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UK targets Chinese tourists

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Chinese tourists look at shoes displayed in Clarks Museum at Clarks Village in Street Somerset, England. The British government is discussing whether it is possible to allow Chinese tourists to get both Schengen and UK visas with just one application to facilitate their travel to the country. Matt Cardy / Getty Images via CFP

Changes to visa system possible as visitors could prove boon to economy

High-spending Chinese tourists have become an increasingly welcome sight on Europe's streets, as the continent struggles through its deepest recession in more than half a century.

Every country wants to capitalize on this growing group of travelers, including the United Kingdom, which has arranged a tourism mission to China and is looking at changes to its visa system to make entry easier for Chinese tourists.

A proposal to allow dual processing of British and Schengen visas was presented to the UK Border Agency on Oct 8. The Schengen area includes 26 European countries that are signed up to a dual visa agreement. A single Schengen visa covers parts of Eastern Europe and most of Western Europe, including France and Germany. Britain has so far refused to join the Schengen system due to national security concerns.

Under the terms of the proposal, Chinese applicants will be able to submit just one application and set of documents to obtain both a Schengen and UK visa.

Walpole, a consortium of luxury brands, and the New West End Company, which represents top London stores, met the border agency recently to discuss the issue.

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"The new visa plan is very necessary. The applications will still be processed twice, ensuring that the UK border regime remains strong, but two visas will be issued at the same time," Julia Carrick, chief executive of Walpole British Luxury, says.

Tourism and retail bosses estimate that the UK misses out on 1.2 billion pounds (\$1.9 billion; 1.4 billion euros) from wealthy Chinese visitors a year as a result of its rigid system.

"France currently attracts eight times more Chinese visitors than the UK. Harmonizing the visa system should lead to the UK performing as well as France," Carrick says.

Research from VisitBritain, the UK's national tourist body, indicates that 61 percent of Chinese people who chose not to visit Britain were put off by the country's difficult visa process.

If the plan is not introduced, "Britain will still welcome increasing numbers of Chinese visitors because of the growing numbers of Chinese travelers. But we will continue to underperform compared with other major European countries," Carrick says. "We understand that the UK Border Agency agrees with the principle of moving to a more harmonized system for visa applications. The issue will be about the practicalities of introducing such a system and the time frame for doing so."

The visa proposal comes as the UK is going through a slow and difficult healing process as it rebalances its economy. The International Monetary Fund says it now expects the UK economy to shrink by 0.4 percent this year.

According to the latest VisitBritain report, tourism accounts for about 9 percent of the country's GDP and jobs and is the third-largest foreign-exchange earner, behind chemicals and financial services.

Tourism can deliver jobs across the country for all skill levels quickly, as well as providing much-needed growth in the economy. A new job can be created for every 40,000 pounds spent by foreign visitors, according to the report.

VisitBritain revealed ambitious plans in October to increase inbound visitor numbers to 40 million per annum by 2020. This increase would represent a 3 percent rise in visitor numbers every year and would deliver an additional 8.7 billion pounds of foreign exchange earnings based on current prices. The additional visitors would also help support an extra 200,000 jobs.

"Should the Home Office wisely revise the current legislation regarding UK visas to streamline the process by which Chinese passport holders are able to travel to the UK, we would expect to see a significant uplift in revenue, both in the hospitality industry and across all retail industries," Stephen Boxall, managing director of The Ritz London, says.

"As the first hotel in the UK to install China UnionPay terminals and launch a series of bespoke amenities for our Chinese guests, at The Ritz we have long understood the importance of this market to British tourism and unreservedly endorse the proposed revision to visa procedures by the Home Office."

This summer, former British culture secretary Jeremy Hunt launched an 8-million-pound publicity blitz aimed at trebling the number of Chinese visitors to Britain to 500,000.

Huang Lin, in his 40s, who comes from Shanghai, says he is happy with the new proposal. "If the visa becomes easier, my family hope to travel to France, Britain, Germany and Italy next year," he says.

According to Cheng Xiaodan, CEO of London-based China Holiday Group, Chinese travel agencies will benefit from the proposed visa changes.

A delegation of around a dozen retailers and leisure companies, including Arsenal Football Club, Harrods and Selfridges, will send delegations to Shanghai in November as part of the UK's largest tourism mission to attract Chinese visitors.

Organized by VisitBritain, the trip will last three days, and is mainly structured around one-to-one meetings with individual tour operators and networking sessions.

"We will be meeting many top Chinese tour operators and will hopefully convince them to include Westfield as a stop in their tour packages," says Myf Ryan, UK marketing manager for Westfield shopping centers.

Although Westfield has already geared a considerable number of its marketing ideas toward Chinese residents and students in the UK, such as discount passes for VIP card holders and goodie bags for new students, Ryan says it is important to reach out to China's domestic market.

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Selfridges sees value in conducting one-to-one meetings with tour operators in China.

"Consumers (in China) still rely heavily on agents and tour operators to book every part of their trip, from flights and accommodation to leisure activities," says a spokesperson for the company, adding that face-to-face meetings work best with Chinese tour operators.

"The face-to-face culture is very important in China, so conducting meetings in person is highly valued. Also, the effort to make the journey to China is appreciated and shows how serious a company is about doing business there."

Like Westfield and Harrods, Selfridges has begun to recruit more Chinese shop assistants and install China UnionPay terminals in recent years.

Despite these efforts, industry observers believe the road ahead remains difficult and some suggest Carrick's views are too optimistic.

"The changes being asked for are particularly significant ones," says Andrew Osborne, a partner at UK law firm Lewis Silkin.

"The UK government wants to be assured that people coming here on tourist visas will eventually leave, but once they are in the UK it is difficult to monitor them. So it is easier to check people before they come to the UK," he says.

The proposal would bring the UK's tourism visa policy closer to that of Schengen countries, which is a situation the British government has been trying to avoid. "The British government wants to maintain control of its own policies. They don't want to rely on other countries to control their borders," Osborne says.

Experts note that even if the plan is agreed, the new streamlined application process is likely to take months to introduce. In the meantime, tourism bodies say they want to see other improvements, such as forms that can be filled out in Chinese and speedier handling of applications.

Mary Rance, chief executive of UKinbound, a trade association representing 250 businesses in Britain's tourism industry, warn that it is not clear how the proposed harmonization between the UK and Schengen visa systems would work.

"Biometric tests are required for UK tourism visas, but not for Schengen tourism visas, so it is not clear how one application could satisfy both visas," Rance says, adding that she believes any new policy initiatives should not apply only to Chinese visitors.

"We think new policies should not just target Chinese tourists, but tourists from all inbound markets who want to come and spend their money here. All the inbound markets in our view are equally important," she says.

Another reason the UK government is unlikely to approve an easier tourism visa policy for Chinese nationals is because China is currently defined as a "high risk" country by the UK Border Agency, Osborne says.

In comparison, citizens from "low risk" countries, including Australia, the US and Canada, do not require a visa to visit the UK, as the likelihood of illegal immigration from these countries is low.

Citizens from "low risk" countries also enjoy other benefits in the UK, such as not having to register their details with the UK police upon arrival and the ability to apply for student visas with fewer supporting documents. Such benefits are not currently enjoyed by Chinese nationals.

Nisha Patel, a senior immigration lawyer at London-based firm Russell-Cooke, says: "The proposed changes are unlikely to be approved because the UK's immigration laws have become increasingly strict since the coalition government came into power. The government's main concern in relation to tourist visas is that if they are not controlled strictly, the number of illegal immigrants in the UK could increase."

However, Patel says: "There are inconsistencies in the government's immigration policies. For example, the government has relaxed restrictions relating to other types of visas, like investor and entrepreneur visas, which target high net worth individuals from countries such as China and yet retained restrictions on tourist visa applications from Chinese nationals."

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