



SINGAPORE & JOHOR: BORDER CONTRASTS

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	4,000,000	(Singapore & Johor) Montreal, Guadalajara, Barcelona, Phoenix
Urbanized Area* Population	2,987,000	(Singapore) Melbourne, Phoenix, Porto Alegre, Barcelona, Montreal
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	123	Newcastle, Sendai, Kitchener, Warsaw, Brasilia, Copenhagen, Mission Viejo
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	319	
Population per Square Mile	24,300	Montevideo, Barcelona, Shenyang, Sao Paulo
Population per Square Kilometer	9,400	
*Continuously built up area		

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Singapore is one of the most civilized, ordered and organized places on earth. Everything is in place. Here, economic theory is put to the test every weekday with the Electronic Road Pricing system that automatically charges automobiles that enter the central cordon every day. It was this successful experiment that was the inspiration behind the much larger congestion pricing program adopted in London in 2003. Singapore also has electronic pricing on some of its freeways, like Toronto. And, like Tokyo, Osaka, Hong Kong and other large high-income Asian urban areas, virtually all of the operating and capital costs of public transport are paid by commercial sources of funding.

But there is an air of predictableness and sameness about Singapore that makes it less interesting as a site to visit, but perhaps makes it a better place to live (rather like Cedar Rapids or Spartanburg). In its own way, this is like Curitiba, very well planned, but a lot more affluent.

The central business district appears to have been borrowed from any number of American or Canadian cities. It is very dense, with the tallest buildings clustered together quite unlike the non-Hong Kong Asian examples like Tokyo, Osaka, Seoul, Guangzhou and Beijing. One waking up here might well think they were in downtown Denver, downtown Minneapolis or uptown Atlanta --- places where the more modern large buildings have long since rendered the older ones to secondary status.

Singapore is a city-state and is located on an island across a causeway from the Malaysian city of Johor. It was a part of Malaysia at independence. But soon, Singapore seceded from Malaysia and has spent the better part of four decades prospering economically. There is still some of the low-rise traditional city, but for the most part one encounters a very modern place here.

As would be expected in such a well organized place, the suburbs look as same as American or Canadian suburbs that might have been built over a 10 year period. They look rather different from their western counterparts, however. They are all mid-rise multi-unit buildings, generally from 10 to 15 floors. They tend to be clustered together and have similar designs, like the taller such projects in Guangzhou, Beijing and Seoul.

The metro, like so many Asian urban rail systems, pays for itself. There is a long circle line that connects the residential locations around the island. At the north end a short bus ride takes one to a customs facility that would be the envy of any port of entry. The walk across the causeway is hazardous to the health of anyone not used to breathing air of petroleum content not experienced in North America for half a century. Malaysia is much less affluent than Singapore, and as a result the inevitable motorization there consists of many more motorcycles and motor scooters, all of which seem to be vying for the world record in pollution emission in the one or two mile length of the causeway.

But that's just the beginning of the problem. At the end of the causeway, one has to find a customs agent or a staffed customs office to officially enter the country. This is not easy. I found myself well inside the county before I realized that it might be wise to try a bit harder to find an agent at this point, rather than face more serious questions later. After awhile I found a customs agent and was issued the usual 90-day visa for a couple hours visit.

Johor could not be more different than Singapore. It is second-world, middle-income in contrast to high-income Singapore. The contrast is rather like San Diego and Tijuana, though the border is easier to cross.

Nonetheless, there are a few international style tall buildings that argue for world-class status for this urban area of approximately 1,000,000 people. There is a very attractive Hindu temple, as tastefully placed as a Route 1 used car lot in Prince George's County, Maryland, outside Washington.

Then I headed back toward Singapore. The problem of the non-existent border was even greater. Apparently I was a lot more concerned about the security of the Malaysian border than the Malaysian immigration service. One only hopes that there are no more porous borders elsewhere in this perilous world. This was before the 9-11 terrorist attacks, and it is to be hoped that the Malaysian immigration service is a bit more attentive now. As would be expected, of course, the border at Singapore is very different and as efficient as one would expect for such a well organized place.

It is said that the best English is spoke in Singapore, and that is certainly an impression one gets there. Also here is some of the most traditional Anglican worship with some of the most crowded churches. Some say that Victoria or Christchurch (the latter reminding me of Pheonix) are the most British places on earth. My vote goes to Singapore.



Parliament Building, Singapore



Downtown Singapore



Overseas Union Bank Building, Downtown Singapore



Congestion Pricing Cordon, Entering Downtown Singapore



Downtown



St. Andrews Cathedral



The Suburbs of Singapore



Singapore Customs House (Malaysian Border)



Johor, Malaysia from the Causeway



Line Waiting to Cross Border into Johor



Downtown Johor



Hindu Temple, Johor

By Wendell Cox

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