

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

## Hong Kong offers a half-million free flights to boost tourist economy

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*The city is giving away free flights next year to revive its battered visitor economy. But there are no expectations of a V-shaped rebound. Image credit: Shutterstock*

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Hong Kong has just announced a 500,000 airline ticket giveaway estimated to be worth **HK\$2 billion (\$254.8 million)** in an attempt to boost its battered tourism industry.

Once an Asian mecca for travel and shopping, Hong Kong's visitor numbers and visitor economy have been decimated after years of **political protests**, topped off by two-and-a-half years of strict COVID-19 international travel restrictions.

In the last few weeks, the government dropped **inbound quarantine requirements** for a **0+3** policy which requires no quarantine, but tests and monitoring in a bid to stimulate the city with returnees.

In addition, the **city has earmarked** about HK\$100 million (\$12.7 million) to attract visitors from around the world, focusing first on those from Southeast Asia taking short-haul flights.

This ticket giveaway is the next big step toward recovery and will start in 2023 once the government removes all remaining travel restrictions.

**The Jing Take:** The announcement is certainly exciting many travelers. Tickets will be distributed by Hong Kong's airport authority and will include outbound as well as inbound flights in arrangement with airline companies.

The tickets were actually purchased from Cathay Pacific and Hong Kong airlines in 2020 by the local airport authority as a pre-emptive measure to boost tourism once restrictions eased.

That said, there are no expectations of a "V" shaped rebound for the city's tourism, **with Hong Kong Tourism Board's (HKTB) executive director expressing as much.**

The HKTB has been on a PR blitz since quarantine restrictions ended with the launch of its "360 Hong Kong Moments" campaign, highlighting tried-and-tested attractions with a focus on the territory's natural beauties as well as new cultural sites such as the Hong Kong Palace Museum.

The city's luxury and retail markets can breathe a sigh of relief, as the flight giveaway will likely bring a boost to languishing businesses in 2023. And there has already been signs of preparations for this with investments pouring into the Asian hub once again.

Harbour City mall opened 70 stores, including Dior, Casa Loewe, Piaget and Van Cleef & Arpels, in the first three quarters of 2022 alone. By the end of the year, the mall says that 100 new stores will have opened on their property.

Mainland Chinese tourism, which previously contributed to a significant part of the visitor economy, is unlikely to return to pre-protest or pre-pandemic levels due to ongoing quarantine restrictions there.

Moreover, key flight routes have been dramatically reduced, and others such as Virgin Atlantic's London-Hong Kong flight have been canceled entirely.

Though Hong Kong tourism is on its way to some kind of recovery, all sectors are waiting with bated breath on news of changes to the mainland's travel policies which would really provide critical stimulation for the economy.

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