

## Coronavirus: Singapore

## Changi's passenger traffic crosses 5% mark of pre-virus levels



## More flights, passengers with VTL launches but experts warn of long road to recovery

Toh Ting Wei

The number of passengers passing through Changi Airport has crossed the 5 per cent mark of pre-pandemic levels for the first time since Covid-19 forced borders shut in March last year.

Mr Lim Ching Kiat, managing director of air hub development at Changi Airport Group, told The Straits Times that the number of passengers passing through the airport last month was at about 6 per cent to 7 per cent of the levels prior to the pandemic.

He said that the launch of the vaccinated travel lanes (VTLs), which allow vaccinated travellers to fly into Singapore without quarantine, has brought about a gradual return of more flights and passengers since September.

Singapore has launched a total of 24 VTLs. In September, when VTLs for only Germany and Brunei

were operational, passenger traffic at Changi Airport was about 3 per cent of pre-pandemic levels.

Meanwhile, the Singapore Airlines (SIA) Group reported improved results last month, ahead of the year-end holiday season.

The group, which comprises SIA and Scoot, said yesterday that it ferried more than 300,000 passengers in November, amid the expansion of its VTL network to nine more cities during the month.

The figure is about 9 per cent of the number of passengers it ferried in November 2019, before the pandemic struck. But it represents an increase of 59.4 per cent compared with October this year.

Industry observers had expected an even stronger recovery for the Singapore air hub in the December holiday season.

But optimism has been dampened by the emergence of the Omicron variant, which prompted countries to reintroduce stricter testing measures.

Mr Lim said: "For now, it is too early to say how the new variant will impact air travel in the longer term. However, Changi remains hopeful that the situation will continue to improve with more vaccination and the close attention to the health safety of airport staff and passengers."

Experts also cautioned that a long road to recovery is ahead for Singapore's air hub.

Mr Shukur Yusof, an aviation analyst from Endau Analytics, said there is still a monumental challenge to return to business as usual, with the 5 per cent mark of pre-pandemic levels being a tiny figure for a global airport such as Changi.

"I see Changi's path to normalcy to be a long drawn-out process that will take two to three years. It will perhaps take longer, if the world remains hostage to Covid-19," he said.

Associate Professor Volodymyr Bilotkach, who is from the air transport management cluster at the Singapore Institute of Technology, noted that a considerable share of the extra traffic through Changi Airport represents delayed demand, as people are going on trips

deferred over the last two years.

He added that travel curbs still in place in key markets such as China, Hong Kong and Australia will limit the extent to which travel to those destinations will recover.

To achieve a meaningful recovery, such as to at least 50 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, the Government can consider a more liberal approach to travel restrictions for vaccinated travellers, said Prof Bilotkach.

He cited the example of the United States, which allows vaccinated travellers from many countries to enter with a negative pre-departure test. A similar move in Singapore could lead to considerable recovery of up to 60 per cent or 70 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, said Prof Bilotkach.

He suggested that Singapore could start by setting up a common VTL to cover all of the European Union and expanding VTLs within the region around the Republic.

"Yet, VTLs should not be considered as the endgame," he said. "Rather, it is a temporary fix until the real removal of travel barriers."

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Crowds at Jewel Changi Airport on Dec 4. Industry observers had expected an even stronger recovery for the Singapore air hub in the December holiday season, but the optimism has been dampened by the Omicron variant's emergence. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

## 3 preliminarily positive cases of Omicron detected

Isabelle Liew

Three more people have tested preliminarily positive for the Covid-19 Omicron variant, said the Ministry of Health (MOH) yesterday.

All three cases are fully vaccinated, and have mild or no symptoms. They are recovering in isolation wards at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases.

One is a 36-year-old man who travelled via the vaccinated travel lane from the United States. His pre-departure test on Dec 6 and his on-arrival polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test on Dec 8 were negative.

However, he tested positive for Covid-19 in his supervised antigen rapid test (ART) on Dec 10. His PCR test result also came back positive on Dec 11.

His 34-year-old wife is the second case. She was placed on quarantine on Tuesday as she had been identified as a close contact of her husband, and tested positive for Covid-19 on the same day.

The couple dined at four restaurants – Mizuki at Ngee Ann City, Li Bai Cantonese Restaurant at Sheraton Towers Singapore and Merci Marcel at Palais Renaissance on Dec 8, and Signs A Taste Of Vietnam Pho at Orchard Gateway on Dec 9.

"All visitors to the affected premises are advised to monitor their health closely and minimise social interactions as far as possible for 14 days from their date of visit or interaction. They are encouraged to see a doctor immediately if they feel unwell," said MOH in a statement.

All customer-facing restaurant staff, and patrons with SafeEntry check-in/out timings that coincided with the time that the couple were at the restaurants, will be issued health risk warnings.

MOH will also contact them for a one-time targeted PCR testing operation.

The third case reported yesterday was a loading cabin assistant at Changi Airport Terminal 3 who had no contact with flight passengers. The 54-year-old man had taken a PCR test on Tuesday as part of rostered routine testing, and it came back positive.

Sixteen confirmed Omicron cases have been detected in Singapore to date, of which 14 are imported cases and two are local cases – both airport passenger service staff.

There were 474 new Covid-19 infections and three deaths reported yesterday. To date, Singapore has 274,617 infections and 807 deaths.

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## Sinovac jabs not as effective in preventing severe disease: S'pore study

Linette Lai  
Health Correspondent

People who received two doses of China's Sinovac vaccine were more likely to develop severe disease from Covid-19 than those

who got two shots of the mRNA-based Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine, a new local study has found.

"This supports the need for three doses of Sinovac-CoronaVac vaccine as a primary series," the National Centre for Infectious Diseases and Ministry of Health

said in a joint statement yesterday.

Researchers found that the Sinovac vaccine was 60 per cent effective against severe disease, compared with 90 per cent for the Pfizer vaccine and 97 per cent for Moderna's vaccine.

In other words, people who took

the Sinovac vaccine were more likely to require supplemental oxygen and intensive care, and also more likely to die of Covid-19.

The study involved 1.25 million people aged 40 and above inoculated with two doses of the Sinovac, Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccine. Of this group, 62,900 peo-

ple eventually became infected with Covid-19 and 1,710 fell severely ill.

The authorities suggested that people who have taken two doses of the Sinovac vaccine should get either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine as a third dose in their primary vaccination series. If not,

they should get a third dose of the Sinovac vaccine.

"We will continue to monitor the vaccine effectiveness of the mRNA and non-mRNA vaccines, including how they are enhanced by a third dose or a booster dose," the authorities said, adding that those offered booster shots should take them.

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SEE THE BIG STORY • A8

## RSAF unveils new copter replacing Super Puma

Tay Hong Yi

The Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) yesterday showcased the new capabilities of its latest H225M medium-lift helicopter, which can carry heavier loads, fly farther and last longer than the Super Puma workhorses it will replace.

Its increased stability and manoeuvrability also allow it to undertake more demanding missions, ranging from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, to medical evacuation and search and rescue operations.

Senior Minister of State for Defence Heng Chee How took a ride in the H225M at Sembawang Air Base yesterday, noting its ability in meeting future demands on helicopter capabilities.

"(Singapore's) Super Puma fleet has served us very well... We always get the right thing and then we use it to the best effect for as long as we can," said Mr Heng, adding that assets have aged and threat scenarios have evolved over time.

The first three RSAF H225Ms, built by Airbus, have been accepted by the RSAF. Subsequent deliveries will happen in phases.

The first orders were placed in November 2016.

The AS332M Super Pumas, which will be progressively re-



Captain Darryl Chong (left) and Third Warrant Officer Dinesh Kumar Suppiah with the H225M medium-lift helicopter at the Republic of Singapore Air Force's Participation Command at Sembawang Air Base yesterday. The helicopter can carry heavier loads, fly farther and last longer than the Super Puma workhorses it will replace. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

placed, have served the RSAF since 1985, flying missions such as Operation Flying Eagle, which offered disaster relief for parts of Indonesia and Thailand hit hard by the 2004 tsunami.

Speaking to the media, Lieutenant-Colonel Oh Chun Keong, commander of the Tactical Air Support Group at the RSAF's Participation Command, said the H225M is capable of the set of missions currently undertaken by the Super

Pumas, yet provides better lift capability.

The H225M can carry more than 20 personnel, 11 stretchers with medical support, or up to 4,750kg of cargo slung underneath it.

It has a range of over 400 nautical miles, about 20 per cent more than the Super Puma.

LTC Oh, 43, said less manpower is needed to support the new helicopters, and their delivery is ongoing.

Captain Darryl Chong, 26, is among the pioneer batch of pilots and crew members who began training with the new helicopter almost two years ago.

Capt Chong, who flew the Super Puma previously, said: "Compared with the Super Puma, even though (the H225M) is more manoeuvrable, it is also more stable for us."

"What the Super Pumas have, the H225M has, but better versions of it."

Handling operations in the cabin behind the cockpit are aircrew specialists like Third Warrant Officer Dinesh Kumar Suppiah.

The 41-year-old praised the H225M's hoist system, used to hoist casualties and other objects via a cable.

"One of the key features of this aircraft is a dual electrical hoist system, while the Super Puma had a single hoist," he said.

Meanwhile, some of the older

Chinook heavy-lift helicopters in Singapore's fleet are being replaced by the new CH-47F variant.

Mr Heng also visited the RSAF's Participation Command at both the airbase and Chong Pang Camp.

During his visit, he witnessed a search-and-rescue demonstration by the RSAF's Rescue 10 team, involving one of the Super Pumas hoisting a simulated casualty.

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