

SINGAPORE IS SO OFTEN AN OUTLIER IN ITS performance that “the Singapore exception” has been a headline everywhere from *The Economist* to the academic journal *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. Little surprise then that the country’s response to COVID-19 was, well, exceptional—“relative to other countries, Singapore has done well in protecting both lives and livelihoods,” a 2023 white paper from the Singapore government states, citing a range of indicators and outcomes.

And yet that exceptionalism wasn’t without its drawbacks. In late March 2020, the country banned all foreign visitors except those in essential services. Travel restrictions remained in place until April 2022, when the country allowed fully vaccinated travelers to enter. “On hindsight, we could have ... eased [border restrictions] earlier as soon as it was clear that the main danger would no longer be from

Trade and Industry, regulating hotels, travel agents, tourist guides and cruise terminal operators. “We also play a very big role in industry development,” says Lim. “We realize that we can’t be a successful destination just because the government wants to be. We need a strong industry on board with us. In Singapore, we value a tripartite arrangement between government, industry, as well as the workers.”

In a recent conversation with Brunswick’s Stephan Burklin and Jonathan Huang, Lim spoke about how tourism is recovering after the pandemic, and how it has changed.

In discussing the industry’s increasing use of technology, Lim also shared a story seemingly lifted from the pages of a science fiction novel. “A hotel

All Roads Still Lead to

SINGAPORE

imported cases,” the same Singapore government white paper reads.

Closed borders and local public safety measures placed Singapore in an economic predicament that wasn’t unique to the country, but was pronounced in it: Tourism typically contributes 4% of Singapore’s GDP, and its roughly 5.5 million residents wouldn’t be able to offset the 19-plus million international visitor arrivals the island saw in 2019.

Yet, as Jeannie Lim, Assistant Chief Executive for the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), told Brunswick, the focus of country’s tourism industry eventually shifted from weathering the crisis to finding the opportunity in it. “We saw the agility and the resilience of the tourism sector and the companies within it,” says Lim. “We took away a lot of lessons.”

With the STB since 2003 and currently on secondment as Assistant Chief Executive of the Lifestyle and Consumer Group at Enterprise Singapore, Lim has a unique vantage into the country’s tourism sector. STB isn’t just a marketing or promotional organization—it’s an economic agency under the Ministry of

group was looking to improve service within their restaurants,” Lim says. “Through an STB program, we helped them partner with a technology solutions provider, which created a wristband for the waitstaff to wear. The device actually detects where staff’s needed at a specific time, so the restaurant can redeploy the manpower. They also use privacy-enabled acoustic hearing to sense the mood in different tables across the restaurant—and if the mood isn’t good at a table, they’ll send staff over to check. They’ve found that decreases complaints by 70% and boosts revenues by 20%. We don’t just tell companies to use data because it’s the thing to do, or because everybody’s doing it. Every company wants to see direct business outcomes.”

Let’s go back to the pandemic’s early days. Singapore’s borders are closed. Travel in the region is coming to a standstill. What was that like?

We were dealing with many different questions: How can we keep people safe? How do we save businesses and jobs? How do we help companies to pivot

International arrivals fell 99.9% during the pandemic’s peak.

JEANNIE LIM
of the Singapore Tourism Board discusses how the country’s tourism industry survived—and actually emerged stronger.



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF SINGAPORE TOURISM BOARD

to different business models, send employees for training, put them in different tasks? We realized, in asking and answering these questions, that a lot of the infrastructure and people in the tourism sector are a core fabric of the whole government and the whole country. We had convention venues that were converted to various COVID-related facilities. Some were converted to COVID medical facilities. Hotels served as quarantine facilities. We had tourist guides acting as our frontline ambassadors to tell people about safe-distancing measures. In hindsight, these were the best people to front it—who's better at reassuring, making you feel safe and comfortable than people in the hospitality industry?

Judging by the airport traffic I can see outside of my apartment window, things are definitely picking up again.

From those dark years we are at a very, very different place. It's hard to catch a flight to London now even though we have several flights a day there. They're very full. We're very happy that this quarter,

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year to date, January to March, we've achieved about 2.9 million visitors. In March alone, we've exceeded 1 million visitors a month. That, for us, is quite an achievement coming out of COVID.

Last year [2022], we were still in that reopening, recovery phase. This year, we're telling everybody: "We've got to switch gears. We're in it for growth."

How do you see tourism—such an important pillar of the Singaporean economy—evolving in a changed landscape?

We put a lot of effort into rejuvenating and reimagining tourism offerings to help them emerge stronger post-pandemic. This year alone, we're going to see an additional 4,000 hotel rooms added to the room stock. Some older, iconic properties took the chance to do a whole refresh and refurb. That's one area we've been focusing on.

The other was growing domestic advocacy. A big scheme we had during COVID was the SingapoR-rediscovers vouchers. We offered every Singaporean adult \$100 to spend on tourism experiences—a

hotel staycation, a tour experience, visit a few local attractions. That stimulated local spending, which supported the businesses in tourism directly.

But also, because of the COVID period, we had to go digital. It was our very first nationwide digital voucher scheme. Doing that required getting the smaller companies, the smaller attractions and tours, to all go digital. We managed to get them all onto online platforms, make sure their technology, their booking systems are all geared up. Tech is now such a mainstay in the whole visitor experience.

Are there any areas where the pandemic inspired you to fundamentally rethink some priorities?

Two areas we were looking at pre-COVID were sustainability and wellness. When we did studies to better understand what drove people to travel, what they were looking for in travel post-COVID, we found they were looking for a deeper meaning, for inspiration. We went through an era where everybody just wanted Instagrammable photos. Now, people are thinking about how they can better connect with a destination, how it can have a deeper purpose. You're seeing a greater focus on health. I think the average business traveler is a lot more open to mixing business and leisure.

We've spent a lot of time asking: How do we reposition now to meet the future needs of the post-COVID traveler? We've had, for example, a lot of our different hotels partner with wellness brands. Last year we launched our very first wellness festival. We had over 18 industry players that curated more than 130 festival programs. There will be a second edition in 2023, and we're now expanding it to a three-week affair where we'll have activations across the country.

This type of connection isn't just important for visitors, but for locals as well. A huge part of what's unique about Singapore—our food, for

instance—revolves around our multireligious, multiracial culture and our heritage. Creating opportunities for people to meaningfully connect and engage with that is so important.

You alluded to doing your homework on understanding what tourists are looking for. How do you think about data—both to understand the people who are coming, and to also create new products and offers for them?

Data allows us to deliver much more convenience, seamlessness and personalization to our visitors. And we look at, and use, data at every stage of the visitor experience journey: from researching Singapore, to booking a trip, to being here, and then once they've left, following up to encourage repeat visits.

We've signed a variety of partnerships across payment gateways, banks, financial institutions and online travel platforms. Traditionally, a lot of our partnerships have been around marketing and cross-promotion. But, increasingly, our partnerships involve sharing data insights. It's not just about getting information and data for us as the Tourism Board, but putting a lot of that data through STAN (Singapore Tourism Analytics Network) or through our Tourism Information & Services Hub (TIH). Tourism companies can tap into these. And they can use this information—peak timings, visitor profiles and preferences—to make data-driven business decisions.

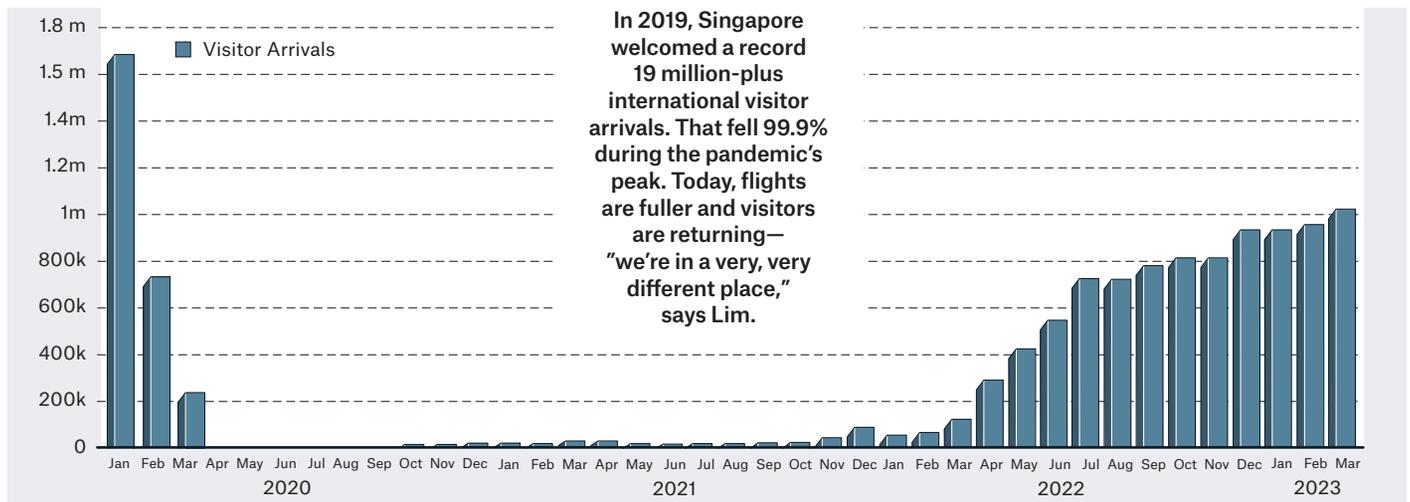
A challenge for us in Singapore is that tourism and hospitality are people businesses. But, post-pandemic, we're facing a manpower crunch—and I don't think we are unique, this is a global challenge. We're trying to encourage a mindset shift: Technology and customer service aren't at odds—in fact, being high-tech can allow you to be high-touch.

For instance, when we first started encouraging

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TOURISM IN THE TIME OF COVID

In 2019, Singapore welcomed a record 19 million-plus international visitor arrivals. That fell 99.9% during the pandemic's peak. Today, flights are fuller and visitors are returning— "we're in a very, very different place," says Lim.



Source: Singapore Tourism Analytics Network

CHART: PETER HOEY

hotels to consider a self check-in kiosk, they were hesitant. People want to talk to people, they felt, not do the check-in work themselves, by themselves. But a lot of visitors—especially business travelers—tell us that self-check-in saves time and they appreciate how seamless it is. And the hotel saves manpower for more high-touch activities.

Sustainable tourism is, for some, a contradiction. Yet Singapore's taking steps to show how it can be possible.

It was important for us to have internationally recognized accreditation—so it was more than just us talking about taking sustainability seriously. We landed on the Global Sustainable Tourism Council's accreditation, and in January 2023, we were officially certified at a country level as a sustainable destination. Regions and precincts have applied before, but we were the first country to do it, and the first country to receive it.

We want to make sure that sustainability is real for visitors, too—that it's not just a sign to hang up your towels in the hotel room. So we want to include gamification on our app, for example, that allows visitors to keep track of their carbon footprint and see how they can easily offset it. We're working to launch a tour around sustainable experiences.

We've also urged companies to look at accreditation, and have worked with the Singapore Hotel Association to launch the Hotel Sustainability Roadmap in March 2022. They set ambitious, clear targets. We don't expect everyone to get there tomorrow, but at least they have clear roadmaps on their certification, emissions reductions and strategies they can adopt to get there.

We're also working with them on the importance of storytelling, showcasing—telling the right story so that people understand it, buy into it, and become advocates and believers. A lot of our hotels and venues now have solar panels. They have waste food digesters and their own urban farms where they're growing their herbs and local produce. Don't just file those away in your annual report or sustainability report. How can you tell those stories in a way that's inspiring and meaningful?

I know Singapore has a goal to grow 30% of its nutritional needs by 2030.

Thirty by 30. That's right.

Does STB have a direct role in helping Singapore to meet those targets?

Yes, definitely and not just the 30 by 30. The 30 by 30

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also contributes to the overarching Singapore Green Plan, where we want to get to net zero by 2050. We know we have to convince the industry that it's also critical—so it's not just the government telling the tourism industry that it's something they have to do.

What are the biggest challenges to Singapore's role as a tourism magnet in Southeast Asia?

In a climate where there is a lot of volatility and geopolitical and inflationary pressures—that will continue to be challenging. We also see increasing competition. People have more options. We know we'll have to remain competitive to attract visitors.

From a number of perspectives, we look at Singapore as a hub. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is connectivity, flight accessibility. We work very closely with Singapore Airlines, with Changi Airport. Currently, we have air links to over 120 cities, and over 80 airlines operating more than 4,000 flights. We want to remain an epicenter from which people can easily connect to the region and the world.

We also look at flows of people, of ideas, of intellectual and equity capital. That means being a place for events—business or leisure. All the multinationals and regional headquarters here make us a strong business hub, and a natural place for global business events. That helps us showcase and become a real marketplace not just for goods and services, but for ideas as well.

But we're not the only country trying to attract these travelers and businesses. We need to continually reinvest in both a mix of hardware and software to remain competitive and appealing. That includes investing in the people in our industry. We need to make sure that they continue to be upskilled, at all levels—a lot of hotel rooms now are set up to be smart rooms, so the people cleaning those rooms need to be able to use tech. That's what it takes.

If someone only had time to see or do one thing in Singapore, what would you recommend?

Such a hard question to answer. If you really had that little time, then I would say go to Gardens by the Bay. I'm currently on the board, so I'm biased, but it's such a unique place. Singapore's tagline for sustainability is: “We're an urban city where large experiences come with small footprints.” Gardens by the Bay is a great mix of what makes Singapore green and modern. It balances nature with innovation—the 18 Supertrees are these remarkable structures that are also vertical gardens.

But, of course, my real recommendation would be that you need to spend more time in Singapore. ♦