

Tourism needs a plan

Kudos to the government for opening up Pakistan's visa regime! News reports indicate that nationals of 50 countries will soon get visa-on-arrival (VOA) facility. Nationals of some 175 countries will reportedly be able to apply for e-visas. The last government had also taken a similar step a year ago but this time the scale is bigger and commitment seems across the board. Scant details have come out, though, regarding the initiative.

For instance, it is unclear which countries exactly made the cut for VOA. Also how and why is the new VOA list different from last year's? What is the basis for including certain countries and excluding others? A list doing the rounds on social media suggests that Anglophone countries (USA, UK, and Canada) are not part of the list – nor are China, France, Netherlands, Belgium and Greece on the list – even though they were part of the 24 countries allowed the VOA last year.

More important, what kind of documentation will be required for VOA facility? Such a facility has existed for certain countries before, but it was bogged down under complex documentation requirements. How will the IATA-certified operators, who have been authorized to get tourists into Pakistan, now have better coordination with the relevant authorities to process pre-arrival documentation? Will the VOA also be for individual travelers or just for groups?

The sudden haste in announcing this initiative is noticeable. A BR genie, who's been involved in the latest tourism-related deliberations with the government, attributed the haste to the Information Minister's unfortunate penchant for announcing decisions prematurely. Wait for one more week, he said, to have more clarity on eligible countries, documentation requirements and internal coordination mechanisms.

While a simplified and tourist-friendly visa regime is a good start, more needs to be done to attract foreign tourist flow. The elephant in the room is the lack of adequate tourism capacity, which currently fails to accommodate even domestic tourists. Every season, Pakistan's tourist hotspots are flooded with local tourists who are bemoaning pricey accommodation facilities of limited number and poor quality.

It would have been better had the government taken a holistic view of the tourism industry and moved in a phased manner. As previously highlighted in this column, all three governance tiers need to coordinate for the purpose of tourism development. The federal government has a role in tourist facilitation and setting & monitoring hospitality standards across the country. The provincial tier has to invest on access roads, grant the leases and ensure tourist safety. The local governments can better undertake resort development, water and sanitation, waste disposal etc.

Simultaneously, as work starts on hard and soft infrastructure, it would be wise to start creating a campaign to sell the soft image of Pakistan - based on natural landscape, cultural heritage and localized specialties. The narrative has to be marketed through missions abroad. Here, too, the need is to create an appealing message by taking input from all regional and institutional stakeholders.

Since tourism is a provincial subject, who will bell the cat? A source who has worked with previous governments on tourism development acknowledged the need for coordination on so many aspects of tourism development. Soon, a National Tourism Board will be formulated by the current government, he told BR Research, so that tourism is developed in a holistic and coordinated manner.

He disagreed with the argument that foreign tourists will not return next time due to limited hospitality infrastructure. He opined that it's okay to attract foreign tourists now because unlike the locals, who are

more interested in recreation in mountainous areas, foreigners are more interested in Pakistan's cultural, heritage and spiritual sites as well as its various cuisines. He explained that most of such attractions are thankfully concentrated in and around cities with better accommodation and transport infrastructure.

Pakistan's vibrancy is coming back. It is time that a message goes out that Pakistan is open to the world. While big and grand steps are in order, it is also time to pay attention to small things that affect tourists' perception. For instance, why is it that most foreign airlines drop the passengers to Pakistan in the dead of the night? The PIA needs to up its game and fill the void that is being dictated by gulf airlines.