

Japan Has the Most Powerful Passport but Only in a Post-Pandemic World

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As vaccination program rollouts gather momentum in certain countries, the resumption of regular international travel is no longer an abstract hope. The latest results from the [Henley Passport Index](#) — the original ranking of all the world’s passports according to the number of destinations their holders can access without a prior visa — provide exclusive insight into what post-pandemic travel freedom might look like as countries around the world selectively begin to open their borders to international visitors.

Without taking temporary and constantly evolving Covid-19 travel restrictions into account, Japan firmly holds onto the number one spot on the index — which is based on exclusive data from the [International Air Transport Association](#) (IATA) — with Japanese passport holders theoretically able to access a record 193 destinations around the world visa-free. Singapore remains in 2nd place, with a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of 192, while Germany and South Korea again share joint-3rd place, each with access to 191 destinations.

As has been the case for most of the index’s 16-year history, the majority of the remaining top 10 spots are held by EU countries. The UK and the US, both of which continue to face steadily eroding passport strength since they held the top spot in 2014, currently share joint-7th place, with a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of 187.

The latest results indicate that the gap in travel freedom is now at its largest since the index began in 2006, with Japanese passport holders able to access 167 more destinations than citizens of Afghanistan, who can visit only 26 destinations worldwide without acquiring a visa in advance.

China and UAE climb global ranking

Although there has been very little movement in the [Henley Passport Index](#) for the past five quarters since the outbreak of Covid-19, taking a step back reveals some interesting dynamics over the past decade. Q2 2021 saw China entering the biggest climbers in the past decade for the first time. China has risen by 22 places in the ranking since 2011, from 90th position with a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of just 40 to 68th position with a score of 77. The most remarkable turnaround story on the index by far, however, is the UAE, which continues its stellar ascendance. In 2011, the UAE was ranked 65th with a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of 67, while today, thanks to the Emirates’ ongoing efforts to strengthen diplomatic ties with countries across the globe, it is ranked 15th with a score of 174.

Wealthy nations with premium passports flounder and fail

With extensive travel restrictions still in place globally, any level of international travel freedom remains theoretical. It is somewhat ironic that Japan is ranked 1st — which effectively means its citizens are the most welcomed in the world — yet recently made the difficult decision to bar spectators from abroad from the rescheduled Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020, now planned to commence in July. But with the rollout of mass vaccination programs in certain wealthy and advanced economies such as the EU, the UAE, the UK, and the US, global mobility will soon be a possibility again for some. For citizens of developing and emerging economies, where vaccine rollouts are much slower, and where passports tend to offer far less travel freedom in general — the future looks decidedly less rosy.

Commenting on the latest ranking, [Dr. Christian H. Kaelin](#), Chairman of [Henley & Partners](#) and the inventor of the passport index concept, says the past year has demonstrated that no government is infallible — even the world’s superpowers and wealthiest nations floundered — and many failed their citizens. “While nobody expects a return to pre-pandemic mobility levels anytime soon, the outlook now is certainly more hopeful than it was even a few months ago. The latest Henley Passport Index ranking is a reminder that economic recovery and development are dependent on global mobility, including personal travel freedom, and that passport power should never be taken for granted.”

Global war for talent super-charged by Covid

Looking ahead to what the rest of 2021 holds, experts commenting in the [Global Mobility Report 2021 Q2](#) released by [Henley & Partners](#) today, suggest that adaptability and responsiveness will be critical to the survival and success of countries and individuals alike. [Dr. Parag Khanna](#), Founder and Managing Partner of FutureMap, says the second half of the year may well see millions of people scattering again. “The shifting patterns of migration in the post-Covid world (when it comes) will be non-linear and perhaps unpredictable. They will mimic the reality of a world in which there are many unfolding crises, from pandemics to climate change to political polarization. Countries facing fiscal pressures as well as skilled labor and investment shortages will seek to attract and recruit everyone from start-up entrepreneurs who can stimulate innovation to doctors and nurses who can boost public health services. The global war for talent is now well underway.”

Commenting on how governments can begin to harness post-pandemic migration opportunities, [Greg Lindsay](#), Director of Applied Research at NewCities, writes in the Henley & Partners report that “destinations ranging from Helsinki to Dubai in terms of climate and temperament are already drafting programs and policies targeting footloose talent whose employers have given them permission to roam”. Lindsay also suggests that the ballooning rate and popularity of programs catering to mobile workers means that “any global destination without one is at risk of being left behind when the world opens up again”.

Backlash against dual citizenship only temporary

On the topic of dual citizenship, [Prof. Peter J Spiro](#), Charles Weiner Professor of Law at Temple University Law School, points out that the recently reported clampdown on the practice by some Asian countries appears to be more of a minor setback than a major countertrend. “Individuals worldwide are increasingly interested in securing or maintaining dual citizenship. Holdout states are having a harder time defending their rejection of the status now that so many countries accept it, and with little apparent downside. Allowing dual citizenship has come to represent an attractive attribute when considering citizenship value.”

However, for some countries, notably the US, embracing a more fluid approach to migration is by no means a given. [Annie Pforzheimer](#), Senior Non-Resident Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, points out in the Henley & Partners report that the current polarized political environment means that “immigration reform faces significant headwinds”, with strong resistance from Republicans to President Biden’s ambitious plan. Pforzheimer says that “Congress also must take steps regarding the EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program, due to expire on 30 June”. An EB-5 Reform Bill has been introduced, but Pforzheimer points out that “while there may not be opposition to the bill, moving legislation at all has been thorny in the US Congress”.

Vaccine passports no guarantee of mobility for all

As political science researchers Uğur Altundal and Ömer Zarpli of Syracuse University and the University of Pittsburgh, respectively, point out in the Henley & Partners [Global Mobility Report 2021 Q2](#), there is a danger that vaccine passports will create perverse incentives. “Given that people will likely need to be vaccinated every year, developed countries might seek to secure vaccine supplies for future use. Ultimately, this could prolong the pandemic and raise the risk of further mutations. There is also no scientific consensus on how long immunity from Covid-19 will last after receiving a vaccine, or over whether vaccines actually prevent the spread of the virus.”

[Prof. Mehari Taddele Maru](#), a part-time Professor at the Migration Policy Centre and a Fellow at the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies in Belgium, comments that “countries able to vaccinate their populations relatively rapidly will also facilitate their citizens’ higher mobility and attract visitors for business and leisure, while countries that are facing conflicts and those that lack funding to ensure adequate storage and efficient distribution of vaccines will lag behind in easing mobility restrictions. Fundamentally, this is attributed to the power asymmetries between wealthy and better-governed nations on the one hand, and those that are not on the other.”

[Prof. Simone Bertoli](#), Professor of Economics at Université Clermont Auvergne (CERDI) in France and a Research Fellow at the Institute of Labor Economics in Germany writes that “while vaccine passports may at first appear to be a convenient shortcut for increasing cross-border mobility, the road to their

application is paved with numerous major hurdles. In the EU, it is doubtful that all the member states will reach an agreement on this issue before the herd immunity induced by the vaccination campaign will make it redundant. This, however, does not rule out the possibility that a subset of countries could strike bilateral agreements with EU member states and other nations. The recent call for a global treaty for pandemics, made by 24 world leaders, including those of France, Germany, and the UK, is a glimmer of hope for future solidarity.”

A changing Middle East in urgent bid to revive economies

[Dr. Robert Mogielnicki](#), Resident Scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington notes in the Henley & Partners [Global Mobility Report 2021 Q2](#) that the recent marked changes to visa policies in the Middle East come as states in the region jockey for greater influence in a post-coronavirus order. Dr. Mogielnicki points to the UAE’s recent announcement that certain expatriates could receive Emirati citizenship. “UAE endeavors to expand eligibility for Emirati citizenship and long-term residence are part of a concerted effort to retain and attract the talented expatriate residents needed for a robust economy.”

Elsewhere in the region, Iraq has begun to relax its highly restrictive visa policies, recently announcing that citizens of over 35 countries, including the US and the UK, may obtain a 60-day visa-on-arrival. These waivers, however, are unlikely to be reciprocated in the near future. Dr. Mogielnicki comments: “Iraq’s government hopes that the new measures will stimulate tourism, encourage investments, and create employment. However, ongoing security challenges and persistent protests are likely to weigh on investor confidence and dampen demand for tourism.”

Award-winning journalist [Justice Malala](#) points out that the Covid-19 pandemic has frustrated the hope of a new normal for Africa and will most likely define the progress of human mobility and commerce for at least another year. “New waves and variants of the disease, challenges in vaccine rollout, and bureaucracy have closed borders across the continent and stalled or halted travel and trade...Some countries will not receive widespread vaccination coverage before 2023...The implications for mobility of Africans, trade, and tourism are huge.”

Appeal of investment migration surges amid ongoing volatility

Countries offering residence- and citizenship-by-investment programs continue to perform very well on the [Henley Passport Index](#), with [Malta](#) being a prime example in 8th position with a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of 186 (an increase from its score of 184 in January’s index). Other top-performing investment migration program host countries include [Austria](#) (ranked 5th, with a visa-free/visa-on-arrival score of 189), [Australia](#) (ranked 9th, with a score of 185), [Portugal](#) (ranked 6th, with a score of 188), [St. Lucia](#) (ranked 30th, with a score of 146), [Montenegro](#) (ranked 44th, with a score of 124), and [Thailand](#) (ranked 65th, with a score of 80).

[Dr. Juerg Steffen](#), CEO of Henley & Partners, says there has been a significant spike in demand for investment migration programs as entrepreneurs and affluent investors seek to overcome the lifestyle limitations and corporate and financial risks of being restricted to a single jurisdiction. “It is clear that diversifying country risk has become a priority in terms of personal access rights as well as financial and property investment. Even high-net-worth individuals from advanced economies with premium passports and world-class healthcare systems are now looking to create portfolios of complementary citizenship and residence options. They all share the same intention — to access health security and optionality in terms of where they can live, conduct business, study, and invest, for themselves and their families.”

Read the full [Global Mobility Report 2021 Q2](#)

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Notes to Editors

About the Henley Passport Index

With cutting-edge expert commentary and historical data spanning 16 years, the [Henley Passport Index](#) is the original ranking of all the world’s passports according to the number of destinations their holders can access without a prior visa. Originally created by [Dr. Christian H. Kaelin](#), the ranking is based on exclusive data from the [International Air Transport Association](#) (IATA), which maintains the world’s largest and most accurate database of travel information, and it is enhanced by extensive, ongoing research by the [Henley & Partners](#) Research Department.

Along with the [Kälin – Kochenov Quality of Nationality Index](#), it is considered a major reference tool for global citizens and the standard reference for government policy in this field.

About the Global Mobility Report

The [Global Mobility Report 2021 Q2](#) is a unique publication that brings together commentary from leading academics and professional experts on the major and emerging trends in global and regional mobility today.

Grounded in geopolitical analysis and with a focus on the realities shaping our world — from Covid-19 to economic downturn and ongoing conflict — the report offers exclusive insight into mobility and migration patterns and looks at what we can expect in the months to come.

About Henley & Partners

[Henley & Partners](#) is the global leader in residence and citizenship planning. Each year, hundreds of wealthy individuals and their advisors rely on our expertise and experience in this area. The firm's highly qualified professionals work together as one team in over 30 offices worldwide.

The concept of residence and citizenship planning was created by Henley & Partners in the 1990s. As globalization has expanded, residence and citizenship have become topics of significant interest among the increasing number of internationally mobile entrepreneurs and investors whom we proudly serve every day.

The firm also runs a leading government advisory practice that has raised more than USD 8 billion in foreign direct investment. Trusted by governments, the firm has been involved in strategic consulting and in the design, set-up, and operation of the world's most successful residence and citizenship programs.

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