SINGAPORE - Two months ago, I placed a $12,000 wager and bought four air tickets at bargain prices. I have won financially, but lost emotionally.

I snagged a Singapore Airlines business class return flight from Bangkok via Singapore to Newark for 122,060 baht (S$5,400) for summer travel. When I checked last week, the same flight cost 199,125 baht - a whopping increase of 63 per cent.

But the recent Covid-19 surge and lockdowns in the world have scuttled another wager - next month's trip to Japan. Thankfully, I am able to reschedule without financial pain. Yet, it is an emotional loss of a much-anticipated winter pilgrimage.

Like many travel hopefuls, I started planning ahead when news of the vaccine breakthrough surfaced in November. Fares were at rock bottom, but expected to skyrocket quickly.

However, last Thursday, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong grimly cautioned that even after everyone in Singapore has been vaccinated, varying travel restrictions will remain. International travel will take time to return to normal as it depends on the global Covid-19 situation.

Yes, planning a leisure trip amid the evolving pandemic is like trying to score against a moving goalpost. But we need some hope. With favourable booking terms, we can hedge and plan.

Savings for good times

In pandemic times, airlines and hotels are even more keen to retain their customer base. They bend over backwards to offer flexible booking terms, attractive perks and value. Membership status is maintained while validity of miles or points and award certificates are extended .

So sharpen the pencil, invest in research and homework. The hacks and savings will go a long way. We all need some good vibes in these times.

Here is a quick take on the travel outlook for the second half of this year and beyond, and some pointers to bear in mind when we start to plan to travel again.

1. TRAVEL BUZZWORDS: VACCINE CERTIFICATION, NEGATIVE COVID-19 TESTS AND COVID TRAVEL COVER

Qantas Airways created controversy in November when it was considering whether to reject unvaccinated passengers on international flights. This was quickly slammed as "discriminatory" by the World Travel and Tourism Council.

With countries at different stages of herd innoculation, Covid-19 vaccine certification is unlikely to be a mandated travel requirement soon.

Singapore was the first in Asia to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine last month, but its inoculation process is cautious.

Meanwhile, other nations with relatively small populations, such as the United Arab Emirates and Israel, would have each administered more than two million doses by this month.

Singapore is planning to ramp up its roll-out with 30 new Covid-19 centres and roving teams that can potentially deliver more than 70,000 doses a day.

So, I am hedging my bets and mapping out travel plans from the third quarter of this year when, hopefully, my vaccination is completed - in line with Singapore's inoculation target.

Meanwhile, more airlines are rolling out Covid-19 insurance to reassure travellers. Japan Airlines is the latest to provide complimentary Covid-19 cover for its international destinations worldwide.

Singapore Airlines' Covid-19 cover - stapled with a paid typical travel insurance - pales in comparison and does not cover journeys taken against travel advisories.

2. SEEK VALUE PROPOSITIONS: THE ANIMAL KINGDOM AND REMOTE COMMUNITIES

The travel world has had a one-year breather so far. For the animal kingdom, the hiatus means larger beasts, which are more curious and bolder. And in greater number.

Meanwhile, cut-off rural and remote communities will cautiously welcome the return of economic activities.

Pro tips

Last autumn, my plans to visit the remote Arctic Inuit settlements froze over as communities ringfenced themselves against the pandemic.

This year, if they reopen, I will time my visit with their yearly whale hunt - where dozens of polar bears mass in a feeding frenzy, feasting on what is left of whale carcasses.

August and September are peak animal migration months, including the massive wildebeest migration in Tanzania and Kenya.

Along South Africa's coastline, the schools of sardine that stretch for kilometres attract whales and also super-pods of dolphins and sharks.

In early autumn, Alaska's brown bears fatten up during the salmon run.

Between November and December, nearer home, Christmas Island transforms into a restless sea of red as 20 million to 30 million crabs migrate from the hills to the beaches in waves.

If travel restrictions are eased, take a break from the armchair BBC/National Geographic documentaries and see nature up close.

Netflix can wait.

3. HOTEL RATES A BARGAIN NOW, BUT MARKED INCREASES AHEAD

Room rates are low currently, but in a clear sign of confidence, hoteliers are slowly raising their prices.

Pro tips

Since bookings are fully refundable, do a quick check of your ideal hotel to tie up good rates for future trips. You can always cancel if plans change.

Within the cancellation window, always monitor for last-minute price drops or offers.

Be sure to book directly through the hotel websites for minimum fuss, in case you need to change bookings.

Always make comparisons using final prices that include taxes and fees. Some websites spring more charges only at the last step.

Snag an upgrade, or even a bottle of wine or cake for a special occasion - provide details under the column for special remarks/requests.

4. PAY FOR ROOMS OR USE REWARDS?

Room rates are dynamic and can swing, but the points required for a free stay remain largely static.

Take, for example, the World of Hyatt rewards programme for Hyatt hotels. Why use 20,000 points to redeem an US$80 (S$106) stay - for instance, at Hyatt Place NYC Times Square on Feb 1 - when the same number of points may later redeem a higher-value stay worth US$415 - at Grand Hyatt San Francisco on Nov 1, for example?

While a redemption is driven by need and availability, it is useful to bear in mind some benchmark values to create more bang for your buck.

Pro tips

When rates are low, you are better off paying with cash than using points. Inexpensive stays usually give poor conversion rates on the required points.

Use the points for more valuable stays. Do a quick comparison of options to establish a value of the redemption points. Make the points churn out higher value. For example, a night's stay at the romantic Park Hyatt Tokyo costs US$620 while it is US$760 at the newer, funky Andaz Tokyo. Both require 30,000 points for a free stay.

Better still, my favourite redemption plan is to use 30,000 points to snag a free stay at the super-zen Park Hyatt Kyoto, which would otherwise cost US$1,420 a night.

5. BE SELECTIVE AND PURPOSEFUL: TICK THE BUCKET LIST

With travel restrictions to continue, short regional trips bring little travel euphoria and may not be worth the trouble.

A fellow traveller, lawyer Alex Lee, took a five-week trip over the festive season.

Upon arrival in Bangkok, a military staff escorted him to the hotel meet-and-greet zone and then he was chauffeured into a 15-day quarantine.

Once completed, it was a week of revenge travel - cheap shopping, phad thai and Thai massage - before he slipped back into Singapore to face another two weeks of quarantine at home.

"My Thai quarantine cost $2,600 while the 'real' vacation for a week cost only $1,500. And I spent 80 per cent of the five weeks confined within four walls," Mr Lee muses.

He comforted himself that he cleared his annual leave and worked from home during the Singapore quarantine. But never again, he admits.

Besides the wishful travel bubbles, leisure travellers will prioritise quarantine-free entry. And if a quarantine caps the return home, the vacation time overseas ought to be purposeful and substantial.

Pro tips

Plan a bucket-list trip sans quarantine upon arrival. Think about a destination repeatedly put off because it takes time to get there, or so vast that it requires the luxury of time to explore and cherish.

A stellar once-in-a-lifetime dream destination? Tahiti. The borders of French Polynesian islands are open and only a negative Covid-19 test is required. The destinations are not peppered with lockdowns.

Another destination: the Caribbean islands. Most of the territories have reopened and require a negative Covid-19 test.

I am planning my third visit to Cuba - before the new Biden administration reverses its current ban and opens the floodgates to hordes of American tourists.

I would certainly do a travel reboot of beautiful Saint Lucia and chic Saint Barthelemy, and plan my visits as itinerary tag-ons.

While there, I plan to learn to sail the trade winds and island-hop between Grenada and Saint Vincent.

"Boys drive cars, men sail yachts," said a salty skipper I met three years ago in Antigua.