

Henley Passport Index: The most powerful passports in a time of global travel access growth

Offering its citizens visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to a record total of 189 destinations, Japan takes the top spot in the [Henley Passport Index](#). Germany and Singapore come in joint second place while third place is shared by six countries: South Korea, Finland, France, Italy, Spain, and Sweden.



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Henley Passport Index, which is based on exclusive data from the International Air Transport Association (IATA), has recently been updated through extensive research to include eight new travel destinations. According to Dr Christian H. Kälén, Group Chairman of Henley & Partners, “this addition means that the index now encompasses almost all of the world’s destinations for which travel information is publicly available, making it the most robust index of its kind.

The Henley Passport Index surveys a total of 199 different passports against 227 different travel destinations, including countries, territories, and micro-states. The index is innovating the way we map and measure travel freedom, making it easier for individuals to understand where exactly they lie on the spectrum of global mobility.”

Visa waivers secures higher spots

While Schengen Area countries have traditionally topped the index as a result of their open access to Europe, developed Asian nations have been able to secure equally high scores in recent years thanks to their strong international trade and diplomatic relations. With close to 40 visa-waiver agreements signed by governments since the start of the year, passport-holders around the world go into the summer season with greater collective access than ever before.

Boosting this trend, Russia — which is usually off-limits to nationals of most countries — announced in April that visas would be waived for all travellers holding tickets to the June–July FIFA World Cup. Nonetheless, the country has fallen from 45th to 47th position on the Henley Passport Index compared to Q1, thus far unable to catch up to regional leaders Ukraine and Moldova, both of which have signed a number of visa agreements since the start of the year.

The **UAE, in 23rd place, remains the fastest overall climber** on the index, ascending 38 places since 2008. The country has secured more new visa-waivers for its citizens in 2018 than any other jurisdiction in the world and is quickly closing in on the lead that Israel, in 19th place, has historically held within the Middle East region.

The US and the UK are tied in 4th place, along with Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Portugal; the US has climbed one place compared to Q1 while the UK has remained stable.

Having gained access to the UAE, Oman, and Bosnia and Herzegovina this year, China has significantly strengthened its position on the ranking, climbing from 74th to 68th position since Q1 — although the country's relatively low score of 70 visa-free or visa-on-arrival destinations means that it still cannot compete with North Asian high-performers Japan and South Korea.

The UAE races to the top as the Middle East region places tourism firmly on the agenda

Leading global efforts towards improved travel freedom are the UAE, which has gained access to eight new countries in 2018 alone: China, Ireland, Burkina Faso, Uruguay, Guinea, Tonga, Benin, and Honduras. The country's reciprocal agreement with China, in particular, has led to the Emirati hospitality and tourist industries reporting growth of up to 70% compared to 2017, as Chinese travellers begin taking advantage of their newfound access to the Middle East's main hub.

The UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs said recently that the country is actively strengthening its diplomatic efforts in a bid to have one of the top five passports in the world, as per the country's Vision 2021.

Ryan Cummings, director of Signal Risk and a leading commentator on the MENA region, confirms this sentiment: “The visa-waiver agreements signed by the UAE to date are very much in line with the country's ongoing intention to position itself as the foremost commercial hub in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) zone, where it is increasingly hosting the regional headquarters of multinational firms operating in culturally diverse industries such as healthcare, professional and financial services, and digital technologies. These developments also reflect the country's publicized goal of shifting its economic dependence away from the extractive industry towards the tourism sector, where it aims to create an ambitious 720,000 employment opportunities by 2028.”

Economic diversification away from the oil sector and towards the less volatile tourism industry has, in fact, become a common theme across the GCC zone. Cummings explains: “Qatar extended a visa-waiver programme to more than 80 countries in the final quarter of 2017, and the country has continued this trend in 2018, as part of its aim to attract eight million tourists annually by 2030. Saudi Arabia, too, issued inaugural tourist visas on 1 April this year, seeking to secure its own target of 30 million tourists by 2030. Bucking the trend in the GCC, however, is Oman, which withdrew the universal issuance of visas-on-arrival in March 2018. Visitors from all except a few select countries will now have to apply for an e-visa via the Royal Oman Police website before travelling to the area.”



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Brexit and travel bans remain the exception as borders open in Asia, the former Soviet Union, and the Caribbean

So far, 2018 has seen little to no activity in the European and North American visa-policy space, although American and British foreign policy continues to dominate headlines. By contrast, dozens of new immigration and border policies have been legislated by countries in Asia and the former Soviet Union in recent months, as well as in Africa and the Caribbean.

Following the general pro-tourism trend emerging in the Middle East, governments in other regions are seeking to boost visitor inflows as a means of stimulating economic growth, strengthening diplomatic ties, and improving travel prospects for their own citizens.

Discussing the Caribbean region, Dr Suzette Haughton, a senior lecturer in Geography at the University of the West Indies, notes that countries such as Grenada, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic are actively strengthening their passport power through engagement with powerful Asian and Middle Eastern states — with this engagement visible in the migration space as well as in the travel space. As she explains: “A major development to watch in the upcoming quarter concerns the increasing mobility of Chinese and Taiwanese business migrants into the Caribbean region, coupled with the alignment of individual Caribbean countries’ national interest concerns with those of either China or Taiwan.”

Ukraine, too, has substantially relaxed its immigration policies over the years, introducing visa exemptions, visas-on-arrival, and, as of April 2018, e-visas for almost every nationality in the world. Much like the UAE, the country has experienced a critical boost to trade and tourism since it opened its borders to Chinese nationals, in particular, reporting a 200% increase in Chinese visitors since the policy came into effect in 2015. Ukraine has also been the beneficiary of a number of new visa-waiver agreements this year, solidifying the gains it made in 2017 when it gained access to the entire Schengen Area.

China is gradually reciprocating the warm welcome it has received on the global stage. On 1 May, the government announced that citizens of 59 countries could travel to its popular Hainan province visa-free for a month — an unprecedented move for the traditionally closed-off nation. Dr Kälin says: “Countries such as China and the UAE that are rapidly ascending the Henley Passport Index remind us that opening your borders to others results in reciprocal benefits and improved passport strength for your own citizens. The countries that perform well on the index are those that are embracing new models of global citizenship and adapting to, rather than shrinking away from, an increasingly globalised world. The index is a useful yardstick for intergovernmental policies and progress, and we expect to see further exciting developments with each quarterly update.”



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26 Feb 2016



Investment migration can help those in restrictive jurisdictions improve their passport power

According to Kälin, investment migration is a critical mechanism for those with low-ranking passports or those in immigration-hostile zones. “Citizenship-by-investment programmes allow financially independent individuals to make a substantial economic contribution to a particular country, in exchange for which they become a citizen of that country and receive a passport. The most credible programs in the industry are all linked to passports that consistently outperform on the Henley Passport Index. Malta, for example, now boasts visa-free access to 182 destinations, while Antigua and Barbuda

in the Caribbean provide access to 149 destinations, including the entire Schengen Area.”

“Crucially,” he adds, “the benefits do not only flow one way. The industry is as popular and as successful as it is because it offers equally real and tangible benefits to countries with programs in place. Our most recent [industry report](#), produced in partnership with The Economist Group, shows that the foreign direct investment generated by investment migration programs results in fresh capital inflows to both the public and the private sector, helping to stimulate socio-economic growth and development. It is precisely the mutually beneficial nature of investment migration that will ensure its continued growth and sustainability in years to come.”

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