

Visa Policy for International Tourist in Vietnam Post Covid

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ABSTRACT

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism was one of the important economic sectors, contributing 10.4% to the global GDP, equivalent to 9.2 trillion USD, creating 333 million jobs, equivalent to 10, 6% of all jobs in the world. However, tourism is one of the industries hardest hit by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the industry's contribution to global GDP was only 5.3%. After two years of freezing due to the Covid 19 pandemic, Vietnam has officially opened to international tourism from March 15, 2022 – the earliest compared to other countries in the region. Although it has fully opened, removing all barriers compared to before the epidemic, international tourists are still not interested in coming to Vietnam. By the end of the year, statistics show that Vietnam recovered the slowest international tourism. The reasons are many, but the main reason is still the visa policy. This study aims to systematically evaluate Vietnam's tourist visa policy, compared it with other countries in Southeast Asia, and proposed visa solutions to attract more international tourists to Vietnam.

Keywords: Vietnam, visa policy, international tourist, South-East Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Today tourism is one of the largest economic and most rapidly growing industries in the world. For many developing countries today, tourism is not only a factor for socio-economic development, but also helps countries preserve their cultural values, protect the environment, and promote peace. Recognizing the important role of tourism in socio-economic development, many countries around the world have invested in tourism development, makes competition between tourist destinations of nation in the region and around the world more and more fierce, especially in the field of attracting international tourist. There is no doubt, that an effective and appropriate visa policy makes travel destinations more attractive and easily accessible to visit (Abdrakhman, 2021).

Located in centre of the Southeast Asia, with over 3200 kilometres of coastline, pristine beaches, mountainous highlands, abundant of hot mineral water, Karst Land, and diverse cultural and historic sites, Vietnam has a lot of opportunities to develop its tourism. Vietnam's tourism industry continues to rank amongst the fastest-growing tourist destinations in the world, with the revenue 2018 reached VND 637 trillion (up 17.7 percent compared to 2017). The Vietnamese government released the "Strategy on Vietnam's tourism development until 2020, vision to 2030" in 2011 to develop the tourism industry as a major driver of economic growth. In early 2017, the Prime Minister approved Decision 08/NQ-TW on developing tourism as a key economic sector and by 2030, Vietnam will attract 30 million international visitors, becoming one of the top tourist destinations in Southeast Asia.

Visa policies are among the most important governmental formalities influencing international tourism. The development of policies and procedures for visas, as well as for other important travel document such as passports, is closely linked to the development of tourism. With the swift growth of international tourism in the last six decades, the quality, reliability, and functionality of visas and other travel documents has

evolved(Tourism & Unwto, 2016).

Like many countries in the world, Vietnam's visa is regarded as a policy instrument for national security and defence. It is a powerful tool to allow or deny to foreigners. However, visa requirement can be a barrier for spur of the moment tourists. Also, time and fee required for visa application processing in person can result in the decline of international visitors to that country. Having recognized that issue, Vietnam has signed the bilateral and unilateral agreements for visa exemption and issued other visa relaxation such as visa on arrival (VOA). Through bilateral and unilateral visa free agreements some major markets for tourism have enabled more tourists to visit Vietnam(Thi et al., 2015)

In general, Vietnam's visa policy is still not attractive enough compared to other countries in the region. The number of countries that are exempt from Vietnam visa is still very limited. Visitors from far-flung markets often have a need to travel for 18-21 days, but most new countries are only enjoying the 15-day visa-free regime, leading to unattractive with visitors who want to stay long with high spending.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visa is proof that someone is authorized to enter or exit the country where the visa is issues. Tourist visa is a type of visitor visa that you may be eligible for if you only plan to make a temporary visit for the purpose of tourism.

Studies on visa policy in the world have shown that a favorable visa policy is a fundamental factor to promote tourism development of a country. "Visa facilitation plays a central role in stimulating growth and job creation" (World Tourism Organization, 2013). "Visa restriction helps to manage cross-border flow of people and prevent illegal immigration. In 2015, destinations around the world still require on average approximately two thirds of the world's population to obtain a traditional visa prior to departure. Some 18% of the world's population is able to enter a destination without a visa, while another 15% can receive a visa on arrival and 6% is able to obtain eVisas"(Tourism & Unwto, 2016).

In the case of Kazakhstan, Akbota Abdrakhman (2021) concludes that the visa facilitation and liberalization policies positively affect the inbound tourism in Kazakhstan, while visa restriction negatively affect Kazakhstan's destination competitiveness and perception. Visa restrictions represent an important hurdle to and deterrent against unwelcome visitors that is binding before visitors even arrive at one's borders (Neumayer, 2010).

In addition, the fact also shows that the visa exemption is also one of the key factors to promote the growth of international tourism of countries today. Choong-Ki Lee, Hak-Jun Song & Lawrence J. Bendle (2010) found that visa arrangements are a key reason in controlling international tourism flows, and that by introducing visa-free entry governments can increase national tourism receipts noticeably. Tourist entry unhindered by visa conditions has a significant positive influence on demand in existing tourism markets(Lee et al., n.d.). Many travellers highlighted the lack of correct and up-to-date information on visa requirements as an inconvenience to travelers. This information must be provided through a constantly updated website for the department of immigration (Zengeni et al., n.d.).

Once the "safest country after the Covid 19 epidemic" and high expectations for the explosion of the international tourist market, Vietnam has now been far behind Thailand in the competition to attract foreign tourists. The number of countries that are exempt from visa on arrival in Vietnam is only 24, with a small visa exemption period (15 days). Experts say that the current visa policy is one of the barriers to Vietnam's international tourism.

Although Vietnam's tourism opened early, it ranked at the bottom of the Asia Tourism Recovery Index after

COVID-19. According to statistics in 2022, Vietnam can only receive about 3.5 million international visitors, much lower than the target of 5 million visitors to generate about 4.5 billion USD in revenue. Therefore, it is extremely urgent to seriously research and come up with solutions to remove visa barriers to tourism for Vietnam's tourism today.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized qualitative research methodology. The secondary data of the study used is public records, including material from laws, policies, data from public surveys of a country, curricula, company or researcher report, data from news articles published in magazines and online materials.

The system of visa-related concepts and the role of visa policies in tourism development have been mentioned. In addition, by synthesizing documents and analyzing the current status of Vietnam's visa policy after the post-Covid period, the existing issues that need immediate reform have been identified. Based on analysis and comparison of the limitations of Vietnam's visa policy with some countries in the region such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia, recommendations on visa policies would be proposed to contribute to enhancing the competitiveness of Vietnam's tourism industry. This is aimed at achieving the industry's goal of making Vietnam a leading destination in Southeast Asia by 2023.

OVERVIEW OF VIETNAM'S VISA POLICY FOR TOURISTS

Vietnam visa is a document issued by a Vietnamese diplomatic mission abroad (Embassy/Consulate) or Vietnam Immigration Department for foreigners. Foreigners holding this visa will be allowed to enter and stay in Vietnam for the specified time. Depending on the purpose of entry, the time of Vietnam visa will also be different.

In Vietnam, visas are specified in Clause 11, Article 3 of Law on foreigners' entry into, exit from, transit through, residence in Vietnam (2014): Visa is a document issued by a competent authority of Vietnam, allowing foreigners to enter Vietnam.

The tourist visa, marked as DL, is issued for people entering for tourism purposes and has a validity of no more than 3 months (The Law on Entry, Exit, Transit, and Residence of Foreigners in Vietnam, 2014).

Visa exemption to Vietnam

At the time of March 2022, Vietnam is granting visa exemption to citizens of 24 countries (ordinary passports), including:

Table 1. List of Countries with visa exemption to citizens

No.	Country	Duration of stay	Purpose of entry
1	Belarus (Republic)	15 days	Not specified
2	Brunei Darussalam	14 days	Not specified
3	Cambodia (Kingdom)	30 days	Not specified
4	Chile (Republic)	90 days	The entry is not for the purpose of income-generating activities
5	Denmark (Kingdom)	15 days	Not specified
6	Finland (Republic)	15 days	Not specified
7	France (Republic)	15 days	Not specified

8	Germany (Federal Republic)	15 days	Not specified
9	Italy	15 days	Not specified
10	Spain	15 days	Not specified
11	England	15 days	Not specified
12	Russia	15 days	Not specified
13	Japan	15 days	Not specified
14	Korea	15 days	Not specified
15	Sweden	15 days	Not specified
16	Norway	15 days	Not specified
17	Indonesia	30 days	Not specified
18	Kyrgyzstan (Republic)	30 days	Not specified
19	Laos	30 days	Not specified
20	Malaysia	30 days	Not specified
21	Myanmar (Union)	14 days	Not specified
22	Philippines (Republic)	30 days	Not specified
23	Singapore (Republic)	30 days	Not specified
24	Thailand (Kingdom)	30 days	Not specified

(Source: *Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs*)

Furthermore, the current implementation of a visa exemption policy for foreign nationals in Phu Quoc Island (Kien Giang province) is based on specific criteria outlined in the amended law on entry, exit, transit, and residence of foreigners in Vietnam, which became effective on July 1, 2020. These criteria include the presence of an international airport, a distinct geographical area separate from the mainland, compliance with the socio-economic development policy, and no adverse impact on Vietnam’s national defense, security, social order, and safety. Additionally, the amended law introduced a provision allowing a 30-day visa exemption for foreigners who temporarily enter the coastal economic zone. This visa exemption policy, applicable for stays of up to 30 days, aims to facilitate tourism and foster economic growth in Phu Quoc Island, taking full advantage of its unique features and potential as a remarkable destination.

E-visa

The Immigration Department of Vietnam introduced e-visa, a type of visa issued through the electronic transaction system, in February 2017. This e-visa allows foreigners to enter Vietnam for a single entry with a maximum duration of 30 days. Individuals who are currently outside of Vietnam and intend to visit can directly apply for an e-visa or utilize the services of an inviting or sponsoring agency. The e-visa fee is paid through the electronic payment gateway, as regulated by the Immigration Department. It’s important to note that both the e-visa fee and electronic payment fee are non-refundable in the event that the applicant’s e-visa application is not approved (Vietnam Administration of Immigration).

Vietnam currently offers electronic visas to citizens from 80 countries worldwide. After a 2-year suspension due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the issuance of Vietnam electronic visas resumed on March 15th, 2022. Holders of an e-visa are permitted to enter Vietnam through any of the 33 designated border gates. The following conditions must be met to be eligible for an e-visa:

- Applicants must be foreign nationals residing outside of Vietnam.
- Applicants must possess a valid passport.
- Applicants must not fall under the cases of inadmissible entry outlined in Article 21 of the Law on

Entry, Exit, Transit, and Residence of Foreigners in Vietnam.

Vietnam Visa on Arrival

Visa on arrival issued by the immigration department is a popular method of applying for a Vietnam visa chosen by many foreign nationals due to its convenience, simplicity, and the possibility to request an urgent entry permission to expedite clearance into Vietnam.

To apply for a visa on arrival, foreign nationals need to request an entry permission letter to Vietnam, also known as a visa approval letter. To obtain an entry permission letter, a guarantee from a company, organization, or individual in Vietnam is required. After completing the application form and paying the fee, it takes approximately 5 to 7 days for the application to receive the entry permission letter in a digital format. Finally, the applicant can present this letter along with other necessary documents to obtain a visa at Vietnam's international border checkpoints.

Tourist Visa extension

A tourist visa is a type of visa with a maximum validity of 3 months, and each entry will be granted a maximum of 1-month temporary residence. After the temporary residence expires, foreign nationals can choose to exit and re-enter Vietnam to be granted an extension of temporary residence or proceed to apply for an extension of temporary residence within Vietnam if they are unable to exit the country. Visa extensions services are available at almost travel agencies. The application dossier includes:

- A certified copy of the travel agency's business license in accordance with the Law on Tourism.
- Confirmation of the foreign national's temporary residence at tourist accommodation facilities.

VIETNAM'S VISA POLICY AFTER COVID PANDEMIC

The number of international visitors to Vietnam in 2020 decreased by 78.7% compared to the previous year, of which over 96% were international visitors in Q1/2020. This was due to covid-19 as the country did not open the international tourism from March 2020 to early March 2022.

Starting from March 15th, 2022, Vietnam officially opens international tourism activities. Accordingly, the entry regulations for Vietnam in 2022 will be completely lifted and applied as before the pandemic. The visa application procedures and eligible applicants will continue to be implemented according to the current regulations of Vietnam, including the laws on entry, exit, transit, and residence of foreign nationals in Vietnam (issued in 2014 and amended in 2019). For travel insurance, the average premium that guests have to pay is around 30 USD per person, in order to receive coverage up to 10,000 USD for Covid-19 treatment in Vietnam.

Therefore, compared to the period before the pandemic, international visitors who want to enter Vietnam will be subject to more lenient regulations. They do not need to register for a tour as before. However, before entry, they must have a certificate of full vaccination/ a certificate of recovery from Covid-19 and a negative nCoV test result before boarding the plane (24 hours for rapid testing, 72 hours for RT-PCR). And within 24 hours of arriving in Vietnam, they must have a negative nCoV test before participating in other tourism activities. From 00h00 on 15 May 2022, no Covid-19 test, no quarantine, no vaccine certificate required to travel to Viet Nam.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to statistics in 2022, Vietnam only received about 3.5 million international visitors, much lower

than the target of 5 million to generate revenue of about 4.5 billion USD. Meanwhile, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore have surpassed their targets for international tourism, while Vietnam is ranked last in the Asia tourism recovery index after COVID-19. Despite opening later than Vietnam, Thailand has welcomed over 10 million international visitors in 2022, generating a total revenue of 14 billion USD thanks to creating easy and attractive conditions for international visitors to enter the country. According to experts' assessments, Thailand is prioritized by tourists as their destination because the country exempts visa requirements for citizens of 65 countries. In contrast, Vietnam is facing a significant barrier due to its visa policy.

Table 2. Compared Vietnam's visa policy with other countries in Southeast Asia

No	Country	Number international tourists after open (2022)	Visa exemption	Visa-free period	Entry time	Visa fee (USD)
1	Vietnam	3.5 million	24 countries	15 days or 30 days	Single	25
2	Thailand	11.8 million	65 countries	45 days or 90 days	Multiple	30
3	Singapore	6.3 million	162 countries	30 days or 90 days	Multiple	30
4	Malaysia	7.2 million	162 countries	30 days or 90 days	Multiple	~20

(Source: authors)

Almost every country in the region is competing on visa programs, while Vietnam has not made any changes to its Visa policy in the past year. For example, Thailand has continuously adjusted its visa policies since opening, most recently allowing tourists to stay for up to 45 or 90 days. According to the Tourism Advisory Board (TAB), it is currently difficult to obtain tourist visas at Vietnamese embassies as compared to pre-COVID-19 times, as applicants are required to have company guarantees or must use visa service agencies which charge high fees, ranging from 200 USD to 500 USD for urgent visas, compared to the official visa fee of only 25 USD.

During the research synthesis process, the author would like to summarize the current challenges regarding Vietnam's tourism visa policy as follows:

1. The number of countries eligible for visa exemption in Vietnam is still very limited, with only 24 countries on the list, whereas Singapore offers visa exemption to 162 countries, Malaysia to 162 countries, Philippines to 157 countries and Thailand to 65 countries.
2. The visa-free period is too short, as for European countries, the visa-free period is only 15 days.
3. Restrictions on visa renewal: Prior to Covid, tourists could apply for a 3-month visa, a one-month single-entry visa, or a one-month multiple-entry visa. After Covid, international visitors from some markets are limited to a stay of no more than 30 days. However, visa application procedures have become easier because tourists can apply for visas online, which means they only need to provide necessary information to obtain an online visa.
4. Visa extension is difficult: Currently, foreign visitors' visas are limited to less than 1 month, and if they stay more than 1 month, they will be penalized. This means that tourists cannot obtain a visa for more than a month. The visa application procedure for an extension of more than 1 month is very complicated, and almost a hindrance to visitors' time in Vietnam. If they want to travel in Vietnam for more than 30 days, they are required to go to Laos, Cambodia, or another country before returning to Vietnam. This is one of the obstacles to international

tourists coming to Vietnam.

Based on the analysis of the limitations, the author proposes the following suggestions:

1. Strengthening the opening of visa policies for international tourists:

Firstly, it is necessary to expand the list of countries exempted from visas to Vietnam from the current 24 countries to the same level as Thailand. Currently, the countries exempted from visas are mainly ASEAN countries and European countries. Another issue that needs to be considered is that the list of visa-exempt countries does not include the United States, Belgium, and some other developed European countries. These are major and safe tourism markets with high levels of spending, but they do not have visa-free access. As a result, the tourism industry is limited in terms of the international customer base.

Secondly, we need to expand the list of countries eligible for e-visas. Currently, of the 80 countries granted e-visas, most are Asian and European countries. In the current situation, countries in the African region and some wealthy countries in the Middle East have a strong demand for tourism. Therefore, Vietnam needs to study and expand the provision of e-visas to citizens of these countries to expand the international tourism market. In the future, Vietnam needs to consider providing electronic visas for citizens of all countries in the world.

2. Extend the duration of visa exemption:

Tourist visas in Vietnam are valid for 30 days. If they want to travel in Vietnam for more than 30 days, it is mandatory to go to Laos, Cambodia, or another country before returning to Vietnam. Therefore, it is necessary to adjust the length of stay for international tourists and simplify visa extension procedures as soon as possible. Only then can Vietnam's tourism compete with other countries in the region.

As mentioned above, currently, 13 out of the 24 countries that are visa-exempt to Vietnam are European, America countries. This is a distant market. European customers prefer to travel for 18 or 20 days, and many people will stay longer to shop or relax after the tour. This will bring a lot of value to the tourism industry. With a visa-free period of only 15 days, it will not be enough time for tourists to travel and explore. Therefore, the urgent issue now is to extend the visa duration from 15 days to 30 or 45 days. This will be a great incentive for international tourists who wish to visit Vietnam for tourism purposes.

3. Issuing visa at the border checkpoint:

Compared to some neighboring countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, the visa application process for entry into their countries is much simpler than in Vietnam. Even Laos and Cambodia have implemented on-arrival visa issuance for international visitors to their countries. Therefore, Vietnam needs to study and implement a pilot model for on-arrival visa issuance at border gates. Doing so will simplify the visa application process and contribute to attracting more international visitors to Vietnam.

4. Provide accurate and timely information on visa on the official website:

According to Tourism Information Technology Center (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism), currently, tourists who want to know information about visas can access two official websites: <http://mienthithucvk.mofa.gov.vn>; and <http://lanhsuvietnam.gov.vn>. Besides, international visitors can obtain information about visas on the official website of the Immigration Department (Ministry of Public Security): <https://xuatnhapcanh.gov.vn>.

However, the information visa on these two official websites of Ministry of Foreign Affairs is still very limited and not regularly updated. Much important information is still from 2010 (information on consular

procedures online on <http://lanhsuvietnam.gov.vn>.) and 2018 (information on visa-free countries to Vietnam <http://mienthithucvk.mofa.gov.vn>).

Comparing with the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand, we can see that the information about their visa is provided in a comprehensive and detailed manner. The visa information section offers three main sources of information, including general visa information, types of visa and visa requirements. In the category of types of visas, information about all types of visas, including tourist visas, is described in detail: requirements, required documents, visa processing fee, visa validity, period of stay and extension of stay.



TOURIST VISA

REQUIREMENT

- This type of visa is issued to applicants who wish to enter the Kingdom for tourism purposes .
- **Employment in Thailand is prohibited****

REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

- Passport or travel document with validity not less than 6 months
- Visa application form completely filled out
- Evidence of travel from Thailand (confirmed air ticket paid in full)
- Recent (4x6 cm.) photograph of the applicant
- Evidence of flight itinerary to and from Thailand
- Evidence of adequate finance (20,000 Baht per person or 40,000 Baht per family)
- NOTE:** Consular officers reserve the rights to request additional documents as deemed necessary

VISA PROCESSING FEE

- 1000 Baht per entry (in the local currency)

VISA VALIDITY

- The validity of a visa is 3 months (single entry) or 6 months (multiple entry)

PERIOD OF STAY

- Upon arrival, travellers with this type of visa will be permitted to stay in Thailand for a period of not exceeding 60 days.

EXTENSION OF STAY

- Those who wish to stay longer or may wish to change their type of visa must file an application for permission at the Office of Immigration Bureau located on Government Center B, Chaengwattana Soi 7, Laksi, Bangkok 10210, Tel 0-2141-9889 (or at <http://www.immigration.go.th>). The extension of stay as well as the change of certain type of visa is solely at the discretion of the Immigration officer.

Figure 1. Tourist visa information of Thailand

(Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand)

In addition, there are currently many unofficial websites such as e-visa-vietnam.com; Vietnamvisa.govt.vn; Vietnam-visa.com... that provide online visa services, which can easily lead to misunderstandings for international tourists. Therefore, the immediate action that needs to be taken is for the tourism authority to coordinate with relevant agencies to promote the official government visa website to international tourists. At the same time, it is necessary to update complete and timely visa information on these websites.

With the strong development of digital technology nowadays, as well as the demand for quick and convenient access to information by international travelers, it is essential to have an official government website that provides comprehensive visa information for international tourists. Vietnam should refer to the government websites of Thailand and Malaysia in building an information website regarding travel visas for international tourists.

5. The policy on visas needs to be reformed:

Ultimately, the most important thing at present is to reform the visa policy. In fact, it has been proven that a liberal visa policy is the key to unlocking the growth of the tourism industry. As an example, in the ASEAN region, many countries have adopted this approach since opening their borders for tourism due to Covid-19 and have attracted a large number of international tourists.

With the aim of welcoming 8 million international visitors in 2022, the Thai government quickly passed proposals to open its visa policy from businesses. As a result, the country received 11.8 million international visitors in less than a year after officially opening its doors and continues to target 25 million international visitors in 2023, based on extending the 45-day visa policy for visa-exempt markets.

For Indonesia, when it initially opened, the country only aimed to receive 3.6 million international visitors in 2022. By September 2022, the Indonesian government implemented several new visa policies, including extending visa-free stays to 60 days, and up to 180 days for those with USD 100,000. One month later, the country announced a “second home” visa policy, allowing foreign nationals to stay in the country for 5-10 years with the primary purpose of attracting foreign tourists to Bali and other destinations in Indonesia. And in just the last 3 months of 2022, the number of visitors to Indonesia increased sharply, reaching 5.5 million international visitors.

So, in actual numbers, only 3.5 million international tourists were welcomed, falling short of the target of 5 million for the year 2022. To achieve the goal of 8 million international visitors in 2023, Vietnam needs to come up with breakthrough solutions to develop tourism starting now. One crucial issue that needs to be addressed in order to compete with other countries in the region is the visa problem.

To achieve this, first and foremost, the tourism management agencies need to listen to proposals from tourism businesses. As these tourism businesses are the ones directly working with international visitors, they understand the visa obstacles that tourists are facing. Thailand is currently implementing this, and Vietnam needs to learn from their experience. Secondly, there needs to be consistency and coherence in the information and procedures, policies and processes related to visa policies among relevant departments to help tourists easily access information quickly, conveniently, and accurately. Finally, in addition to visa issues, to attract more and more international tourists to Vietnam, we need to invest in tourism products, infrastructure, and a safe and friendly tourism environment.

CONCLUSION

This study has explained the reason why visa policies are a barrier for international tourists coming to Vietnam. One year after reopening tourism due to the Covid pandemic, the Vietnamese government has not made any changes to its visa policy, while other countries in the Southeast Asian region are continuously reforming their visa policies since reopening tourism. Based on these limitations, this study has proposed specific solutions and recommendations to reform Vietnam’s tourism visa policy, contributing to making Vietnam one of the top tourism destinations in Southeast Asia. However, the limitation of this study is that it only stopped at qualitative analysis, without surveying or quantitatively analyzing the factors influencing Vietnam’s visa policy from the perspective of international tourists. The theories on visa policies, as well as the recommendations, presented in the study will serve as a scientific foundation for relevant agencies to refer to and apply in order to develop timely solutions for visa policies to enhance the competitiveness of Vietnamese tourism with other countries in the region after the post-Covid 19 period.

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