

COVID-19 HAS TURNED the tourism industry on its head. The concept Responsible Tourism previously only focused on people mitigating negative economic, environmental and social impacts while travelling, but now it has to make room for more pressing concerns.

To restore visitors' confidence, hygiene and sanitation have been catapulted to the top of the to-do list for many countries, and more iron-clad preventive measures have been introduced to guard against unwanted outbreaks.

Malaysia is no exception.

Penang recently launched the "Responsible Tourism" campaign to assure domestic tourists of health conditions in the state. In his speech, Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow explains that, "In order to regain the confidence of our tourists, we need to have a solid standard operating procedure (SOP) which will give them the reassurance of their safety when they visit Penang."

Let's Go On a Holiday

In the past, Penang's tourism sector relied heavily on international tourists. But despite border closures, the state has done well in pivoting to the local market; its ability to maintain green zone status for over 100 days was certainly helpful in attracting domestic visitors over.

Industry players have had to study and cross-check the various SOP guidelines provided by the federal and state governments, and by the World Health Organization (WHO),

✦ "In the hotel industry, hygiene and safety is paramount," says communications director Suleiman Tunku Abdul Rahman.



✦ A staff member from World Express Tours Malaysia carefully sanitises the tour van.

✦ Shangri-La's hotels have started using QR codes for their menus and encouraging digital payments to minimise contact.



✦ To comply with social distancing measures, the furniture in E&O's dining areas have been rearranged.

✦ Note the tape marking on the floor. Visitors to E&O are encouraged to be mindful of how far they should distance themselves from each other.



There is something incongruous about the idea of a carefree holiday when one's body temperature is subject to frequent scanning. Adding to this contradiction, don't face masks and bottles of hand sanitisers also get in the way of luxury?

in order to comply with all of them and to integrate them into their daily procedures.

Established already in 1969, World Express Tours Malaysia had always provided an impressive range of services from ground transportation and hotel reservations, to sightseeing tours. But since the pandemic began, every single process must now be carefully thought out – and careful coordination among its different partners is crucial. "We must constantly monitor that all parties, internal and external, observe the relevant SOPs of sanitising the premises and practising social distancing in public areas," says executive director Cherry Lee.

The measures they need to take can be condensed into the following main steps:

1. Comply with the Government Safety requirements;
2. Carry out temperature checks on all clients and staff;
3. Ensure the wearing of face masks in all public and crowded areas;
4. Practise social distancing;
5. Sanitise all touch points regularly;
6. Provide contactless service wherever possible, and;
7. Work out an exit strategy if anyone is found to have Covid-19-like symptoms.

"This is not an easy time," says Lee. Operational costs have ballooned, but she takes comfort in viewing this as a long-term investment to regain customers' trust.

The struggle is also deeply felt by New Bob Rent-a-Car & Tours, a Penang-based car rental company that works with tour guides and hotels to arrange personalised itineraries for its clientele, most of whom are international tourists. Since coming out of the MCO, the business is now solely relying on customers from the Malaysia My Second Home programme, and on domestic tourists, especially those from East Malaysia.

"We conduct at least two rounds of sanitisation on our fleet of vehicles," explains general manager Goh Thean Eng. "We spray the whole of the car's interior with a germ killer first. Following this, and with the windows closed, the car's exterior will be sun-exposed for a few hours. Later, we again conduct basic cleaning of high-touch areas, including the door handles. And before the car is rented out, the entire spraying process is done again."

At Your Service!

Even in the most turbulent of times, the hospitality industry's task of ensuring the well-being of their guests and enhancing

their experience has not changed. "In the hotel industry, hygiene and safety is paramount," says Suleiman Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The long-time director of communications who oversees Shangri-La's hotels in Penang – the Rasa Sayang Resort and Spa and Golden Sands Resort – notes that "it is in our nature to look after people, always anticipating and exceeding their expectations so that our guests can have complete peace of mind."

Upon arrival at the hotel, luggage is disinfected, health indicators are checked and guests are given a care-kit that includes a face mask, a bottle of hand sanitiser and anti-bacterial wet wipes. Shangri-La's hotels have also started using QR codes for their menus and encouraging digital payments to minimise contact; while the housekeeping staff, armed with UV light, electrostatic spray devices and hospital grade disinfectant, clean and inspect all high-touch surfaces.

"We were recently visited by a panel of government auditors to examine the SOPs of our in-house front and backend operations. These include the ATP Monitoring System, which comprises self-contained testing devices and swabs for detecting the presence of adenosine triphosphate, specific enzymes and bacteria in guest rooms," explains Suleiman.

His knowledge of the most technical detail, and the restrained passion under that polite façade bring Monsieur Gustave H. to mind, the fictional concierge of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* who delivers impeccable service with panache. "It is our duty to ensure that at all times, the safety of our guests and staff are protected."

Still, there is something incongruous about the idea of a carefree holiday when one's body temperature is subject to frequent scanning. Adding to this contradiction, don't face masks and bottles of hand sanitisers also get in the way of luxury?

Eastern and Oriental Hotel (E&O), the grande dame of Penang does its best to blend health and safety protocols smoothly – and discreetly – into its opulent setting. "We strive to ensure a balance between enforcing these measures while maintaining the welcoming environment that E&O is renowned for," says general manager Alison Fraser.

For her, the challenge lies not so much in ensuring that hotel operations strictly adhere to government directives, but rather in getting hotel guests to comply with the protocols that have been decided upon. Guests do not seem to be as finicky about sanitation as hoteliers are. "There have been no changes to customer behaviour, preferences and risk aversion levels. Our staff members, on the other hand, have gone through in-house training to guide guests accordingly when the need arises."

Owing to its spacious premises, E&O has been able to comply with distancing measures without needing to cut down on guest numbers. This has been achieved simply, by removing or rearranging the furniture, especially those in the hotel's dining areas.

But with sharp drops in the number of guests, hostels and budget establishments are expected to suffer quite badly. Oon Yee Mun, the proprietress of Balik Pulau BookLodge B&B, currently only accepts four guests at a time; if guests are from the same travel group, six is the maximum. She says that although the homestay saw a surge in bookings when it reopened on July 1, bookings for August slowed. "I don't expect business to improve immediately."

Dining... in Confusion?

Like many F&B owners, Danny Kooi of Trois Canon Café at Lebuhr Campbell is on the horns of a dilemma. Between changing the café's physical layout to observe the SOPs and managing customers' expectations, he, like many other food operators, do not have things easy at all.

For one thing, Kooi has had to explain to groups of disgruntled customers hoping for a table at his establishment why, despite arriving in the same car, they can't be seated at the same table; so much so that he actually had a copy of MBPP's SOPs prepared and on hand as he patiently explains the regulations to them.

Adding to this confusion is the strange clause found in the Malaysian National Security Council guideline that stipulates that "the number of customers at the table is based on table size and does not exceed four

Owner Danny Kooi of Trois Canon Café.

➤ Balik Pulau BookLodge B&B host, Oon Yee Mun.



Esther Ping Dominic



➤ To meet the 1m requisite, tables at Trois Canon Café must be kept at least 2m apart.

➤ Kooi has a copy of MBPP's SOPs prepared and on hand to explain the regulations to customers.

customers for the big table". The federal government later amended the SOPs for restaurants and eateries to operate at maximum capacity during the Recovery MCO, but with the provision that social distancing of 1m is adhered to.

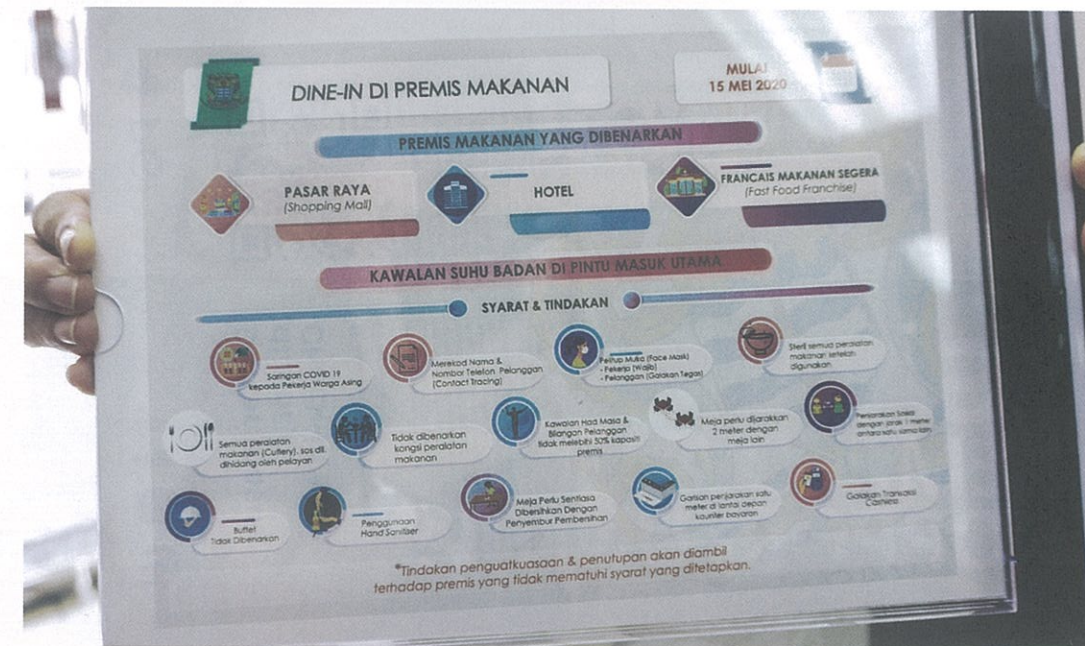
Most of Kooi's customers are office workers, students or tourists who sometimes come in big groups. To meet the 1m requisite, tables must be kept at least 2m apart, which means that many customers have to be turned away. To lessen their frustrations, Kooi has started introducing delivery services.

Additional SOPs for the F&B industry include ensuring the sanitation of the dining space, checking customers' temperatures, writing records or scanning the official MySejahtera app to monitor the whereabouts of each individual.

Reshaping Public Consciousness

Public toilets are the most frequently used facility. Maintained by ground workers, the responsibility of keeping them clean cannot however be only shouldered by a select few, and should instead be borne by all Penangites.

A public toilet near the Esplanade, a popular tourist attraction, is managed by a retiree from MBPP, who wishes to



be known simply as "Uncle". Following SOP guidelines, Uncle puts in a strenuous three hours daily to thoroughly clean the cubicles and high-touch areas like water basins, the nursing room, as well as the accessible toilet.

But while people like Uncle work to keep these places clean, how are they protecting themselves? Pre-pandemic, the face mask and gloves would have been complementary PPE. But today, they form part of the standard uniform.

Bad user habits contribute to the poor conditions of public toilets, laments Uncle. "This could cause a serious public health crisis with Covid-19 around." This worry is also shared by business owners who feel it to be incumbent on them to maintain the public facilities in their areas. Howard Tan, owner of "Shop Howard", moved to Lebuhr Armenian in 2014, and witnessed first-hand how gentrification took hold in the neighbourhood.

Though the overall environment has vastly improved, the same can't be said about its hygiene levels. "Littering is a

chronic problem," says Tan, adding that he usually starts his day by picking up rubbish strewn at alleyways or wedged into large potted plants. He is in regular contact with MBPP and calls for assistance when he is unable to remedy the problem himself, such as when garbage bins get overturned.

"What's upsetting is that most times, business owners are just intent on making money," he sighs.

"Building a clean and safe environment is an essential part of promoting Penang's tourism. Covid-19 or not, Penangites ought to take ownership of the spaces they inhabit," he says. ■

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➤ Littering is a common sight in alleyways near Tan's shop.

Esther Ping Dominic is a writer who is surprisingly still alive despite the saying "curiosity kills the cat". Having been on the receiving end of undeserved kindness, she aims to live her life reflecting that.



Lim Sok Swan is currently focusing on heritage studies. She believes that more understanding among different groups and cultures can make Malaysia a better home for all.



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