

## MATTA: Reopen borders in stages

By [Adib Povera](#) - February 18, 2022



Travellers arriving at Kuala Lumpur International Airport under the Malaysia-Singapore Vaccinated Travel Lane programme in November. - REUTERS PIC

KUALA LUMPUR: As more countries unveil plans to welcome fully vaccinated international tourists, the Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA) cautioned that Malaysia will be left behind if the country's borders remain closed for leisure tourism activities.

MATTA proposed that the government reopen the country's borders in stages, starting with fully inoculated tourists from countries in Southeast Asia before relaxing restrictions for other travellers.

Its president, Datuk Tan Kok Liang, said the proposal was based on the fact that 70 per cent of tourist arrivals to Malaysia were from Asean countries.

"Opening is better than closing our borders. There are proposals that we should emulate the United Kingdom, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand. However, taking into consideration all factors, no one size fits all.

"Every country has its own precarity, including the healthcare system and the people's readiness. For instance, there are countries, such as China and Japan, whose borders are still closed to international tourists."

He said MATTA understood the importance of protecting the public healthcare system from being overwhelmed, but it was equally important for the government to look into the livelihood of tourism players as Malaysia had shut borders for almost two years.

"Over the past 22 months, there have been no Covid-19 clusters linked to tourism.

"We feel the government should facilitate the reopening of borders and allow the arrival of fully vaccinated tourists from Asean countries before opening to tourists from other parts of the world.

"To make sure the reopening of borders will not affect our Covid-19 prevention measures, we can carry out risk evaluation and reciprocate with countries that are categorised as low risk."

On the standard operating procedures (SOP), Tan said it should be less stringent without neglecting basic requirements, such as only allowing in travellers who had completed their primary vaccination and booster shot, as well as requiring tourists to have a negative Reverse Transcription-Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) test 48 hours before arrival.

"We want the process to be in order, but neither stressful nor difficult for tourists to travel into our country."

He said there should be streamlined efforts to recognise other countries' Covid-19 vaccination certificates.

Health expert Datuk Dr N.K.S. Tharmaseelan said Malaysia could not keep its borders closed for too long as Covid-19 fatigue had started to take its toll.

"Just look at Canada, the UK, the United States, the Netherlands and New Zealand, where 'Freedom Convoy' truckers have clogged and blockaded roads in protest, disabling further economic recovery.

"We cannot close our borders permanently. Instead, we can slowly reopen borders to other countries, provided that travellers have completed their primary vaccination and booster jab," said the former Malaysian Medical Association president.

He said most countries had vaccinated more than 75 per cent of their population against Covid-19.

"So if any new variants emerge, such as Omicron, they will not cause severe mortality due to the build up of immunity provided by the vaccines.

"As long as people adhere to the SOP, observe physical distancing, wear masks and sanitise, we can open up borders in stages."

Tharmaseelan said the reopening of borders should be done in a guarded manner as Covid-19 fatalities were nearing one million in the US, breached half a million in Brazil and India, and several Asian and European countries had crossed the 100,000 mark.

"The freedom to choose, move and decide is a fundamental human right, but we should also be aware of the realities, such as rising Covid-19 fatalities, although at a slower rate."

Academician Dr Oh Ei Sun described the reopening of borders as a complex issue.

He said Malaysia was still struggling to find a balance between socioeconomic needs and protecting the public healthcare system from being overwhelmed.

"On one hand, the country needs the tourism receipts and business to fire up the flagging economy. On the other hand, there is the risk of the public healthcare system being overwhelmed by Covid-19, although the infectious Omicron variant causes mild symptoms.

"Having said that, who knows what will happen in the future? What will happen if we open up the borders? It may cause infections. The scariest thing is that there is no standard answer."

Oh, a senior fellow at the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, said he hoped this uphill task would be handled professionally.