

Banned BBQs And Criminal Collies

In densely populated Asian cities, rules are key to keeping order, but the bewildering tangle of laws can befuddle expats. Pet, noise and pollution policies abound; homeowners should also police mosquito breeding.

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In Singapore, look out for the "moszie police."

Crystal Nanavati, a blogger from Boston who moved to Singapore in 2010, once got a visit from a "mosquito inspector" who wanted to check for stagnant water in her home. The inspector examined her balconies, bathrooms and planters, looking for areas ripe for mosquitoes—carriers of the deadly dengue fever. Though he didn't find anything that warranted the standard \$200 fine, he noted a vase of dying flowers from her recent wedding anniversary. "He told me to deal with the flowers that day," says Ms. Nanavati, who lives in a 1,400-square-foot apartment in the central district near Orchard Road with her husband and children. "That the state can come in and evaluate your house, even for a public health risk, is awkward at best."

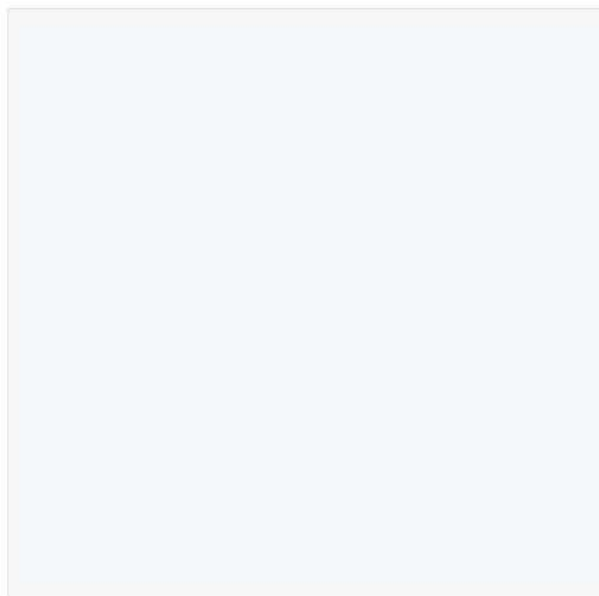
In some of Asia's fastest-growing and most densely populated cities, developers, building managers and municipal authorities have implemented a variety of rules and regulations to keep residential life running smoothly. That can mean strict guidelines governing everything from cooking to pet ownership to elevator use—a bewildering tangle of laws for expats and other new arrivals.

"There's no precedent for so many people being urbanized so quickly," says Christopher Dillon, an expat consultant who lives in Hong Kong and has written several Asian home-buying guides. "Rules are written and rewritten on a daily basis."

Pet regulations are increasingly commonplace. In Tokyo, high-end buildings such as Tokyo Twin Parks, which has 1,000 units in two, 47-story towers, have separate elevators for pets and their owners. Other high-rises require owners to hold their pets or put them in strollers while in common spaces. Some buildings in Asia are "pet negotiable," with residency permitted only after a pet interview. When shopping for a home in Hong Kong, one couple said their pet Pomeranian, Chippy, had to submit to a "look-see" interview with the building manager. The dog passed inspection, but the husband ultimately decided on a different building.

In Beijing, dogs taller than 35 centimeters, or about 14 inches, as well as any of the 41 breeds deemed "violent" are banned within certain areas of the city. (Collies and golden retrievers fall in the city's violent category.) But the regulation, which was strengthened last year with a 5,000 yuan (\$805) fine for violators, is haphazardly enforced, real-estate agents say, adding that some residents skirt the rules by walking their large dogs at odd hours.

To cope with its pernicious pollution, authorities in the Tongzhou district of Beijing in April banned open-air barbecues, a law that affects both food vendors in the street and residents who grill on their balconies. According to Chinese state media, the rule was implemented to help curb air pollution. Anyone caught with an open-air grill would be fined anywhere from \$322 to \$3,220. Many city dwellers were outraged by the rule, saying the smoke from a few lamb skewers was hardly contributing to Beijing's smoggy air, but the policy remains.



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While the rules may seem extreme to Westerners, the issues are real, city planners say. Asia has an average of 131 people per square kilometer, compared with 32 people per square kilometer in the U.S., according to data compiled by the United Nations. China faces particular challenges amid recent efforts to encourage rural farmers to migrate to urban areas for manufacturing jobs. As a result, about 13 million people are moving to cities every year, says Ken Rhee, the Urban Land Institute's chief representative for mainland China.

In packed cities, many expats accustomed to single-family homes on large lots particularly feel the squeeze. Closet space is virtually nonexistent, even in high-end buildings. Bruce Wright, an architect in San Francisco who has worked on residential buildings in China, says developers often design apartments in ways that let residents maximize the living space later. For example, areas that in the West would be considered storage space—usually 64 to 100 square feet—are converted into a maid's room or office area. Residents in apartments with double-height ceilings sometimes hire subcontractors to carve out a loft area for sleeping space. "The efficiency of land use is so important," Mr. Wright says. "Developers try to trick the code in the most curious ways."

One of the biggest adjustments for foreigners comes down to noise. Though many cities have noise restrictions, some residential buildings add extra rules to pre-empt complaints. In many Japanese luxury high-rises, for example, practicing musical instruments must take place before 8 p.m., says Yukiko Takano, a real-estate agent with Japan Sotheby's International Realty in Tokyo. "We have to state it in the contract," she says.

Still, some expats say other noise issues aren't policed at all. Christopher Piro, a real-estate agent from Vancouver who lives in Da Nang, Vietnam, says one of his neighbors partakes in "Vietnamese house music" karaoke nearly every night. "In the U.S., you'd go knock on their door and ask them to turn it down," Mr. Piro says. "But here people don't seem to care," adding cultural differences may be the culprit. In Vietnam, many people grew up living in shops with little insulation along noisy streets.

Zhao Hao, a strategy consultant from New York who has lived in China for four years, currently shares a three-bedroom apartment in Beijing with two roommates. Despite the city's Law on the Prevention of Noise Pollution, which prohibits loud renovations past the working day and on weekends, Ms Hao says she has heard construction at all hours, including late at night. "I don't think I've ever lived in an apartment where I wasn't bombarded with drilling noises," she says.



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