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Coronavirus: Play safe with staycation at home



Recharge, relax and enjoy some of the activities at Village Hotel Sentosa (above), one of Far East Hospitality's mix of niche properties. The others include "Oasia for the wellness conscious, Quincy for the social urbanites and Rendezvous for the arts and culture aficionados". PHOTO: VILLAGE HOTEL SENTOSA

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Singaporeans love staycations and the Republic is known for world-class hotels - a match made in heaven, especially given the coronavirus outbreak now. Travel Editor Lee Siew Hua looks at what is being done to propel domestic tourism

Lee Siew Hua Travel Editor ✉ (mailto:siewhua@sph.com.sg) 🐦

Playing safe, one family will stay in a Sentosa boutique resort for a night instead of spending the March school holidays in a nearby hot spot like Phuket.

Housewife Jasmine Chan says her three daughters, aged five, seven and 10, would love to take a plane somewhere but they are also beach babies, so Sentosa is still ideal. Her youngest has only one request: a hotel with a bathtub.

Ms Chan, 40, also decided to "market new experiences" on Sentosa to her kids - riding the monorail and exploring a coastal trail.

It did cross her mind that coronavirus cases had emerged earlier in Sentosa hotels, but she reckons: "You can't let your life come to a standstill and not do anything."

WORLD-CLASS PAMPERING

With hotels concerned about no-show tourists and vacant rooms, staycations now come with fancier freebies, from bottles of prosecco to picnic baskets, from spa treats to soap-making lessons.

At the lush Capella Singapore on Sentosa, the Capella March Family Times staycation package lets kids under 12 stay, dine and play for free.

Activities include mocktail making, family yoga and a cooking masterclass. Rates start at \$584, with no surge over the one-week school break from Saturday to March 22.

Top staycationers, says its general manager Fernando Gibaja, are families with one or two kids and couples aged 25 to 45. "Some perks that we've seen drawing staycationers is the possibility of opting for early check-in and late check-out service," he says.

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> While Sentosa is an island that feels like a flight-free escape, urban sojourns are also popular.

Coronavirus: More opting for staycations instead of travel abroad for school holidays

The Royal Plaza on Scotts has amassed more than 300 staycation bookings since its What The Duck?! deal launched on Feb 26.

Rates start at \$168 a night, compared with regular weekend rates of \$240. The new staycation offer is bundled with more perks than usual: room upgrade, entry to the co-working lounge with all-day refreshments, breakfast for two and 30 per cent off its Carousel buffet.

Mr Patrick Fiat, general manager of the 511-key hotel, highlights the upside of a city stay: "Everything is at the doorstep, with endless options for dining, entertainment and shopping."

PLUSHIES AND BEER

Hotels craft staycations to suit a spectrum of Singaporeans and permanent residents.

For instance, SO/Sofitel Singapore in Robinson Road has designed stays for families (plush toy and sweet treat included), couples (house-pour wine) and beer-lovers (interactive microbrewery tour).

It is part of Accor, Singapore's largest hotel operator with an inventory of 7,625 rooms across 30 hotels. Accor's diverse collection ranges from Novotel Singapore on Stevens, with rooms from \$180, to Raffles Hotel, where family staycations come with semi-buffet breakfast, spa credit and 50 per cent reduction on an adjoining suite for the children.

Similarly, Far East Hospitality has a mix of niche properties.

Its chief executive officer Arthur Kiong says: "We believe the key reason we are successful in the staycation segment is because we have a diverse portfolio of brands that cater to a variety of psychographics - Oasia for the wellness conscious, Village for the urban explorers, Quincy for the social urbanites and Rendezvous for the arts and culture aficionados."

Take the Oasia Hotel Downtown, a tropical skyscraper in the central business district, which has an O' What A Weekend! package from \$160 a night. Staycationers will refuel with high tea - and recharge with a fitness class.

At Rendezvous Hotel Singapore in Bras Basah Road, couple staycationers can take along a complimentary picnic basket for a date at Fort Canning Park. The Rendezvous In The City package starts from \$250 a night. These Far East Hospitality hotel deals start on March 13.

With deals galore, the take-up rate is promising.

Mr Kieran Twomey, group chief operating officer of Millennium Hotels and Resorts, says: "The demand this year is slightly slower than usual as people are still cautious about Covid-19. However, we are expecting last-minute bookings closer to the March school holidays."

The group has a Staycation With My Millennium package offering guests up to 25 per cent off room rates. This comes with a 20 per cent dining discount across its six hotels here, which include Orchard Hotel, Grand Copthorne Waterfront and Studio M.

PENT-UP WANDERLUST

It is hard to suppress wanderlust.

Mr Michael Issenberg, chief executive officer of Accor Asia-Pacific, says: "While business is slightly down for staycations from January to February, we are starting to see higher bookings for March as people have been at home for a while and are looking to get out again."

Staycations, while counter-intuitive in a tiny country, have huge appeal. Singaporeans averaged 2.4 staycations in 2017 - just slightly less than the three personal overseas flights they take in a year, according to the 2018 Singapore Staycation Study released by Expedia Brand.

The report found year-on-year increases of 25 per cent in 2016 and 40 per cent in 2017 for local hotel bookings by Singaporeans on Expedia.com.sg.

"Not only does this underscore the growing appeal of Singaporeans being tourists in their own backyard, staycations have also become quick and easy alternatives for Singaporeans to take a short break without the need for detailed planning or extensive travelling."

What staycationers angled for: free breakfast, great deals and convenient locations, in that order. Expedia is working on a new staycation campaign with industry partners, with details to come.

SAVVY DOMESTIC TOURISM

With staycations so hot, pampering locals with holidays without hassle is integral to the business model of many hotels.

Ms Margaret Heng, executive director of the Singapore Hotel Association (SHA), points out: "Domestic tourism has become an important market segment for many hotels in Singapore, especially during the weekends.

"In recent years, we have noticed innovative packages to promote local bookings, for example, babymoos and pet staycations for the fur kids."

To propel local tourism, the SHA has a new listing of staycations that is targeted to be ready on its website (www.sha.org.sg) tomorrow. Its has 158 members, representing about 85 per cent of the gazetted room count here.

"Singapore has earned global recognition for being a world-class destination. It makes sense for Singaporeans to love our local hospitality experiences too," she adds.

Certainly for Far East Hospitality, with 13 hotels here, staycations make business sense.

Last year, 10 per cent of its total room nights were made up of staycations, equating to almost \$8 million in revenue.

Its Sentosa hotels were overnight stars after opening in April last year. For the Village Hotel Sentosa and The Outpost Hotel, the staycation segment made up over 30 per cent of total room nights for the first three months. Revenue was about \$1 million.

Mr Kiong, its CEO, adds: "Today, staycationers seek unique, engaging experiences from their stays - not just the standard room and breakfast."

Experiences are what traditional Chinese medicine physician Leong Weizhen, 34, cherishes, along with the joy of relaxing from her work week of six to seven days.

One top experience was a spontaneous sunset walk on the beach behind The Outpost Hotel. "It made me appreciate the beauty there is in Singapore without having to travel."

The singleton takes two or three staycations each year. "Sometimes I see more than 20 patients a day. To ensure that I have optimal mental alertness, I take regular breaks to recharge and rest," says the co-founder of the Oriental Remedies Group.

Because of the coronavirus outbreak, she dropped her eight-day trip to Japan, planned for this month. "I chose to postpone it to the autumn period to see the red leaves instead," she says. Thankfully, a generous patient gave her a one-night stay at the Capella Singapore.

NO FIRE SALES

While some staycations are discounted, they are not fire sales.

Mr Kiong of Far East Hospitality reasons: "Most hotels would rather use value add-ons than price to attract business because once price is lowered, it brings down the positioning of the hotel.

"There's also the concern that it will bring in the wrong type of clientele."

Look at the total package, says Mr Michael Chiam, a senior lecturer in tourism at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. "Even if room rates do not change but the total package is of value to Singapore guests, it will still attract customers."

Staycationers will play a role in the bounceback in business, he says. "If international travellers find that locals are staying in these hotels without any incident, that means the hotels are safe and that will boost confidence."

Even Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has suggested staycations. In a Facebook post last Monday, he said: "If you're worried about travel restrictions, consider a staycation at a local hotel.

"Above all, let us go about our lives as normally as possible."

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