

I have lived in Singapore for over **40 years**. In that time I have watched hundreds of thousands of visitors arrive, explore, and leave — some delighted, some confused, some genuinely frustrated by things that were entirely avoidable.

These are the ten mistakes I see most consistently. None of them are complicated. All of them are fixable before you arrive.

01 Eating or drinking on the MRT

Including water. The fine is SGD 500 and it is enforced. Plain-clothed officers patrol regularly. The rule applies to the entire paid zone — trains, platforms, and the gated concourse areas. Buy your drink, exit the fare gates, then drink it.

SGD 500 fine

The most common tourist mistake in Singapore — and the most expensive.

02 Choosing the hawker stall with the shortest queue

The queue is the quality signal. Singaporeans queue for food they trust. An empty stall next to a 20-person queue is empty for a reason. The wait at Tian Tian chicken rice at Maxwell Food Centre can be 25 minutes. It is worth 25 minutes.

The best stalls at the best hawker centres will always have a queue.

03 Going to Chinatown on a weekend afternoon

Weekend afternoons are peak tourist time. Pagoda Street becomes a single file of visitors. The stalls that cater to this crowd price accordingly. Go on a weekday before 10am — the wet market is operating, the regulars are at breakfast, and the shophouses look the way they looked 40 years ago.

Our Chinatown Audio Guide is designed for this exact weekday morning walk.

04 Tipping at restaurants

Tipping is not customary in Singapore. A 10% service charge plus 9% GST is already included in your bill at most restaurants — you are tipping on top of a tip. At hawker centres, tipping is not done at all. Do not leave coins on the table.

The 'GST + service charge' total is approximately 19% on top of menu prices.

05 Treating Sentosa as a full-day destination

Most visitors feel Sentosa is underwhelming by hour three. The beaches are pleasant but small. Universal Studios is excellent for families but expensive. Unless you have children or have specifically booked Universal, a half-day is the right allocation. The cable car ride is worth doing once.

Budget half a day. Spend the rest of your time in a real Singapore neighbourhood.

06 Visiting Gardens by the Bay in the afternoon heat

Walking between the Supertrees at 2pm in 33-degree heat is not the experience. Go at 7:45pm for the free Garden Rhapsody light show — the Supertrees illuminate in sequence over 20 minutes and it is genuinely spectacular. The paid domes (Cloud Forest, Flower Dome) are best in the morning before the crowds arrive.

The Supertree light show runs nightly at 7:45pm and 8:45pm. Completely free.

07 Assuming Singapore is fully cashless

Singapore is one of the world's most cashless cities — PayNow QR codes at most hawker stalls, contactless on the MRT, Grab for taxis. But older hawker stalls, wet markets, and traditional kopitiams still prefer cash. Carry SGD 30-50 in small notes (SGD 2 and SGD 5) for these situations.

The fully cashless experience exists. So does the 'cash only' sign at the best laksa stall.

08 Skipping the kopitiam breakfast

Kaya toast (coconut jam on charcoal-grilled bread), soft-boiled eggs with white pepper and light soy, and a cup of kopi (coffee with condensed milk) — this is the most authentically Singaporean 20 minutes you can spend. Most visitors eat hotel breakfast or skip it entirely. Find any old-school kopitiam — marble tables, folding metal chairs, handwritten menu — and sit down before 9am.

Total cost: approximately SGD 5. Memorability: disproportionate to the price.

09 Leaving the Merlion on the itinerary

The Merlion statue is approximately 8 metres tall. It is photographed, admired for about 90 seconds, and that is the entire experience. The surrounding area — Marina Bay waterfront — is genuinely beautiful and worth walking at sunset. But building an hour around the statue itself is an hour that could be spent at a wet market, a clan association temple, or a proper hawker lunch.

See the waterfront. The statue is incidental.

10 Leaving without understanding what you actually saw

The red columns in front of a shophouse are not decoration — they are a traditional architectural element indicating a Chinese business. The tissue paper on the hawker table means the seat is taken. The gold paper burning outside a shophouse is an offering, not rubbish. The yellow lanterns mean a family is in mourning. Singapore's street culture is dense with meaning — most visitors walk through it without reading it.

Every layer of Singapore rewards attention. Most visitors leave having seen the surface. Come back — or go deeper on this visit.

Want to go deeper?

The SG Insider's 10 is the starting point. A personalised briefing covers what you specifically need for your trip, your travel style, and your time in Singapore.

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