

The Great Visa Reversal

ONE OF the most important developments of the travel and tourism industry in the 1990s was the recognition that visa requirements are a significant, if not the most significant, impediment to travel. Anyone who has experienced the pleasure of travelling through airports in Europe by flashing a passport at the immigration officer knows the sheer ease and convenience of seamless visa-free travel.

Governments and national tourism organisations began to recognise that travel and tourism growth could be fast-tracked by removing impediments and bottlenecks to the movement of peoples and goods across borders. Before September 11, 2001, efforts to remove or relax visa hurdles were making much headway in several regional and sub-regional areas.

Today, not only have these efforts been shelved, the possibility of further relaxation looks very dim indeed.

This setback does not augur well for the future of travel. An industry that was arguing, and winning, the case for continued relaxation of visa formalities and regulations due to the positive economic and job-creation impact now looks set to be ignored because of safety and security priorities. Not only has the industry been caught off-guard but it is ill-prepared to handle the huge bureaucratic and administrative tangle associated with it.

Safety and security concerns are here to stay, and clearly must remain of paramount concern for both the visitors and the visited. But this should not be, indeed must not be, at the expense of travel and tourism. Ways have to be found to reconcile the importance of safety without affecting the travel

and tourism industry's well-known ability to create jobs and foreign exchange.

This edition of *Issues and Trends* will argue the need for a non-discriminatory universal visa to better help separate the wheat from the chaff in an increasingly turbulent world.

The Messy World of Visas

The world of visas is discriminatory, complex, confusing, chaotic and costly for both applicants and those who man the machinery behind the system. Here are just a few examples of how messy the system can get:

DOUBLE STANDARDS: Developing countries have come under considerable pressure to give visa-free access to citizens of the rich industrialised countries, while the reverse is clearly not the case. This means that gangsters, paedophiles, rogue financiers, drug dealers, prostitution racketeers, among other criminals and less desirables from the industrialised countries, can get visa-free entry into developing countries. This not only allows them to seek refuge from the law in their own countries but raises the very real prospects of them quickly becoming security threats to the developing countries themselves. By contrast, even respectable bankers, businessmen and academics from developing countries need visas for the industrialised countries. Is this fair? Why should this continue to be the case?

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: The first step in the process of applying for a visa is to check the location of the nearest consular office. If the visa applicant is living in a

capital city with an embassy or consulate, then a visit is convenient. If not, it depends on whether the embassy concerned accepts applications by mail or courier. In which case, one worries about the future of that passport, including the potential for theft, while in transit. If the documentation is not in order, back goes the passport and time is wasted.

PAPERWORK (otherwise known as “supporting documentation”): This can include tax forms, bank statements, letters of invitation, letters from employers, confirmed return air-tickets, forms that have to be filled in duplicate or triplicate, and photographs. For expatriates living abroad, it can mean work permits, proof of residency, etc. Some embassies have forms that are downloadable from an Internet site. Others distribute them only from the diplomatic missions. The information required on these forms can be overly invasive and is sometimes less than obvious in terms of relevance. Consider entries such as, “Dates of previous travel (to the country concerned)” or “Name of mother.”

SECURITY OF INFORMATION: Who has access to this information? What guarantee does an applicant have that their private information is not shared by embassy staff with anyone who may misuse it? What checks and balances are in place to ensure against this? What legal recourse do the applicants have in case they have reason to suspect misuse?

TYPES OF VISAS: Is the purpose of travel to visit a friend, to have a holiday, for business, or for a convention? For each of those categories, the documentation and processing period can be different. Some countries give multiple entry visas, others do not. Some multiple entry visas are valid for five years, others only for six months. Some countries require the visa to be used within one month from the date of issue, others allow three months. And so forth.

VISA CHARGES: The fees vary from one country to another. Some peg it on the basis of reciprocity, which means that citizens of developing countries may pay – what seems to them – outrageous amounts. Often these rates fluctuate with the prevailing exchange rates. Virtually no embassy takes credit cards. Either way, the charges can add up to a considerable chunk of the overall travel costs. If the visa

application is being made through a travel agency, additional costs are incurred there, too.

INTERVIEWS: In the days before heightened security concerns, it used to be a relatively simple formality, in many countries, to send the company messenger down with the stack of paperwork to the diplomatic mission. Now, many embassies want the applicant to turn up in person, just in case they need to be interviewed. This might be possible for a person travelling alone, but if the family is going along, then the process becomes more arduous and the trip less appealing.

PROCESSING TIMES: This can take anywhere from one to three days. Embassies are trying to expedite the turnaround time, especially those of developing countries facing the pressure of declining arrivals. A 24-hour turnaround time is okay if only one country is to be visited. More often than not, travellers, especially first-timers, like to visit several countries at the same time. The increased time wasting this can involve contradicts the book-pack-and-go immediacy of travel bookings, a major driving force in determining choice of destination. As Internet bookings grow, and advance booking-periods shorten, market forces will increasingly favour those destinations where people can go without a visa.

PEAK TIMES: Because travel tends to occur around peak times like school vacations or long holidays, embassies get deluged around those times, putting further pressure on consular staff. This can mean more hassles, longer waiting times and more complaints.

FORGERIES: The United Nations has 189 member states. Do consular staff at all embassies everywhere know how to detect a forged passport of each and every one of those nationalities? What about forgeries of the other supporting documents?

EMBASSY INFRASTRUCTURE: The quality of waiting rooms at many embassies leaves much to be desired. There, and in long queues, visa applicants jostle for space with the citizens of the country concerned awaiting consular services. Some embassies do not have waiting rooms at all. Many open their visa windows only for a few hours in the

mornings. If the applicant is not there on time, then one day is lost.

ATTITUDES OF CONSULAR STAFF: A visa office is the first point of contact for a person wishing to visit a particular country, the so-called first moment of truth. While airlines, tourist offices and other such points of contact in the tourism industry itself are trained to be friendly and accommodating, consular staff may be less inclined thus. Applicants often find impolite or cranky personnel who consider applicants guilty until proven innocent. Consular staff at embassies of industrialised countries tend to be slightly better trained and professional than those from developing countries.

PROBLEMS AT CHECK-IN COUNTERS: The full complexity of visa regulations may not be in the airline computer system. Under a bilateral agreement, Country A may have a regulation granting citizens of Country B a visa-free stay of three days, provided they can show a confirmed onward booking. But if staff at airline check-in counters do not know that, or if it is not in the computer, tense scenes can ensue when the citizen of country B is denied boarding.

Being up-to-speed with the myriad of visa regulations is not the airlines' responsibility, but because they are being made to pay for deportation of passengers who turn up without visas, they are becoming increasingly concerned, and vigilant. If the person denied boarding is a real threat, so be it. If not, be prepared for some angry complaints, lost future business and higher costs when lawsuits ensue.

NO GUARANTEE OF ACCEPTANCE: Even if all the paperwork is in order and the visa approved, embassies say that the final right on whether to allow or not allow a person into that country rests with the Immigration officers at the international point of entry. It is unlikely that anyone will be turned away, but it can happen.

These examples above are only a fraction of the reality on the ground. The pressures of safety and security are only worsening the situation. Even after all that, it is debatable how much difference the system truly makes, how much extra security it provides as against the costs they exact.

Furthermore, this is an era in which immigration and emigration are facts of life. Many people often hold dual and

triple nationality. The citizenship and ethnic or cultural background of the traveller is no indication of whether that person is or is not a security threat. People's private political, social, religious or cultural beliefs are neither stamped in their documentation nor reflected in the colour of their skin.

Towards a Universal Visa

All of the above lends a sense of urgency for the global travel and tourism industry to initiate a universal visa system based on common security, administrative and financial standards that can be fairly applied, address the issues, simplify and expedite the process, facilitate travel and still enhance safety and security.

The system will no doubt be legally, technologically and financially complex, but perhaps no less complex than setting up a single currency. If that can be done, why not this?

Yes, it could mean transgressing certain boundaries and may even necessitate setting up a global database of people with criminal records. Or it could involve some kind of global ID card that is recognisable and readable across borders, one that would include a more detailed history of personal information and would replace passports. Privacy issues will arise but that is the trade-off and risk one lives with even when paying for a simple transaction with a credit card.

Yes, it will also be expensive, but travellers are already paying for the heightened cost of safety and security today. Note that this heightened security today only applies to aviation. Security levels are often much lower at road, rail and sea border crossings, effectively neutralising any preventive benefits of increased aviation security.

To some extent, the possibility of creating a universal visa is made easier by the fact that two relatively smooth visa systems already exist.

- Australia requires visas of citizens of all countries, excluding New Zealand. No one can even get on a plane without proof of visa issuance in the airline reservation code. Even transit passengers who are only changing planes in an Australian airport en-route to a holiday in New Zealand

need an Australian visa, even if they are not going to pass immigration or leave the airport there.

- The Schengen visa in Europe is another good example of how a one-visa policy can be implemented. It took years to negotiate and set up, but it appears to work relatively well and has a good balance of flexibility and security built into it. With a Schengen visa, travellers may travel freely throughout the Schengen zone, which currently includes Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Greece, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

A combination of the two systems could make an ideal fit and be expanded country by country, region by region. The experience and track record of these visa systems means that others thinking of moving along the same lines need not reinvent the wheel. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is mooting the possibility of setting up a single-visa system. This might be a good place to start to iron out the cricks and wrinkles.

Clearly, immigration agencies already know much about running such systems. The technology, too, exists: Smart-cards, hand-prints, face and eye-recognition are coming on board. If proper standards are worked out, it could save the developing countries huge bills in being sold obsolete technology.

Conclusion

Universal protection remains perhaps the most compelling reason for a universal visa. Safety and security does not involve only protection against terrorism. It means keeping all borders of all countries free of all kinds of criminals and potential troublemakers.

Developing countries want to keep their countries free of rogues and criminals from developed countries just as much as developed countries want to keep their countries free of illegal immigrants and potential asylum seekers from developing countries. Unfortunately, developing countries rely on tourism income, but do not have the money to set up elaborate visa-scrutinising machinery.

This imbalance must be sorted out.

Clearly, the best way of easing safety and security fears is by addressing the deeper political, social and economic issues that feed them. While there is no foolproof system, just as there is no loophole-free legal system, there is however, ample proof of how some countries have used visa policies to good advantage.

Lao PDR and Cambodia, both classified by the United Nations as the least developed countries in the world, used visa-free or visa-on-arrival policies to open their countries to tourism in the 1990s. Pre-September 11, Cambodia was racking up some of the highest annual visitor-arrival growth rates in the world. Clearly, this did what tourism should do in the developing countries: generate foreign exchange, create jobs and income and raise living standards.

The interests of the majority must not be hijacked by the need to keep out a minority. When it comes to facilitation, the travel and tourism industry needs to gear up to face this new era of new realities, and come up with new solutions in which everyone's interests are served – speedily, inexpensively, fairly and efficiently.

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