4th UNWTO Silk Road Ministers’ Meeting

Visa Facilitation on the Silk Road

Conclusions and Minutes

5, March 2014, ITB Berlin

On the year of the 20th Anniversary of the Samarkand Declaration on Silk Road Tourism, the 4th UNWTO Silk Road Ministers’ Meeting was convened to discuss visa facilitation as a means to further advance tourism development along the ancient trade route.

Held in collaboration with ITB Berlin, the 4th Silk Road Ministers’ Meeting brought together 21 Ministers and Vice Ministers of Tourism from the Silk Road countries, along with representatives from the European Commission, the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to exchange experiences and visa facilitation strategies.

Continuing the work initiated in 1994 when the Samarkand Declaration on Silk Road Tourism was signed, calling for ‘the adoption of facilitation measures that would reduce travel barriers and stimulate tourist flows along the Silk Road’ the participants discussed how the Silk Road countries can develop their collaboration to advance the visa facilitation agenda in 2014 and beyond.

Opening the meeting, UNWTO Secretary-General Taleb Rifai emphasized the importance of a cooperative approach: “Complicated visa processes are still a major barrier to the growth of the tourism sector, and as such a barrier to job creation and poverty alleviation. UNWTO welcomes the measures already taken by the Silk Road countries in this area and commends their strong commitment to further advancements, evident by the high level of participation in this Minister’s Meeting. Only by joint action can we fully unlock tourism’s potential as a driver of sustainable growth and regional integration along this unique historic route and transform barriers into opportunities”.

At the meeting, UNWTO released its Tourism Visa Openness Report for the Silk Road Countries, which demonstrated that while many visa barriers still remain, visa policies along the Silk Road are improving. At the beginning of 2008, 87% of the world population required a visa prior to departure to a Silk Road destination as compared to 73% in 2013. Between 2010 and 2013, visa facilitation measures in Silk Road countries accounted for 14% of all improvements made globally, with the most common measure being substituting a traditional visa requirement for a visa on arrival.

The following outlines the key points made during the Ministerial Debate by each country/delegation on visa policy improvements and developments:
Mr Pedro Ortún, Director, Tourism, CSR, Consumer Goods and International Regulatory Agreements Directorate, DG Enterprise and Industry:

- The Silk Road is a good example of interregional cooperation, in line with similar activities supported by and promoted within Europe such as the ‘European Institution of Cultural Routes’. To this end, the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the European Travel Commission are open to joint collaborative initiatives.
- To achieve sustainable and responsible management of tourism, it is key for all tourism stakeholders to acknowledge the multiple dimensions of tourism from the ethical, social, economic perspectives.
- The European Commission will propose changes to the visa policies currently in place for the Schengen Area; there is an intention to balance the visa approach by strengthening the economic dimension as opposed to primarily focusing on the security implications.

Tajikistan:

- For the last 5 years, Tajikistan has been adopting an open-doors approach towards visa policies, focusing on the economic potential that travel liberalization offers. There is now the general acknowledgement that travel liberalization has a positive impact on investment climate and overall economic activity. Improvements include:
  - More than 80 countries can now obtain a visa-on-arrival
  - The waiting time to obtain a visa has decreased from 14 working days to a maximum of 3 working days
  - The cost of obtaining a visa has decreased to $25 USD
  - Group visas can obtain a discount of up to 50%
  - The introduction of electronic visas is being examined, possibly to be launched in 2015

Kyrgyzstan:

- The Kyrgyz Ambassador expressed concern that measures undertaken by Kyrgyzstan to liberalize visa procedures for 45 countries in July 2012 was not reflected in the report.
- According to the Ambassador, and despite initial challenges, the measure has had positive effects with 3 million tourists visiting the country in 2013.
- Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan was ranked one of the 10 most interesting destinations by the travel portal Globe Spots.
- Due to the demonstrated positive impacts, Kyrgyzstan called for a more practical approach towards visa facilitation.

Reply provided by Dr. Dirk Glaesser, Acting Director, Sustainable Development of Tourism, UNWTO:

- Regarding the methodology used in the report, Dr. Glaesser explained that the data available stretches to April 2013. Furthermore, later verification proved that the changes mentioned by the Ambassador are actually reflected in the report, which can be found on page 17, table 9.
- For the report, a double-analysis approach was used: information provided by NTO’s/ Ministries of the countries involved were contrasted with open source data. After the information was gathered and compiled, the countries were contacted to provide their input/clarifications.
- Regarding the fact that the economic output of visa facilitation measures was not fully regarded in the report, Dr. Glaesser clarified that the report solely focuses on the policies implemented, not on the
economic impact of said reforms. The economic impact of policy change is another dimension of visa facilitation – currently UNWTO is working on a report which will address these issues and will be made available to Member States

Pakistan:
• Situated on the Silk Road boasting unique mountainous landscapes, the Gilgit-Baltistan region has a huge potential for tourism development, especially nature-based, eco and adventure tourism
• In 2013, Gilgit-Baltistan hosted a Silk Road Festival which attracted delegations from 11 Silk Road countries and is expected to increase attendance at this year’s edition
• There is a strong commitment by the Federal Government to liberalize travel
• Gilgit-Baltistan is especially working towards improving the tourism infrastructure, from roads to accommodation, and seeks to improve the air connectivity of the region

Armenia:
• Armenia has been pushing towards travel liberalization for the last 8 years. Armenia now has a free-visa regime with the CIS countries, the Schengen Area, plus UK and Ireland. All the remaining countries can obtain a visa-on-arrival at an average cost of $8 (USD)
• Currently Armenia is negotiating visa relaxation with the US and Canada.
• The free visa regime has been a major boost to tourism: last year, the total number of tourist arrivals increased by 19% following an already significant increase registered in previous years

Cambodia:
• Cambodia has been following an open-sky-policy since 1997. Visas-on-arrival are available for most nationalities. E-visas are available for some countries at an approximate cost of $20 (USD)
• An Inter-ministerial Committee, headed by the Minister of Tourism, comprises representatives from different government sectors (tourism, customs, security officials, etc.) and constantly monitors and evaluates the impact of measures taken in regard to visa and travel facilitation
• There is a direct and positive link between travel liberalization and economic development – tourism growth in Cambodia has reached an average of 15% growth per year

Bangladesh:
• In 2013, Bangladesh introduced visa-on-arrival for 62 countries
• Like Cambodia, Bangladesh’s visa policies are monitored by a Ministerial Committee which has the intention to liberalize its visa regime. It is currently considering (1) the introduction of e-visas and (2) to extend the number of countries, currently 62, benefitting from a more liberal visa approach
• To primarily affect the SAARC countries (Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), but gradual travel liberalization could be extended to the Silk Road countries in the future

Kazakhstan:
• Kazakhstan praised the quality of the report and explained that visa facilitation was recognized as a priority by the experts convened for the UNESCO/UNWTO Silk Roads Heritage Corridors Workshop held in Almaty in October 2013
• Recognizing the positive effects of travel liberalization, Kazakhstan is working towards simplifying visa procedures for 38 countries
• A Pilot Project is already under way to study the implications of introducing a new visa regime in time for the 2017 Astana Expo
- Kazakhstan underlined the importance of working under the UNWTO frame to coordinate and collaborate on visa facilitation issues
- A general invitation was issued to all delegates to attend the Astana Economic Forum in May which will also feature a discussion panel on the Silk Road

**Indonesia:**
- ASEAN is moving towards the full implementation of a visa-exemption regime for ASEAN nationals travelling within the region, with the aim of extending a single visa to foreign tourists (possible implementation: end of 2015)
- Indonesia currently grants a visa-on-arrival regime to 62 countries and is preparing the introduction of e-visas and biometric passports.
- Due to the complexity of the subject, Indonesia insists on the necessity of bilateral agreements and reciprocity

**Iraq:**
- Iraq has the intention to gradually ease its visa policies
- Orders have been sent to its Embassies to facilitate and assist tourist seeking a visa
- Importance of religious tourism was mentioned: even between 2006-2007, an extremely bad year from a security perspective, 1.5 million tourists travelled to Iraq for religious purposes

**Republic of Korea:**
- Korea has granted visa-exemptions to 110 countries - among them 9 Silk Road countries
- The Tourism Ministry would like to further liberalize travel but it is a process that requires conformity among all relevant governmental stakeholders
- There is a clear link between travel liberalization, carried out in the last 5 years, and tourism development: international tourist arrivals: 6 million (2005) → 12 million (2013)

**Additional points added by Moderator:**
- India is working on extending its visas-on-arrival scheme for 180 countries by the end of 2014
- Georgia has a no-visa policy for 90 countries, which resulted in a rapid increase in international arrivals. In 2006, when Georgia established visa free regime with EU, the number of travelers grew by 55%. This same pattern was observed with other countries with a growth rate varying from 30% to as high as 180%.