Time to resume travel, with certain precautions in place

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Singapore is opening up green business lanes for travel to and from certain countries with low risk of coronavirus infection. There is no reason why tourism travel cannot also resume, in a limited way, with certain precautions. Doing so will save jobs, help the economy and satisfy the desire to travel again. How can it work on the ground?

INCOMING TOURISTS
One way to handle incoming visitors would be not to quarantine them if their visit is limited to certain areas and to have precautions taken to prevent them from passing the disease to the local community. This means that such visitors have to stick to a pre-determined itinerary. For example, certain hotels, such as beach resorts, could be used exclusively for such travellers.

So restaurants and other facilities at these hotels will be closed to locals. Staff serving visitors will have to stay on-site, or in designated places for, say, two to three months. They then need to serve a stay-home notice (SHN) or be quarantined before they can mingle with the rest of society.

The tourists may be taken on tours but should not be allowed to leave the tour bus. Alternatively, certain tourist attractions — such as the zoo or night safari — could be reserved exclusively for tourists for, say, a couple of days a week. Staff working on “tourist days” would need to take precautions, and everything has to be disinfected before the “local days”.

OUTBOUND TOURISTS
Similar tours could be organised for Singaporeans wanting to travel overseas. For example, golf tours to China or Vietnam where the visitors stay and play, or scuba diving trips where the visitors could be taken from the airport directly to a boat, or even family holidays, say to Club Med, where all activities are within a confined area.

These travellers will, of course, need to serve quarantine or SHN, or whatever measures are in force, on their return to Singapore, to be quarantined only once, not twice.

For some, especially those who are working from home, that would be a small price to pay. Allowing such travel would help airlines, hotels and tourist attractions generate some income and keep their staff employed.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY
Associate Professor Hui Loyang, an infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital, said: “If we are not bitten in the process”, Professor Hui: “I would imagine many visitors to Singapore have family, friends and work colleagues, and stopping their trips would discourage travel. Unrestricted activities could be allowed for travellers from very low-risk countries.”

As for people here travelling overseas, our calls belong to the other country. Said Prof Hui: “Singapore is not really able to dictate conditions in the partner countries. We can’t tell them not to swab or quarantine, for example.”

But he added that with the launch of green lanes, “I can see that opening up for tourism within these travel bubbles will soon become feasible”.

THE WAY FORWARD
Singapore has reported very few cases in the community – seven in the past fortnight of whom one had been isolated prior to detection. This has led to greater easing of measures, such as allowing up to 100 people at weddings and religious services from next month.

Allowing visitors from other countries without a lot of restrictions would expose Singapore to higher risk of Covid-19 transmission. But there are always risks in life and in the world we live in.

The point is to balance the risk with the potential benefits. The possibility of a small number of infections that can be quickly contained, against thousands of jobs saved, is certainly worth looking into.

Bigger countries can push for local tourism. Singapore is far too small for that, even with tourism vouchers and guaranteed employment.

Travel and tourism are a major source of income for the country. Tourism accounted for 4.8 per cent of gross domestic product last year, or close to $20 billion in direct economic impact.

It is time to remove the mothballing of most of Changi Airport, and to explore new ways we can open up again, and accept that a certain level of risk comes with greater freedom of movement.

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