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TOURISM

Sector on the mend as HK records jump in visitor numbers to 604,564

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Hong Kong's pandemic-battered tourism sector showed signs of recovery in 2022 when the number of visitors increased more than sixfold to 604,564 from the year before, with more than half of the travellers coming from the mainland.

Last year's figure was an improvement on the about 91,000 arrivals logged in 2021, with the figures for November and December in 2022 standing at 113,763 and 160,584 respectively, the city's Tourism Board said yesterday.

The number of visitors last October was 80,524, with an economist attributing the uptick in subsequent months to the

government's decision to lift its quarantine and later medical surveillance requirements for travellers, as well as most testing rules.

Travellers from across the border made up a large share of last year's total figure, with 375,144 visitor arrivals coming to Hong Kong from the mainland.

While the city and the mainland also resumed quarantine-free travel from January 8, Gary Ng Cheuk-yan, a senior economist with Natixis Corporate and Investment Bank, said he believed the industry and wider economy were unlikely to undergo a meaningful recovery in the near term. "The border with the mainland has fully reopened, but there are still quotas and tests put in place that do not fully encourage mainlanders to come here at the moment," he said.

The MTR Corporation yesterday announced it would increase the number of available cross-border, high-speed train tickets to 7,000 per day in each direction. The new quota takes effect today.

Under the current cross-border entry regime, 50,000 people each day, going either way, can travel through the four other available land ports. The government will increase the daily quota to 65,000 in the four-day run-up to the Lunar New Year holiday.

Ocean Park chairman Paulo Pong Kin-ye, meanwhile, said the venue was gradually recovering from the pandemic after the number of visitors reached its highest level since last April. He stopped short of providing the figure.

The park's operators also planned to hire 350 more full-time

employees to prepare for a rise in visitors, Pong said.

Government figures showed a surge in the number of passengers landing at the city's airport, with the facility handling 5.7 million passengers in 2022, accounting for an increase of 318.4 per cent compared with the year before. For December alone, the Airport Authority recorded 1.6 million passengers, a ninefold increase from the same period in 2021.

But the airport's total cargo throughput in 2022 dropped by 16.4 per cent year on year to 4.2 million tonnes, while flight movements fell by 4.2 per cent.

Hong Kong previously held the position of the world's busiest international cargo airport between 1996 and 2021.

Ng attributed the dual declines to weak global demand on the

back of inflation issues in the United States and the European Union, adding he did not expect the situation to recover until the middle of next year.

Fred Lam Tin-fuk, the authority's CEO, said: "The airport

endured another challenging year in 2022 as the impact of the pandemic continued ... Nevertheless, we saw light at the end of the tunnel when the government relaxed travel restrictions."



Tourists at Golden Bauhinia Square. Last year's visitor figure is an improvement on the about 91,000 logged in 2021. Photo: Sam Tsang

The number of tourists arriving in the city was also far below the pre-pandemic level of 55.9 million logged in 2019.

However, cruise ships are once again set to dock in Hong Kong after avoiding the city since last July. Silversea Cruises' liner Silver Spirit is set to arrive in Hong Kong tomorrow. Resorts World Cruises also said its first ship would use Hong Kong as its homeport from March 10, with the company to offer two- and three-night itineraries and departing the city every Friday, Sunday and Wednesday on a weekly basis.

On the coronavirus front, the city yesterday recorded 4,653 new infections, 124 of which were imported, and 50 more deaths. Its tally stands at 2,836,370 cases and 12,863 related fatalities.

Additional reporting by Jess Ma