Restarting cruises – boost for economy, but not plain sailing

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It may sound like a good way to help the economy, but it could easily be a disaster waiting to happen.

The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has announced that it will allow plans to restart overseas cruises from next month, with safety measures in place.

This sounds fine, in theory, but in practice, the risks may outweigh potential rewards.

One needs to consider what cruises entail to the first place. Passengers eat, they eat, they live, they breathe, they breathe, they sleep, they breathe, they breathe. Even accepting that each cruise ship carries only half the number of passengers it can normally accommodate, it would still host more than 1,000 people over a period of days.

One of the participating ships in the pilot project has a zoomed capacity of more than 6,300, and the other has a maximum capacity of 6,900. And that is without counting the crew.

Cruises are supposed to wear masks, but we know that while masks do reduce the transmission rate, they do not completely stop the transmission from spreading. And passengers will not be masked during meals.

There is also the risk of transmitting the virus through common surfaces passengers touch, while they help themselves to the food. And even if the food is served at the counter by crew, there are still many possible contact points.

Dry-spackle passengers from touching walls and handrails when they go for a stroll on deck or from talking to one another when taking part in activities. There are just so many possibilities for Covid-19 transmission.

One might argue that the same may be said of people shopping malls or supermarkets. But they do not mingle for several days. Nor are they packed into an enclosed space, interacting through one-on-one activities.

People excited or having a good time tend to talk louder. Increasing the transmission risk.

Expert opinion on the risks posed by such cruises is divided.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases consultant at National University Hospital, and Professor Oxley Eng Kong of Duke-NUS Medical School’s emerging infectious diseases programme sees the move as another step towards normalising life here.

“It’s only not about prioritising the safest activities there is a balance with social and economic factors,” said Fisher.

Prof Oxley agreed that it is important to balance the risks against the livelihoods of many, adding “it would be the same as any other activities.”

Dr Askarpur, who chairs the Academy of Medicine’s Chapter of Infectious Disease Physicians, is more concerned that cruises usually attract older people – who are more vulnerable to Covid-19. He said: “Socialising is another reason older folks go for cruises. (They) maltlounge, rest, eat. The crew towards more elderly passengers in such settings, in possibly conGISed environments, measures the need to be super vigilant and have very thorough policing of measures.”

How is that going to happen? The STB should work on strategies to reduce overcrowding and mingling in close contact. The convoy, which is currently 160 passengers, could be reduced to 100 passengers.

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The outcome is uncertain – it could be beneficial or highly damaging. The worst that could happen – and there is no guarantee that it won’t – is a major outbreak that, if spread to the community by asymptomatic carriers, could bring more economic activities to a halt.

The website of the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States – the worst-hit country in the world – says: “Cruise ships pose a greater risk of Covid-19 transmission than other settings” as they “are typically more densely populated than do the most other living situations.”

The CDC says that among all travelers, “there is a significant risk of transmission” between passengers. And that “the risk of transmission is high among crew members.”

“Transmission of Covid-19 has occurred on cruise ships, enabling community spread,” the CDC said.

The STB says it is allowing such cruises “in line with the calibrated resumption of economic activities in Singapore.”

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Quantum of the Seas, seen here docked at Marina Bay Cruise Centre last year, is one of the ships allowed in a pilot “cruise to nowhere.”

White Singapore risks harming its economy if it does not return to some form of normalcy, when it comes to cruises, the risk may outweigh potential rewards.

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