

A new departure: Changi Airport T5 as a unique lifestyle destination

More than shopping and dining – and travel, of course – how about a terminal as a place where you go to feel better?

Lynda Wee

Imagine an airport of the future, with curated lifestyle zones such as wellness offerings ranging from personalised beauty care to fitness pods where you work out in a virtual cityscape of downtown Singapore. Or you could visit a pop-up store offering an immersive tech playground. Cue the possibilities arising from ambitious Changi Airport Terminal 5 (T5).

Work has now started on the terminal, and it is expected to be operational in the mid-2030s. It will allow the whole airport to handle 140 million passengers a year, up from 90 million.

While Changi Airport already offers shopping and eating galore, T5 is a bold step in the direction of reimagining airports as lifestyle hubs and destinations in their own right, driven by a surge in travellers with new expectations of their flying experience.

For a city like Singapore, renowned for design, innovation, technology and hospitality, the airport must reflect not just where people are going, but how they want to feel when they get there.

So how does an airport, already ranked best in the world, go further? What could T5 look like, in those terms?

The answers require a reimagination of travel retail as an experience, not just an offering.

An important consideration is that airports are the gateways to a nation's soul. They are often the first hello and the final goodbye.

T5 can set the global standard for what airports can become – not just holding spaces, but meaningful places.

REDEFINING THE STOPOVER EXPERIENCE

The expected surge in traveller numbers brings more than just logistical scale and complexity. It reflects a shift in traveller profiles.

As a global aviation hub connecting Asia, Europe and the Pacific, Singapore welcomes not only more tourists and business travellers, but also a growing tide of transit and transfer passengers.

In 2024, Changi Airport handled over 67.7 million passengers, with a significant portion in transit, on their way to other destinations but choosing to stop in Singapore.

This group is expected to rise as Asia-Pacific becomes the world's largest aviation market by 2040 owing to the emerging economies and increased tourism interest in Asian cities.

Transit and transfer passengers have unique needs and mindsets.

They are often time-rich – stranded for several hours between flights – and experience-hungry, eager to convert their waiting time into something worthwhile and



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memorable. For travel retail, transit time presents transformation opportunities.

Yet, until recently, travellers have been perceived as transient, just passing through to reach their destinations. As a result, they are offered straightforward, functional stores selling products – wines and spirits, gadgets, chocolates, cosmetics and fragrances, to name a few.

Today's travellers are different. With global brands just a click away, the urgency to buy at the airport has faded. Add baggage constraints and a growing preference for seamless digital experiences, and traditional travel retail begins to feel dated.

Meanwhile, the traveller is also changing. Business travellers are now frequent fliers as global business grows. Leisure travellers increasingly view travel as a lifestyle, not a luxury.

Together, they form a new consumer base that is digitally fluent, experience-seeking and willing to invest in moments that feel personal.

The answer is to offer a terminal that is not just a place of transit, but a destination with curated lifestyle zones.

NEW WAYS WITH RETAIL

T5, which sits on a plot of 1,080ha, will almost double the size of Changi Airport's existing area, and so there's plenty of room for these curated lifestyle zones.

No longer just a place to shop in between gates, the airport is poised to become a destination

for treating oneself, exercising, discovery, immersion and brand storytelling.

Stopovers are often pre-planned, so passengers can be engaged even before they touch down.

Through a digital concierge or app, Changi Airport can empower passengers to discover, plan and custom-build their stopover itinerary, such as by booking a massage, reserving a nap pod, pre-ordering luxury goods or even signing up for a cultural micro-tour.

Picture artificial intelligence-powered prompts suggesting wellness products for jet lag, or fashion picks suited to upcoming weather conditions based on a planned destination.

In terms of retail offerings, luxury remains a cornerstone. From high fashion houses to fine jewellery and curated lifestyle brands, these tenants will always bring prestige and presence.

But now, it won't be just shopping, it will be theatre. These brands can fly in artists, designers or craftsmen to host live demonstrations and exclusive showcases.

I see this as emotional retailing at its finest. It disconnects the travellers from the transitory nature of airports and places them in a timeless world.

You also need timely surprises that inject novelty, spark curiosity and fuel social sharing. This can be offered by pop-up retailers, seasonal installations and rotating exhibitions. Whether it is a limited-edition sneaker drop or an immersive tech playground,

this ever-evolving layer of retail keeps the experience dynamic, especially for frequent fliers who pass through Changi multiple times a year.

The retail experience does not stop at the shopfront.

You need digital infrastructure that allows travellers to preview products, try them virtually, purchase them online and pick them up in person or have them shipped to home, facilitating seamless shopping, online and on the ground.

Taking another step, T5 could also offer a special buy-and-ship zone offering ship-to-home convenience. No more baggage stress, just curated convenience.

WELLNESS ON THE GO

For travellers disembarking from a flight and waiting to board the next, a freshen-up becomes an attractive proposition. It is about restoring body, mind and spirit.

For fitness lovers, consider augmented reality-enhanced spin classes that ride through Singapore's skyline, or quick strength workouts in gym pods.

For the stressed, mindfulness rooms could provide the dedicated space for breathing exercises, meditation and yoga.

For the exhausted, rejuvenation in multisensory pods offering scent, sound and light therapy can induce calm and rest.

Travel can take a toll on one's skin, posture and energy levels. On-the-go beauty rituals such as hydrating facials, oxygen therapy, anti-fatigue massages and hair and scalp treatments could be

offered.

Singapore brands could be roped in for an authentic Asian touch, with dermatology clinics in the airport for personalised skincare consultations tailored to one's skin type and travel destination.

Or there could be spaces encapsulating "Blue Zone" living, referring to regions known for having the longest-living populations in the world. These spaces could focus on healthy food, movement and mindfulness to enhance longevity and well-being.

A thoughtfully designed personal care zone could make the difference between a frustrating wait and a rejuvenating interlude.

As a showcase of local culture, a Little Red Dot zone could celebrate Singapore with live performances, local crafts and rotating exhibitions. Travellers could taste hawker favourites, check out Singapore brands and interact with Singapore's multicultural heritage without leaving the terminal.

For example, there could be a Peranakan heritage craft exhibition where local artisans showcase their embroidery apparel; or tile-making and batik demonstrations.

A SEAMLESS REGIONAL LOYALTY PROGRAMME

With more connections and transactions being done, these become opportunities to recognise passengers for their patronage through a regional

loyalty ecosystem.

This could be shared between Changi and partner airports, airlines and brands – one that follows the passengers across continents as well as rewards them.

Many travellers are frequent fliers, loyalty members, app users, or digital natives with established patterns and preferences. But their data is often siloed across airlines, banks, hotels and travel-related services.

The future lies in partnership. By forging alliances, travel retail can harness unified data to understand travellers' needs in real time and respond with curated, personalised offerings that truly matter.

With a diverse and growing traveller base, larger physical space, modern digital infrastructure, seamless immigration processes, a vast airline network and a proven track record, Changi Airport has the critical mass to evolve into a true lifestyle destination hub offering travellers a richer, more meaningful experience.

The market is ready, and the resources are in place.

What's needed now is collaboration among retailers, tech innovators, wellness providers and cultural advisers to build an integrated and powerful ecosystem that transforms transit into a curated journey.

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