

PM unveils ambitious plan to boost tourism

• Visa fees slashed by 22 to 65pc • Foreign nationals from 175 countries to benefit • E-visas within 7 to 10 working days

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Imran Khan on Thursday unveiled ambitious plans to open up Pakistan for tourists and investors from around the globe, setting an eye on harnessing the immense potential to fetch multi-billion dollars for the national kitty.

Launching the new visa policy under which foreign nationals from 175 countries will be issued three-month e-visas within seven to 10 working days, he said it was a big change beyond the imagination of the people.

He termed the new visa policy a first step saying many more were in the pipeline, referring to the famous Chinese proverb "The journey of a thousand miles begins with first step."

PM Khan said there was a mindset in the country to make visa issuance more and more difficult after the 60s. He said in the 70s the then socialist government reversed the process and started treating wealth creation and profit-making as a sin. He recalled that a politician in the 70s used to start his speeches criticising capitalists and landlords. PM Khan said investors would only come to Pakistan if they found their investments in the country economically feasible. "Nobody invests in charities." He claimed this mindset caused a colossal loss to the country.

He said that Pakistan's industrial production was more than the combined production of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. PM Khan said the new visa regime opening Pakistan showed the confidence that Pakistan had no security issues.

Talking about the potential in Pakistan, he said the beautiful northern areas of Pakistan were double the size of Switzerland. He said there were still some undiscovered areas. He vowed to promote environment-friendly tourism according to best international practices.

‘Great potential’

PM Khan said there was great potential for religious tourism in Pakistan, which offers sacred sites to Buddhists, Sikhs and Hindus. He pointed out that a 40-foot sleeping Buddha, discovered near Haripur, was the largest in the world, but the world was unaware of it.

He also referred to Kartarpur and Nankana Sahib, besides Katas Raj temples. "We will market all these."

He also talked about ancient sites especially in Peshawar which he said was the world's oldest living city. He said attractions like Moenjodaro, Lahore and Multan would also be brought on the world tourism map. "We are looking for innovative ideas to introduce these attractions to the world."

The country's beach tourism was also unexplored PM Khan said and hinted at taking steps to attract investment in the sector. "Pakistan has a coastline of over 800 kilometres." Citing the example of Malaysia, he said the country was earning 22 billion dollars from beach tourism alone.

He said Pakistan was also blessed with unmatched skiing slopes in the world as its gradient was the steepest, from K-2 to the ocean. “What we have done is just the beginning. A strategy is on the anvil directed at promoting tourism.”

PM Khan said that people of Northern areas will be provided soft loans to build additional rooms in their houses to lodge tourists.

He told the audience that an area had been developed in collaboration with Germany to be opened for tourism.

He said Pakistan’s missions abroad will be formally tasked to promote investment and tourism.

Earlier, Minister of State for Interior Shahryar Afridi said the visa fee had been reduced by 22 to 65 per cent.

He said foreign missions would grant three-month e-visa to foreigners in 175 countries within seven to 10 days. In the initial phase, to begin within a week, nationals from the United Kingdom, UAE, China, Malaysia and Turkey will be granted such visas.

He said the number of countries for visa on arrival for individual and group tourism had been revised from 24 to 50.

“Foreign nationals of Indian origin will also be allowed to avail this facility for religious tourism.”

Minister Afridi said multiple five-year business visas would be granted within 24 hours, subject to provision of required documents, and journalist visas would be cleared within four weeks. He said nationals of Bahrain, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and UAE would be granted 30-day multiple visas.

The ceremony was attended by federal ministers, diplomats, high-ranking officials and tourism ministers of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Iftikhar A. Khan