

e-Tourist Visa : Travel Tourism Made Easy

*Nanu Bhasin
Navneet Kaur*



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TOURISM IS travel for recreation, leisure, religious, family or business purposes, usually for a limited duration. Tourism is generally associated with international travel, but may also refer to travel to another place within the same country. The World Tourism Organization defines tourists as people “travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes”.

Tourism has become a popular global leisure activity. Tourism can be either domestic or international, and international tourism can be classified as either inbound or outbound tourism. Today, inbound tourism is a major source of income for many countries, especially in terms of foreign exchange earned by the country as a whole. It also has a substantial impact on the local economy and employment of a place frequently visited by tourists.

India is a country with a rich cultural heritage which has always fascinated travellers. It is a unique land of diversities where all kinds of natural beauty including desert, sea, forests, mountains, flowers, wildlife is present within a single geographical boundary of a country. Anybody visiting India will have experience of

different cultures, dresses, cuisine, flora and fauna in different states. Thus, India has always been a destination for tourists who want to enjoy this combination of culture, tradition and rich heritage. Not only this, the foreign tourists act as “Ambassadors of Indian culture” and take the message further across the world.

Indian government has made various efforts to take advantage of these unique possessions to promote tourism. One such big initiative is the scheme of **e-Tourist Visa**. This measure has been introduced to make travelling to India easier and simpler for foreign tourists.

e-Tourist Visa : Background

The entire scheme began with the demand by the Tourism industry to liberalise the visa regime for foreign tourists to give a boost to tourism in the country. In response, ‘Visa-on-Arrival’ was initiated by the Government in 2010 on a very limited scale. ‘Visa-on-arrival’ means that you need a visa to enter, but it is possible to apply for and receive the visa only when you show up in the country of visit itself.

The Government of India introduced the concept of Visa on Arrival (VoA) in January 2010 for citizens of five countries ie Finland, Japan, Luxembourg, New Zealand

Nanu Bhasin is Director, Press Information Bureau, New Delhi.

Navneet Kaur is Dy. Director, Press Information Bureau, New Delhi.

and Singapore visiting India for tourism purposes. The processing of Visa on Arrival was manual during this period.

Visa on Arrival (VoA) was further extended to citizens of six more countries namely Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Philippines, Laos and Myanmar in January 2011 and South Korea in April, 2014. Till this stage, the VoA scheme remained operational on a very limited scale.

However, the scheme was substantially scaled up by the new government when it was further extended to 43 countries w.e.f. 27th November, 2014 and to Guyana in January 2015 bringing the total number of countries under the Scheme to 44. The concept of Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) was also introduced at the same time.

Electronic Travel Authorization: e-Tourist Visa

To attract more foreign tourists, a very important step taken by the new Government is the introduction of Electronic Authorization (ETA) enabled Tourist Visa on Arrival, which is now re-named as **e-Tourist Visa** but with no change in the scheme guidelines of ETA enabled TVoA.

The government proposes to take the tally to 106 countries within 2015-16 itself.

The new scheme, **e-Tourist Visa**, has helped the prospective short duration traveller to apply for an Indian Visa from his/her home country online without visiting the Indian Mission and also pay the visa fee online. Once approved, the applicant receives an email authorising him/her to travel to India and he/she can travel with a print out of this authorization. On arrival, the visitor has to present the authorisation to the immigration authorities who would then stamp the entry into the country. Currently, the VoA is valid for one month, allows single entry only, and is non-extendable.

e-Tourist Visa can be availed of by International Travellers whose sole



objective of visiting India is recreation, sight seeing, casual visit to meet friends or relatives, short duration medical treatment or casual business visit. It is not applicable to holders of Diplomatic/official passports.

The intention of e-Tourist Visa is to facilitate legitimate travellers by strengthening the security framework through a completely IT-enabled environment. Travellers had faced issues with the VoA facility launched in 2010 because it was

not IT integrated. The new system is fully digitised, simple and user-friendly, and therefore eliminates all the hurdles.

Scope of e-Tourist Visa

The Immigration Department has set up 72 dedicated counters at nine airports—Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Kochi, Thiruvananthapuram, and Goa – to facilitate and take care of e-Tourist Visa travellers.

Table 1: Progress of TVoA/e-Tourist Visa scheme

Year	2010 (Jan-Nov)	2011 (Jan-Dec)	2012 (Jan-Dec)	2013 (Jan-Dec)	2014 (Jan-Dec)
TVoA/e-Tourist Visa	5644	12,761	16,084	20,294	39,046

Source-Marketing Research Division of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India"

Table 2: No. of 'e-Tourist Visa' vs 'Manual TVoA'*

Year	January	February	March	January-March
2014 (Manual TVoA)	1,903	1,980	1,958	5,841
2015 (e-Tourist Visa)	25,023 (1215%)*	24,985 (1162%)*	25,851 (1220%)*	75,859 (1199)*

Source-Marketing Research Division of Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

*Percentage increase over same month of previous year.

*No pre-authorization was required during the initial Manual TVoA scheme.

Currently, e-Tourist visa facility is available at only these nine airports. However, the foreigner can take exit from any of the authorized Immigration Check Posts (ICPs) in India.

As on January 2015, e-Tourist Visa was available for following 44 countries: Australia, Brazil, Cambodia, Cook Islands, Djibouti, Fiji, Finland, Germany, Guyana, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Kiribati, Laos, Luxembourg, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Mexico, Micronesia, Myanmar, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue Island, Norway, Oman, Palau, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russia, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Tonga, Tuvalu, UAE, Ukraine, USA, Vanuatu, Vietnam.

After introduction of e-Tourist Visa, the manual Visa on arrival without requirement of a pre-authorization prior to travel was earlier available for 12 countries.

Success of e-Tourist Visa

The implementation of the scheme will send out a clear message that India is serious in making travel to the country easy and the scheme will contribute to taking India's share in International Tourist Arrivals to 1 per cent by the end of 12th Five Year Plan as compared to the current share of 0.64 per cent.

As the Table-2 shows, there has been a substantive growth in the number of tourists availing of e-Tourist Visa after the introduction of ETA. During the month of March 2015, a total of 25,851 tourists arrived by e-Tourist Visa as compared to 1,958 TVoA of previous scheme during the month of March 2014, registering a growth of 1220.3 per cent. Similarly, during the month of February 2015, a total of 24,985 tourists arrived by e-Tourist Visa as compared to 1,980 TVoA of previous scheme during the month of February 2014, registering a growth of 1161.9 per cent.

During January- March 2015, a total of 75,859 tourist arrived by e-Tourist Visa as compared to 5,841

TVoA during January- March 2014, registering a growth of 1198.7 per cent.

As per latest available data, as on 14th April, 2015 nearly one lakh ten thousand Visas have been issued by the Government under the scheme.

This high growth may be attributed to introduction of e-Tourist Visa scheme currently running for more than 40 countries as against coverage of earlier TVoA scheme for 12 countries only.

The percentage share of top 10 source countries for e-Tourist Visa, in India during March 2015, were as follows: USA (33.25 per cent), Germany (14.64 per cent), Russian Federation (13.13 per cent), Australia (8.37 per cent), Republic of Korea (6.39 per cent), Ukraine (4.21 per cent), Mexico (2.93 per cent), Japan (1.99 per cent), New Zealand (1.91 per cent) and Israel (1.68 per cent).

The percentage shares of different ports for e-Tourist Visa, in India during March 2015, were as follows:

New Delhi (47.32 per cent), Mumbai (18.55 per cent), Goa (12.03 per cent), Bengaluru (6.27 per cent), Chennai (5.60 per cent), Hyderabad (2.93 per cent), Kolkata (2.78 per cent), Kochi (2.68 per cent) and Trivandrum (1.84 per cent)

Issues related to e-Tourist Visa

Although e-Tourist Visa is now available to more than 40 countries, the scheme is yet to become operational for several countries like China, United Kingdom, Spain, Italy and Malaysia, which are important from the tourism perspective.

Similarly, the facility needs to be extended to several other airports like Varanasi, Gaya, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Tiruchirapalli which are important hubs of foreign tourist arrivals in India. This will also help to disperse the burden of tourists at the current 9 airports where the facility is applicable.

A demand is also being raised by the stakeholders and tourists that multiple entry should be allowed

along with the visa on arrival facility, so that any tourist coming to India can visit neighbouring countries also. The multiple entry will promote the growth in the Foreign Tourist arrivals.

Similarly, there are demands for increasing the visa period to two months to give a greater flexibility to the tourists.

International Travellers are also facing the difficulty of Biometrics for which applicants have to travel long distances in their home country which negates the very purpose of online application.

Since the discontinuation of manual VoA, foreign tourists are calling it a misnomer. They say that the new scheme is only an e-Visa and not a Visa on Arrival in the true sense since no pre-authorization is required in the latter.

Conclusion: In a nutshell, the e-Tourist Visa has helped to meet the long standing demand of Tourism industry for a liberalised visa regime for the last 20 years. The ETA list includes nations like US, Germany and UAE which cover 40 per cent of our inbound arrivals currently. Although, e-Tourist Visa cannot be the sole source for growth in foreign tourist arrivals, but will certainly act as a key input to accelerate foreign tourist arrivals. E-Tourist Visa certainly makes destination India more attractive for tourists.

Readings

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(E-mail: pibcultour@gmail.com)