

# RETURN OF CHINESE TOURISTS - A HEADACHE FOR ASIAN NEIGHBORS



After dreaming of a return of Chinese tourists, the global tourism industry now faces the headaches of a wish came truth. Countries must now choose between participating immediately in the grand reopening or waiting to see how the risks of a new wave of Covid-19 will (or will not) play out. There is already a clear divide.

Southeast Asia seems quite supportive, with most not imposing any measures. Singapore's Minister of Health, Ong Ye Kung, confirmed no change to Singapore's border measures - all travelers must be fully vaccinated or have a negative pre-departure test (PDT) result.

**Malaysia is an exception, announcing last week that it would operate special lanes for Chinese travelers at its international ports of entry with tests upon arrival.** Elsewhere, the United States and some European Union countries have imposed a TDP requirement on travelers from China.

But this is not an East-West divide: Japan was among the first countries to announce a negative TDP requirement; Morocco is making history by being the first country to ban all arrivals from China.

There is a huge economic and political gamble: Southeast Asia desperately needs Chinese travelers for its economic recovery.

Countries are expecting a gradual increase in the number of Chinese tourists after China lifted its border measures. In 2019, the region welcomed about 32 million Chinese visitors, accounting for 23 percent of its total arrivals, according to the ASEAN Statistics Division. Thailand, Vietnam and Singapore were the top three ASEAN destinations for Chinese arrivals, in that order.

In 2020, all received only a fraction of what they received in 2019: Thailand, only 1.2 million in 2020, compared to 11 million in 2019; Vietnam 900,000 compared to 5.8 million; and Singapore, 357,000 compared to 3.6 million before the pandemic.

Thailand would be happy if it received only 5 million Chinese tourists this year. A spokesman for the Singapore Tourism Board said that forecast figures are not currently available.

Sometimes with confusion: Thailand had announced the obligation for all international arrivals, not only from China, to be fully vaccinated - only to cancel it two days later, the day it was supposed to take effect.

"I think tourists will come back around late February or early March at the earliest," predicted Sisdivachr Cheewarattaporn, president of the Association of Thai Travel Agents, pointing out that many Chinese people do not have passports, flights are limited and tour operators are still preparing to manage group travel. Moreover, the prices of travel packages to Thailand increased by 20% for Chinese tourists.

However, could other travelers from different countries be deterred from traveling for fear of

increased exposure to Covid-19 infection due to Chinese tourists? Will China crowd out markets such as Indonesia and India, which supported Singapore's tourism industry last year?

Each country weighs the potential economic gains against the possibility of offending China. Beijing, bristling at the entry restrictions imposed by a series of countries, warned that it would apply "countermeasures based on the principle of reciprocity," saying the restrictions imposed "lack scientific basis."

**Western politicians and health experts say millions of Chinese are increasing the risk of another "game-changing" variant emerging.**

Those in Southeast Asia allay these fears by reporting high rates of immunity and vaccination, as well as more than two years of experience in managing Covid-19. Singapore, for example, reported that about 40% of the population was infected, 56% with up-to-date vaccination, while health care capacity has also been strengthened.

Date: 2023-01-23

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/chinese-tourists-on-the-move-but-countries-are-scared-news12898>