

VISA-FREE POLICY NEGATIVELY IMPACTS TOURISM IN KENYA



In January of this year, Kenya began allowing travelers worldwide to enter the country without requiring a visa. President William Ruto announced in December of the previous year that all tourists would be exempt from visas starting in early 2024.

Although the decision to open Kenya's borders to visitors from all over the world may help boost the growth of the country's tourism industry, a major problem is that **the visa-free policy negatively impacts the sector and the economy instead of promoting it.**

Last year, during the 60th Jamhuri Day celebrations in Nairobi, President Ruto announced that obtaining a visa to enter Kenya was no longer necessary. This decision to make Kenya visa-free and open the borders to global citizens came after another proclamation by the president in Congo-Brazzaville in October of the same year.

In his speech announcing this latest historic move, President Ruto said: "As the President of this extraordinary country, it is with great pleasure that I make a historic announcement of the decision of the Government of Kenya. From January 2024, Kenya will be a visa-free country."

This now-iconic speech quickly went viral, and it seemed that the country was finally entering the era of globalization with an approach encouraging steady socio-economic development.

Kenya's tourism industry needs a boost. While many travelers list an African safari as a top destination, traveling to and across the continent can be challenging due to logistical issues. Obtaining a visa adds to the paperwork and costs.

The Kenyan authorities have developed a new platform to identify and track travelers entering the country. Instead of obtaining a visa, travelers must obtain an Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) issued by the digital site. While the ETA is technically a simplified visa form and comes with a processing fee, it is issued for security reasons. It maintains a database of people entering and leaving the country.

Obtaining the ETA can be complicated enough that even visas seem more accessible. Under the new ETA system, nationals of countries that previously did not need an entry visa to travel to Kenya will now have to pay between \$34 and \$52 to enter the country, like everyone else.

Before implementing the visa-free policy, individuals from 51 different nationalities were not required to have a visa to travel to the country. However, they now have to go through a time-consuming process that entails providing their flight details, evidence of their hotel reservation, and other necessary documents before they can travel. After submitting these documents, they must wait 72 hours for electronic authorization to travel to the country.

For this process to function effectively, individuals must know their arrival and departure dates well in advance to apply for the permit. However, the existing system can result in difficulties when individuals need to travel urgently.

Citizens of the East African Community (EAC) are exempt from the new visa regulations in Kenya and do not need to go through the long process of obtaining the AEV. This new policy also benefits those who previously had to pay more for a visa.

You do not need to apply for the AEV if you already have an East African visa. However, almost everyone else will have to pay for an AEV, including children under 16 who previously did not need a visa to enter the country.

The consequences of this decision may include more than additional red tape and new costs, which could discourage travelers from visiting the country shortly. The 51 countries that previously did not require visas—and others affected by this agreement—may retaliate. After all, Kenyans also need to travel, and countries that have become more difficult to travel to could make it difficult for Kenyans to enter their territory.

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