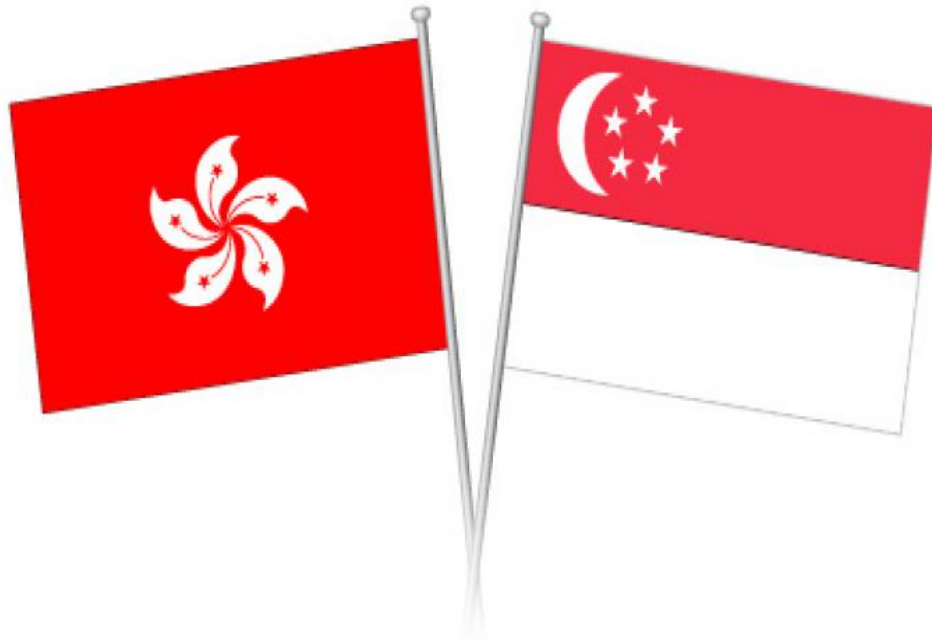


Singapore to start air travel bubble with Hong Kong from Nov 22

- A Monitor Desk Report

Date: 12 November, 2020



Dhaka: Hong Kong and Singapore will start an air travel bubble that will replace quarantine with Covid-19 testing from Nov 22, officials said in separate media briefings on November 11.

There will be several flights a week on Singapore Airlines and Cathay Pacific Airways from that date, rising to daily from December 7. A maximum of 200 people will be permitted on each flight and details of the arrangement, released nearly a month after the two Asian hubs first announced they would reopen their borders to one another, will be reviewed after one month.

Singapore Minister for Transport Ong Ye Kung said at a news briefing that this was the first travel bubble of its type and may be used as a template for other countries, if successful. The travel bubble will help ensure a brighter future for the city-state's Changi Airport and Singapore Airlines, he said.

Even the Singapore-Hong Kong arrangement comes with a long list of requirements and some restrictions. Ong said the waiting time for a Covid test would likely be about four hours and fares would be a commercial decision for the two airlines.

Flying on the travel bubble between the two cities will also require a degree of paperwork. Tests should be taken within 72 hours prior to departure and applications for travel approval should be done online at least seven days ahead of time. Should travellers become Covid positive in either city, they would need to bear the full cost of any medical treatment provided to them.

Having brought their Covid-19 outbreaks largely under control, Hong Kong and Singapore are eager to prise open their borders and get their economies ticking back to life again. Hong Kong's total reported infections stand at 5,389, while Singapore's tally is just over 58,000. That contrasts with many nations in Europe, as well as the US, which is now reporting over 100,000 cases a day.

On November 3, Hong Kong announced new rules stating that arrivals from anywhere other than mainland China would have to quarantine in a hotel for 14 days. But visitors from Singapore will be exempted from this under the travel bubble agreement.

Singapore already allows people from five countries for general travel without having to serve quarantine, though they still have to isolate when they return home. The city-state is also assessing the risk travelers pose based on where they are arriving from. The priority is to have effective tests to replace the quarantine requirements that deter people from flying overseas.

Opening borders is also important for flag carriers Singapore Airlines and Cathay as they've been reduced to flying at just skeleton capacity because they have no domestic market in which to operate. Last year, the Hong Kong-Singapore route was the 10th busiest internationally in Asia, according to OAG. Both airlines have suffered record losses this year.

Ticket prices have risen in anticipation of the Hong Kong-Singapore bubble. The lowest fares on Singapore Airlines economy class rose to SD 678 for return flights in December, up from SD 557 earlier this month, according to the carrier's website. The airline doesn't plan to use its Airbus SE A380 superjumbos for flights to and from Hong Kong when an agreement on opening up is reached, Lee said