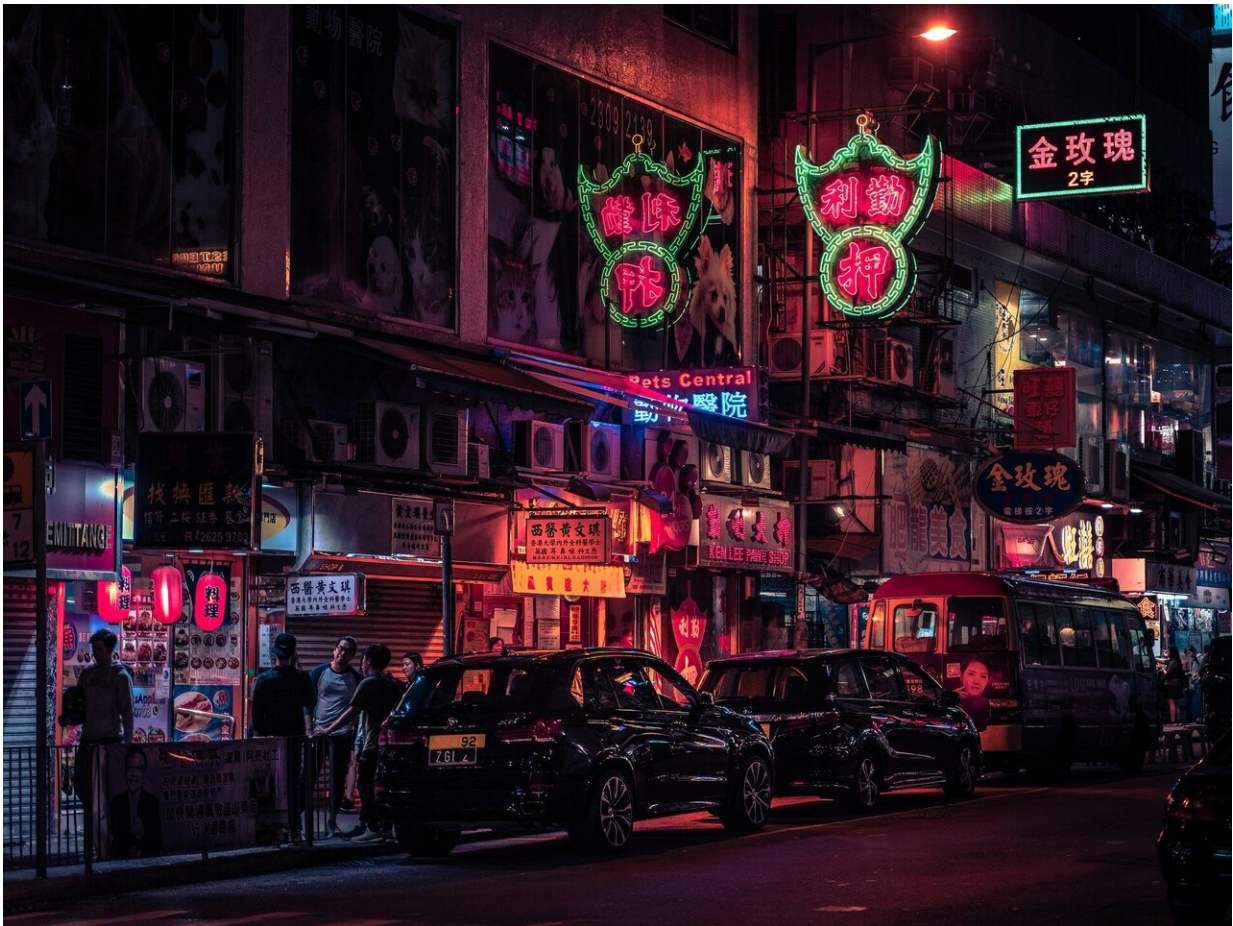


Jubilant Chinese plan trips abroad with Covid quarantine to end

December 27 2022



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People in China reacted with joy and rushed to plan trips abroad

Tuesday after Beijing said it would scrap mandatory COVID quarantine for overseas arrivals, ending almost three years of self-imposed isolation.

In a snap move late Monday, China said that from January 8 inbound travellers would no longer need to quarantine, as it further unwinds hardline virus controls that had torpedoed the economy and sparked nationwide protests.

Infections have surged nationwide as key pillars of the containment policy have been dismantled, while authorities acknowledged the outbreak is "impossible" to track and discontinued much-maligned daily case tallies.

Still, many Chinese were jubilant to learn of the end of restrictions that have kept the country largely closed off to the world since March 2020.

"I felt like the epidemic is finally over... The travel plans I made three years ago may now become a reality," said Beijing office worker Fan Chengcheng, 27.

A Shanghai resident surnamed Chen said it "felt like someone has pressed the button to end the movie", adding that her parents in Britain would be able to visit more easily.

"Finally, China's going back to normal," she told AFP.

Another Shanghai local, surnamed Du, said a swifter reopening may help the country reach so-called herd immunity more quickly, adding that there was "no way to avoid" the virus in the eastern megacity.

Online searches for flights abroad surged on the news, with travel platform Tongcheng seeing an 850 percent jump in searches and a 10-fold spike in enquiries about visas, according to state media reports.

Rival platform Trip.com Group said searches for popular overseas destinations rose 10-fold year-on-year within half an hour of the announcement—with users particularly keen on Macau, Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand and South Korea.

But some may face hurdles going abroad, with Japan saying it would require COVID tests on arrival for travellers from mainland China from Friday.

Rising cases in China, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said, were "causing growing concern in Japan".

Beijing's [foreign ministry](#) said Tuesday that countries should uphold "scientific and appropriate" disease controls that "should not affect normal personnel exchanges".

'Relief'

The Chinese announcement effectively brought the curtain down on a zero-COVID regime of mass testing, lockdowns and long quarantines that has roiled supply chains and buffeted business engagement with the world's second-largest economy.

"The overwhelming view is just relief," said Tom Simpson, managing director for China at the China-Britain Business Council.

"It brings an end to three years of very significant disruption."

An uptick in international trade missions is now expected for next year, he told AFP, although full resumption of business operations is likely to be "gradual" as airlines slowly bring more flights online and companies tweak their China strategies for 2023.

The EU Chamber of Commerce in China also welcomed a move that would "potentially boost business confidence" and let executives and workers travel more freely.

All passengers arriving in China have had to undergo mandatory centralised quarantine since March 2020. That decreased from three weeks to one week in June, and to five days last month.

The end of that rule in January will also see COVID-19 downgraded to a Class B infectious disease from Class A, allowing authorities to adopt looser controls.

On Tuesday, Chinese immigration authorities announced the gradual resumption starting January 8 of passport issuance for "tourism" or "overseas visits of friends"—suspended due to the pandemic.

And foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said China would "optimise" arrangements for foreign nationals seeking to return to work, conduct business, study abroad or visit relatives.

Some entry restrictions will remain however, with China still largely suspending the issuance of visas for overseas tourists and students.

Beijing said Tuesday it would "continue to adjust its visa policy for foreigners visiting China in a scientific and dynamic manner in accordance with... the epidemic situation".

Winter surge

China's government and state media have sought to project an image of measured calm as COVID washes across the country.

But officials in several cities have said hundreds of thousands of people

are estimated to have been infected in recent weeks.

Hospitals and crematoriums are overflowing, according to independent reporting by AFP and other media.

The government announced last week that it would effectively stop recording the number of people dying of COVID, while the National Health Commission said Saturday it would no longer publish daily case figures—widely criticised as inaccurate.

But some studies have projected around one million people could die in China from COVID over the next few months.

The winter surge comes ahead of major public holidays next month in which hundreds of millions are expected to travel to reunite with relatives.

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Citation: Jubilant Chinese plan trips abroad with Covid quarantine to end (2022, December 27) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-12-jubilant-chinese-covid-quarantine.html>

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