

Singapore Changi rejuvenates itself for return of business travel

A Monitor Report

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Singapore: Singapore's Changi Airport, routinely voted the world's best and a key part of the city-state's psyche, is reinventing itself for the Covid era and beyond.

In a bid to keep people engaged until life returns to normal, it is offering glamping for families at Jewel, the nature-themed entertainment complex open to the public, as well as a host of holiday offerings from canopy park tours that involve topiary walks and bouncing on a sky net, to seasonal dining menus.

With an eye further into the future, slices of the nearby Singapore Expo site are being transformed into a giant construction site as 840 guest and meeting rooms are built in short order- part of Connect@Changi, a sprawling facility to house overseas business visitors as part of a bubble initiative.

Nearby, children start making themselves at home in large white tents erected as part of the airport's Glamptations in the Clouds initiative. People can stay overnight amid the greenery and wake to the sound of splashing water from the [world's largest indoor waterfall](#). Prices start from SD 320 (USD 240) and slots have been fully booked for weeks.

The camping and holiday dining deals may be temporary measures but they are all part of endeavors aimed at spurring activity at Changi, whose importance to the tiny city-state is hard to underestimate. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

was close to tears when he promised Parliament in September that "Changi will thrive again," citing its opening in 1981 as a moment of immense national pride.

Because international visitors are such an enabler of other economic activity across the island -- including food and beverage, retail, and healthcare - it is tough to calculate to what degree the closing of borders has hobbled Singapore's economy. According to government figures, aviation alone accounts for about 3 percent of gross domestic product, with tourism contributing another 4 percent.

As 2021 dawns, Singapore's success containing Covid is allowing it to open for business travel adapted to virus-era life, including convincing the World Economic Forum to move its annual jet-set meeting from Davos. While a return to pre-virus traffic is still far off, the green shoots are a welcome sign for a place synonymous with global trade and travel.

"If you think about the role of Singapore as a regional hub and the whole idea of connectivity and logistics facilitation, then Changi is quite critical," said Selena Ling, head of treasury research and strategy at Oversea-Chinese Banking Corp.

Changi Airport, typically Asia's third-busiest hub for international traffic, has like all aviation centers experienced its fair share of pain. Passenger numbers plunged to 24,500 in May, just 0.4 percent of what they were 12 months prior. They recovered to 111,000 in November, but that's still down around 98 percent on 2019 levels.