

[You Belong with Me](#), or How Singapore Used Taylor Swift to Restore its Reputation

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Taylor Swift's recent concert tour in Southeast Asia was indicative of the importance of tourism and big names to sell a destination, as well as a lack of intra-ASEAN solidarity



Credit: Freepik

[I Knew You Were Trouble](#)

Taylor Swift is a global phenomenon, one of the world's best-selling musicians ever; the first billionaire whose main source of income is music; the 2023 Time 'Person of the Year'; the first artist who has won four Grammy Awards for Album of the Year; and her current The Eras Tour became the first in history to gross [over \\$1 billion](#). For some, Swift is an [anti-hero](#) as she has been the subject of [conspiracy theories](#). Donald Trump-supporting [conservatives charged](#) that Swift's „artificial” relationship with an NFL player was a plot to endorse Joe Biden during the Super Bowl halftime show on 11 February 2024. While

Swift has [criticised Trump](#) and [endorsed Biden](#) in the past, nothing outrageous happened during the Super Bowl. However, her influence on voters is real. In September 2023, Swift posted a [message on Instagram](#) encouraging her followers to register to vote. The website Vote.org reported a [1,226% jump](#) in registrations an hour after the post.

Swift has a real impact on the economy too. Not only has she made good business choices that have made her a billionaire. She also [positively affects places](#) where she performs. Philadelphia, Chicago, Colorado, and Cincinnati experienced a boost in GDP through consumer spending on hotels, restaurants, taxis, hotdog vendors, and other businesses. In Las Vegas, Swift's presence, not gambling, caused the highest post-pandemic tourism spending. It is estimated that Swift will generate [\\$5 billion](#) in consumer spending in the US alone.

The late economist Alan Krueger called Swift "[an economic genius](#)", and given her impact on the economy, no wonder that there is a phenomenon called "Swiftonomics" and that universities [offer courses](#) on her work. Also, everyone would like her to perform in their country or city. That is why Swift caused some [bad blood](#) among ASEAN member states.

[The Story of Us](#)

[The Association of Southeast Asian Nations \(ASEAN\)](#) is an intergovernmental organisation of 10 member states established in 1967 with the aim of promoting economic growth and regional stability among its member states. In 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) established a single market with four freedoms of movement. ASEAN's member states are among the world's top-performing economies, with their [combined GDP comprising](#) 3.5% of the world's GDP in 2021. The member states account for more than [7.7% of world exports](#), while they import [7.2% of world's imports](#). The block attracts [10.9% of total world FDI](#). ASEAN has free trade agreements (FTA) with China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand. However, while the growth rate of [ASEAN trade](#) is 25%, the share [of intra-ASEAN trade](#) is low, at 21.3%.

In early March 2024, the ASEAN countries held a three-day summit in Melbourne, Australia. While [the focus of the summit](#) was expected to be Myanmar's humanitarian

crisis and conflicts in the South China Sea, Taylor Swift stole the show. As part of her Eras tour, Swift held six concerts in Singapore between March 2 and 9 and this was her only destination in Southeast Asia. Singapore's government, it has emerged, has [provided a cash incentive for Swift](#) to make the city-state her only tour stop in Southeast Asia. While the exact amount has not been officially reported, [Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin](#) said that the Singapore government offered Swift an extra \$2 to 3 million per show.

Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, insisted that this was not a hostile act towards the neighbours. Other countries, however, [complained](#) that the Singapore deal deprived them of the tourism boom her concerts bring. Considering that the only other destination in Asia was in Tokyo, Japan, and the nearest stop was Australia, more than 300,000 tickets were sold for the Singapore shows and helped generate [significant benefits to the economy](#), especially in tourism activities. In the end, Singapore was [out of the woods](#) when the [Secretary-General of the Thai Prime Minister's Office](#) said that Thailand did not hold it against Singapore and took what Singapore did as an example.

[Look what you made me do!](#)

Singapore is among the countries with the most efficient institutions. The city-state is one of the four Asian Tigers, ranked between first and fourth on the [rule of law](#), [government effectiveness](#), [control of corruption](#), [regulatory quality](#), and [political stability](#) rankings. It is the most [competitive](#) country in the world, with the highest [Economic Freedom Index](#), and it has the 12th highest [Human Development Index](#) (HDI). [The number of taxes](#) is low, five. With a favourable economic and political environment, it attracted [FDI](#) in the amount of 30.2% of GDP in 2022. With these characteristics, Singapore is a dream destination for doing business. Then why did Singapore have to pay extra for Taylor Swift?

The country has yet to reach [pre-pandemic levels](#) in terms of tourist arrivals. A bigger problem is Singapore's reputation; in 2018, the country was ranked [the second least exciting city](#) (out of 32). It was also the „[worst rated city for culture](#)“. In truth, this is not a new problem; Singapore has always struggled with a dull reputation. In the 1970s, long hair was banned under a scheme called [Operation Snip Snip](#), which prevented many rock bands from performing in Singapore as they were not allowed to enter the country without having a haircut. Having artists such as Taylor Swift, Coldplay, and Ed Sheeran perform in the country today makes it look like a [modern, open-minded, and vibrant place](#). Times have

changed and it is not only the business environment and stable institutions that generate growth.

Other ASEAN countries thought that there was a [blank space](#) in the calendar and that Swift should have written their name. Leaving Taylor Swift references aside, this case shows that there is no loyalty in economic integrations and that participating countries do not have each other's back. While ASEAN aspires to deeper integration, with a low share of intra-trade and a lack of understanding and support among the members, it will not be easily accomplished.

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