

Africa declines in travel freedom index

The African continent has suffered the most dramatic decline in freedom of travel to other countries around the globe, according to the Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index.



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Over the last decade, African countries account for 16 of the 20 biggest fallers on the annual *Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index*, and the continent as a whole suffered the most dramatic decline on the just-released 2017 edition of the index.

A highly-regarded ranking of the world's countries based on the degree of travel freedom enjoyed by citizens, the *Visa Restrictions Index* is published by leading global residence and citizenship advisory firm, Henley & Partners, and produced in partnership with the International Air Transport Association (IATA), which maintains the world's largest and most authoritative database of travel information.

With its nationals able to access 98 countries without a visa, South Africa, which dropped one position from 2016, is ranked 55th on the 2017 index. In contrast, citizens of Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Spain, the US and the UK have unrestricted access to 173 or more countries – and Germans, whose country retains its top spot on the index for the second year running, have access to 176 countries. The highest ranking South Africa has achieved in the last decade was in 2008 and 2009, when it occupied the 35th position.

Freedom of movement

Nigel Barnes, managing partner of Henley & Partners' recently launched South African office, points out that the majority of the countries to which South Africans can travel unhindered are to be found in Africa and South America: "This means we have freedom of movement to predominantly developing regions. For South Africans who travel frequently to the UK, US and EU, this is very restrictive."

The country ranked third in the African region, with its Indian Ocean-island neighbours, the Seychelles and Mauritius, taking first and second positions respectively. The Seychelles, whose nationals enjoy visa-free access to 137 countries worldwide, achieved 29th position on the index, while citizens of Mauritius, which ranked 33rd overall, have unrestricted access to 131 international countries.

With visa-free access to 69 countries, Kenya takes fourth spot in Africa and is also the continent's biggest climber, moving up two positions since last year to rank 68th. But, losing four places in one year, Ghana, which now ranks 77th, recorded the most negative movement on the index as a whole. And, over the last decade, Sierra Leone has suffered the index's largest individual decline, losing 29 ranks overall.

"There is still huge disparity in the levels of travel freedom between countries, despite the world becoming seemingly more mobile and interdependent," says Barnes. "Generally, visa requirements are a reflection of a country's relationship with others, and take into account diplomatic relations between countries, reciprocal visa arrangements, security risks, and the dangers of visa and immigration regulation violations," he explains.

Global overview

Even after losing visa-free admission to one country, German nationals still enjoy the greatest travel freedom in the world. Sweden also remains static in second place, with its citizens able to access 175 countries (just one less than Germans) without a visa, and Denmark, Finland, Italy, Spain and the US jointly rank third, enjoying unrestricted access to 174 countries. The UK, however, has slipped down yet another position this year to fourth, having shared first place with Germany for three consecutive years from 2013–2015.

Syria, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan sit at the very bottom of the 2017 *Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index*, each with visa-free access to less than 30 countries worldwide. This shows a slight change from last year's ranking, with Somalia rising out of the bottom four with access now to 30 countries, and Syria dropping into it with only 29. In total, 48 countries lost ground over the past year, dropping between one and three ranks, and only 42 countries showed no movement at all.

Barnes explains that, although the size and make-up of the 'Top 10' remains the same as last year, the changing geopolitical climate could well affect the rankings over the next 12 months. "We have recently witnessed several major events — including Brexit and the election of US President Donald Trump — that are likely to have an impact on global mobility. These can be interpreted as steps toward restricting movement and creating barriers to entry. This trend towards curbing travel freedom is already apparent in the shift in rankings on this year's index."

Peru was the highest individual mover in this year's index, gaining 15 places. Island nations also made a strong showing, with the Marshall Islands, the Solomon Islands, Micronesia, Kiribati and Tuvalu all gaining over nine places. The fortunes of the emerging economies of the BRICS nations, however, were varied. Brazil and China both increased their standing on the index, moving up three and two ranks respectively. The remaining three, South Africa included, all lost ground: Russia dropped three places and India two.

Citizenship-by-investment programmes

In contrast to 12 years ago, when the *Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index* was first published, there are now many more residence- and citizenship-by-investment programmes available to those who wish to enhance their travel freedom. More and more governments are embracing these programmes as a means of stimulating economic development and

growth, and there is an increasing number of wealthy and talented individuals looking to diversify their citizenship portfolios in order to give themselves and their families greater international opportunity, stability, freedom and security.

Barnes points out that the countries offering the most important citizenship-by-investment programmes in the world continue to perform strongly on the index. “Malta offers the top-ranked investment migration programme globally and scores very highly with the world’s 10th most powerful passport and visa-free access to 167 countries. Austria is also in the top 10 with a total of 173 countries, and Cyprus is not far behind at 16, with 158 countries accessible without a visa.”

Likewise, countries that offer citizenship-by-investment programmes in the Caribbean have performed well. Grenada is ranked at 37th place and offers successful applicants visa-free access to 124 countries, including China, Europe’s Schengen area, Singapore, Brazil, and other key markets. Antigua and Barbuda, and St Kitts and Nevis share 30th place on this year’s index, with visa-free access to 136 countries, and St Lucia, which is ranked 36th, offers its citizens unrestricted access to 127 countries worldwide.

“For individuals who hold passports of countries with fewer visa-waiver agreements, such as South Africa, a second or even third citizenship can open up travel opportunities to countries previously restricted by time-consuming visa application requirements and processes,” says Barnes. “The *Henley & Partners Visa Restrictions Index* is relevant to individuals interested in improving their mobility and the quality of their nationality, as well as to governments focused on improving the local, regional and global opportunities inherent in their passports.”

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