

# PROS AND CONS: RUSSIA ANNOUNCED E-VISA AND A TRAVEL BAN FOR CHINESE VISITORS



Tourism experts have been pointing out for a long time that the troublesome and obsolete system of tourist visas in Russia negatively affects the industry as a whole, and above all the number of incoming visitors. The authorities thus decided to change the system.

After a series of global sanctions, GDP stagnation, and following the successful experiment of hosting the 2018 World Cup, Russia is planning to introduce e-visa as a means to boost tourism growth and income. **The e-visa (or electronic visa) will be introduced on January 1, 2021, throughout the country, after its implementation as a pilot project in three destinations.**

“Our goal is to be able to open the country, which was closed to the world for many years (...) the last 20 years for Russia have been very hard and tourism was not a priority. Now we see it as a priority,” says Zarina Dogúzova, President of the Federal Agency for Tourism of Russia (Rosturizm).

Authorities began testing the waters in 2017 with an e-visa that allowed citizens of 18 countries to only visit the city of Vladivostok for 8 days, located in the eastern part of the country. The plan was extended last summer to Kaliningrad and to tourists from 53 countries - including member countries of the EU - and, in September, to the crown jewel of Russia: Saint Petersburg. More than 300,000 people have made use of these visas' regime. The visa exemption for those attending the 2018 World Cup boosted the annual number of visits by 10%.

But Russia already knew how far this experiment could go. Few tourists settle for visiting only one city, and those who wish to travel the rest of the country still have to face a complex and expensive process. Next year, starting from January 1, people will only have to fill out an online form at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and an e-visa will be issued within four days. This will put an end to invitation letters or having to inform hotels about registrations, which then provide information to the authorities.

“We know that the visa is one of the toughest issues. Modern people want to travel freely, cross borders and enjoy their holidays with the least obstacles [possible] and we understand that. If we want to take a step forward, we need to do some things that are a trend throughout the world, such as making the visa process easier. It was not an easy decision for the Government, for the president [himself],” says Mrs. Dogúzova.

The e-visa will go from the 8 days of the pilot project to 16 days, still far from the 90-day visa-free transit for the Schengen area, and from the 30 days of the majority of non-electronic Russian visas. Dogúzova believes that it is the first step and hopes that the definitive list of countries, still under study, will surpass the 53 countries of the pilot project, of which the United States, for example, is not part of.

“I'd very much like for more Americans to visit Russia because it is one of the less active markets in Russia; it is not so much a matter of security as of having the same visa regime,” she says. It is no

surprise that the United Kingdom is also left out after the diplomatic crisis in 2018 due to the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, which London chalked up as part of Russian military espionage inner conflicts, and that forced the EU to enforce sanctions against Moscow for chemical attacks.

According to the expert, the implementation of the national e-visa in 2021 will increase the number of tourists by 30% to 40% compared to this year.

10 years ago, only 158,000 Chinese visitors traveled to Russia. Today, they account for the majority (19%) of the 5 million tourists who visited the country in 2019, a fifth more than the previous year. Chinese groups of up to 50 people may travel visa-free, and authorities have hired multilingual personnel for airports and railway stations. Russia and China share a border, and their presidents, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, maintain a good political and personal relationship. In recent years, both presidents have been strengthening their strategic alliance, as seen last December in the inauguration of the Power of Siberia natural gas pipeline to compensate for the damaged relations with the United States and the European Union.

However, welcoming the Chinese market with open arms was not well received by everyone. Alla Manílova, Vice Minister of Culture, suggests allocating specific days for foreign visitors in the most popular destinations. "Other tourists cannot enter some tourist attractions because the Chinese groups are there filling the place up," said Manílova while recalling Tsarskoye Seló, the famous town of the tsars near St. Petersburg.

Lately, the coronavirus has come in the way of tourism activity. **Last week, Moscow imposed a travel ban on Chinese visitors, temporarily reversing the visa exemption for Chinese tourist groups** and removing them from the pilot project in St. Petersburg, Kaliningrad and Vladivostok, a city located just kilometers away from the border.

"It is too early to talk about numbers because it is not high season yet. It will depend on how the situation unfolds. Most Chinese visitors come in spring and summer. We see those tour operators are worried, but the situation is not dramatic," says Dogúzova.

The Association of Tour Operators of Russia has estimated at 90 million euros the losses that the country may suffer if the Chinese tourist flow does not recover by the end of March, which is a peak month of the season.

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