

Travelling Again in 2022

Text and photos by Dr Jimmy Teo, Editorial Board member



The COVID-19 pandemic halted overseas travels for both work and leisure between 2020 and most of 2022. I recall a meeting scheduled for February 2020 with a hypertension workgroup in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia which was cancelled at the last moment, and I requested from Singapore Airlines a refund of the air tickets which was thankfully granted.

Time flew by quickly for most doctors and healthcare staff during the pandemic as we attended to numerous meetings and increased clinical services, while pivoting many clinical, business and research activities to online formats. After the borders between Singapore and Malaysia reopened on 1 April 2022, I was asked to attend a meeting in Penang discussing the management of patients with cardiorenal and metabolic disease.

Starting nearby

In May 2022, I downloaded my electronic vaccination certificate and submitted it to the Malaysian app “MySehjahtera”, though by then check-ins using the app were not officially required. As the travel industry had just restarted in earnest, I received my flight ticket only the day before I was due to fly! Singapore Changi Airport was still quiet with many areas under renovation. Surprisingly, clearing Malaysian immigration control was straightforward.

I was put up at the conference hotel and almost everyone was masked up and observed hand hygiene. One of the highlights of this trip included taking a trishaw to a dinner meeting at a Peranakan restaurant, Richard Rivalee. I had time to meet a nephrologist friend,

who took me to the famous Siam Road *char kway teow* stall. It took an hour before I got my fried noodles, but it was worth the wait. Penang was still quite quiet near the conference centre, with many shops closed and adorned with banners advertising opening dates and job vacancies. Nonetheless, I managed to get some Penang delicacies like red bean pastries. Overall, things were beginning to go back to business as usual.

In August 2022, I was invited by the Malaysian Society of Nephrology to be an examiner for the specialty examinations. Changi Airport was still quiet, and the airport lounge had just been renovated. The flight was straightforward and clearing immigration at the airport in Kuala Lumpur was fairly quick compared to pre-pandemic times when lines could be quite long. At the end of the gruelling examination day, both candidates and examiners rejoiced, and there was time to enjoy the weekend in the city, including indulging in the dry-type pork ribs *bak kut teh*. By this time, the city was coming to life with more visitors and activities, though traffic was relatively light. Most people still wore face masks and observed safe-distancing measures.

Travelling further out

In September, I flew to Madrid, Spain via Munich, Germany for a clinical trial investigators’ meeting. European countries were mostly reopened to fully vaccinated tourists and there were few requirements save for checking vaccination certificates at the airline counter. The weather was fabulous.



The research coordinator and I enjoyed lunch at a local restaurant and squeezed in a late afternoon visit to the palace, cathedral and market, where we enjoyed champagne with oysters. We wrapped up the evening with a walk in the park and enjoyed a wonderful plate of calamari at a restaurant. It was great to meet other Asian investigators and research coordinators from Taiwan and Japan, as these places were still under some travel restrictions at that time.

Outdoors, many people did not wear face masks, but in cabs and indoors, many service staff wore face masks. Hand hygiene resources and COVID-19 test kits were also widely available for all conference attendees. Due to an air traffic controller strike causing Europe-wide delays, my return flight connection was cancelled. Fortunately, I managed to fly into Frankfurt the next day where the airline sorted me out and helped me return in time for my Monday clinic, much to the relief of my fellow doctors!

In October 2022, I was invited to speak at the International Society of Hypertension meeting in Kyoto, Japan. Even until the last moment, travel plans to Japan were uncertain as there were still many restrictions in place. In fact, I had to apply for a visa via a travel agent for entry, upload my itinerary and vaccination certificate, and download the MySOS app. The day I arrived however, Japan had fully reopened, and I cleared immigration with smooth Japanese efficiency, allowing me time to take the Haruka express train to Kyoto from Osaka's Kansai International Airport. I enjoyed the meeting very much, as well as the hospitality of the

Japanese Society of Hypertension. Kudos to Professor Kiroshi Ito and his team for overcoming the challenge of organising this meeting under constantly changing travel rules! At Kansai International Airport, the airport lounge was under renovation when I left, and the airline provided vouchers for the newly opened food court where I enjoyed ramen, gyoza and Japanese beer.

In November 2022, the Kidney Week organised by the American Society of Nephrology was officially an in-person meeting (with hybrid option) and I flew to Orlando, USA via Dubai, UAE. This was the first time I flew to the US via a Middle East stop to avoid a stopover Stateside, as I had read about inadequate manpower and travel facilities causing missed flights and unusual delays.

2022 had been an important year for my school-going children, and we decided to make more memories by going overseas. By December 2022, it was almost business as usual for most places in Asia, including China. In early December, we flew into Danang, Vietnam, and travelled by road to Hue, the former imperial city. After a day of exploring the imperial citadel and tombs, we left for the ancient town of Hoi An, and ended our trip in Danang. We rounded off the year by a trip to Hua Hin and Bangkok, Thailand. I will describe these adventures in subsequent articles.

How time flies

As I write this article in January 2023, the pandemic is still ongoing, with new variants of COVID-19 popping up. I received the bivalent vaccine in December 2022, and our handling of

COVID-19 is beginning to look like how we manage influenza. The past three years have been extremely challenging in all aspects of work where we learnt new models of care, business and research.

In 2020 and 2021, I had urged my fellow doctors to proportion time properly as pandemic work was likely to be a marathon rather than a sprint. I deferred all research activities and ran outpatient clinics daily with team segregation to provide essential specialty-level services, as staff were redeployed for pandemic-related duties in 2020, standing down by 2021. In 2021, I learnt how to lecture and discuss online, use a green screen, and pre-record lectures in case of connection failures. I am heartened by the technological advances which enabled the speedy development of vaccines, antibody treatments and antiviral medications. There will always be new infectious diseases. What we have learnt from this and past pandemics is that adequate medical resource is required to ensure that excess deaths directly and indirectly caused by new infections is kept low.

As I plan my vacation and other trips in 2023, many places in the world are slowly adapting to business as usual. I am glad to share with you my frontline view of how travel changed in 2022, and I am also surprised that I travelled out of Singapore seven times in 2022! ♦

Legend

1. Almuneda Cathedral, Madrid, Spain
2. Siam Road, Penang char kway teow
3. Peranakan food from Richard Rivalee
4. Haruka Express train in "Hello Kitty" livery at Kansai International Airport

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