

True colours

Get a taste of what it will be like when travel to Singapore can restart with Katie McGonagle's guide



Stepping into Singapore's striking ArtScience Museum, it was as if the past 10 months had never happened. Inside the lotus flower-shaped building, childish giggles filled the air as little ones bounded around with huge light-filled balls that changed colour each time they bounced off the floor.

They gathered at tiny tables to draw their favourite sea creatures, then stared in awe as purple octopuses and rainbow-striped fish were projected across the walls in a larger-than-life undersea world, as if brought to life purely by the power of their imagination.

The museum's Future World exhibit combines the best of art and engineering in a place so exciting and inspiring that kids' (and adults') minds can't help but be fired up with the spark of creativity. You can watch butterflies flit across the walls and flowers grow to the size of tall trees, walk through interactive displays where birds swoop and swirl around you or stroll through a space-like tunnel of starry lights, all the while forgetting about the realities of the pandemic outside.

That's not to say life hasn't changed in Singapore. Face masks are ubiquitous and obligatory everywhere, including outdoors, which can be uncomfortable given the heat and humidity; there are restrictions on gatherings; you must check in and out of every venue to comply with the city's strict

track-and-trace rules; and borders remain closed to all but a handful of nations.

Yet once British travellers are allowed to visit, some of those changes might work in its favour for clients who feel reassured to know how strictly Singapore has enforced its rules and how – once on-arrival testing is out of the way – they can still experience the melting-pot cultural mix of the Asian city-state.

TRAVEL SAFE

My visit to attend hybrid travel conference TravelRevive at Marina Bay Sands, the first Covid-safe in-person travel event to be held in the region, looking at how the tourism sector can rebuild, was a taster of what the experience might be like once Singapore's borders reopen to leisure travellers.

Having been granted special permission to enter the country for the conference, the requirements were stringent but straightforward: a PCR test within 72 hours before departure, and another test on arrival at the airport (costing around £110), with a short quarantine in a hotel room at the Mandarin Oriental Singapore until the results arrived later that evening.

I filled out an SG Arrival Card prior to departure, listing where I'd been in the past 14 days, entered my details via the simple-to-use Safe Travel Concierge site, and downloaded the obligatory ➤

ASK THE expert

CHEE PEY CHANG,

assistant chief executive

international group,
Singapore Tourism Board

"In the past, the average length of stay in Singapore was three-and-a-half days. Going forward, given the additional requirements and hassles of travel, people want to stay in places longer and really experience what the destination has to offer. "The locals have been starting to discover more of our own country, and the travel trade in Singapore has taken this on board because they realise they can't depend on foreign tourists at the moment. "Over the past couple of months, there have been a lot more interesting itineraries being rolled out. These will continue to be pushed to the travel trade when international travel resumes and hopefully that will entice people to want to stay in Singapore for a week or more."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Gardens by the Bay; shophouses on Keong Saik Road; infinity pool at Marina Bay Sands

PICTURES: Scott Frances



TraceTogether app to scan QR codes at entry and exit to every restaurant, hotel or tourist attraction.

It was a lengthier process than we have been used to pre-pandemic and it's worth noting hard copies of many of the documents were required rather than electronic versions, but assuming Singapore's entry requirements remain similar when leisure travel resumes, you can reassure clients that although it's time-consuming, it's not particularly complicated.

SINGAPORE SWINGS

Singapore is heavily reliant on international travel, both for business and leisure, but with borders closed since late March (albeit with steps towards re-establishing regional travel), one of the initiatives taken to support the local tourism sector was to grant each resident a S\$100 (£56) voucher to spend at the city's tourist attractions.

Not only has this helped keep local attractions open, but suppliers were also prompted to innovate with more inventive walking tours and hotel packages, which will be available to international markets once travel resumes (see box, left).

It seems to have worked in helping prop up demand for domestic tourism, with popular spots such as Gardens by the Bay pleasantly busy with families admiring its display of Christmas decorations.

While you might have to wear a face mask and scan a QR code to enter each area of the sprawling complex, it doesn't impact the experience. The sky-high Supertrees and 30-metre Cloud Forest waterfall were just as impressive, the wafts of perfumed scents swirling

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through the Flower Dome just as fragrant, and the tiny secret garden just as much of a surprise, light shining on its exotic blooms like a real-life Garden of Eden.

Likewise, the infinity pool at the Sands SkyPark, accessible to guests of Marina Bay Sands, still offers its famously far-reaching view over the Singapore skyline. Guests have to reserve a time slot, with restrictions on the number of people allowed in at once, but there were plenty of excited visitors taking swimming pool selfies with the city's soaring skyscrapers in the background.

We went up another storey to the SkyPark Observation Deck, 57 floors high, overlooking the waterfront. Cruise ships were arrayed in the distance awaiting their return to sailing, and the tiny dots of runners pacing along the edge of the marina were visible in the bay below.

Life might not be back to normal just yet, but when British travellers can return to Singapore, they'll find its mix of traditional shophouses and towering skyscrapers, densely populated city blocks within steps of nature parks, and street art-filled alleys alongside Michelin-starred foodie hotspots, as exotic and enticing as ever. **TV**