



What you need to know – tourist visas

Introduction

These notes are based on the author's own experiences in Central Asia, written from the perspective of a **British Citizen resident** in the UK. They are provided to help fellow travellers avoid some of the common pitfalls. The advice below is not exhaustive, and circumstances do change.

Central Asian visas

Tourist visas for Central Asia are not, with just a few¹ exceptions, difficult to obtain, provided you plan ahead. Depending on the nature of your venture, you need to decide if you wish to obtain all the requisite visas before setting out, or at the various Consulates along the way.

Terminology

Many visas have a specified *duration of stay*, typically 30 days, from entry, provided you do so by a specified date, usually within one to 3 months of the *issue date*. This period is normally referred to as the *period of validity*. Failure to enter within this period renders the visa invalid. Others are for *fixed dates*, typically 30 days apart, the start date normally the one you requested when making your application, allowing you to enter and leave at any point between them. An *application fee* is always payable, even if your request is unsuccessful.

Tourist visas normally permit a *single entry* into, and corresponding exit from, the country. However, *double entry* ones are sometimes possible, and in some instances desirable. For example, crossing briefly from Kazakhstan into Kyrgyzstan to visit the Capital Bishkek, before returning to Kazakhstan, a detour of approximately 150 kilometres, necessitates a double entry visa for Kazakhstan, unless you wish to seek a

¹ Iranian visas are often subject to political whim, requests being denied through no fault of the applicant

fresh single entry one in Bishkek. If a *double entry* visa is obtained, particular care should be taken to check the *maximum duration* of each stay. Some permit 2 entries, and corresponding exits, within *fixed dates*, others a specified maximum *duration of stay* for each entry.

Multiple entry visas, normally permitting unlimited entries, and corresponding exits, within *fixed dates*, are not normally available for tourists.

Whilst some nations require only a *valid passport* – typically a minimum of 6 months validity remaining, and sufficient blank pages, usually one, for the visa – together with a completed application form, one or 2 passport size colour photographs and an *application fee*, others may insist on other supporting documentation. This can range from a *Letter of Invitation* (LOI), a faxed or e-mailed *hotel booking* from within the country, a *return flight reservation*², a *confirmed*³ *flight booking* or a combination thereof. These requirements are often collectively described as *visa support*. A number of reputable agencies⁴ exist who, for a suitable fee and sufficient notice⁵, are able to provide the requisite documentation, as well as up-to-date advice on specific visas.

Country of origin is normally deemed to be the nation whose passport you are entitled to bear, or, in the case of dual nationals, the one you present. *Country of residence* is normally deemed to be a nation, which may be different to your *country of origin*, where you have permission to reside for a fixed or indefinite period, other than by means of a visa. Typically this requires you to hold a *Residents Permit* or equivalent.

Finally, whilst the term *visa* is universally recognised, they are sometimes described as *entry permits* or similar. The term *Consulate* is used to describe that part of an *Embassy*⁶ that deals with the issue of visas. Whilst normally co-located, this is not always the case. And be aware that some nations are much looser in their use of terminology than others.

Prior to departure

Obtaining visas prior to departure avoids delays on the road, and if done in your *country of origin* or *country of residence*, normally secures the most favourable terms

² Often obtainable from travel agents for free

³ Requires payment to have been made, not just a reservation. However, subsequent cancellation is normally possible for a small fee

⁴ The author has made extensive use of Stantours, based in Almaty, Kazakhstan – see www.stantours.com – which also offers secure means of payment transfer

⁵ Typically one to two weeks, but it may sometimes be possible to expedite this for an additional fee

⁶ Normally provides far wider services than just those of a Consular nature

i.e. both the number of times you are permitted to enter and exit, and the maximum duration of your stay. However, the visa may cost more than if procured elsewhere. Furthermore, its *period of validity*, within which you must enter the country, may expire before you get there, especially on long trips.

On the road

On long trips you may have no choice but to obtain visas whilst travelling, simply because it will not be possible to enter before the *period of validity* for a UK acquired one has expired, or because you wish to keep your plans flexible. However, a few visas are only obtainable in either your *country of origin*, or *country of residence*. For example, at the time of writing, UK nationals can only obtain a Russian visa in London.

Returning your passport by reputable courier to a UK visa agent may seem tempting, but many nations require you to carry the original on you at all times, and it is often required to perform routine tasks such as booking train tickets or checking into accommodation. Furthermore, delays in its return, or even its inadvertent loss, could result in overstaying in country, incurring a fine or even deportation and a bar from re-entry. The UK Identity and Passport Service (IPS) also advise the cross-border transfer of passports, other than by hand of the holder, are not permissible.

Notwithstanding the above, many Consulates require you to leave your passport with them, typically for anything from one day to a week, whilst they consider your application and, if successful, insert the visa. In such circumstances a colour copy of your passport personal details page, together with any relevant visa for your stay, should be retained. It is often possible to shorten the visa processing time by payment of an additional fee, or simply asking.

Some nations allow visas to be obtained on arrival at their international airports. However, many airlines are reluctant to let you board a flight without first holding a valid *entry permit* as they are likely to be fined if you are subsequently refused entry. Except when the visa is, in practice, a tourist tax, issued without the submission of an application form, as is the case for UK nationals visiting Turkey or the Republic of Georgia, no such arrangements are known to exist for land border crossings. A valid visa should always be obtained before attempting entry.

Use of agents

Whether you choose to obtain your visas prior to departure or on the road, it is usually possible to use an agent to submit the application, and your passport, on your behalf. This avoids lengthy queues at the Consulates, and they are normally able to

advise exactly what is required for a successful request. However, this will incur a fee, in addition to that payable for the actual visa, and you will miss out on what can often be an enriching experience.

Visa requirements

Visa requirements vary not just between individual countries, but often between their various Consulates. Details may be vague, and changeable. The least onerous requirements, and most generous terms – such as *duration of stay* - are normally found in your *country of origin* or *country of residence*.

The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) website – www.fco.gov.uk – provides details of the individual entry requirements for countries. However, interpretations often vary between Consulates, and some stipulations that would normally preclude the issue of a visa to a traveller, such as residency status, may, in practice, be waived. It is therefore advisable to seek the advice of an experienced local visa agent as to the most probable situation e.g. Stantours - www.stantours.com - for the Central Asian countries.

The relevant *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (MFA) may contain additional information, often in English. Some Consulates have their own websites, useful for downloading application forms, ascertaining opening hours, processing times, fees, their location, as well as guidance on visa requirements.

In all instances you will be required to present a valid passport, normally one or 2 colour passport photographs⁷, and a completed application form. It is suggested that you provide sufficient information to support your application, rather than add unnecessary detail that may delay processing or otherwise confuse matters. **However, under no circumstances should you be dishonest, as this may result in a permanent bar on entry, difficulties obtaining visas for other countries, or more dire consequences if your subterfuge is detected whilst visiting.**

At the Consulate

Assuming you have a completed application form and any relevant supporting documentation, and have chosen to visit the Consulate yourself rather than use an agent, you must first locate it. Whilst many are relatively straightforward to find, often marked on city tourist maps, some are not. Unless the Consulate has its own website, be very wary of advice on the internet, do not assume local taxi drivers know where it

⁷ Those which meet the particularly stringent UK Identity and Passport Service (IPS) requirements should suffice for almost any other country in the world

is, and the absence of a listing on the local Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) website does not, in itself, preclude its existence. Even reputable guide books can quickly become out-of-date, or even plain wrong. Some Consulates move around with alarming regularity. A local English speaking travel agent is often the most reliable source of advice, or they know where to obtain it.

Some Consulates allow you to pay the *application fee*, often in US Dollars, when you submit your request. Others require you to make a deposit into a local bank, presentation of the receipt being required when you return to collect your passport. The branch specified may be obscure, far from the Consulate, and fiendishly difficult to find.

On arrival

Assuming you have been successful in obtaining a valid visa, you should first check that your intended *point of entry* is open to foreign nationals. Whilst international airports should present no difficulties, some land border crossings may have restrictions, including lengthy periods of closure to all traffic.

Ensure Passport Control clearly stamps your visa with your *entry date* if difficulties are to be avoided when attempting to leave. Similarly, ensure any *immigration card* you may be given has been properly completed and stamped if subsequent fines are to be avoided. As with visa requirements, details may be scant, misleading or just plain wrong. The services of a reputable local visa agent may be helpful in ensuring proper compliance with the rules.

Apart from the usual prohibited items such as illegal narcotics or limitations on the importation of alcohol, many Customs Regulations require you to declare any cash in excess of a stipulated sum, usually for an amount much greater than the average traveller would normally be carrying. However, some countries have less common prohibitions or restrictions that may catch out the unwary. For example, possession of codeine in some Middle Eastern countries is a serious criminal offence, likely to lead to a lengthy sentence of imprisonment. As with immigration requirements, details of Customs Regulations, especially in English, may be difficult to obtain, or, at best, confusing. The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) website – www.fco.gov.uk – is a useful starting point.

Once you have entered

Some countries require you to register with the *Immigration Police* – sometimes referred to in the former Soviet states as the *Office of Visas and Registrations* (OVIR) or, in China the *Public Security Bureau* (PSB) – within a specified period after entry,

typically between 24 hours and five days, unless your stay in country is for less. Many, but not all, hotels, and some travel agents, will complete the process on your behalf, often for a small fee.

Some nationalities are exempt any registration requirement, although, once more, details can be scant or confusing. Furthermore, if you plan to exit via a land border crossing rarely visited by foreigners, the border guards may deny any such exemption exists, insisting instead, quite wrongly, that you first pay a fine.

For example, a UK national obtaining a Kazakhstan visa at a Consulate overseas automatically has his passport details registered⁸. Furthermore, when arriving at a recognised international airport such as Almaty or Atyrau, the passport details are registered once more, signified by 2 stamps on the relevant immigration card. Despite this, the Kazakhstan Consulate in London insists you register with the Immigration Police within 3 days of arrival, even though the actual time limit for non-exempt nationals is actually 5 days.

Whilst many countries will allow you to seek an extension to a tourist visa whilst in country, for a fee, some do not, other than in exceptional circumstances such as hospitalisation. Even where an extension is permissible, there is usually a delay of anything between a few days and a week before it will be granted, during which your current visa must remain valid. It is sometimes possible to expedite the process by payment of an additional fee. Or just asking.

In addition to carrying a colour copy of your passport personal details page, separate from the original, it is suggested that a copy of the visa be made following entry, clearly showing the stamped *entry date*. A digital camera is often ideal for this, and additional security possible by e-mailing the image to a family member or friend at home.

Getting out

Assuming you have not over-stayed your visa, and have complied fully with immigration requirements and Customs Regulations, you should have no difficulty in leaving, especially via international airports familiar with foreigners. However, if you seek to exit via land border crossings, you may find misunderstandings occur, resulting in the insistence, quite falsely, that a fine be paid. A polite, if robust

⁸ Source - "Advisory for foreign nationals arriving in the Republic of Kazakhstan" guide book (in English) published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan International Information Committee – Astana 2008

approach is suggested in such circumstances. See “What you need to know – scams” for more details.

Second passports

In some circumstances your application for a visa may be refused if your passport already contains one, or other indication of entry such as a stamp, for certain countries e.g. by many Middle Eastern countries for Israel, or Armenia if you wish to visit Azerbaijan. If this is likely to be problematic for you, it *may* be possible to obtain a second passport from the UK Identity and Passport Service (IPS). It is understood that this is normally done only if there are exceptional circumstances, usually business related and supported with a letter from your employer. The author obtained one on the exceptional grounds that his business was the raising charitable funds for The Outward Bound Trust.