

CHINESE TOURISTS REGAINED THE LEADING POSITION IN VISITING RUSSIA



According to the border service of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the number of foreign tourists visiting Russia has tripled from January to September 2023 in comparison to the previous year.

The increase in tourist flow can be attributed to the introduction of electronic visas and the resumption of visa-free travel for groups from China. As a result, **Chinese tourists have once again become the leading group for trips to Russia.** During this period, the FSB recorded 105.8 thousand cases of Chinese tourists crossing the Russian border.

Between January and September 2023, Russia saw a significant surge in tourists from various countries. The most visitors came from Germany, Turkey, Iran, and Turkmenistan. The number of tourist trips from Germany, Turkey, and Iran has doubled compared to the previous year, with 42 thousand, 33.7 thousand, and 25.5 thousand trips, respectively. Notably, the number of trips from Turkmenistan to Russia has increased by eleven times, reaching 23.5 thousand compared to 2.1 thousand in the previous year.

Why Are Chinese Tourists Important for Russia?

Chinese tourists were the largest group of foreign tourists visiting Russia before the pandemic. A visa-free regime between Russia and China enabled this. In 2019, 1.4 million Chinese tourists visited Russia, with most coming as part of a group. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the visa waiver agreement was temporarily suspended in 2020.

Due to the pandemic and travel restrictions, the number of foreign tourists visiting Russia significantly decreased in 2020 and 2021. In the summer of 2022, Russia lifted COVID-related restrictions, but the war in Ukraine and the following sanctions by many countries interrupted direct flights with Russia. This led to fewer foreign tourists visiting Russia by the end of 2022. However, the visa-free regime has increased the number of Chinese tourists visiting Russia.

Russia and China renewed their visa-free travel agreement in August 2023, generating high hopes for the return of Chinese tourists. The visa-free regime for tourist groups between Russia and China became operational in mid-September, and the electronic visa mechanism launched on August 1 has also contributed to the growth of tourist flows. The Ministry of Economic Development noted that the incoming tourist flow is growing and has already surpassed 100 thousand people through electronic visas and visa-free group trips from China and Iran. The Ministry predicts that the incoming tourist flow will continue to grow next year, and they plan to launch a tourist card by the end of this year. They also plan to promote Russia as a tourism brand in 17 priority countries, including China, the Republic of Korea, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, India, Malaysia, and others.

How Much Did Russia Earn from Tourists from China?

Chinese tourists were the top spenders among foreigners visiting Russia before the pandemic. In

2019, their total spending reached \$1 billion. **Russia was a popular market for Chinese tourists due to the weak ruble.** They mainly purchased premium and luxury goods, such as clothing, bags, shoes, watches, and jewelry. Chinese visitors were also active in Russian museums, such as the State Historical Museum, where up to 70% of foreign tourists were from China.

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