

Could Singapore have done more?

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SINGAPORE — As the woes of stranded travellers made the headlines worldwide in recent days — how governments dealt with the unfolding drama have come under scrutiny too. This includes how some cities helped, or did not help, the travellers.

In New York, the city's marketing and tourism organisation NYC & Company teamed up with more than 30 member hotels to offer a 15-per-cent discount on room rates and transport to the airport for travellers affected by the Icelandic volcanic eruption.

The city's official tourism website specially offered visitors information on low-cost activities over the weekend.

In South Africa, Cape Town Tourism had asked the city's hotels and tourism establishments to post their most generous rates for those stuck in limbo. Most hotels offered discounts; many refunded advance payments made on bookings that could not be honoured.

In Singapore, some have asked: Could the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) have done the same? Some observers felt that by not doing so, Singapore lost an opportunity to showcase itself as a welcoming destination. In fact, some hotels increased prices as the flight cancellations chaos unfolded.

"If the authorities organised, say, 2,000 Singaporeans to open their homes to these travellers to experience Singaporean hospitality, you'll achieve a positive image that is infinitely more than what television ads can do for you," said BrandAsian CEO Joe Baladi. "You need to think out of the box in situations like this ... and it has to be done very quickly, as an opportunity for a country to shine."

For instance, instead of letting people sleep at the airport, the air force or the army could come in to provide accommodation, said the brand strategist.

Creative thinking guru Kirpal Singh agreed: "Perhaps in Singapore, we're centred on governance, and a committee takes a long time to make such a decision."

But not all were critical of the tourism authority. Mr Martin Roll, founder of branding consultancy Venture Republic, said: "It would have been easy for Singapore to sell itself, as it's small and dynamic, but it could be the situation was not as acute as in Europe and you have to understand that people are positively not in the mood, they are stressed and want to get home."

About 40,000 travellers are said to be stranded here, and observers pointed out that a major trade show, the Food Hotel

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Asia conference, is also one reason why hotel prices have increased.

A few travel agents told MediaCorp, however, that some hotels raised prices by about 30 to 50 per cent after the chaos began.

Many hotels, when contacted, did not reply with an official comment.

But at Grand Copthorne Waterfront Hotel, for example, its Club rooms are now \$550, from \$350. Over at The Swissotel The Stamford, its Classic rooms were priced \$500 yesterday and are fully booked till the weekend. They usually cost \$200, a reservation clerk said over the phone.

Some hotels are adjusting to the situation. The Singapore Marriott Hotel told MediaCorp it has asked guests to update the hotel on any changes to their travel schedule, as this will help it to release rooms to other travellers who may require them or to hold on to bookings for those who may have to extend their stay.

When asked about STB's measures during this period — executive director (communications) Muhamad Rostam Umar told MediaCorp it has been "closely monitoring" the situation. "While we can expect visitor arrivals from Europe to be affected during this period of flight disruptions, it is too early to determine its full impact."

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

- AirAsia has offered all travellers stranded in Singapore and Malaysia a special promotion rate of RM99 (\$43) — excluding taxes and fees — for travel to any Asean destinations, except Myanmar.
- Singapore Airlines reinstated seven flights between Europe and Singapore late last night and early this morning.
- SingPost said airport closures across Europe have disrupted postal services to destinations there, and it has urged the public to defer mailing to European countries for now.

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