

# Malaysia and Singapore – people, culture, language

## A guide for businesses



### The countries

**Malaysia** is a nation that manages the tricky balance of embracing the future while drawing on the past. Strategically located where the Indian Ocean meets the South China Sea, Malaysia is situated on major trade and immigration routes in the region. Early immigrants brought wealth as well as their own unique cultural heritages and religions. This diversity has remained in place through the centuries up until today.

The country has a significant economic freedom and encourages economic investment. Its capital city, Kuala Lumpur, is a bustling metropolis where towering skyscrapers overlook primitive longhouses.

**Singapore**, a densely populated city-state, is one of Asia's "Four Tigers" and is Southeast Asia's most important seaport, financial centre and manufacturing hub. Like its neighbour Malaysia, it is multi-cultural, with the main mix between Malays, Chinese and Indians. The people are generally highly educated with a high standard of living and GDP comparable to that of Western Europe.

Singapore is known for its cleanliness, strict social policies, steamy tropical climate and diverse cuisine, as well as having one of the world's most modern airports.



*Malaysia's Petronas Towers were the world's tallest towers from 1998 to 2004, when they were overtaken by Taipei's 101 building.*

### Did you know...?

- There are more than 60 sub-ethnic groups in the Malay provinces of Sabah and Sarawak alone.
- As part of Singapore's drive for cleanliness, the import, sale and possession of chewing gum is banned.
- Indians and some Malays see the head as the seat of the soul; as a result one should never touch another's head.
- The Chinese never give each other anything in odd numbers; it is unlucky.
- Malays are rather comfortable with long silences; they see them as a time to reflect rather than uncomfortable moments to be filled.

### Fast facts

**Locations:** Southeastern Asia

**Capitals:** Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) and Singapore

**Official Language(s):** "Bahasa Melayu" Malay (Malaysia); Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and English (Singapore)

**Populations:** 25 million (Malaysia); 4.5 million (Singapore)

**Ethnic Groups:** Malay, Chinese, Indian and others

**Religions:** Islam, Buddhism, Hindu, Christian and others

**Currencies:** Ringgit (Malaysia); Dollar (Singapore)

**Dialling Codes:** +60 (Malaysia); +65 (Singapore)

**Time:** +8 hours GMT

### Language

**Talking the talk:** the positive impression you will make by speaking a few basic phrases in the local language cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases in Malay:

English	Malay	Pronunciation
Hello	Helo	<i>hello</i>
Good morning	Selamat pagi	<i>Se-lamat patee</i>
Good evening	Selamat petang	<i>Se-lamat pa-tang</i>
Goodbye (to one leaving)	Selamat tinggal	<i>Se-lamat tin-gal</i>
Good bye (to one staying)	Selamat jalan	<i>Se-lamat ja-lan</i>
How are you?	Apa khabar?	<i>Apa khabar</i>
I'm fine	Khabar baik	<i>Khabar bayeek</i>
Yes	Ya	<i>ya</i>
No	Tidak	<i>TidaŃ</i>
Please	Sila	<i>See-la</i>
Thank you	Terima kasih	<i>Te-reema kasee</i>

## Diversity

- It is always key to remember that the different cultures have their different approaches to life and thus different ways of conducting business. For example, when meeting and greeting the three main ethnic groups will all differ.
- **Malays**  
Younger people or those who work in multi-national companies may have adopted the western concept of shaking hands with everyone, but this is not the case with older or more reserved Malays.  
Men and women do not traditionally shake hands, since Muslim men do not touch women in public.
- **Chinese**  
Ethnic Chinese shake hands. Their grasp is rather light although the handshake itself can be rather prolonged. Men and women may shake hands, although the woman must extend her hand first.
- **Indians**  
Ethnic Indians shake hands with members of the same sex.  
When being introduced to someone of the opposite sex, nodding the head and smiling is usually sufficient.



Singapore's business district.

## Relationship building

- Business relationships are founded on personal relationships and these take time to develop.
- Business is a matter of being tied into the proper network, which is the result of long-standing personal friendships or the proper introductions.
- You must be patient as this indicates that your organisation is there for the long term and is not looking only for short-term gains.
- Always be respectful and courteous when dealing with others as this leads to the harmonious relationships necessary within business.
- Rank should always be respected. The eldest or most senior person in the group is revered.

## Communication styles

- Singaporean and Malaysian communication is guided by a desire to maintain face and avoid losing face.
- This is ultimately achieved through not losing emotional control or appearing embarrassed in public.
- It is a good idea not to show anger in public as it makes people uncomfortable and creates a feeling of powerlessness.
- Since maintaining face at all costs is a cultural mandate, people strive to avoid confrontation or tricky situations.
- As a result they avoid giving negative responses by saying that something is inconvenient or may be difficult. To be polite, they may tell you what they think you want to hear.
- Ambiguous language is often used to maintain harmony. Malaysians also use silence or talk around the point rather than give a negative response.
- Both countries have a "high context culture", which means that tone of voice, body language, eye contact and facial expression can often be as important as the words spoken. Therefore, it is important to observe the person as they speak.
- Personal questions are not considered taboo. In fact, you should expect to be asked somewhat intrusive questions about your salary, marital status, and the cost of your personal possessions. This is considered getting-to-know-you conversation and is not meant to make you feel uncomfortable.

## Meetings and negotiation

- The main purpose of initial meetings is to develop a sense of trust between the parties, rather than to convey information.
- Do not try to schedule meetings during Chinese New Year or Ramadan as many businesses close or their hours of work change.
- You should arrive at meetings on time. Punctuality is a virtue.
- There should be a period of small talk before getting down to business discussions.
- Never disagree or criticise someone who is senior to you in rank as it will cause both of you to lose face and may destroy the business relationship.
- Business negotiations happen at a slow pace.
- Be prepared with a mental list of concessions you would be willing to make that would not injure your own business.
- Singaporeans (particularly ethnic Chinese) tend to be tough negotiators on price and deadlines.
- Decisions are usually consensus driven so concentrate on all present, not just a perceived key decision maker.

## Further resources

Malaysia International Chamber of Commerce and Industry [www.micci.com](http://www.micci.com)  
International Enterprise Singapore [www.iesingapore.gov.sg](http://www.iesingapore.gov.sg)  
EuroCham [www.eurocham.org.sg/](http://www.eurocham.org.sg/)  
Britain in Asia Pacific [www.britaininasiapacific.com](http://www.britaininasiapacific.com)

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