

CORONAVIRUS

Hong Kong to reopen to visitors, Thailand loosens entry rules

Bangkok drops negative COVID test requirement to bring tourists back



The Tourism Authority of Thailand hopes to welcome 5.6 million foreign tourists this year. © Reuters

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April 22, 2022 15:40 JST

Updated on April 22, 2022 21:32 JST

HONG KONG / BANGKOK / TOKYO -- Hong Kong is dropping a ban on visitors arriving in the city for the first time since the pandemic started, as Thailand loosens entry requirements to draw tourists to boost its beleaguered economy.

Singapore joined the twin announcements Friday by saying it too would further loosen its COVID-19 rules, including reducing pre-visit test requirements and lifting all restrictions on employees returning to their workplace.

In a surprise announcement, Hong Kong said it would open its borders to visitors from May 1, the first time in two years, unlocking strict border controls that effectively shut the international financial hub off from the outside world as it mirrored mainland China's strict zero-COVID policies.

The city drew about 56 million visitors in 2019 before virus restrictions dragged that figure to nearly zero, dealing a blow to the city's economy and sparking an expatriate exodus.

Friday's move comes a day after Hong Kong allowed venues including gyms, theme parks, beauty parlors and movie theaters to reopen after a four-month closure sparked by an omicron-fuelled outbreak that left its strict virus measures in tatters. Until earlier this year, Hong Kong had avoided the worst of the pandemic with few infections or deaths.

Hong Kong has also dropped its mandatory hotel quarantine for visitors to one week from 21 days and this month discarded a flight ban from nine countries for residents scrambling to return to the city

Also Friday, Thailand said it was dropping its requirement for a negative PCR test to enter the country,

From May 1, fully vaccinated visitors will be allowed to enter Thailand without further tests or any quarantining, Thailand's Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) said on Friday. Visitors will be required to carry health insurance that will cover medical expenses during their stay in Thailand.

"Looking back to the first three months of this year, we see the numbers of infected international tourists entering the kingdom keep falling," said CCSA spokesman Taweasilp Visanuyothin. "As a result, we considered the plan to open up a little bit more to welcome international tourists and finally approved the easing measure."

Currently, visitors must take PCR tests upon entry and stay at a quarantine hotel overnight while awaiting their results. If they test negative, they are free to go but must book another PCR test at a quarantine hotel on the fifth day and, again, stay until they receive their results.

The easing restrictions come despite a relatively high number of COVID-19 cases, in a sign that the Bangkok government is desperate to boost tourism, which accounted for nearly 20% of its gross domestic product pre-COVID.

The industry has been pushing the government to open up. William Ellwood Heinecke, CEO of Minor International, which owns, operates and invests in over 520 hotels and resorts including the Anantara chain, sent an open letter to Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha on Tuesday, asking the government to drop PCR tests at airports.

Thailand only took in around 700,000 foreign tourists in 2021, a plunge of over 98% from the 39 million in 2019 before the pandemic, generating just 40 billion baht (\$1.1 billion) in revenue. The Tourism Authority of Thailand expects to welcome 5.6 million foreign tourists this year.

Its neighbors Singapore and the Philippines have opened to fully vaccinated travelers since April 1.

Citing a drop in infections, Singapore said Friday it was relaxing border controls further from April 26 by allowing all fully vaccinated travelers to visit via air or sea checkpoints without requiring a PCR test within two days of their departure.

Under the changes, there would no longer be a limit to the size of social gatherings and all employees would be allowed to return to their workplaces, Singapore authorities said.