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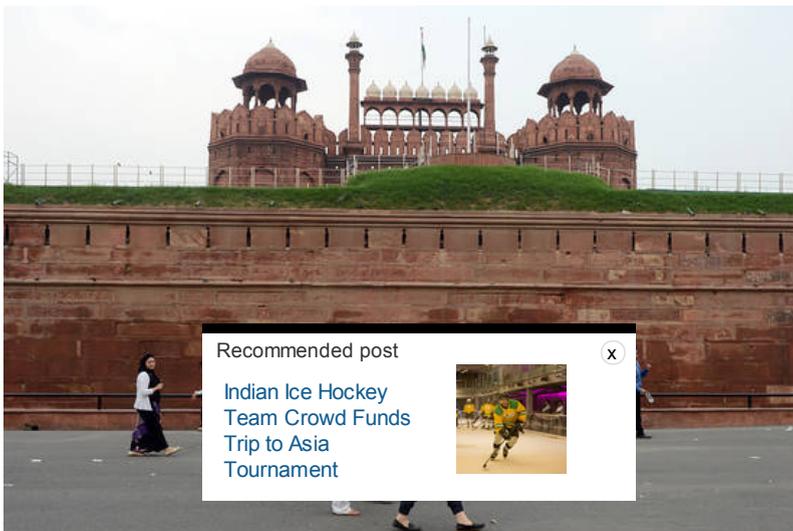
India's Incredible Quick Fix to 'Visa-on-Arrival' Problems

ARTICLE COMMENTS

TOURISM TOURIST VISA-ON-ARRIVAL



By SURYATAPA BHATTACHARYA



Foreign tourists visit the landmark Red Fort in New Delhi on October 8, 2013. — Raveendran/AFP/Getty Images

When Jomana Fikree showed up at Dubai's international airport to take a flight to India without a visa, she thought it wouldn't be a problem.

"I had looked it up a month before and it said **visa-on-arrival**" for citizens of the United Arab Emirates, said Dr. Fikree. "I was so happy, I was chilling."

But without a visa, it turned out, she couldn't check-in.

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Over the past five years, India has been rolling out an entry permit program called "tourist visa on arrival" allowing travelers from certain countries to apply for a visa online instead of at an embassy.

From five countries in 2010, India expanded the program in November to cover 44 nations, including the U.S., Australia, Japan, Germany and Russia – all among the top 10 countries that send the most tourists to India.

The latest additions included the U.A.E.

With just a few hours before her flight's departure, Dr. Fikree tried to apply for a visa

About India Real Time

India Real Time offers analysis and insights into the broad range of developments in business, markets, the economy, politics, culture, sports, and entertainment that take place every single day in the world's largest democracy. Regular posts from Wall Street Journal and Dow Jones Newswires reporters around the country provide a unique take on the main stories in the news, shed light on what else mattered and why, and give global readers a snapshot of what Indians have been talking about all week. You can contact the editors at [indiarealtime\(at\)wsj\(dot\)com](mailto:indiarealtime(at)wsj(dot)com).

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online on her phone, then on her iPad.

When that proved too slow, she says, she called a helpline and was told applications needed to be made at least 72 hours in advance of travel.

"This didn't make any sense," she said. "I have been to other countries where you have visa-on-arrival or others where you need to apply beforehand. This name is misleading."

A recent study showed that the Indian "tourist visa on arrival" program was confusing because of its name and "poor implementation."

Although the number of tourists arriving in India in 2014 increased to 7.4 million visitors from 6.9 million in previous year (a jump of 7.1%) overwhelmingly visitors were reluctant to use the new visa application system because official websites do not make clear the rules, the study found.

Fewer than 1% of tourists arriving in India in 2014 were using the "tourist visa on arrival" service, said Natasha Agarwal who co-authored the study and is a consultant with the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in New Delhi.

"In India, what it means is you have to apply online in your home country, get a print-out then bring the print-out with you and present it at a point of entry. It is clearly not visa on arrival," said Ms. Agarwal.

Amid growing criticism of the new visa program, Mahesh Sharma, India's tourism minister on Thursday took action.

Since people were unhappy that the tourist visa-on-arrival wasn't in fact a visa on arrival for tourists, he decided to change the name.

He told reporters that the program would now be called "electronic travel authorization" or visa online, to help end confusion.

Still, those who apply and receive the new visa can visit India no more than twice in one year, their stay cannot exceed a month each time. It is not clear how much time must lapse between applications.

Only nine Indian cities are equipped to handle passengers arriving with the new visa, including Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Kochi, Goa and Thiruvananthapuram.

Some travel agents are recommending customers steer clear of the system altogether.

Yoko Igarashi, in charge of travelers to India at a Tokyo-based travel agency Ryojin-Sha said her company was informed of the visa changes in December.

The time between notification and implementation was very short—"typical of India" she says— which caused some confusion, said Ms. Igarashi.

Most customers do not use the new online application system, she added, because she advises them to stick to the old method of applying at an Indian embassy.

And Dr. Fikree from the U.A.E., she had to abandon her plans to come to India because of the confusion. "It was disappointing," she said. "I was so looking forward to the trip."

—Miho Inada in Japan contributed to this post.



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