

S'pore-HK travel bubble sparks bookings surge, hopes for wider reopening

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The opening of Asia's first "travel bubble" allowing tourism without quarantines since the pandemic hit has sparked a surge in searches and bookings for travel between Singapore and Hong Kong, stirring hopes the model could be rolled out more broadly.

Some of the first flights between the two cities starting Nov 22 on Singapore Airlines Ltd and Cathay Pacific Airways Ltd have already sold out, amid a quota of 200 daily travellers that will rise to 400 on Dec 7.

In the three hours after details were released on Wednesday, flight searches for Hong Kong to Singapore grew by 300 percent, followed by a 200 percent increase in Singapore hotel searches, according to Trip.com Group Ltd data.

"I think in the short term, people who want to travel are, like, shaking in their pants right now to sign up to travel," said Jameson Wong, Asia Pacific director of travel data firm ForwardKeys. "Christmas has been popular (for bookings), as

offices will be closed."

Airfares between the cities have risen by about HK\$1,000 (RM530), or 35 percent, since the travel bubble was announced last month, Daiwa analyst Kelvin Lau said in a note to clients.

One way Singapore-Hong Kong tickets range from S\$618 (RM1,900) to S\$1,028 (RM3,200) on Singapore Airlines in December, according to a check of its website on Thursday.

Travellers will need to take and pay for two to three Covid-19 tests depending on the duration of their stay, in an agreement that Lau said could be a model for a broader re-opening of travel within Asia.

International passenger traffic fell by 96.4 percent in September compared with last year for airlines in the region, according to the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines. Singapore Airlines and Cathay Pacific have been among the hardest hit because they lack domestic aviation markets, and both carriers have cut thousands of jobs.

International Air Transport Association Regional Vice President for Asia Pacific Conrad Clifford said the bubble, although small, was a step in the right direction

to reboot international travel.

"We look forward to seeing Hong Kong and Singapore expand this arrangement with other destinations, and for other governments to adopt a similar approach," he said in a statement.

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