

China extends visa-free entry to 75 countries

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Dhaka: China is witnessing a steady revival in inbound tourism following sweeping visa policy reforms that now allow citizens from 74 countries to visit visa-free for up to 30 days, a significant expansion from previous rules.

The relaxed policy—part of Beijing's broader push to stimulate tourism, boost the economy, and enhance soft power—led to over 20 million foreign visitors entering without a visa in 2024, accounting for nearly one-third of all international arrivals and more than double the 2023 figure, according to the National Immigration Administration.

“This really helps people to travel because it is such a hassle to apply for a visa,” said Georgi Shavadze, a Georgian living in Austria, during a recent trip to Beijing’s Temple of Heaven.

While Chinese tourist sites remain dominated by domestic travelers,

international travel companies are preparing for a surge in foreign visitors during the peak summer season.

“I’m practically overwhelmed with tours and struggling to keep up,” said Gao Jun, a veteran English-speaking tour guide. To meet demand, Gao has launched a training program for aspiring guides.

China reopened its borders in early 2023 after lifting COVID-19 restrictions, but attracted only 13.8 million visitors that year—less than half the 2019 pre-pandemic total of 31.9 million.

The new visa-free program began in December 2023 with France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Malaysia. Since then, most of Europe has been included, along with five Latin American countries, Uzbekistan, and four Middle Eastern nations.

Azerbaijan will become the 75th country added on July 16. About two-thirds of these countries are participating under a one-year trial basis.

For Norwegian traveler Øystein Sporsheim, the change is a relief. “It was much harder with two children. The embassy hardly opens, and we had to make two trips,” he said.

Tourism businesses are reporting major growth. “The new visa policies are 100pc beneficial,” said Jenny Zhao, managing director of WildChina, a boutique tour operator.

Zhao says business is up 50pc from pre-pandemic levels, with Europeans now accounting for 15–20pc of their clients, compared to under 5pc in 2019.

Shanghai-based Trip.com Group reported that air, hotel, and other travel bookings to China doubled in Q1 2025 compared to the same period last year. About 75pc of bookings came from travelers in visa-free regions.

Despite strong ties with China, no major African country is yet eligible for the 30-day visa waiver.

For travelers from 10 countries not on the visa-free list—including the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Sweden—a limited 10-day entry is possible via transit, provided they depart for a third country.

This policy is available at 60 ports and applies to 55 nations, most of which are already on the broader visa-free list.

Sweden and the U.K. remain notable exceptions among high-income nations. Sweden's exclusion comes amid strained ties following the 2020 sentencing of Swedish-Chinese publisher Gui Minhai to 10 years in prison.

Gui vanished in Thailand in 2015 and later appeared in Chinese custody.