

Access (almost) all areas: the British passport is No.1 for visa-free travel

Holders are able to visit 173 of the world's nations while Afghans can visit only 28 countries free of formalities

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Wednesday, 2 October 2013

The British enjoy the widest range of visa-free travel on the planet. Along with citizens of Finland and Sweden, holders of UK passports are able to visit 173 of the world's nations without applying for a visa.

[The annual 2013 Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index](#) ranks countries according to the number of nations their citizens can access with just a passport. The results show that membership of the European Union is a key determinant of ease of movement across frontiers.

Nine out of 10 of the top countries are EU members: Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands join the leading three, with only the United States representing the rest of the world. Citizens of all these countries can travel to more than 170 other nations visa-free.

The least advantageous passports to possess remain the same as they have in previous years. Pakistan and Somalia tie for third-worst place, with just 32 nations allowing passport-only access. Citizens of Iraq can visit only 31, while the least popular nationality in terms of red tape is Afghanistan. Holders of passports issued in Kabul are able to visit only 28 countries free of formalities, with 87 per cent of the world's nations putting up the shutters.

The compilers assert that there are 219 countries in the world. No nationality is able to access as many as 80 per cent of the destination countries, but there is a strong correlation between average wealth and access to open frontiers. The second group of 10 countries includes Canada, Japan, Norway, New Zealand and Switzerland.

The imbalance between ease of access for citizens of rich nations and the lack of openness displayed by those countries was revealed in a World Tourism Organization report, which reported that three-quarters of the world's population requires a visa ahead of travelling to Europe.

In the Henley & Partners survey there is a wide gap between the "old" EU and the "new". Of the former Iron Curtain countries, Hungary performs best. Bulgaria and Romania are a long way down the list, sandwiched between Brazil and Barbados. Russians are allowed visa-free access to 95 countries, one more than citizens of Turkey and South Africa - the highest-placed African nation. South Africans are significantly better placed than the four lowest-placed European countries: Bosnia-Herzegovina (91), Albania (88), Belarus (61) and Moldova (59). The latter lies below Cuba, Kazakhstan and Zimbabwe.

Citizens of the two most populous nations are placed low in the listing. India, with 1.2 billion people, issues a passport that opens doors to only 52 countries - one fewer than Burkina Faso and Indonesia, the fourth-most populous. China, with 1.3 billion, rates only 44, behind Vietnam, Cambodia and East Timor. This week the Home Secretary, Theresa May, indicated that she will relax Britain's tight visa rules in a bid to encourage more tourism from the People's Republic. Citizens of Hong Kong and Macau, both autonomous regions of China, can travel to many more countries - 152 in the case of Hong Kong.

At the other end of the size and population spectrum, being small is no guarantee of accessibility. San Marino, Andorra and Monaco fail to break the 150 barrier, though Liechtenstein makes 159.

Neil Taylor, a guide and tour operator with wide experience of present and former communist countries, said there was evidence of individual locations over-riding national rules in order to attract tourists: "Russian visas remain complex, but if you take a cruise to St Petersburg you can dodge the red tape. The same applies to the 72-hour stopover scheme just introduced by several major gateways to China."