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THE STRAITS TIMES

S-E Asia set for rich pickings from Chinese tourist influx

With few Covid-19 entry tests, region will be bigger draw as China reopens borders

South-east Asian economies are set to be leading beneficiaries of China's scrapping of travel bans as they have steered clear of the Covid-19 tests before entry that Europe, Japan and the United States have imposed on Chinese visitors.

Even as the virus tears through its 1.4 billion population, the world's second largest economy is reopening its borders from Sunday, a move that promises to unleash a wave of travellers eager for diversion after three years of strict curbs at home.

Such newly mobile Chinese tourists will opt for "minimal hassle" and head for destinations that do not demand testing, which in turn stands to benefit South-east Asia, said CIMB economist Song Seng Wun.

"The busier regional airports are, the better it is for their economies," he added.

While Australia, Britain, India, Japan and the United States are among the nations that require a negative Covid-19 test from inbound travellers from China, South-east Asian countries, from Cambodia to Indonesia to Singapore, have all eschewed such requirements.

Except for airplane wastewater testing by Malaysia and Thailand for the virus, the region's 11 nations will treat travellers from China like any other.

"We are not taking the stance of discriminating (against) any countries," said Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Interest in the region waxed high even before news of its lack of test requirements.

As many as 76 per cent of Chinese travel agencies ranked South-east Asia as the top destination when outbound travel resumed, according to a survey released in December by trade show ITB China.

The region is home to many tourism-reliant economies where the Chinese used to make up the bulk of visitors to beach paradises, luxury malls and casinos that have all been hit hard in the last few years.

Now, their tourism industries are gearing up to welcome Chinese travellers back.

In 2019, 155 million Chinese travelled abroad, spending

US\$254.6 billion (S\$343 billion), or close to the gross domestic product of Vietnam, said Citi, whose researchers expect "meaningful recovery" in mass tourism to start in the second quarter of 2023.

In Vietnam, almost a third of the 18 million foreign arrivals in 2019 were from China, while about a fifth of Singapore's international arrivals were Chinese who spent \$900 million.

Thailand expects to welcome five million Chinese travellers in 2023, or about half of the 10.99 million in 2019. Tourism accounted for nearly 20 per cent of Thailand's national income before the pandemic, with China its largest source of foreign tourists.

"This is an opportunity to restore our economic situation and recover from losses we suffered for nearly three years," Thai Public Health Minister Anutin Charnirakul said on Thursday.

Malaysia projects 1.5 million to two million Chinese tourists in 2023 versus three million before the pandemic.

And the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents is preparing for a road show in Chinese cities to woo visitors, said its vice-president Ganeesh Rama.

Officials have downplayed health worries aired by other countries, such as the United States' concern over insufficient information and fear that more cases in China could spawn new variants of the virus.

Singapore said it had high population immunity, as about 40 per cent of its people had been infected with the coronavirus and 83 per cent had been vaccinated, while it has bolstered healthcare capacity.

Dr Karen Grepin, a public health professor at Hong Kong University, agreed with that approach, adding: "Every day, countries import thousands of cases of Covid-19 from around the world."

In Bali, Ms Ida Bagus Agung Parta, chairman of the resort island's tourism board, said it would "increase our defence", as workers take a second booster dose of vaccine this month.

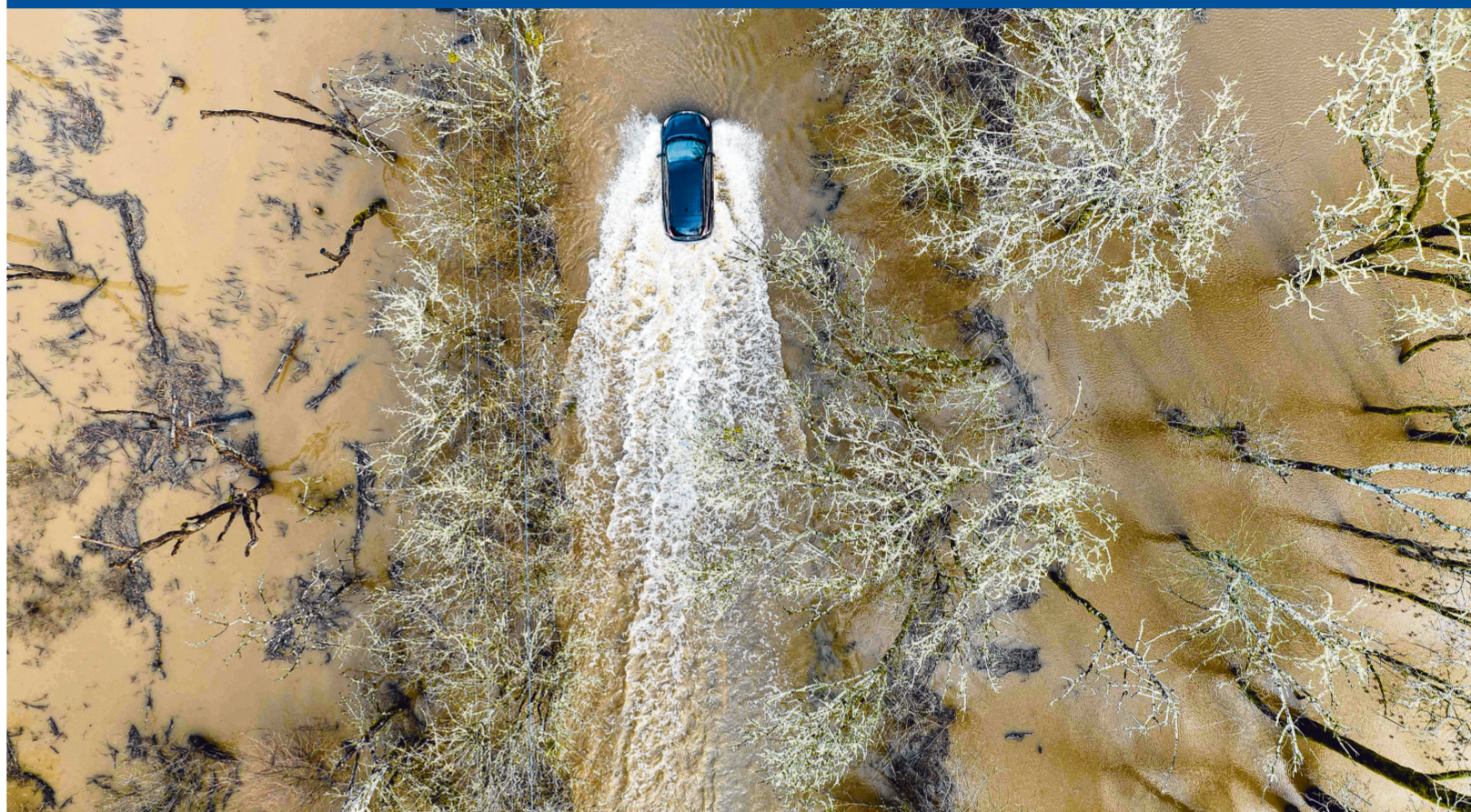
Mr Kadek Sucana, who runs a seafood restaurant in the Jimbaran area, told AFP: "Before the pandemic, we had a lot of Chinese customers... At least 100 to 200 customers came daily."

He is hoping for a "full house again... because Chinese tourists come in large groups".

REUTERS, AFP

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Water, water everywhere, no road to go



A vehicle moving on a flooded road in Sebastopol, California, on Thursday. A massive Pacific storm unleashed high winds, torrential rain and heavy snow across California in the United States for a second day, knocking out power to tens of thousands of homes and disrupting road travel with flash floods, rock slides and toppled trees. At least two more back-to-back storms are forecast over the next several days. PHOTO: AFP SEE WORLD • A10

Seniors urged to get second Covid-19 booster jab

Salma Khalik
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Although Covid-19 vaccines do not work as well in older people, a second booster dose does provide significantly more protection, according to several studies, including one done in Singapore.

The local study led by the Ministry of Health (MOH) found that people aged 80 and older who had taken their second booster shot were far better protected than those in the same age group who had only three mRNA shots.

They had less than half the risk of hospitalisation, and their risk of severe illness or death was about a third compared with those with only one booster shot.

Today, only 61 per cent of seniors in this age group are "up to date" with their Covid-19 vaccination – meaning that their last booster was taken less than a year ago.

Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, an infectious diseases expert at the National University of Singapore Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said protection against severe Covid-19 wanes over time. Each booster dose helps to temporarily reverse that progression even as it also decreases the risk of infection in the short term.

"The elderly should most definitely get their second booster doses of the Covid-19 vaccine, as well as the third should the Expert Committee recommend it," he said.

The study shared its data – which looked at 80,000 people aged 80 and older, half of whom



A study led by the Ministry of Health showed that only 61 per cent of seniors aged 80 and older are "up to date" with their Covid-19 vaccination. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

had taken their second booster – in letters to journals such as The Lancet at the end of 2022.

However, the team looked at this group for only up to 60 days after their second boosters. Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, said the study is not suggesting that seniors need boosters every two months.

"The best interval and constitution of vaccine composition are still under intense study," she added.

At the end of 60 days, relative effectiveness was 55 per cent against hospitalisation and 63 per cent against severe illness where the patient might require oxygen, in-

tensive care or even die. Protection against infection was only 22 per cent better after 60 days.

In real numbers, 252 people in the group with two boosters were hospitalised and 40 died – compared with 626 hospitalised and 115 deaths in the group with one booster shot.

MOH said the study is ongoing. Professor Paul Tambyah, a senior infectious diseases consultant at the National University Hospital, said the study was to determine whether a second booster shot would provide any benefit to this group of seniors.

He said it was reassuring that the decline in efficacy was a gradual drop by the time the study ended.

Prof Leo noted that this group was studied as the majority of people here needing hospitalisation, or who had died, were older patients with chronic illnesses.

"Age is the most significant independent risk factor for severe illness that remains despite vaccination," she said.

There are few studies on the effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines for very old people, for whom vaccine protection is usually lower than that for younger adults.

An Italian study of people in the same age group suggested that over a four-month period, among those who had a second booster, 431 infections and 73 cases of severe illness were averted per 100,000 people.

The researchers suggested evaluating the benefit of a third booster shot four months after the second one, for people in this higher-risk group.

Data from MOH shows that only three in five people aged 50 and older have up-to-date vaccination. More than 90 per cent have the minimum protection – one booster shot.

For some, this was taken more than a year ago. In contrast, among people aged 12 to 49, 69 per cent to 81 per cent are up to date.

Prof Tambyah said: "I have advised seniors and others who are travelling or immunocompromised to ensure that they have had a fairly recent vaccination."

But he added that there is not a lot of data on the long- or medium-term benefits of repeated vaccination if they are not at high risk.

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Covid-19 • Parliament to discuss current measures

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung will make a ministerial statement on Singapore's response to the current global Covid-19 situation when Parliament sits on Monday. He will address questions cen-

tered on Singapore's readiness for new variants and possible enhanced measures, given China's reopening.

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Energy • Natural gas still key to S'pore despite supply issues

Natural gas will remain a critical component of Singapore's energy mix until renewables like solar, hydrogen and power imports can take on more of the load, said Tuas Power chief operating officer Mi-

chael Wong. This comes as uncertainties surrounding the supply of natural gas globally are expected to lead to volatile prices in 2023.

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