

INTERNATIONAL

Hong Kong offers 5 lakh free air tickets after COVID isolation, sheds quarantine

Hong Kong is ready to welcome the world back, its leader said on Thursday, pledging more than half a million free flights and positive publicity to resurrect the once-vibrant global hub after three years of COVID-enforced isolation. The Government's rebranding campaign, "Hello, Hong Kong", bills itself as an effort to tell "good stories" about the southern Chinese city, where years of political repression, coupled with pandemic curbs, have tarnished its business-friendly reputation. Promising "no isolation, no quarantine and no restrictions" during a speech to business and tourism heavyweights, Chief Executive John Lee announced 5,00,000 free air tickets for visitors to experience the city's "hustle and bustle". The giveaway will open in March, and mainly be distributed by local airlines Cathay Pacific, HK Express and Hong Kong Airlines. Another 80,000 tickets will be offered to residents in the summer, with the carriers yet to announce destinations. Adherence to Beijing's zero-COVID doctrine of quarantine, closed borders and face masks kept Hong Kong largely virus-free until a deadly Omicron out-break at the start of 2022. But it also contributed to an economic recession and the exodus of more than 2.5% of the population.

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