child. After giving birth, the mother does not bathe for 40 days (modern families may not practise this) and wraps her body with layers of cloth to tone her muscles. She also avoids 'cooling' foods, which are thought to sap her strength and body heat. A lady masseuse may be engaged to massage the young mother and help her regain her figure and vitality.

Christian households will hold a baptism ceremony within a month of a birth. During this ceremony, a priest or pastor will baptise the infant and declare the given name of the child. A common practice amongst Eurasians, even today, is to appoint two godparents, chosen from among close friends or relatives, who help to look after the child and are responsible for him or her in the absence of the parents.

If you are invited to a baptism ceremony, turn up as for a formal church service, but you do not have to take part in the rites if you are not a believer. Suitable gifts for the family include silver for the infant or items that the child can wear or use.





## BIRTHDAYS

Many younger Singaporeans celebrate their birthdays with their family and friends in the Western tradition, with a cake, candles and a party. But traditionally, birthday celebrations have been family affairs for many cultures, and in the past, only those who have reached the ripe old age of 60 or more would enjoy such personal festivities.

### MALAY CUSTOMS

Younger Malays may adopt the Western practice of a birthday party with their friends and relatives. If you are invited, do remember to avoid unsuitable gifts such as alcohol and non-*halal* food, and dress modestly. Birthdays for individuals over 60 are considered landmark events and may be celebrated on a grander scale. Such birthday celebrations may take the form of a *kenduri* or feast with prayers, gifts of food or other tokens at a mosque and a buffet meal.

Apart from birthdays, circumcision or *sunat*, in which the foreskin of the penis is removed, is a very important religious ritual for Malay Muslims. *Sunat* is compulsory for Muslim boys who reach puberty and have completed their reading of the *Quran*. This ceremony was traditionally performed by a *Tok Mudim* or circumciser but is now carried out by modern doctors. Afterwards, there is usually a feast for relatives and friends. If you are invited to this occasion, you can give a cash gift to the family in an envelope.



### CHINESE CUSTOMS

Many Chinese Singaporeans now celebrate birthdays in the Western tradition with a party. If you are invited, remember to avoid taboo gifts such as clocks, knives, scissors, mirrors or shoes. Pears are also shunned as 'li' sounds like the Mandarin word for separation. Also avoid wearing white or black clothes, or giving white flowers as these are associated with mourning.

In the past, people only celebrated their 60<sup>th</sup> birthdays, as a full life cycle according to the Chinese calendar lasts 60 years. Thus, the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday is of particular significance. During this event, guests are served *shou mian* (longevity noodles) which must not be cut when served, and *shou tao* (longevity buns) with sweet fillings. Suitable gifts for 60<sup>th</sup> birthdays include: eggs, wine, tonic food such as ginseng and dried mushrooms, silk, scrolls with auspicious calligraphy and *hongbao*. Avoid giving flowers, especially white blossoms, as some may associate this with mourning.

### INDIAN CUSTOMS

Some Indian families celebrate birthdays in the Western fashion with a party and appropriate food. Devout Hindus, however, also observe a traditional and private birthday ceremony marked by solemn prayers with the family.

The 60<sup>th</sup> year is a time for celebration. Usually, the children of a person who reaches 60 years of age will pay for and organise the celebrations, which are held to wish the individual long life and good health. Married men who reach 60 will have their entire wedding ceremony re-enacted in a ritual called *aruvathaam kalyanam*, during which the husband once again ties the *thali* around the neck of his wife, as he did at their wedding ceremony.

If you are invited to such an event or other birthday, dress for the occasion with bright, cheerful colours. Gifts are welcome, and if you are giving money, place it in a greeting card or yellow packet.

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## FUNERALS & MOURNING RITES

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Death is an inescapable part of life. Singapore's communities have different sets of rituals related to how families mourn and remember a loved one who has passed on. Many of these rites have been adapted to accommodate the needs and constraints of life in HDB estates. This is why funerals, notably those held by Chinese households, may be highly visible to neighbours. This segment explains how Singapore's main ethnic groups conduct their funeral arrangements and shares what you, as a neighbour or friend, can do to pay your respects to the deceased and comfort the family in a way that respects their traditions.

### MALAY FUNERALS

When a person dies, the body is cleaned and wrapped in pieces of unsewn white cloth. Camphor, powdered sandalwood and fragrances are applied to the body, which is not embalmed. The wake is usually held at the deceased's home and kept short (24 hours at most), as Islam frowns on prolonged grief. So if you wish to pay your respects to a Malay neighbour, do so as soon as possible after you learn of his or her death. When you visit, dress in white and modest attire. Usually, you will see the body placed in the centre of the room. If you are not a Muslim, you may not be invited to see the body at close quarters. Respect the family's wishes, and offer them your condolences. Avoid making unnecessary noise during this sombre period. Wreaths are not a Malay tradition, but if you send one, a common practice is to disassemble it and sprinkle the flowers over the grave. Cash donations are appropriate, and some families may have a small box or bowl for this purpose. Otherwise, place your money in an envelope.

### CHINESE FUNERALS

When death occurs, a family will be dressed in mourning colours, usually white, black, green or navy blue. During the wake, which may last for three, five or seven days, family members maintain a constant vigil; it is a common practice to play mahjong or other games to help each other stay awake at night. When visiting, avoid wearing colourful clothing, especially red. To offer your condolences, you may send wreaths or give cash in white envelopes, known as *bai jin* or 'white gold', to help defray the funeral expenses. Before you leave, the family may give out red threads or red packets containing a coin. This is believed to ensure a safe journey home for the mourners. You should discard the thread before you reach home to avoid bringing ill-luck to your household. You may also notice red paper charms on the walls of lift lobbies and landings; these are placed to keep bad luck from affecting neighbours. After the wake, a band of musicians may accompany the hearse as it departs for the graveyard or crematorium.



### HINDU FUNERALS

When a death occurs, the body is placed on a raised platform with a cloth covering the body below the shoulders and the head facing south. The body is usually cremated as soon as possible, so visit quickly so as not to delay the funeral. Wear simple, sombre clothes, do not wear jewellery or make-up and avoid touching photos and images in the home. Also do not bring any flowers, food or gifts. Do not bid farewell when you depart as it is believed that if you do so, then you may have to attend another such event in the same house. Hindus also believe that after a funeral, one should return home immediately and shower to be cleansed of negative feelings and forces. Families will conduct prayers every night for the soul of the deceased for up to 31 days. On the 31<sup>st</sup> day after the death, special prayers will be held at home by a priest who will start the rituals as early as 4.30am. These rituals are not very noisy, but do not be alarmed if you hear bells ringing and mantras being chanted in the wee hours of the morning next door.

### SIKH FUNERALS

In Sikhism, cremation is also practised. The body of the deceased is washed, dressed and covered with a sheet of cloth. It is forbidden to wail or beat oneself, so the mourning family repeats the phrase '*Waheguru, Waheguru*' (Wonderful Lord, Wonderful Lord) to console themselves. As a sign of mourning, Sikh men may wear turbans of white or black fabric.

At the crematorium, the assembled mourners hold prayers for the deceased and commit the body to the fire. They then gather at a temple or Gurdwara for readings of the holy book *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. When the ashes are collected, they are immersed in the sea. Seven days after the funeral, a prayer called *Paath Da Bhog* is held in the temple where the concluding verses of the *Guru Granth Sahib* are read. The prayer session seeks to give closure to the bereaved family and ease them back into daily life after the funeral.

### EURASIAN FUNERALS

When death occurs, the body remains at home for two to three days. The family members wash the body with water and brandy, to prevent germs from spreading, before placing it in a coffin. During the wake, which usually lasts for up to three days, you may pay your last respects to the deceased. Dress in sombre attire, and if you wish to give a token to the family, place the cash in an envelope with a condolence card. The family may serve you certain cakes associated with mourning, such as *kueh ko chi* (a purple rice cone filled with green beans or coconut) and *goreng sago*, a type of doughnut. On the night before the burial, the family will maintain a vigil until daybreak. A priest will then lead in a Requiem (Mass for the dead). Some traditional families believe that the spirit of the deceased may remain in the home for seven days, and keep a vigil on the seventh day till midnight. A favourite drink, or even the favourite dishes of the deceased, may be prepared and left for the departing spirit.



## WHAT'S (YOUR NEIGHBOUR) COOKING?

Singaporeans, regardless of race or religion, are united in their enjoyment of a good meal and the pride they take in their food. It is safe to say that nearly every person you meet will have his or her own favourite tips on where to find the best selection of food on the island and which stall or shop sells the best-tasting chicken rice, *nasi lemak*, chilli crab or fish-head curry.

Singapore is not famous as a food paradise without good reason; the communities that call the island home have each added their distinctive traditions to Singapore's culinary landscape. Often, one cuisine would borrow influences from another to create dishes that Singaporeans can call our very own. Noodles, which are of Chinese origin, are integral to Malay and Indian Muslim specialties such as *mee rebus* and *mee goreng*. Fish-head curry was created by an Indian Singaporean chef who adapted a traditional South Indian recipe for his Chinese clients who loved eating fish heads. Chinese Singaporeans, especially the Peranakans, have also embraced the creative use of spices and other local ingredients to create unique delights such as chicken rice and laksa.

Many Singaporeans grew up eating their favourite local dishes at *kopitiam* (coffee shops) and hawker centres in their HDB estates. These humble eateries, which house individual stalls selling a selection of food and beverage items, provide cheap, safe and fast options for dining outside, from a quick and hearty breakfast to an affordable lunch and freshly prepared suppertime treats.

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### CURRY'S A HOT FAVOURITE

Singapore's food culture is one in which different communities and cultures have borrowed from each other to enrich their own culinary traditions. Perhaps no item best captures this blending of multicultural flavours than the curry, which every major community in Singapore has embraced and adapted to their own tastes. Originating from India, where *kari* means 'sauce' in Tamil, the practice of adding a spicy gravy to meat, vegetables and rice has spread from Indian cuisine to the Malay, Chinese and Eurasian communities. Be it Malay curry puffs and beef *rendang*, Hainanese curry rice, Indian fish head curry or Eurasian *curry debal* (devil's curry), recipes inspired by or based on curry abound and are enjoyed not only by the people who created these dishes but fellow Singaporeans and many foreign visitors.

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### HAWKER CENTRES & KOPITIAM

In the past, street hawkers were very popular, as they provided cheap, fast and tasty options for busy working folk. But unregulated hawkers also posed a public health threat, given their poor hygiene. To tackle the problems caused by itinerant hawkers, the government built several hawker centres around the island in the 1970s and 80s, providing former hawkers with clean stalls equipped with modern cooking and cleaning facilities. For the public, this meant that traditional favourites such as *char kway teow*, *roti prata* and *nasi lemak* are now available at centralised locations, with the assurance of food that is safe, cheap and as tasty as ever.

Coffee shops, popularly known as *kopitiam*, are another beloved culinary institution. Traditionally, these eateries occupied shophouses, providing meals and refreshment to people who worked or lived in the neighbourhood. Many *kopitiam* have opened shop in HDB estates, offering residents a convenient and cosy corner to grab a meal, sip a cup of tea or coffee, and enjoy a hearty supper with family, friends and neighbours.

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### EATING WITH YOUR NEIGHBOURS

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Despite all the diversity and quality of food available at hawker centres, *kopitiam* and restaurants, there's still nothing like food made with love by one's own family. Many Singaporeans regard with special fondness the dishes prepared by their parents and grandparents, which they enjoyed since childhood and often require much care and effort in the selection of ingredients and cooking. So if your neighbours invite you to join them for a home-cooked meal, be it during a festival or simply to get to know each other better, accept the invitation if you are able and be prepared to tuck into a meal that is rich in both flavour and tradition. Having a meal in Singapore, especially with your neighbours, is generally a no-fuss, no-frills affair. Apart from special occasions such as a wedding or major festival, you are not expected to dress up – just be decently attired, turn up with a smile (or a suitable gift) and show your appreciation for the host by trying out the dishes and sharing what you make of them.

Eating, both outdoors and at home, is typically a communal affair in Singapore. So each guest will usually have a plate or bowl for himself, which is filled with rice or noodles. To this, the guest adds small servings of meat, fish, vegetables or gravy from common plates or serving bowls placed at the centre of the dining table.

Western-style forks and spoons may be provided, but don't be caught off-guard if your host prefers to dine in their traditional manner. Chinese meals will usually come with chopsticks for picking up individual food items as well as rice and noodles, plus a flat-bottomed soup spoon. At Malay and Indian settings, there may be no utensils as people use their right hand to eat. If you ask politely, your host, whether he is a Chinese, Malay or Indian, will gladly provide a spoon and fork, but if you are game enough to follow the examples of your hosts, they will surely appreciate your effort, even if it is not as polished as their movements. Of course, if you are not sure how to handle a particular item, don't be shy to ask your hosts for tips and tricks on how to tackle the item.

### MEALS WITH YOUR MALAY NEIGHBOURS

If you are invited to a meal and decide to bring some gifts, remember: no pork and alcohol as these items are *haram* or prohibited to Muslims. Suitable items include fresh fruit or cakes and desserts, if you can find a bakery or shop that is *halal* certified. If you are not sure whether an item you plan to bring is suitable, check with your neighbours before doing so. If you plan to invite Malay neighbours for a meal, do ensure that there are *halal* food options for them. Food receptacles and utensils used for *halal* items should not come into contact with those used for non-*halal* foods. For outdoor meals, check if the restaurant, hotel or eatery has *halal* food or is able to cater to Muslims.

### Seating and serving

You may find yourself seated at a table or invited to take a seat on the floor. If the family is very traditional, men and women may also be seated separately. Before the meal, the family may say a short prayer or *doa* to give thanks.

Every person will have his or her own plate, while pots or serving plates with rice and various dishes will be placed at the centre with ladles or spoons for dishing out the food. Use these serving spoons instead of your individual spoon to transfer food to

your plate and avoid letting the food on your plate touch these serving spoons. When it is your turn, begin by ladling some rice onto your own plate before adding servings of other dishes. Keep your servings small, so you can have seconds or try different items.

You may be provided with a fork and spoon, or request for these utensils, but don't be surprised if the family eats with their hands in the traditional way. If you choose to use your hands, wash them before eating. Some hosts may provide a small bowl of water for this purpose. When eating, use only your right hand to handle food. If you are not used to it, it is normal to make a bit of a mess at first. Learn by observing your dining companions. Don't be in a rush; it is customary and polite to thank your host for the meal and engage in conversation before leaving.

### MEALS WITH YOUR CHINESE NEIGHBOURS

Usually, a Chinese home-cooked meal will have rice accompanied by an assortment of dishes, such as fish, chicken, pork, vegetables and mushrooms. Every guest will be provided a bowl or plate, on which rice is served. Many Chinese families use chopsticks or Western-style spoons and forks, to handle solid food, while a traditional soup spoon is used for liquids. When you are helping yourself to the individual dishes placed at the centre of the table, don't use your own chopsticks or spoon. Use the serving spoon, tongs or ladle provided for each dish to place small servings onto your plate or bowl.

### Chopstick do's and don'ts

You may notice that many Chinese prefer to eat using chopsticks – when eating rice from a bowl, the bowl is held close to the mouth while the chopsticks are used to 'shovel' portions of rice into the mouth. If you are handy with these implements, you can use these instead of a fork and spoon.

### Do take note of a few norms and taboos:

- If you haven't already used your chopsticks, you can use them to serve the person seated beside you. If you have already used yours, use a serving pair or tongs instead.

- When you are not using your chopsticks, place them by your plate or bowl, with their tips on a dedicated chopstick rest, or position them on the edges of your bowl or plate. Never stick the ends of your chopsticks upright into your bowl; to traditional Chinese, this resembles joss sticks in an urn and is thus a highly inauspicious act during mealtime.
- Don't use your chopsticks as skewers or grab food by holding one stick on each hand. This is both clumsy and unrefined.
- Don't suck or lick the chopsticks. Keep contact between your lips and the tips of the chopsticks minimal.



### MEALS WITH YOUR INDIAN NEIGHBOURS

Indian families typically have their dinner late in the evening, some time between 8 and 9 pm. But if you are invited to dinner, your hosts are likely to have the meal earlier for the convenience of the guests, so do arrive on time or early. Before the meal, some snacks or drinks may be served; this is a time for casual conversation while dinner is being prepared. Appetisers may include *vadai* (deep-fried dough), *murukku* (crispy rice and lentil twists) or *samosas* (fried pastries with a savoury filling).

As a guest, your host may serve a meal using modern plates, although some traditional families may prefer to use the *thali*, a stainless steel tray with compartments for rice and side dishes. If your hosts are South Indians, they may serve rice or *roti* on a piece of banana leaf. When you are done, fold the leaf in half with the ends away from you.

Additional dishes will be placed in larger plates or pots with serving spoons or ladles. Your host may offer to ladle rice and curries onto your plate or *thali* as a gesture of hospitality. If they do so, do let your host know politely when to stop, as they may feel it is impolite to serve you too little food. What you can do is ask for a smaller serving and explain that this will allow you to sample more dishes and have seconds. While eating, do not offer other guests food from your *thali* or banana leaf, or take food from theirs.



### HOW TO EAT WITH YOUR FINGERS

If you decide not to use a spoon and fork, wash your hands before eating. Use only your right hand for eating; if you need to hold a cup or use an utensil to go for seconds, use only your left hand. Place your rice in the centre of the plate or *thali*, with curries and other items on the side, then use your fingertips to mould together small amounts of the side dishes with the rice before placing the food in your mouth. Don't use your thumb to push the food in – this is considered rude. Some people may prefer to press their food into small 'balls' which they deftly flick into their mouths. If you are eating *roti* such as *chapati* or *thosai*, use your fingers to tear off a small piece of the bread, dip it in curry (or use the bread as a scoop) and place it in your mouth. Avoid letting the food stain your palm or the first half of your fingers.

### MEALS WITH YOUR EURASIAN NEIGHBOURS

Eurasian cuisine blends influences from both east and west but with plenty of unique touches and generous servings of spice. Popular dinner items include *smoore* (beef rump in a spicy stew), oxtail stew, corned beef cutlets, chilli pork chop, *vindaloo*, steaks and curries. For festive occasions, specialties requiring much time and effort in preparation such as *curry debal*, *sugee cake* and *mulligatawny* will be served. It is not uncommon for a Eurasian family to have their unique versions of these dishes, which were passed down from generation to generation.

*Curry debal* or devil's curry is probably the most well-known Eurasian dish among Singaporeans. This dish has its origins in a Boxing Day (the day after Christmas) tradition, when housewives would gather Christmas leftovers such as roast chicken, beef, pork and turkey, and turn these into a new concoction with spices such as candlenuts and ginger. *Debal* actually means 'leftovers' in Portuguese, so the dish has actually nothing devilish about it except its (mis)translated name. *Mulligatawny*, another Eurasian favourite, is a spicy soup of colonial Indian origin, made from broiler chicken, strong spices, tamarind and coconut milk, and served with rice or a French loaf. For dessert, *sugee cake*, a confection of butter, semolina and almonds, is popular with both Eurasians and Singaporeans at large.

If you are invited to a meal with an Eurasian family, expect it to be similar to a Western dinner but with typically Eurasian dishes. If it is a regular meal, you may be served a selection of meat-based, vegetable and fish dishes, plus soup and dessert. If the occasion is a religious holiday such as Christmas or Easter, a wedding, an anniversary, a christening or a birthday, expect a more lavish meal with up to seven or eight courses of curries, sambals, vegetables, roast items and a wide choice of desserts and pastries. Some families may also practice the tradition of a late afternoon high tea, during which sandwiches, cakes, pastries and tea will be served.

## MOMENTS OF CELEBRATION THE FESTIVALS OF SINGAPORE

Given Singapore's diversity of races and religions, it is not surprising that various festivals take place throughout the year, as different communities take turns to mark major events on their calendars and celebrate the milestones of their traditions.

In Singapore, major festivals such as the Lunar New Year, *Hari Raya Puasa* and *Deepavali* are celebrated on a grand and colourful scale. During festive periods, the ethnic districts of Telok Ayer (Chinatown), Geylang Serai, Kampong Glam and Little India are often bedecked with colourful lights, striking décor and lively bazaars. In HDB estates across the island, families and friends also prepare for their festivals by sprucing up their homes, organising get-togethers and performing rituals significant to the occasion.

In this chapter, we offer a look into the various festivals that Singaporeans celebrate, common practices related to these events as well as how you can share in your neighbours' joy as they clean up, dress up and cook up a feast for a season of joy and goodwill.







#### • AWAL MUHARRAM (NEW YEAR)

The Islamic New Year, *Awal Muharram* commemorates the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622. Though not a public holiday, many Muslims celebrate *Awal Muharram* by fasting, attending sermons at mosques and making resolutions to be better Muslims. Traditionally, *Awal Muharram* is commemorated with a sweet rice porridge called *bubur asyura*.

#### • MAULUD NABI

*Maulud Nabi*, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, falls on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of *Rabiul Awal*, the 3<sup>rd</sup> month of the Muslim calendar. In the past, large-scale public processions were held to commemorate *Maulud Nabi*, but today, Muslims celebrate this event by attending mosques to pray and listen to sermons about the Prophet's life and teachings.

#### • RAMADAN: A MONTH OF FASTING

A key pillar in Islam is that every able-bodied adult refrain from food and drink between dawn and dusk during the Muslim month of *Ramadan*. *Ramadan* is a time for spiritual devotion aimed at cultivating patience and humility. Many Muslims also try to stop smoking and refrain from other undesirable habits during *Ramadan*. You may notice Muslim households waking up especially early during *Ramadan* to prepare a pre-fast meal called *sahur*. At the end of the day, the fast is broken shortly after the call to evening prayers or *Maghrib*. After breaking fast, many Muslims also gather at a mosque or a void deck to perform a supplementary evening prayer called *Tarawih*. During *Ramadan*, remember that your Muslim neighbours are fasting. So you should not offer them food and refrain from grabbing a bite in their company.



#### • HARI RAYA PUASA

*Hari Raya Puasa* marks the end of the fasting month of *Ramadan*. This public holiday, also known as *Eid*, *Lebaran* or *Hari Raya Aidilfitri*, is celebrated by the Malay as well as other local Muslim communities.

Before the festival, many families will perform a thorough spring-cleaning and decorate their homes with bright lights and ornaments. During this time, areas such as Kampong Glam and Geylang Serai will be filled with festive bazaars. On the eve of *Hari Raya Puasa*, Muslims gather at mosques for the *Takbir*, a special prayer of thanksgiving. The next morning, households begin their celebrations with a breakfast of festive dishes such as *ketupat* and *rendang*. An important festive custom is for children to kiss their parents' hands and seek forgiveness for bad deeds in the past year with the words

'*Maaf zahir dan batin*'. Many families will also attend prayers at mosques before they continue with other festive activities.

During *Hari Raya Puasa*, people visit each other to share in the joy of the occasion and renew old ties. This often takes the form of an open house or *rumah terbuka*, whereby neighbours, friends and relatives take turns to visit each other and partake of a buffet-style feast or *kenduri*. Your Muslim neighbours may invite you over, and when you visit them, dress up formally and greet them by saying '*Selamat Hari Raya Puasa*', '*Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri*' or '*Eid Mubarak*'. A common festive practice is for parents to give their children monetary gifts called *duit raya*, which is often placed inside money packets. You are not expected to give *duit raya*, but if you choose to do so, no offence will be taken.





• **HARI RAYA HAJI**

*Hari Raya Haji* or *Hari Raya Aidiladha* is a Muslim festival and public holiday that celebrates the sacrifice made by the Prophet Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic), who offered his son Ishmael (Ismail) to God in obedience to God's command. At the last moment, a goat appeared and took Ishmael's place as the sacrifice. The festival takes place soon after the time when Muslims perform the *Haj* pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. *Hari Raya Haji* falls on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of *Zulhijjah*, the 12<sup>th</sup> month of the Muslim calendar. The festival is marked by ritual sacrifices of livestock to honour Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. This ritual, known as *korban*, is traditionally performed at mosques and other religious centres and a portion of the meat from the slaughtered animals is distributed to the poor and needy members of the community.

• **LUNAR NEW YEAR**

The Lunar New Year (*Xin Nian* in Mandarin) is celebrated on a grand scale by the Chinese community and usually falls between late January and mid-February. Also known as *Chun Jie* (meaning 'Spring Festival'), the Lunar New Year marks the start of springtime and a new year according to the traditional Chinese calendar.

You can tell that the Lunar New Year is coming soon when you see your neighbours spring-cleaning and decorating their walls and doorways with bright red scrolls bearing auspicious characters and couplets. You will also see paper cut-outs of the Chinese character for 'prosperity' or *fu* pasted upside-down on walls. The Chinese word for 'upside-down' (*dao*) rhymes with the word for 'arrival'. Hence, an upside-down *fu* suggests the eminent arrival of good fortune.



Families ensure that everything is spick and span by the eve of the new year. No cleaning is done on the Lunar New Year itself, as this act is believed to 'sweep' away one's luck. On the eve of the new year, family members from near and far gather for their reunion dinners and children get to stay up late to welcome the new year with their parents.

The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> days of the Lunar New Year are public holidays. Many people take this opportunity to visit relatives and friends. If you are visiting, wear bright, preferably red, outfits and stock up on mandarin oranges. It is customary to offer your host a pair of mandarin oranges with both hands (in Cantonese, the word for mandarins, *gam* sounds like the word for gold) to wish them a successful new year. Before you depart, the host will present to you two mandarin oranges as well, which you must accept.

Giving *hongbao* (red packets containing token sums of cash) is an old Lunar New Year custom and a popular way of conveying one's good wishes. Usually, the elders and married members of a family will give *hongbao* to their younger kin, single relatives and children. If you receive a *hongbao*, thank the givers and wish them '*Xin nian kuai le*' (Happy New Year), but do not open the *hongbao* in their presence. If you are giving *hongbao*, place even sums or better, amounts ending with '8' such as \$8 or \$88. Avoid sums ending with '4' as this numeral sounds like the Chinese word for 'death'.

The new year marks a clean slate, so people who owe you money will likely want to repay the debt before the festival. Similarly, if you owe sums to your merchants, do settle these bills with them before the new year. They will certainly appreciate the gesture!



▪ **QING MING (ALL SOULS' DAY)**

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> lunar month (usually April), many Chinese families visit cemeteries or columbaria with offerings of food, flowers and incense as well as brooms for sweeping the tombs. This period, known as *Qing Ming* or All Souls' Day, is when the Chinese pay their respects to deceased ancestors as an act of filial piety. Nowadays, due to the lack of land for burial, many families opt for cremation and place the ashes of their loved ones in a columbarium. Taoist families may burn joss money and paper replicas of cars, houses and toys to provide for the deceased in the afterlife. On the eve of *Qing Ming*, some families serve only cold food for meals; this custom arose as a ruler once tried to force Jie, a faithful servant, out of a forest by burning it, causing the servant's death. In regret, he decreed that no fires be lit on the anniversary of Jie's death.

▪ **ZHONG YUAN JIE (FESTIVAL OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS)**

Come July and August, many Chinese households set up altars at their doorsteps with food and ritual offerings. They also burn joss papers at metal receptacles placed around many flats. These are signs that *Zhong Yuan Jie* (the Hungry Ghost Festival) is in full swing. According to Taoist beliefs, the spirits of the dead visit the earth during the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month and must be appeased with offerings. During this period, many Chinese shun acts such as weddings, major purchases and business ventures. You may see in your neighbourhood large tents or pavilions where dinners, auctions and Chinese opera or *getai* performances are held by clan or temple associations. These are often colourful and lively occasions, but for the sake of a good night's sleep, such events are required by law to cease by 10.30 pm.



▪ **ZHONG QIU JIE (MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL)**

Also known as the Lantern or Mooncake Festival, this festival is celebrated in the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month, during which many people buy and eat mooncakes, while children play with lanterns of different shapes and designs. Some families also make offerings to Chang Er, a Lady in the Moon who is a symbol of marriage and fulfilment. The festival's association with mooncakes arose in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when Chinese rebels during Mongol rule hid messages in mid-autumn pastries. Mooncakes are roundish pastries often filled with red bean or lotus seed paste, and a whole salted egg yolk. Other popular fillings include green tea, yam, chestnut and dates, while modern versions include durian, snowskin and ice cream mooncakes. There are also vegetarian as well as *halal* mooncakes available from certain bakeries.

▪ **VESAK DAY**

A public holiday, Vesak Day marks the birthday, enlightenment and earthly death of Lord Buddha, and is celebrated by both Buddhists and Taoists. This festival takes place on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> lunar month (usually mid-May). During Vesak Day, Buddhist devotees will flock to temples and monasteries to pray, attend sermons and perform rituals such as bathing statues of Buddha. Devout Buddhists may also adopt a vegetarian diet or make contributions to charity during this festival in a gesture of compassion. In the past, many devotees also practised the releasing of captive animals, but this is not encouraged nowadays as the released animals seldom survive (causing pollution in parks and waterways with their bodies) and the practice fuels the repeated capture or breeding of wild animals for sale to devotees.



#### • DEEPAVALI

Also known as the Festival of Lights, *Deepavali* celebrates the victory of Lord Krishna over Narakasura, an evil demon king. People then lit clay lamps to welcome Lord Krishna from his victory. For Hindus, *Deepavali* (also known as *Diwali*) thus signifies the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance. The Sikh community also celebrates *Deepavali* as the day when the teacher Guru Hargobind Singh was released from prison along with 52 other Sikh rulers.

Not to be confused with the Tamil New Year, *Deepavali* is a public holiday that usually falls in late October or early November. Nonetheless, *Deepavali* is still a time for new beginnings and celebration. As *Deepavali* approaches, many Hindu families will put up colourful lights and oil lamps around their

homes to welcome the goddess Lakshmi.

It is also a time for spring-cleaning, new clothes and furnishings, and the preparation of festive treats. You may also see especially elaborate *kolam* created at doorsteps.

On *Deepavali* morning, Hindu families wake up early for a ritual oil bath, which symbolises the cleansing of oneself. Children bow to their elders to receive blessings. Everybody then changes into new clothes before praying before the family shrine and going to temples. *Deepavali* is also a time for visiting. If your Hindu neighbours are at home, you can wish them '*Deepavali Valthukkal*' ('Happy Deepavali'). Many families also give gold or maroon envelopes containing money as festive gifts to children. Unlike the Chinese *hongbao*, the amount given should be an odd sum. You can buy these festive envelopes at shops in Little India.



#### • THAIPUSAM

Rivalling *Deepavali* in brilliance and fanfare, *Thaipusam* takes place early in the year, on the full moon of the Tamil month of *Thai*. This festival honours Lord Murugan, a son of Lord Siva who defeated evil demons with his silver chariot and golden spear. *Thaipusam* is celebrated with a grand procession from Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple at Serangoon Road to the Chettiar's Temple at Tank Road. Many male devotees in this procession carry a *kavadi*, a spiked metal or wooden frame. Women and children who take part may carry pots of milk on their heads as offerings to Lord Murugan. Musicians and singers chant sacred hymns to encourage the devotees as they take part in the procession, which to many represents the fulfilment of vows made to Lord Murugan in return for answering their prayers or healing them and their loved ones from sickness.

#### • PONGAL

This harvest festival is widely celebrated by South Indians. *Pongal* (also spelt *Ponggal*) takes place in mid-January and the name of the festival is derived from *ponggal*, a sweet mixture of boiled rice, jaggery (brown palm sugar) and milk offered to the Sun God Surya. *Pongal* is celebrated with particular fanfare at Little India with a festive bazaar featuring cows and goats from local farms, which are garlanded to thank them for their labour and provision of milk. Some families may place oil lamps around their homes during *Pongal* and make *ponggal* in their kitchens. The *Pongal* feast is often a major affair with families preparing substantial meals to feed streams of visitors. Children also enjoy gifts of money, which are believed to bring in good luck. Traditional households will celebrate *Pongal* over three days, and visits to temples are a must.





#### ▪ TAMIL NEW YEAR

Indians of Tamil origin mark the Tamil New Year or *Puthandu* on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the Hindu month of *Chithirai*, which usually falls in mid-April. Although not a public holiday, many Tamil families celebrate this day with much festivity. An important ritual is *kani kanal*, which involves an arrangement consisting of a bronze vessel, lamp, mirror and fruits. It is believed that when a family wakes up at dawn and lights the lamp, catching sight of these objects before anything else will bring good fortune for the rest of the year. The family then holds prayers and visits a temple to seek blessings. Elders will also give *kai visesham* or lucky money to younger relatives, an act that signifies abundance to both the giver and recipient. You may notice your neighbours creating new *kolam*, placing fresh mango leaves at their doorway and welcoming visitors during the Tamil New Year.

#### ▪ GOOD FRIDAY & EASTER SUNDAY

Good Friday is a time of contemplation for many Christians as they mark Jesus Christ's death and sacrifice on the cross. The 40-day period leading up to Easter is known as Lent, and some believers abstain from meat during this time. On Good Friday morning, Christians attend church services to remember Christ's death on the cross. Devout Eurasian families may serve a sombre breakfast of black coffee, hot cross buns and *kueh ko chi*, a confection usually reserved for funeral wakes. During Good Friday, many Catholics also confess their sins before a priest and seek forgiveness for their wrongdoings. On Easter Sunday, some churches conduct sunrise services to celebrate Christ's resurrection. Eggs, being a symbol of rebirth, have become associated with Easter, and brightly painted eggs are often used as gifts during Easter.



#### ▪ CHRISTMAS

A public holiday, Christmas is celebrated primarily by the Christian community. But many non-Christians also mark it as a year-end festival of good cheer with gatherings with friends and exchanges of gifts. Christmas is also referred to as Yuletide or Noel.

For Christians, Christmas marks the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and is celebrated with great joy, involving carolling sessions, midnight services or Mass on Christmas Eve to usher in Christmas as well as worship services on Christmas Day itself. Many families also practise the tradition of decorating Christmas trees in their homes. Catholic households may set up a Nativity scene, which consists of a manger with the infant Jesus Christ surrounded by his mother the Virgin Mary and three Wise Men bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Santa Claus or Father Christmas is also closely associated with Christmas. Well-loved by children as a bearer of gifts, Santa Claus is thought to have been a 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop who secretly gave gifts to his flock.

Among some Eurasian families, there is a tradition of fasting before the Christmas Mass at midnight, followed by a celebratory supper in the early hours of the morning. Christmas Day itself and the period up to New Year's Eve is a time for visiting close friends and relatives, festive meals involving roast turkey or goose, devil's curry and sweet desserts, and social parties and dances. An old Eurasian custom, now seldom observed, is for young people to return home at midnight to greet their parents. All the lights will be switched on and every door open to let good fortune enter the home.



• **NATIONAL DAY:  
A CELEBRATION FOR ALL CITIZENS**

Finally, one 'festival' and public holiday that unites all Singaporeans, regardless of race, language or religion, is the day on which the nation celebrates its independence and sovereignty: National Day. Held on 9 August, National Day is an eagerly awaited moment by many Singaporeans, who look forward to a chance to view the National Day Parade, whether 'live' at the parade grounds or on TV, with all its spectacular displays, rousing marches and dazzling performances.

Continuing the local tradition of having an 'open house' during major festivals, the grounds of the Istana, the official residence of the President of Singapore, are open to the public during the National Day period as well as *Hari Raya Puasa*, the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the Lunar New Year, *Deepavali* and Labour Day. These 'Open House' days offer a rare chance to view the gardens and selected halls of the Istana building and enjoy picnics with family and friends on the Istana grounds.

**Flying the Flag**

Many Singaporeans take the opportunity to show their love for the nation during the National Day period by flying the National Flag at their homes and workplaces. You will see rows of flags displayed from HDB balconies and windows all over the island as National Day beckons. The five stars on the flag represent Singapore's five core principles of democracy, justice, peace, progress and equality, while the crescent moon symbolises Singapore's status as a young, ascendant nation. The red upper segment stands for universal brotherhood and the equality of man, while the white below speaks of purity and virtue. The National Flag may be displayed from homes during the National Day celebration period between 1 July and 3 September. If you plan to fly or display the National Flag, do remember that the flag must be treated with respect and dignity at all times, and not be allowed to touch the ground. If you need to dispose of a worn or damaged flag, place it in a sealed black trash bag so that it is not visible in the dustbin.

**Where can I learn about the history of Singapore's communities?**

To learn more about Singapore's history and shared multicultural heritage, you can visit the National Heritage Board's (NHB) museums, which include the National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum, Peranakan Museum and Singapore Philatelic Museum. The NHB also runs three Heritage Institutions focusing on the collective histories of Singapore's major communities: the Malay Heritage Centre in Kampong Glam, the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall at Tai Gin Road and the Indian Heritage Centre (to open in 2015) at Campbell Lane.

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