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Some expatriates in Hong Kong moving to Singapore as Covid-19 situation in territory worsens



Ms Rebecca Metcalfe, her husband, Nick, and children Marnie (left) and George, will be coming to Singapore likely in June. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MS REBECCA METCALFE



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PUBLISHED MAR 17, 2022, 5:00 AM SGT

SINGAPORE - As Hong Kong battles a worsening Covid-19 outbreak and surge in deaths, some expatriates there who plan to leave the city are moving to Singapore.

In the past two months, several immigration service firms based in Singapore and international schools like Dulwich College (Singapore) have seen an uptick in inquiries from expatriates living in Hong Kong wanting to make a transfer.

A Facebook support group set up in late February for expatriates moving out of Hong Kong has also since drawn more than 4,400 members.

Foreign residents, including white-collar expatriates, made up about 10 per cent of Hong Kong's population of 7.5 million in 2020.

Between June 2020 and June 2021, the city saw an outflow of 89,200 residents, leaving its population at about 7.39 million. This resulted in its biggest population decline of 1.2 per cent in 60 years.

Mr Ryhan Muneer, senior manager of Immigration@SG, an immigration consultancy firm, said the number of inquiries it has received from Hong Kong since January to date has doubled compared with the same period last year.

"The motivation for the decision to get out of Hong Kong is that it no longer seems attractive for both individuals and businesses with the exerting of strong-arm Covid measures," he said.

"Singapore's measures are more flexible and realistic, on top of sound infrastructure, an English-speaking environment and openness for global business outcomes."

Mr Ryhan said some clients are looking to transfer to offices here or are seeking new employment in Singapore, while others hope to incorporate a new business or relocate an existing business here.

Mr Philip Ng, director of OCSC Global, an immigration and relocation consultancy, said it started to get inquiries from expatriates in Hong Kong in the fourth quarter of last year. They include Europeans, Indians, and Americans.

"The majority of inquiries we've received are looking for job arrangements as a means to migrate to Singapore, whereas some have already secured a job offer and inquired about our services for work pass applications," he said.

Besides the Covid-19 situation, Mr Ng said the political uncertainties in Hong Kong are a main concern for foreigners seeking more stability.

Mr Tom Boasberg, superintendent at the Singapore American School, said that it has since January received more than 10 times the number of applications from Hong Kong than it normally gets at this time of the year. About 60 per cent of the applicants are Americans, and their ages range from three to 18.

"Most families are making plans to arrive by August, in time for the new school year," said Mr Boasberg, adding that many of them had expressed interest in attending a school that would be open for face-to-face classes.

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The EtonHouse group, which runs several international schools, has also seen a steady increase in inquiries from families in Hong Kong since the start of this year, and more so in the last few weeks since late February.

A spokesman said it expects more to come, as many families are in the process of sending in applications.

"Depending on the year level and school they apply to, we are able to offer places to them," she said. "Some who are expected to start in August in the new academic year have asked to start sooner."

Likewise, a spokesman for Tanglin Trust School said it has received more student applications from families in Hong Kong in the first two months of the year, compared with the whole of last year.



Between June 2020 and June 2021, Hong Kong saw an outflow of 89,200 residents. PHOTO: AFP

Ms Rebecca Metcalfe, 39, a British-Australian national who is in Hong Kong with her husband and two children, aged two and six months, will be coming to Singapore likely in June.

Her trader husband accepted an offer last month from his bank to move to its Singapore office.

"We feel unsafe here now, we worry about being split up, put into isolation facilities, fined and held captive here as it doesn't feel like Hong Kong is going to open up any time soon," she said.

"It's been challenging; school is closed, all baby groups and play dates cancelled. All the children's friends are leaving, as are many of mine.

"It's been challenging for mental health as we haven't seen family for two years now, and we can't travel, or even exercise without wearing a mask," said Ms Metcalfe, who owns a women's clothing online store. She will continue to run the store from Singapore.

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A 36-year-old Briton who wanted to be known only as Andre said he will be moving to Singapore by the end of the month after spending more than 18 years in Hong Kong. The company director who works in the information technology industry said he hopes the situation would have changed by 2023, so he could possibly return.

"When Singapore made a plan to open up back in June and they executed it in October, I knew they took the right path following science," he said.

"Already back then, I was making plans to come to Singapore and that's been exacerbated by Singapore going in the polar opposite direction of Hong Kong," he said.

Hong Kong is tightening up, while Singapore is loosening up and [preparing for its Grand Prix event](#), he added.

Since last month, Hong Kong has been recording tens of thousands of new cases daily and the city is struggling to cope with the surge in deaths due to the virus.

The possibility of a large-scale lockdown or a mass Covid-19 testing exercise has sent people into panic mode, emptying supermarket and pharmacy shelves of groceries and essentials.

Like China, Hong Kong has adopted a "dynamic zero" strategy that involves eliminating infections with strict mitigation measures instead of living with Covid-19.

About 90.5 per cent of residents have had at least one vaccination but rates for the elderly are lower, with only about 50 per cent for those aged 80 years and above.

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