

Open season

As visa-free travel opens doors for tourists to Singapore, Malaysia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, concerns mount over rising crime and immigration challenges

BY JEAN LUC ANBERLY LIM, HAINI AZMI

AT SINGAPORE'S FAMED Gardens by the Bay, 24-year-old Sun Shiji reflected on her decision to travel abroad for the first time, citing the city state's visa-free entry for Chinese nationals as a major draw. "I just had to show my passport when I crossed the border," the fresh university graduate excitedly told This Week in Asia, as she described her seamless four-day trip with a friend.

Since February, Chinese travellers have enjoyed visa-free access to Singapore, reciprocated by a 30-day pass for Singaporeans visiting China. This arrangement places them alongside citizens from the US, UK, and other Asian member states who benefit from similar travel privileges.

Visa-free travel has sparked a wave of explanation across Southeast Asia, where tourism is proving

essential for economies still recovering from the pandemic — prompting many governments to relax long-standing immigration restrictions.

Travellers from India, China and Russia have emerged as the biggest beneficiaries, flocking to explore the region's beaches and resorts. Many are venturing abroad for the first time, drawn by the ease of travel that eliminates bureaucratic hurdles. For Sun, Singapore was a natural choice — not only is it safe and clean, but it also holds personal significance as the home of one her favourite singers, JJ Lin.

"It's also great because even though my English isn't that good, lots of people here can understand Mandarin," she said.

In the tourism hotspots of Phuket and Bali, hotel occupancy rates are soaring back to pre-pandemic levels. Flights have resumed to many second- and

third-tier Chinese cities, and package tours are also making a comeback. Indian tourists, known for their spending power and lavish wedding celebrations, are flocking to the region, while independent Russian travellers — both the affluent and budget-conscious — are nanjing it with new-found ease.

The elimination of stringent visa requirements has opened up the region to a broader range of travellers — Chinese and Indian tourists especially.

Singapore's 30-day visa-free policy "significantly enhances convenience by eliminating the need for complex visa applications for Chinese travellers," said Jeevanish Wong, assistant director of marketing communications at Chan Brothers Travel in the city state.

"Flight capacity between China and Singapore has exceeded pre-Covid levels, underscoring the strong demand for travel between the two countries," he added.

But this surge in arrivals, who often go largely unscanned before reaching immigration, has also raised alarms about potential criminal elements

entering Southeast Asia.

Reports of illicit activities, including thefts, burglaries and organised crime linked to newly arrived Chinese nationals, have surfaced in Singapore, leading to increased scrutiny.

Last month, three Chinese nationals with ties to foreign syndicates faced charges related to housebreaking incidents in private residential areas of the city state. Authorities say that they are currently working with their counterparts in China to trace another 14 suspects who left Singapore shortly after committing their crimes.

"No visa regime can completely eliminate undesirable visitors. Minister of State for Home Affairs Sun Xueling emphasised on Monday in response to a parliamentary question regarding crime rates since the visa exemption.

"Even if the 14 Chinese nationals were taken into account, the percentage of Chinese visitors arrested in Singapore would be lower than the corresponding percentage last year," she said, without giving exact figures.

The only way to keep post-hoc actions entirely would be to close the country's borders "but doing so would destroy Singapore's economy", she said.

As it strives to stake its claim as one of Southeast Asia's most vibrant destinations, Singapore has rolled out a series of initiatives to attract tourists.

Indeed, travel has steadily increased since the pandemic — particularly with major concerts by global artists like Coldplay and Taylor Swift drawing in crowds as "Singapore showed that it was a world-class travel destination", said Tat Yam Suen, founder of local tour operator Manster Day Tours.

Other new attractions include Mission Land at Universal Studios and the Oceanarium at Resorts World Sentosa. But the famously expensive city state's elevated costs may be deterring some travellers. "For those packing a country to visit in Southeast Asia, they can decide to go to Malaysia, Thailand or Indonesia, versus Singapore, which is going to be more expensive," Suen said.

"The Singapore currency is very strong, especially compared to our neighbours."

Local frustrations over over-tourism are also becoming more common. At the National University of Singapore, for instance, a recent influx of Chinese tourists disrupted classes, prompting the university to

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A TOURIST
POSES FOR
PICTURES AT
SINGAPORE'S
MUSEUM
PARK LAST
MONTH.
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**SINGAPORE HAS SHOWN THAT IT'S A
WORLD-CLASS TRAVEL DESTINATION**

Tat Yam Suen, tour operator