

## Opinion Business travel

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### Airtight rooms and glass walls — Singapore pioneers pandemic-era meetings

A new facility at Changi allows travellers to fly in for contact-free meetings



A meeting room at Connect@Changi, split by a glass divider

Might the future of pandemic-era travel look more like a prison visitors' room than a business-class lounge? It's an unhappy thought, but one I grappled with recently as I met an old friend passing through Singapore, inside a new facility designed to allow Covid-safe meetings behind airtight glass panels.

In normal times Singapore revels in its status as a travel hub, with Changi airport widely judged among the world's best. But now the skies above the city-state are all but empty, with only a dribble of visitors each day. Almost all arriving travellers have to endure a strict two-week quarantine period stuck inside a local hotel. The result is a country that is largely Covid-free but a hub in name only; I last left town well over a year ago.

Given this, it was with great excitement that I hopped into a cab one recent morning to visit Connect@Changi, described as "the world's first quarantine-free travel bubble for business travellers", where transiting international visitors are allowed meetings with locals, albeit separated by glass walls.

Dreamt-up by Singapore's government, the new facility is predicated on the idea that some meetings have to happen face-to-face, even in a pandemic. Those with deals to sign or urgent issues to discuss, the thinking goes, can fly into Singapore and stay in a purpose-built, hermetically sealed hotel, with 150 bedrooms and rates starting at S\$384 (\$290) per night. There are 40 meeting rooms, for between four and 22 attendees.



The reception area at Connect@Changi

Having been herded through arrivals by a chain of staff in full protective gear, intrepid visitors are then placed in a testing centre located next to the baggage carousel. Test done, a Covid-secure taxi arrives to make the five-minute journey to the hotel for contactless check-in. After being confined to their room overnight until an email confirming a negative result comes through, they are then free to roam the hotel, which includes a central courtyard, “gym pod” and myriad self-service vending machines for food, but no pool. Having had their meetings, they then fly right back out again, avoiding both quarantine requirements and any actual contact with the local population.

The hotel building itself isn't terribly easy to find, located in a remote corner of the city's sprawling airport convention centre. Inside I was directed down a sparsely decorated corridor and into a room the size of a large cupboard, where my friend, Ryan Heath, a journalist with Politico, sat waiting behind a floor-to-ceiling glass partition. Covid-19 has introduced any number of odd new greetings, from fist bumps and elbow touches to awkward apologetic waves. To these we added one more, as both placed a spread-out hand on the glass between us to say hello, and settled down to talk.

Our strange meeting came about mostly by chance. Ryan was making his way back from the US to Australia for family reasons. With business class costing an eye-watering \$11,000, he found a clever way to buy two economy tickets and break the journey with a one-night stay in Singapore, housed at the new facility. Given he would be there anyway, he suggested, why didn't I come by for breakfast?



James Crabtree, left, connects with an old friend at the facility

We chatted amiably for an hour inside our cell, our voices picked up on internal microphones and broadcast as audio to the other side of the glass. Air-conditioning systems hummed gently in the background, recycling any pathogens away via separate “air handling” systems. Some rooms have document transfer boxes, small airlocks equipped with ultraviolet disinfection systems, through which papers can be passed. A monitor sat behind me in case I wanted to give an impromptu in-person PowerPoint presentation. Food arrived too: a plastic-wrapped curry and a small boxed juice for me, and a small breakfast plate with fruit for my international visitor.

The existence of the facility has certain implications for the future of business travel. On one hand it shows that, despite the importance Singapore places on being a global hub, the authorities here do not expect business-as-usual to resume any time soon. On the other, the fact that such places can be quickly established but as yet have not popped up in other parts of the world, suggests demand for urgent in-person meetings is lower than might have been previously assumed. Most of us now find that Zoom meetings will do just about as well.

Connect@Changi certainly did not seem overly busy during our visit, although the facility claims it has hosted hundreds of meetings since opening in February. Not to be put off, Singapore now plans a major expansion: by the end of 2021 there will be space for some 1,300 visitors in a total of 340 meeting rooms. A rare treat though it was to greet an old friend passing through town, most travellers will be fervently hoping they won’t be needed.



## Welcome to Connect@Changi

Designed for Singapore and international travellers to conduct business meetings and engagements, Connect@Changi will offer an integrated 'test-stay-work-meet' experience for short stay accommodation.



### 10-pax Meeting room

26sqm room comes with 65" TV, glass divider, business equipment upon request and video camera in selected rooms is allowed for local visitors and in-house guests respectively.

 Maximum 5 in-house guests and 5 visitors

### 8-pax Meeting room IN-HOUSE GUEST ONLY

21sqm room comes with 55" TV and business equipment upon request.

 Maximum 5 in-house guests\*



### 4-pax Meeting room

11sqm room comes with 43" TV and glass divider (in selected rooms) and allowing local visitors and in-house guests respectively.

 Maximum 4 in-house guests

Embrace the new normal and elevate your business meetings in our state-of-the-art meeting facilities right here at Connect@Changi.

<https://connectatchangi.sg/meetings>