

Singapore hotels look to woo staycationers with promotions, COVID-19 safety measures

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Staycation

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Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort and Spa, one of the hotels given approval to reopen for staycations, is capping its occupancy at 50 per cent for now to comply with authorities' safety requirements for both guests and staff. (Photo: Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort and Spa)

SINGAPORE: Staycation packages with more perks and safety measures that are part of a “new normal” have been put in place by coronavirus-battered hotels in Singapore, after being given the green light to reopen their doors this month.

Hotel operators that CNA reached out to say they have seen positive demand for staycations from the local crowd so far.

Hotels in Singapore have had to stop taking in guests since authorities imposed a “circuit breaker” in early April to curb the coronavirus outbreak. The circuit breaker restrictions ended on Jun 1 after nearly eight weeks, setting Singapore on a phased and gradual reopening of its economy.

As part of the second phase of the reopening, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) said on Jul 3 that hotels will be able to resume two activities – providing accommodation to guests for leisure purposes such as staycations, and opening recreation areas for children – after getting approval from the authorities.

READ: Hotels can apply to reopen for staycation bookings

Since then, STB has received applications from more than 100 hotels. Thirty-five hotels have been approved to resume staycations as of Wednesday (Jul 15), a spokesperson said.

That includes Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort and Spa, which said that it has received 1,000 calls and emails on “days with higher volume of enquiry” since announcing its reopening on Jul 10.

But the hotel is capping its occupancy at 50 per cent for the time being to comply with mandatory safety requirements for both its staff and hotel guests, said general manager Piotr Kupiec. With that, it is now fully booked for most weekends until mid-August.

Far East Hospitality, whose hotels such as Oasia Hotel Downtown have been approved by authorities, is also limiting occupancy to no more than 50 per cent during peak periods such as weekends.

It has seen “more than 80 enquiries per day” across its various platforms and an increase in bookings, especially from couples and families looking to celebrate special occasions like anniversaries, said CEO Arthur Kiong.

Hotel Yan, a boutique hotel located along Tyrwhitt Road, said it saw around 90 bookings within a day after it announced its reopening.

As part of safety requirements, the hotel is releasing up to 20 per cent of its 59 rooms for staycation guests, and is now fully booked “for the month of July and some dates from August”.

“Given the approval from STB that only came in earlier this week, we are strongly encouraged with the number of bookings received,” said a hotel spokesperson.

With travel restrictions still in place, people unable to travel overseas will opt for short stays in local hotels “as a means of a short getaway”, she added. “This might indicate a strong demand for staycation among Singaporeans.”

SAFETY MEASURES A “NEW NORMAL”

Hotels that reopen for staycations will have to follow the safe management measures laid down by the authorities.

According to the STB’s advisory, these include the screening of every individual before allowing them into the hotel premises, requiring everyone to wear a mask and implementing the SafeEntry digital check-in system.

As part of reducing capacity and intermingling at hotel lobbies, they have to ensure staggered check-in and check-out timings for different groups of guests and limit occupancy to no more than 1 person per 10 sqm in public spaces accessible to guests at any point in time.

Hotels also have to keep the records of guests for at least 28 days after they check out.

Other mandatory safety measures include rigorous cleaning and disinfecting regimes throughout the property. For instance, hospital-grade disinfectants have to be used when cleaning frequently-touched areas and equipment in the guest rooms.

Even after getting an approval, STB said hotels will be subject to continued checks and are required to submit weekly updates.

Such strict safe-management measures will be ‘part of the new normal’ for hotels, said the STB spokesperson.

Hotels reopening said they have these in place, with some like Sofitel Singapore Sentosa Resort and Spa taking it a step further by leaving guest rooms vacant for at least 24 hours in between occupants.

“Contactless” services are also available at several hotels. For example at Marina Bay Sands (MBS), payments, as well as the delivery of luggage and other hotel amenities, will be “contactless” so as to minimise physical interactions.

Guests may also have to make reservations and adhere to time limits at facilities such as spas, gyms and pools.

At Oakwood Premier AMTD Singapore, a maximum of five people are allowed to use its outdoor infinity pool at any given time, meaning that guests will have to pre-register for their preferred slots. A similar rule applies for its fitness centre where only three people will be allowed at any point in time.

The hotel located in Tanjong Pagar has also added a new room service called the Oakwood Mobile Bar, which allows hotel guests to enjoy cocktails and canapes in their rooms.

“We believe having a satisfying stay begins from a safe sanctuary that you can trust,” said regional general manager Roy Liang who oversees Oakwood’s hotel properties in Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam.



A mobile bar that allows guests to enjoy free-flow cocktails and canapés in their rooms is being offered at Oakwood Premier AMTD Singapore. (Photo: Oakwood Premier AMTD Singapore)

The list of approved hotels also includes those that are used as dedicated facilities for individuals serving their 14-day stay-home notices.

These hotels have in place “strict protocols” to segregate those on stay-home notices from the other guests, STB said. This includes housing individuals who are there because of COVID-19 on segregated blocks or floors.

“The first-hand experience gained by handling various accommodation needs over the past few months has been invaluable for our hotels and their staff. They are now familiar with areas such as infection controls and sanitisation – skills which will help them lead the way in safe hospitality,” STB added.

One of these hotels is MBS, which has been housing guests on stay-home notices in its hotel towers 2 and 3. They are required to stay inside their designated rooms at all times, and are not allowed to use common facilities in the property.

MBS said in a press release that its reopening will begin with “a limited number of rooms” in tower 1, with a hoarding to be set up in the hotel lobby.

DISCOUNTS AND OTHER PERKS

Hotel operators have also come up with a slew of staycation packages that include attractive discounts and various perks targeting families and couples.

Singapore Marriott Tang Plaza Hotel, for example, has three packages with one being priced at a close to 50 per cent discount. The “Blissful Escapes” package, usually priced at S\$720++, now costs S\$380++.

Other perks include flexible check-in and check-out timings, credits that can be used at the hotel’s food and beverage (F&B) outlets and for in-room dining, as well as complimentary parking, said the hotel’s director of sales and marketing Alvin Lim.

At Far East Hospitality, its Oasia Hotel Downtown is targeting wellness-conscious guests with a package that includes a one-hour fitness session, while those staying at the Barracks Hotel, which is housed in a colonial house on Sentosa, can enjoy a personalised tea tailoring experience.

Smaller hotels are also ramping up their offerings to fight the competition.

Apart from attractive room rates, Hotel Yan is in the midst of planning tour itineraries with travel operators for its staycation packages.



Hotel Yan positions itself as Singapore's first industrial chic and boutique hotel. (Photo: Hotel Yan)

A LIFELINE?

Latest figures from the STB showed international visitor arrivals plummeted 43.2 per cent to 2.7 million in the first three months of 2020. January alone accounted for about 1.7 million tourists, as arrivals plunged to 732,757 in February and 239,899 in March.

This has pummeled the hotel industry, with average occupancy rate down 27.2 percentage points to 58.6 per cent in the first quarter. Gazetted hotel room revenue for the same quarter fell 30.9 per cent year-on-year to S\$687.3 million.

READ: Tourism spending down 39% to S\$4 billion as visitor arrivals plunge in Q1: STB

These figures are likely to fall even more for the second quarter going by the latest monthly tourist arrival figures from the STB.

A ban on short-term visitors that took effect on Mar 24 have taken the monthly arrival figure to a historic low of 748 in April before rising slightly to 880 in May.

“With global travel restrictions still in force, domestic tourism will give a much-needed financial boost to hotels in Singapore,” said Ms Kwee Wei-Lin, president of the Singapore Hotel Association.

“As we gradually prepare for the return of international travellers, staycations will pave the way to better the financial health of our industry,” she added.

Hotel operators said they are glad to be able to reopen for staycations but they also recognise that this is only a short-term survival strategy.

Mr Kiong from Far East Hospitality said: “Unless international travel is able to resume fully soon, depending on staycations to uplift the industry is neither realistic nor sustainable. This reliance will close hotels and cripple our tourism infrastructure and capabilities over the long run.”

Even with encouraging figures at the moment, it will “be hard-pressed to match the figures” it saw before the outbreak. “In 2019, 10 per cent of our total room nights were made up of staycations, equating to almost S\$8 million in revenue,” he added.

Similarly, the Singapore Marriott Tang Plaza Hotel said it sees “strong demand” for staycations for now, given the packages rolled out by hotel players and a “pent-up demand” for travel among Singaporeans. However, it is “unable to predict the demand in the long run”.

As part of its other survival plans, it is looking at boosting its F&B revenue through takeaways and bento catering, as well as organising virtual conferences and small-scale solemnization ceremonies.

“As the situation is constantly evolving, we are constantly reviewing our strategies and initiating new plans,” said Mr Lim.

Several hotel players also said they are looking forward to receiving business travellers who will be entering Singapore under the “green lane” arrangements.

“We are hopeful on several fronts, especially to welcoming business travellers who are coming into Singapore for essential travel as well as continuing to accommodate local guests,” said Mr Kiong, noting that Far East Hospitality will still be going ahead with the opening of a new hotel in November.

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