

TRAVEL VISAS –
KEEPING THE DESTINATION'S FRONT
DOOR OPEN

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THE POWER of THE RUBBER STAMP

A new year has begun. Across the world people are setting new dreams, new directions, new diets, new deliverables, and new destinations for the year ahead. With the calling in of twelve fresh months of possibility comes a wonderful perception of increase in control of one's world. Changes, challenges, and achievements are all strengthened in their potential for success. Energy is high, anticipation is fresh and fiery!

For the world's travel and tourism industry, 2012 marks a formidable milestone. In 2012 the industry will cross the mark of over 1 *billion* international travelers. Despite economic pains and resulting emotional strains, travellers of the world are determined to keep moving, keep seeing, keep exploring, keep connecting, keep learning, keep contributing. E-ticket, money, passport, mobile phone / laptop / tablets, chargers, all set. In their minds, nothing could possibly keep them back.

That is until it is discovered that a travel visa may be required...

GAINING ACCESS

The 21st Century has seen our world lose its borders. Through transformational advances at technological, political, psychological, social and mobile levels, the world has become a collective space of exploration and expression. Finances aside, individuals can move across the globe with a global identity document – a passport – in hand (or retina scan). While a seemingly simple document issued by nations capturing what may appear as personal information 101, the purpose and importance of a passport is often overlooked, as is just how dramatically travel has evolved.

The term 'passport' is believed to come from its pure function of being a carrier of permission to *pass* through the *porte* (door or gate) of a territory. First references to a passport can be found as far back as 450BC, in the Hebrew Bible, during the time of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah, one of the dutiful officials of King Artaxerxes I of Persia, set out on his travels to Judea holding in his possession a letter from the King requesting governors of other neighbouring lands that they offer Nehemiah safe passage as he travelled through their lands. Ultimately, it is England's King Henry V who history credits for formalizing passports as an official way of supporting, and protecting, his subjects as they ventured out into foreign lands.

To this day, a passport represents a capture of essential personal details of a national, issued by their home rulers (governments), verifying that the traveller is a legal citizen of their home nation, and is used for the purposes of honestly and safely entering the gates (border crossings) of foreign lands. It is also, of course, a means of tracking the movements of a nation's citizen back home.

With dramatic changes occurring in global mobility of citizens, increased checks on travellers became required. Unquestioned, open-ended entry became more of a curse than a blessing for receiving nations. Passport holders soon needed to prove that their

identity is legitimate, their intentions for entry were honourable, and their reasons for entry needed to be clearly defined. First introduced around 1835, *visas* became vehicles for further endorsement by governments, stating the specific reason for entry, effectively forming a contract between the passport holder and the nation being requested entry.

This purpose of the visa remains to this day. For tourists, ultimately, a tourist visa is a formal statement of trust.

For the traveller, it is a commitment to enter a country and play by the rules. Receiving nations trust that you will come, stay, enjoy...and leave.

For the destination, it is a commitment to open certain doors of a nation to the traveler.

At its essence, the role of a visa is clear, and its need clearly understood.

The process of attaining a visa, however, is where clarity diminishes. And where excitement of travel can be extinguished.

RIGHT OF ADMISSION RESERVED

Visas have, today, become an interesting reflection of relations between the governments of different nations. Political and financial capital have become determinants of visa requirements of citizens.

There is no golden rule for which nations require visas and which do not. It is not about developed versus emerging nations, western vs eastern. Logic need not apply when it comes to visa applications.

For many nations with *friendly* relations, trusted policies, or historical treaties, visa waivers may be put in place, eliminating the need and cost for visa securement by passport holders seeking entry. In many other nations, visa on arrival is provided. Either way, the process is easy, if not completely absent.

Still, there are less than fortunate realities facing our world today that make it necessary for visas to be demanded of hopeful entrants, examples being:

1. Illegal immigration: suspicion of abuse of national borders by those seeking relocation, employment, and a chance at a better life
2. Global Terror: entry into a nation by those threatening the security and safety of nationals
3. Political Sparring: nations using travel visas as a tool for political point-scoring against those nations they are battling with over unrelated issues

Visas are being demanded prior to entry as a mechanism of protection of national security as well as social systems and structures.

Sadly, with increased flows of travelers, increased suspicion around reasons for entry, increasing revenue generating potential of visas, the process of securing tourist visas seems to be turning into more of an expensive inquisition than an application. For millions of travelers, the process of attaining a visa can be one of the most unpredictable and unpleasant parts of the travel experience. Foreign offices of many destinations have adopted a 'guilty until proven innocent' approach to assessing visa applications. Lengthy, costly, aggressive, inconsistent and highly administrative application and interview processes are inflicted on hopeful holiday makers as a way of determining genuine spirit of intent of entry, visitation and exit. While the need for screening is understood, the attitude and methods are questionable.

The net effect: for potential travellers, 'VISA', often, becomes a nasty four-letter word. As powerfully expressed by Peter Kerkar, Global Chief Executive of leading Indian travel company Cox and Kings when discussing the matter of securing visas to the UK amongst a gathering of global Ministers of Tourism and CEOs in London at the end of 2011:

"It's worse than an IRS audit. The "humiliation of this process is incredible. And then there is no consistency in terms of rejection. If a family applies, the father and two children may be accepted but the mother will be rejected. There is no explanation. We (visitors from BRICS nations) don't want to leave our countries, we love our countries. We just want to visit yours."

From a governmental perspective, as stated by Pavlos Geroulanos, the honourable Minister of Tourism of Greece,:

"Visas are to free travel what tariffs are to free trade. They create more problems than they (have) intent to fix. Take the Schengen visa. Its intention is to stop illegal immigration for which it has done close to nothing while it has been detrimental to tourism."

Speaking from direct experience, Minister Geroulanus continues.:

"Compare growth rates of Russians traveling to Turkey and Greece. The Russian outbound market opened for Turkey and Greece at the same time. Russians had a choice of either of the two sides of the Aegean roughly at the same time. Three factors made the difference in arrivals: culture, price and visas. Visas made the difference. The Schengen visa process turned potential Russian visitors away from Greece and towards Turkey. 'Til today, Greece falls far short in attracting these important travellers. Countries like mine do not have the luxury to miss out on such growth opportunities."

Importantly, Greece's Minister of Tourism put the spotlight on the underlying message being extended by what should be a global hospitality sector.:

"Apart from adding a planning inconvenience as well as an extra cost, visas project a message that says: "we don't want you around". The EU is once again shooting itself in the foot by leaving the job of its image to bureaucrats who will treat a Chinese or Russian person as if they are second-rate criminals. "How do I

know you will return to your country?" asked EU bureaucrat of a Chinese millionaire. Is this the image we want to project as a tourism-loving continent?"

FINDING A SINGLE STAMP OF APPROVAL

While the risks of visa processes to traveler activity are noted, the risks of outright elimination are also present. Sadly, for this reason, those honestly seeking admission through the front door are penalized because of those travelers trying to sneak through the back door.

The issue of increased traveler movements in tandem to increased security is a global debate. It need not, and should not, be an *'either/or'*. It must be an *'and'* if the global travel and tourism industry is to grow in a way that truly connects the world, sustainably, meaningfully, equitably and healthily.

Elimination of the visa is not the answer. Rather, elimination of the hassles is the seed of the solution. As suggested by the honourable Minister of Tourism of South Africa, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, establishment of a global e-visa system would provide our industry with a quantum leap forward in addressing these fundamental issues, and unlocking critical barriers to traveler desire and destination growth.

The debate must continue. New ideas, new insights, new innovations, new approaches will provide us with the solution(s) that keeps us safe and secure, as travellers and travel destinations.

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