



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The world will become even more visa-free in 2024



Travel plans for millions globally will be eased from the start of the year, given that trends of visa waivers continue as governments seek to boost their economies and the flow of people.

The government in Bangkok **announced** last Tuesday that Thailand and China will permanently abolish travel visas for their citizens from March.

Beijing is responding in this way to a move by Thailand, which abolished visas for Chinese citizens last September, and to boost its tourism industry after bad years during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tourism accounts for around 20% of Thailand's GDP. It has been severely affected by a drop in visits from China, which declined from approximately 11 million in the pre-pandemic period to around 4 million last year. There are expectations that eliminating visa requirements for Chinese visitors will promote a resurgence to previous high levels.

Thailand already has a good experience with arrivals from India, which in the last 2 months of 2023 increased by as much as 28%. This was a direct result of the abolition of visas for Indian citizens last October.

China has followed a similar logic. Last November, it **introduced** a trial period of one year during which tourists from Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Malaysia could enter China without visas.

The Kenyan government has opened its doors to everyone since January 1. "It shall no longer be necessary for any person from any corner of the globe to carry the burden of applying for a visa to come to Kenya", said President William Ruto 2 weeks ago, announcing a move from which Kenyan tourism expects a return to pre-pandemic levels.

After years of waiting, from January 1, citizens of Kosovo can **travel to the European Union** without visas and stay in it for up to 90 days. This small Balkan country has a large EU emigration and considers this opening a significant step for its ambitions to become a

member of the Union.

Openness overcomes xenophobia

Even authoritarian regimes, such as Iran, have resorted to visa-free entry, prioritising profits from hosting foreign guests over xenophobia.

Last December, Tehran **cancelled** visas for citizens of as many as 33 countries, including India, Saudi Arabia, Russia, the UAE, and numerous African countries, but only for one member of the G7 (Japan) and one from the EU (Croatia).

Profit from tourism is the principal motive for this decision in Tehran, which is satisfied with the growth of revenues of almost 50% in the last year compared to 2022, but seeks to encourage that wave even more.

However, this regards not only tourism. The government wants to use this to neutralise, as it stated, Iranophobia campaigns globally.

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Popular indices for "measuring" the power of passports for 2024 also confirm some previous regularities, despite the somewhat different criteria they apply in their research.

First of all, they clearly correlate the possibility of citizens of a country travelling without visas with the openness of their market and its stable and high growth. However, the more travel restrictions (more visa requests) a country has, the more issues it has with its economy, politics, and security.

Strong economies are also the most open

At the top of the list of several passport indices, Asian countries dominate, primarily Singapore and Japan, whose citizens can travel without visas to more than 190 countries.

The UAE, which moved from 56th to 12th place on the quarterly ratings list of the Henley Passport Index and obtained visa-free status for up to 107 countries in the last 10 years, has joined them.

According to another popular index, the **Global Passport Index**, an interactive platform that forms ratings for each change in visa regimes, the UAE took the leading position at the end of 2023.

On either list, the trend for 2024 remains largely unchanged. In addition to highly developed Asian economies, such as Japan, Singapore and South Korea, almost all EU members are at the top again, followed by the UK, Norway, Switzerland, Australia, and the US.



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This regularity between openness to travel and economic performance is reflected at the top and the bottom of the list, where countries have traditionally been plagued by conflict, autocratic rule and widespread corruption.

Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Palestine, and Syria are again at the bottom of global openness and trust in their passports. They enjoy a visa-free regime in only about 30

countries globally.

Even though they seem to be in a vicious circle, countries with strong visa restrictions cannot count on the world to be more open to them until they make their own economic and security systems more reliable and internationally verifiable.

Freedom of travel, as a significant prerequisite for raising global exchange, generally increases over the years. The average number of countries whose citizens can travel without a visa has doubled in the last 15 years, and only 8 countries have less visa-free access today than a decade ago.