

Visa openness the key to unlocking Africa's economy

 By [Oz Desai](#)

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After years of pedestrian economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, we're starting to see some improvements in many of the continent's major economies, with the World Bank projecting growth rising to 3.2% in 2018 - almost three times the economic growth the region saw in 2016.



Oz Desai, GM Corporate Traveller South Africa

An uptick in mining output, recovery in the agricultural sector and improving global conditions are helping to stimulate business across the continent. The growth is not meteoric, but it is stable.

Some would say it's a prime time to consolidate and prepare for opportunities so that these can be pursued as soon as they arise.

Breaking the barriers to travel

While many parts of the world grapple with conversations around closing borders, there are murmurs of the opposite in Africa, a region renowned for its lack of visa openness and one that could see prosperity and growth if the barriers to travel were consciously broken down.

According to the African Development Bank, the free movement of people is a cornerstone of regional integration. When business people move more easily across the continent, because of liberal visa policies, they bring higher levels of investment, fresh skills and they expand the range of goods and services on offer.

In the past year, over a third of African countries have more liberal visa policies than they had in 2015, and four countries have even moved up into the top 20 most open visa countries.

Just this month, we saw the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) reach a key milestone agreement making travel within the six-member regional block, comprising Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and Chad, visa-free and integration of central Africa a reality.

The more open the visa regime, the better for business

The African Union's introduction of a single African passport was a further step in the right direction and, for South Africans, the news that Nigeria would start issuing visas on arrival for all Africans was equally good news, considering the business interests of and related travel conducted by South Africans in that West African state.

It is certainly becoming easier to travel within the continent, but it should be even easier. The more open the visa regime in Africa, the easier it would be to do business more quickly and affordably – from promoting entrepreneurship, diversifying economies and adding value to services, to attracting investment and even introducing much-needed skills.

The World Bank estimates that intra-African trade is more expensive than trade in any other region. Not only is it often easier for citizens from other regions to travel through Africa than Africans themselves, but goods originating within Africa also attract crippling import tariffs and permits.

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According to the African Development Bank's Visa Openness Index, some 54% of Africans still need visas to travel to other African countries, 24% can get visas on arrival and only 22% do not need visas at all. Only 13 out of 55 African states offer e-Visas although this number was only nine in 2015 and only 10 offer liberal access (visa-free or visa on arrival) to all Africans.

Countries like Angola, Ethiopia and the DRC score among the lowest in Africa in terms of visa openness, with Seychelles, Uganda and Ghana being the most visa open. Ghana, in particular, has made significant strides in visa openness, announcing last year that it would provide visas on arrival for citizens of every AU member state.



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Enabling business travel

In addition to the albeit slow progress in terms of visa openness across the continent, it is encouraging to see that other enablers to business travel are improving. New airline routes, the introduction of low-cost carrier flights and improve airport infrastructure is making it easier than ever before to access Africa.

As a frequent business traveller, I wait in anticipation to see the Yamoussoukro Accord bring about open skies in Africa and for the African Union's dream of "a continent of seamless borders" to become a reality. The unambitious 2063 deadline extended by the AU, however, is an awfully long way away. Africa can't afford to wait five decades for the same benefits that a frontier-free Europe enjoys.

As we improve our transport infrastructure across the continent, we should be pursuing relaxed visa regimes so that when the opportunity arises, Africans can be the first in line to contribute to the continent's growth.

ABOUT OZ DESAI

With a proven track record in business management and finance, Oz Desai heads up Flight Centre Travel Group's dynamic Corporate Traveller brand in South Africa. Having worked in a retail travel, management and finance environment within the Flight Centre group, Desai's first-hand experience brings great depth to the role of positioning Corporate Traveller as the preferred provider of travel solutions to corporate South Africa.

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