

Episode 87: Singapore

Summary

Our guest Hairul talks about his home country of Singapore. He talks about doing army service as well as Singapore's ethnic mix, its delicious food and its famous chewing gum ban.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my friend Hairul, and Hairul, we're talking about where you're from, which is both a city and a country, because it's the city-state of Singapore. So you were born and bred there, right?

Hairul: That's right. Umm, I was born and went to school, uhh, in Singapore. Umm, and after I finished my, uhh, time in the army - it was two-and-a-half years - I moved to Australia to do my university degree.

Nick: So doing army is mandatory in Singapore?

Hairul: It is, uhh, for now, for all males between sixteen-and-a-half ... so you get a letter from the government, uhh, advising you to report for a medical, uhh, evaluation at sixteen-and-a-half. Umm, so typically, you would serve your two years between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two. Uhh, so I enlisted, uhh, a month before my nineteenth birthday and, uhh, yeah, so I was in there or two-and-a-half years.

Nick: And so were you happy to do that as kind of service to the state or duty to the state, or did you not want to do it?

Hairul: Uhh, I wasn't enjoying it that much when I was doing it, but I guess the consolation¹ is that everyone has to do it, umm, albeit in different, you know ... you get posted in different vocations. So it's, uhh, fun because it's actually an additional, kind of, uhh, conversation topic. Whenever I meet a fellow Singaporean anywhere, you know, one of the things we talk about is, 'Oh, what did you do during your national service?' So it's something that we Singaporean guys kind of can bond over².

¹ consolation: small positive thing that can follow hardship (sometimes 'consolation prize')

² bond over (phrasal verb): talk about and become closer as a result

Nick: Yeah, it's interesting. It's almost like an identity marker or something that you can, yeah, you can bond over or that you can talk about.

Hairul: Yeah. So, umm, I think about two years ago the Singapore army started to do this, umm, uhh, kind of, uhh, PR, umm, exercise, where they filmed a reality, kind of, TV series. And it's actually called Every Singaporean Son.

Nick: OK, that's interesting. So if I have this correct, and I think that I do, but in Singapore you have three major groups of people, let's say ethnic groups. So you have the Chinese, you have the Indians, who are South Indians I think.

Hairul: Yes.

Nick: And then you have the Malay, and that's the group that you belong to. Umm, but the Chinese are dominant, right?

Hairul: Yes, so, umm, I guess the indigenous population would be the Malays. But in the, kind of, early 19th century with, umm, kind of, trade and when Singapore, the economy was picking up, there was a big, kind of, migrant population, especially from South China, with the labourers³. And same with the Indians from South India. So at the moment the Chinese would be the majority, about two-thirds, and then the Malays would be, kind of, 20 per cent, and the rest would be the Indians.

Nick: And does that play out OK? Are there problems between the groups or is it all pretty alright in terms of tension?

Hairul: Umm, I think it's all pretty alright. There's actually a significant part of school talking about, umm, kind of, racial harmony. Sometimes it can be a bit, kind of, forced. But the upside⁴ is that, umm, I have friends, I have Chinese friends and I have Indian friends. And, uhh, a funny thing is that a conversation between a Chinese person and an Indian person can sometimes be in the Malay language. Umm, so all of us, so every Singaporean, would know a few words in, uhh, Mandarin, uhh, Malay or any of the Indian dialects, so that's quite interesting.

Nick: Yeah, it's nice that people make the effort to learn a little bit. But even within that, English is kind of the lingua franca among those groups?

Hairul: Uhh, yes, so English is the, I guess, the working language. So everything in school, or in most of the schools, is taught in English. And then, uhh, you normally take up⁵ a second language, which is usually the language, umm, that you're, you know, born into, that your parents speak at home. So I, umm, so everything in

³ labourers: workers who do physical and/or manual labour (e.g. building houses)

⁴ upside: positive result

⁵ take up (phrasal verb): start a course or activity

school was taught to me in English and I took Malay as a second language, but I also have Malay friends who took, umm, French or Mandarin as a third language.

Nick: Because didn't you also speak English, or some English, at home as well?

Hairul: Umm, not so much when I was growing up. I guess now with me travelling and spending more time (overseas). Uhh, it's funny you should mention that, because I remember when I was studying in Sydney, instead of calling home I would just email every day. Umm, and this was before Whatsapp and Facebook Messenger and all that, and, uhh, most of my emails were fully in English.

Nick: Yeah at a certain point if you're doing everything in that language, it becomes easier, I guess, to even talk to your parents in that language.

Hairul: True, true, yeah. But everyone's - at home - everyone's comfortable speaking in English as well as Malay.

Nick: OK, so getting back to Singapore, the city, now a lot of people who come there think it's a little bit too neat, it's a little bit, perhaps a bit fake. Uhh, as a native Singaporean, what's your take on that?

Hairul: Umm, I can see where they're coming from. Umm, before I was travelling a lot for work and for holidays and when I was, umm, before I was kind of old enough to appreciate it, I guess I wouldn't know any better. Umm, I, you know, kind of growing up as a kid, I thought everyone else was going to be the same. Umm, but, you know, we do take our orderliness and our neatness very seriously. Umm, I guess it's easier for the government or whoever's looking after the space to enforce⁶ those kinds of rules, because Singapore is small so it's easier to enforce. And I guess growing up, umm, we're more, uhh, I don't know, easier to, uhh, to preach to, I guess.

Nick: Yeah, so the, I think the epitome⁷ of this neatness or this orderliness is that you can't, uhh, spit out chewing gum on the street. Is that right?

Hairul: Umm, I may be wrong, but I think the chewing gum ban was enforced right around the time that the metro, the Mass Rapid Transit System, was launched in the mid-eighties. Uhh, and so the reason or excuse was that, uhh, people were going to stick the used gum in between the train sliding doors. Uhh, for me, personally, I was never a chewing gum person, myself. Umm, but it just became one of those things where, you know, if it was banned, then it became like a, almost like something that people, uhh, like a forbidden fruit. So, umm, people would, umm, drive to Malaysia and buy chewing gum like it was, you know, some

⁶ enforce: impose, keep in force

⁷ epitome: classic example

contraband⁸ or hot item. Umm, now it's a bit more relaxed, you can actually get chewing gum for, to help cure your, kind of, nicotine addiction.

Nick: OK, so for medicinal purposes you can get chewing gum in Singapore.

Hairul: Yes.

Nick: I've got to tell you though. It is interesting that people, if they're coming from the West, I think they think Singapore's a bit too Western, or a bit not Asian enough compared with their expectations. The last time I went to Singapore, I came from India, which, you know, is a bit chaotic, a bit noisy and all of that. And so coming to Singapore, I found it amazing because it was suddenly a lot neater than what I'd been experiencing before. So I think it depends on your perspective a little bit. I also wanted to ask you about Singaporean food, because it's famous as maybe the best food in the world. Uhh, what do you have to say about that?

Hairul: Umm, I'll probably get in trouble with my parents, but food would be a close second to the thing I miss most about Singapore (his family). Because food is still cheap, I know it's, uhh, obviously things don't get cheaper over time. Uhh, food is cheap, you know, good food is cheap, uhh, and it's also available round the clock⁹. Uhh, one of the things I struggled with, umm, moving to Australia, was that, umm, I couldn't eat any time I wanted because the restaurants would close, you know, between lunch and dinner. And as Singaporeans you just eat at any time just because it's there. Umm, the concept of supper to Singaporeans is also different from, I guess, other people. People catch up over supper, and so supper is, I guess, defined as anything after ten o'clock, uhh, ten at night. Umm, and it can be a full meal, so it's not just, you know, uhh, I don't know what...

Nick: It's not like a late-night snack. It's a legit¹⁰ dinner.

Hairul: It's not porridge or toast or, yeah, you can have like a full chilli crab for supper.

Nick: And I've heard that because the food is so good and so cheap, Singaporeans just don't even cook at home, because they can just get the food they want on the streets.

Hairul: It is true. And because of, umm, it's sort of widely available. For me, back home, umm, I have a local kind of food court just across the road. So, you know, why, kind of, umm - and when I'm home alone - why would I just make a mess in

⁸ contraband: illegal product imported into another country (by trafficking; usually something more serious than chewing gum like weapons or drugs)

⁹ round the clock: all the time, at any hour

¹⁰ legit (informal): short for legitimate, which can mean lawful. In this case it means a full or proper dinner.

the kitchen just for a plate of noodles when I can just go down and get one in 20 minutes.

Nick: Alright, and Singapore noodles of course!

Hairul: Yes, although there is no such thing, uhh, in Singapore. So don't go to, uhh, when you're in Singapore, don't ask for Singapore noodles, because you'll be laughed at.

Nick: Alright, thanks a lot Hairul.

Comprehension Questions

1. What does Hairul think about doing military service in Singapore now that he looks back on it?
2. According to Hairul, why was the chewing game ban instituted in Singapore?
3. What did Hairul struggle with when he first moved to Australia?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. She decided to _____ yoga classes once a week. She's never done yoga before but she's really enjoying it.
2. The museum we wanted to go to was closed. But the _____ was that we went wandering around the neighbourhood and discovered all sorts of things that we wouldn't have otherwise seen.
3. The bakery is open _____ and there's almost always a line out the door, no matter what time it is.
4. When she introduced her boyfriend to her father, they discovered they both supported the same football team, so they were able to _____ that.
5. I didn't get the job I applied for. They told me that if it was any _____ to me, I just missed out and was the second choice.
6. It's a _____ business, it's not a scam. He has put a lot of effort into it.
7. The Camino de Santiago is the _____ of the goal being the journey, not the destination.
8. The government introduced a new law banning jaywalking (crossing the street while not at a regular crossing), but it has proven difficult to _____ so far.
9. All the men in his family are _____, so when he told his parents he wanted to be a lawyer, they were surprised, to say the least.
10. He got involved with the wrong kind of people and ended up getting in trouble with the law for smuggling _____ goods over the border.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you been to Singapore? If so, did you enjoy it? If not, would you like to go? Why or why not?
2. What do you think about Singapore's approach to neatness and orderliness?
3. Singapore is famous for its Asian food. What is your favourite type of Asian cuisine and why?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. He enjoys talking about it with other Singaporeans as a way to bond with his countrymen.
2. He said the chewing gum ban was instituted to coincide with the opening of the metro system.
3. He struggled with not being able to eat out whenever he wanted, like he can do in Singapore.

Exercises

1. take up
2. upside
3. round the clock
4. bond over
5. consolation
6. legit
7. epitome
8. enforce
9. labourers
10. contraband