

# Singapore - TomorrowLand? or Totalitarian?

*thwaaack! OUCH! thwaaack! OUCH! thwaaack! OUCH!*

Many Westerners regard Singapore as a weird tropical tyranny where:

- 1) You get caned with a bamboo stick for spray-painting graffiti.
- 2) Chewing gum is prohibited.
- 3) You get executed via hanging if you're convicted of drug-dealing.

The tiny archipelago-on-the-equator is all that, it's true, but it's also an astonishing model mega-city success, with astute futuristic sensibilities in its environmental, business, educational, infrastructural, and technological policies.

Only 46 years into statehood, the Malaysian-named "Lion City" (which is actually 3/4 Chinese with no wild felines) has boomed feverishly from its beginnings as a poor, dirty, muddy, backwater shipping village into today's immaculate, glittering metro of 4.7 million inhabitants with \$62,100 GNP per capita, a figure that accelerated a mind-boggling 14.5% in 2010.

William Gibson scoffed at Singapore in his 1993 *Wired* essay, "Disneyland with the Death Penalty," but now, few critics are sneering. Singapore's rise is one of the most spectacular in the last half-century, rivaled only by South Korea and Israel. For the unconvinced, I've categorized the achievements below, followed by an examination of their low rating in democracy:

**School First:** Singapore has an A+ education system that the government wisely and lavishly invests in, especially in science and tech. Dividends are reaped: the 2009 PISA survey, that tested high schoolers internationally, awarded Singapore teens 2nd place in Math, 4th in Science, and 5th in Reading. Many schools utilize iPads, all secondary schools offer "blended" online and traditional curriculums, and generous development grants are awarded to schools that demonstrate excellence.

**Business-Friendly:** Singapore gets an armful of awards for its economic openness. In 2010, Transparency International rated it 3rd most "corruption-free" nation, and Boston Consulting tabbed it "Most Innovation Friendly." Numerous other groups have handed Singapore trophies for "Most Open Economy", "Best Business Environment", and "Easiest To Do Business In." Singapore Airlines and Singapore Changi Airport are both recognized as #1 in international flying.

**Nifty Networks:** Ericsson's Networked Society City Index ranks Singapore one of the "Top Three" along with Seoul and Stockholm. The Lion City was praised specifically for its innovations in e-health and its genius in traffic management - satellites and a road-pricing system are used to reduce street congestion. Singapore also offers free Wi-Fi in thousands of urban areas - this amenity is greatly appeals to small businesses and entrepreneurs.

**BioTech Growth:** The New York Times noted that, "You can't buy Wrigley's spearmint gum in Singapore. But human embryonic stem cells? ... vials... for \$6,000." The minuscule over-achiever is rated 2nd in the world (behind USA) in stem biotech, with impressive discoveries: last May, A\*STAR's Genome Institute of Singapore discovered a switch to speed up stem cell production. A gigantic, 2,000,000 square foot "Biopolis" complex was recently constructed.

**Eco-Conscious:** Singapore was named one of the "Top Ten Cities of the Future" by Ethisphere Institute for its long-term sustainability planning. In water efficiency, the city-state aims to triple its reclaimed waste-water production capacity, plus develop desalination to meet 30% demand, and expand water catchment to an impressive 90%.

**Tough Little Guy:** Despite its diminutive size, Singapore wields the most advanced military in SouthEast Asia. The government spends 5% of its budget on defense, and male citizenry is conscripted for 2 years of mandatory service. Singapore enjoys a close ally in Israel - the island's troops were trained in 1965 by the Israel Defense Forces, a hefty percentage of Singaporean weaponry is purchased from Israel, and the Israeli "Iron Dome" was partially financed, and will eventually be utilized, by Singapore. Enemies? There are occasionally border disputes with Indonesia and Malaysia, plus the threat of a regional terrorist group - the Jemaah Islamiyah.

**Urban Ingenuity:** Singapore is contending with its limited area and expanding population via two marvelous methods. Above ground, it reclaims land with earth from its own hills, and builds beautiful artificial islands. Below sea level, it plans to intensely, creatively burrow, creating massive subterranean spaces as deep as 100 meters, linked by a network of railways.

**Fun Lifestyle:** Singapore is consistently rated "the cleanest city in the world" and it's almost crime-free - the homicide rate is just .05 per 100,000. Drugs are obviously not an issue here - only .005% of the population smokes marijuana, with even tinier numbers for opiates. Mercer's 2010 Quality of Life survey rated Singapore #1 in Asia. High regional ranking is also achieved in Shopping (#1), Low Infant Mortality (#2), and Health Infrastructure (#3). Singapore's skyline includes a 541-foot-high ferris wheel, casinos on Sentosa Island, and a rainforest park in the heart of the city.

**Multi-Culti Peace:** Back in the British colonial era, Singapore was divided into three ethnic enclaves by its founder, Sir Thomas Raffles. Today "Chinatown", "Little India", and the "Arab Quarter" co-exist happily, exemplifying the harmony between the Chinese (74.2%), Indian (9.2%), and Malay (13.4%). Multiple faiths - Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Hinduism, and 18% nonbeliever - reside in tolerant acceptance, and the four major languages - Mandarin, Tamil, Malaysian, English - intercommunicate efficiently.

**Miscellaneous Perks:** Singapore's port is the 2nd largest in the world (Shanghai's #1). Singapore is the 4th leading financial centre in the world. Singapore is #1 in chemistry in the Asian Pacific, according to Reuters. Singapore is the globe's "Top Logistics hub", says the World Bank. Singapore has targeted nanotechnology to compete in - already, there are 24,000 nano researchers here from all over the world.

**Freedom? Democracy? Liberty?:** Is Singapore "totalitarian"? Are Singaporeans denied "freedom" in this nation that should be castigated as an authoritarian, single-party, corporatist technocracy? My opinion is slightly Yes, but Not Really.

On the dark side, it's true that the wealthy island is ranked only #85 on the Democracy Index (between Bolivia and Bangladesh) and it's even lower in Freedom of the Press - #111. Media is tightly controlled here; *Wired* magazine was banned after Gibson's article was published, and "Sarong Party Girl" had her racy web photo removed by disapproving officials in 2005. *Republica Opinion* noted recently that, "it might

take years for Singapore's citizens to enjoy the right to free speech as we know it."

On the bright side, the May 7 elections were the freest in Singapore's history, and Lee Kuan Yew's reign of 30 years as Prime Minister produced economic miracles. Poor residents here can receive free housing and subsidized food, there's an extraordinarily low rate of unemployment (3.4%) and excellent wages for workers, corruption is not a societal scourge, and there's no religious obstacles impeding scientific research, as there has been in the USA. Plus, lesbians, gays and the transgendered are accepted and integrated equitably here.

"Freedom"? To do what? The abstract noun has multiple applications. Singapore is definitely a wretched habitation if you're a muckraking anarcho-journalist with graffiti, gum-chewing, and heroin habits. But if you're a transgendered stem cell technologist who likes shopping, sunshine, and free WiFi, the Lion City must feel like nirvana.