

For information

LegCo Panel on Security

Travel convenience for visitors to Hong Kong

Purpose

This paper informs Members of 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 achieve further convenience by applying for a Travel Pass ¹. A similar arrangement is also available to nationals of the APEC economies participating in the APEC Business Travel Card Scheme ². Only nationals of 42 foreign countries need to apply for visas to visit Hong Kong. In 1999, 5.5 million overseas visitors came to Hong Kong. 98.4%, or 5.4 million of them, came without the need for a visa.

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 visits 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 (i.e. Australia, Chile, Korea, Hong Kong, the Philippines, New Zealand, Thailand and Malaysia) without visas and enjoy streamlined immigration clearance at the control points of the participating economies within three years.

3. Our visa requirements are kept under constant review to facilitate visitors while ensuring that immigration control and security are effectively maintained. For example, we have lengthened the visa free period of nationals of Venezuela from 1 month to 3 months with effect from 1 January 2000, and have granted visa-free access to nationals of Hungary for a stay of not more than 14 days with effect from 20 January 2000.

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 four to six 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 concerned 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 facilitate persons who are travelling in Russian tour groups on 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 1999, the Immigration Department received 10,820 applications for visit visas from overseas through the Direct Visa Application machinery and 5,235 applications referred by the CDCMs or the HKSAR Beijing Office, and was able to finalise the processing of about 85% of them within four weeks. In view of the fact that the actual performance exceeded the pledged standard of finalising 70% of entry visas within six weeks upon receipt of necessary documents, the Immigration Department has raised the percentage to 80% with effect from January 2000.

8. In addition to the support rendered by the CDCMs and the HKSAR Beijing Office, our overseas Economic and Trade Offices 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 1999, 98.1% of passengers at the airport were cleared

within 15 minutes. In respect of the other control points, 98.5% of passengers were cleared within 30 minutes in the same year.

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 three years, Mainland visitors have been the largest tourist group visiting Hong Kong. The annual number of Mainland visitors, including transitees, remained at around 2.6 million, representing a daily entry rate of about 7 200. The number of Mainland visitors has further increased in the first three months of this year, totalling about 0.9 million. The daily average of their arrivals in the period is about 9 700.

11. Under the Group Tour Scheme, Mainland visitors may visit Hong Kong for sight-seeing purpose up to 15 days each time. Following a regular review meeting held between the Mainland authorities and the Administration on 17 April 2000, a number of facilitation measures will be implemented. 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.

There will be a review of these new arrangements in six months' time. In the meantime, both sides will continue to cooperate closely to put in place measures for tightening control against abuses.

12. Under the Two-way Permit Scheme, Mainland visitors are allowed to stay in Hong Kong to visit relatives for up to three months on each landing. The average daily arrivals of Two-way Permit holders has been 1 003 per day in January – March 2000.

Taiwan Visitors

13. Over the past three years, the annual number of Taiwan visitors amounts to around 1.9 million, representing a daily average arrival figure of about 5 200. In January – March 2000, Taiwan residents paid 0.5 million visits to Hong Kong, i.e. about 5 800 visits per

day on average. They have been the second largest tourist group visiting Hong Kong over the past 3 years.

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

<u>Type</u>	<u>Validity</u>	<u>Period of Stay</u>	<u>Processing Time</u>	<u>Fee (\$)</u>
Single-journey	3 months	15 days - 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	540

Improvement Measures Made

15. 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 -

- (i) the period of stay granted to TVP holders was extended from seven days to 14 days;

- (ii) the number of types of TVPs was reduced from seven to three to simplify the application procedure;
- (iii) the processing and issue of TVPs were computerised. The processing time of applications for multi-journey TVPs was reduced from seven to five working days;
- (iv) the validity of the jumbo-size multiple-journey TVPs was extended from two to three years;
- (v) since June 1998, MTP (台灣居民來往大陸通行証(俗稱“台胞証”)) holders 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 over 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 2 400 in January – March 2000;
- (vi) since June 1998, we have launched a fast track service of multiple-journey TVPs valid for three years to bona fide visitors. The normal processing time for TVP applications under the service is reduced from five to two working days. We have received an average of over 300 applications for the service on a daily basis; and

- (vii) 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

16. Immigration Department will soon start a feasibility study on the possibility of issuing TVPs by electronic means. It is hoped that with the employment of information and communication technology, the processing time of a TVP application can be shortened from the existing arrangement of several days to within a few minutes. This will facilitate easier visits of Taiwan residents to Hong Kong, in particular those of pack-and-go type travellers. The study will be completed before the end of this year.

Security Bureau

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