Bittersweet ‘birthday staycay’ but he’s proud of S’pore’s response

Audrey Tan

Biologist Marcus Chua turned 36 on Tuesday, but the birthday was a bittersweet one despite his swanky surroundings in a hotel with views of Singapore’s famous city skyline.

It might all look five-star, but the reality for many people like Mr Chua, who are now complying with the 14-day stay-home notice (SHN), is far from fancy. Room service, for example, does not come on a silver platter but is hung on his door in a disposable plastic box.

Mr Chua’s “birthday staycay” began when he returned from the United States on Thursday night, all ready to serve the stay-home period in a hotel instead of in his own home.

“Even though it was a pity that I could not see my family after arriving in Singapore, it’s actually my preferred option to stay elsewhere so there is less chance of me transmitting the virus to others if I had been infected,” said Mr Chua, a PhD student at George Mason University in the Washington DC suburbs.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) announced on Tuesday that all Singaporeans returning from Britain and the US from 11.59pm the following day would have to serve the SHN in dedicated facilities instead of their own homes.

This was because those arriving from the two countries account for the largest share of imported cases by far. Returnees will have their own room and bathroom and all meals provided so that they avoid physical contact with other individuals, MOH said.

Mr Chua said on Twitter: “It’s a brilliant move to support the hospitality industry and keep the pandemic at bay.”

He added that travellers were given special laundry bags to prevent contamination and were notified that spot checks would be done via calls or text messages.

Those who flout the rules may be liable for penalties such as being required to bear the full cost of the hotel stay, according to a circular from the Singapore Tourism Board that was given to returning passengers.

Mr Chua, a mammal scientist at the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, said he had initially considered staying put in the US to finish the semester, but the escalating crisis there and repeated reminders from NUS and the Singapore Embassy to come home prompted him to change his mind.

He booked a flight to return to Singapore this Wednesday, but this had to be brought forward after Etihad Airways cancelled the flight.

Some of his colleagues at NUS had collated data on previous flights between Washington DC and San Francisco – where the next homebound Singapore Airlines flight would depart from – and analysed them to find a route that had the least likelihood of being cancelled.

Thankfully, his Alaska Airlines flight departed on time and Mr Chua found himself in San Francisco with about a day to spare.

He said: “There was a huge sense of comfort when I boarded the Singapore Airlines flight. Not only did it remind me of home, it was also comforting to see cabin crew taking precautions by donning surgical masks.”

Passengers were also seated at least a seat apart from one another.

When they arrived at Changi Airport, passengers were served SHNs by Immigration and Checkpoints Authority officers and taken by bus to the hotel in groups of 15 in 40-seater coaches. “Perfect for maintaining social distancing,” Mr Chua quipped, adding: “I couldn’t be more impressed and proud of Singapore’s response to Covid-19.”

While looking forward to going for a swim and catching up with family and friends after serving his SHN, Mr Chua said he has no lack of things to do. He plans to catch up on his lectures, which are being broadcast online, complete his assignments and write research proposals.

“When all that is done, there’s video streaming and two books to read,” he said. “And I have my binoculars, so there’s also bird-watching. I heard jungle fowls and kingfishers this morning.”

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Room service for those serving the stay-home notice in a hotel is hung on the door in a disposable plastic box. PHOTO: MARCUS CHUA/FACEBOOK

KEEP OTHERS SAFE

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