

RUSSIAN FAR-EAST: VISA-FREE REGIME FOR CHINESE TOURISTS?



Chinese tourists are travelling all around the world and many countries are realizing the potential of the possible inflow from the Far East. As a result, many countries are relaxing or even cancelling the visa requirements for the entry of visitors from China. Even Russian authorities are considering visa-free regime with China.

Russia is traditionally one of the favorite destinations for the Chinese tourists which is why many suggest that visa application requirements should be eliminated for their entry into the country.

Russia has a precedent to base its potential decision on. **Four years ago, all entry visa requirements were cancelled for South Korean visitors staying in the country for up to 60 days.** This has brought unexpected fruit, especially in the port city of Vladivostok. Every year since 2015, the number of guests from South Korea has doubled. In the first 10 months of 2018, the number grew by 150% to a total of 290 thousand.

Thus said, the question is, can Russia go visa-free with China as well? As of now, Russia gives out visas for a period of up to 30 days, as well as visas for businessmen upon invitation from a Russian organization for 30 to 90 days. Moreover, there is also a visa-free regime for organized tour groups from three people for a period of 21 days. There is also a special regime in Vladivostok, with electronic visas given out to citizens of 18 countries, including China. However, visitors cannot leave the region with this visa and have to enter and exit from the same place, which limits the interest in this service.

As a result, the most convenient but also most expensive way for Chinese tourists to visit Russia is to travel with traditional visas, with the cost starting at \$90. Mostly, however, visitors prefer to travel in groups to avoid paying this fee. This is why there have been many discussions about a possible visa-free regime for the Chinese tourists. However, one of the problems is that Russia would only agree to a mutual visa-free regime, not unilateral. But this is not prioritized by China, seeing the conservative approach of the country towards visa regimes.

The example of South Korea shows what the result can be, with both sides benefiting greatly from the visa-free regime. South Koreans with an interesting holiday destination not far away from Seoul and the citizens of Vladivostok can enjoy the development of their city in terms of infrastructure, air services and much more.

The behavior of Chinese and South Korean tourists surely is different. Thus said, it is not sure whether the same approach with Chinese tourists would lead to the same positive results, as there is a lack of statistics in this sense. Most of the data comes from border controls or are focused on revenues, rather than behavior. At this point, one can only guess the possible effect.

Meanwhile, the opponents of such a step are bringing in their arguments. Some expect a visa-free regime to cause problems in terms of control of immigration. Economically speaking, the elimination of visas would be an issue, considering that many institutions as well as travel agencies benefit from the visa fees paid by the Chinese tourists.

It is difficult to say at this moment what the effects would be. Last year, Taiwan started a pilot visa-free regime for Russians until the end of July this year. Russia could look at this example and go by the same path, with no significantly bad consequences possible in a pilot version.

Paradoxically, China can also be an example for Russia, despite the conservative approach to visa-free regimes. **In the past couple of years, the country has opened itself to 24-hour visa-free transit in almost all their airports.** Some cities even extend the period to 72 hours or more.

The steps remain to be seen but after a successful attempt in Vladivostok for an electronic visa, one can ask why this is not tried in other Russian cities. From Kaliningrad to Novosibirsk, Yekaterinburg or Murmansk, which are popular destinations amongst the Chinese tourists.

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