

Tourists rushing back to Southeast Asia

A Monitor Report

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Bangkok : After over two years of lockdowns and border controls, Southeast Asia is finally returning to the pre-pandemic times of travel.

Flights are steadily returning to 2019 levels in the region's major economies, with Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia being the most popular destinations in 2022, according to the flight data analytics firm Cirium.

In Singapore, which had the most inbound flight bookings in the region in 2022, bookings rose from around 30 per cent of 2019 levels in January to 48 per cent by mid-June.

The Philippines also saw a sharp uptick in bookings, from about 20 per cent at the start of January, to almost 40 per cent by mid-June, according to Cirium.

Tourism is a key moneymaker for Southeast Asia, a region which saw international visitors more than double from 63 million in 2009 to 139 million in 2019, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation.

The industry accounts for around 10 per cent of gross domestic product in Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia and between 20 per cent and 25 per cent of GDP in Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines, according to a May 2022 report published by the Asian Development Bank.

Most countries in Southeast Asia - including Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines - have stopped requiring fully vaccinated travellers to take Covid-19 tests before travelling.

In 2019, visitors from China made up more than 30 per cent of tourists to some Southeast Asian nations, according to the Asian Development Bank, a fact which makes China's prolonged border closure even more painful for the region. Southeast Asia has about 66 per cent of flight capacity - measured by scheduled airline seats - compared with pre-pandemic levels, according to OAG. Europe and North America are back to around 88 per cent and 90 per cent of pre-pandemic capacity respectively, OAG's data showed.