

For information

LegCo Panel on Security

Travel convenience for visitors to Hong Kong

Introduction

This paper updates Members on the Administration's efforts to enhance the travel convenience of visitors to Hong Kong.

Overseas visitors

2. Hong Kong operates a liberal visa regime. People from over 170 countries and territories can visit Hong Kong visa free. Frequent visitors eligible for visa-free entry into Hong Kong may enjoy greater convenience at immigration clearance by applying for a Travel Pass¹. A similar arrangement is also available to nationals of the APEC economies under the APEC Business Travel Card Scheme². Only nationals of 40 foreign countries need to apply for visas to visit Hong Kong. In 2000, 6.77 million overseas visitors came to Hong Kong. A great majority of them (94.5%) came without the need for a visa.

3. Our visa requirements are kept under constant review to facilitate visitors while ensuring that immigration control and security are

¹ The Travel Pass is valid for three years and good for multiple entries to Hong Kong for a stay of 2 months on each trip. The holder of a Travel Pass will be allowed to use Hong Kong resident counters where available for arrival and departure. Applicants should have a genuine need to visit Hong Kong frequently and have come for visitors trouble-free on 5 or more occasions (other than return from side trips to the Mainland or Macau) in the 12-month period immediately preceding the application, or they can satisfy the Director of Immigration that their visits may bring substantial benefits to Hong Kong.

² Card holders can make multiple visits of 2 months to participating economies without visas and enjoy streamlined immigration clearance at the control points of the participating economies within three years. In Hong Kong, Card holders from participating economies will be allowed to use resident counters where available.

effectively maintained. Since our last update of the position to Members in May 2000, we have granted visa-free access to nationals of the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic for a stay of not more than 14 days with effect from 14 October 2000 and 18 November 2000 respectively. We will consider further relaxing the visa requirements for foreign nationals as and when the situation warrants.

4. For those who need a visa to visit Hong Kong, applications can be submitted directly to the Immigration Department by the applicants or their sponsors (the direct visa applications machinery). Processing time under this channel normally takes less than four weeks, including two weeks for the transit of mail in both directions. Alternatively, applications can be submitted to the Chinese Diplomatic or Consular Missions (CDCMs) nearest to the applicants' place of domicile, or to the Immigration Section of the HKSAR Beijing Office if they are residing in or visiting the Mainland. From our experience, the CDCMs normally finalise straight-forward unrefereed visit visa applications within one week and the HKSAR Beijing Office may do so within 3 working days.

5. The CDCMs and the HKSAR Beijing Office may issue visas to the nationals of some 30 countries without reference to the Immigration Department if the intended visit does not exceed 14 days. For other applications, they will refer them to the Immigration Department. However, with a few exceptions, simplified application procedures are in place for such referred applications i.e. the CDCMs or HKSAR Beijing Office may directly issue the visas 14 days after referral of the applications to the Immigration Department if the latter does not have any unfavourable comments.

6. To enhance the travel convenience of Russian tourists, we have introduced a fast track service on 18 January 1999 for the issue of visas to persons who are travelling in Russian tour groups in the Mainland to make a side trip to Hong Kong. Under the scheme, visas allowing a stay of not more than 14 days are processed by the Immigration Department within three working days.

7. In 2000, the Immigration Department received 12,282 applications for visit visas from overseas through the direct visa application machinery and 5,579 applications referred by the CDCMs or the HKSAR Beijing Office, and was able to finalise the processing of about 90% of them within four weeks. This compares to the finalising of 85% of applications within four weeks in 1999. In view of the fact that the actual performance exceeded the pledged standard of finalising 80% of entry visas within six weeks upon receipt of necessary documents, the Immigration Department has raised the target to finalising 100% within four weeks upon receipt of the supporting documents with effect from 2001.

8. In addition to the support rendered by the CDCMs and the HKSAR Beijing Office, the offices of the Trade Development Council in the Mainland also assist potential visa applicants by distributing application forms and providing relevant information.

9. Apart from having a liberal visa regime and visa application processing procedure, we have in place one of the most efficient immigration clearance arrangements in the Asia-Pacific Region. Our performance pledge is to clear 92% of passengers at the airport within 15 minutes; and 92% of passengers at all other control points within 30 minutes. We have been able to achieve the pledged standard at all control points. In 2000, 99.0% of passengers at the airport were cleared within 15 minutes. This is an increase of about 1% compared to the 98.1% in 1999. In respect of the other control points, 98.79% of passengers were cleared within 30 minutes in 2000.

Mainland Visitors

10. Mainland visitors can pay private visits to Hong Kong through the Group Tour Scheme and the Two-way Permit Scheme. Over the past few years, Mainland visitors have been the largest tourist group visiting Hong Kong. The annual number of Mainland visitors, including transitees, was around 3.2 million in 1999, representing a daily entry rate of about 8 700. The number of Mainland visitors has increased to about 3.8 million. The daily average of their arrivals in the period is about 10,300.

11. Under the Group Tour Scheme, Mainland visitors may visit Hong Kong for sight-seeing purpose up to 14 days each time. In 1999, the average daily arrival of Mainland group tour visitors to Hong Kong was 922. In the first eleven months of 2000, the figure increased to 1,227.

12. Following a regular review meeting held between the Mainland authorities and the Administration on 17 April 2000, a number of facilitation measures are being taken forward. Highlights include -

- (a) the yearly quota will be raised from 547,500 to 730,000. That is, the average daily quota will be increased from 1,500 to 2,000. This daily target may be exceeded as necessary during peak periods such as the Chinese New Year period, but the overall yearly quota of 730,000 will be observed;
- (b) the number of designated Mainland tour operators will be increased from 4 to 17. All these Mainland tour operators should have a Hong Kong ground receiving agent which must be a member of the Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong;
- (c) the Immigration Department will streamline the entry procedures for Group Tour members under the Scheme; and
- (d) to meet the needs of short-haul tourists, the operators may organize tours which last only for one to two days.

On items (a) and (b), the Immigration Department is ready to receive the increased number of visitors once the implementation details are finalized by the Mainland authorities. Items (c) and (d) have already been implemented.

13. Under the Two-way Permit Scheme, Mainland visitors are allowed to stay in Hong Kong to visit relatives for up to three months. The average daily arrival of Two-way Permit holders has been 1,188 per day in 2000.

14. A Business Visit Scheme was implemented in March 1998 to enhance the mobility of Mainland business visitors. Under this Scheme, Mainland residents may enter Hong Kong for business visits on an 'Exit-entry Permit for Travelling to Hong Kong and Macao' (EEP) with an appropriate endorsement issued by the Public Security Bureau (PSB). The endorsement may be valid for single, double or multiple journeys good for a stay of 7 or 14 days on each visit. The daily arrival of EEP holders for business visits averaged 210 in March - December 1998. It rose to 736 in 1999 and further increased to 1,790 in 2000.

Taiwan Visitors

15. Over the past few years, Taiwan visitors have been the second largest tourist group visiting Hong Kong. In 1997 – 1999, the annual number of Taiwan visitors amounts to around 1.9 million, representing a daily average arrival figure of about 5,200. In 2000, Taiwan residents paid 2.37 million visits to Hong Kong, i.e. about 6,500 visits per day on average.

16. To enter Hong Kong, most Taiwan residents use Taiwan Visits Permits (TVPs) issued by the Immigration Department. There are 3 types of TVPs, details of which are tabulated below:

Type	Validity	Period of Stay	Processing Time	Fee (\$)
Single-journey	3 months	15 days to 3 months	15 working days	135
Regular-size multiple-journey (16 pages)	1 year	14 days on each landing	5 working days	270
Jumbo-size multiple-journey (32 pages)	3 years	14 days on each landing	5 working days (or 2 working days under a fast-track service)	540

Improvement Measures Made

17. The Administration has made continuous efforts to facilitate Taiwan residents to travel to Hong Kong over the past few years. These efforts have brought about a number of improvements to the TVP system. Highlights include -

- (a) the period of stay granted to TVP holders was extended from seven days to fourteen days;
- (b) the number of types of TVPs was reduced from seven to three to simplify the application procedure;
- (c) the processing and issue of TVPs were computerised. The processing time of applications for multiple-journey TVPs was reduced from seven to five working days;
- (d) the validity of the jumbo-size multiple-journey TVPs was extended from two to three years;
- (e) since June 1998, we have launched a fast track service of multiple-journey TVPs valid for three years to bona fide visitors in June 1998. The normal processing time for TVP applications under the service is reduced from five to two working days. We have received an average of about 428 applications for the service on a daily basis in 2000;
- (f) since June 1998, holders of 'Mainland Travel Permit for Taiwan Residents' (台灣居民來往大陸通行證 - commonly known as "台胞證") [MTPs] with an entry/exit endorsement issued by the Mainland authorities have been allowed to transit Hong Kong en route to or from the Mainland for a period of up to seven days without an entry permit. In June - December 1998, a total of 249,363 Taiwan visitors entered Hong Kong through this channel, averaging over 1,100 per day. This daily average figure rose to 2,000 in 1999 and further up to 3,095 in 2000; and

- (g) as from June 1998, we have extended the transit period allowed for Taiwan residents holding other acceptable travel documents other than TVPs and MTPs from two to seven days.

Feasibility study on issuing TVPs by electronic means

18. The Immigration Department has conducted a feasibility study on the possibility of issuing TVPs by electronic means. The objective of the study is to facilitate visits by Taiwan residents by significantly shortening the processing time of TVP applications through the use of information and communication technology. We are now studying how to take forward the proposal and aim to work out the implementation details in 2001.

Security Bureau
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