

Pick me! I am young, healthy and interested in the arts in your city! – exploring the future of travel visas

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Abstract

Purpose – This viewpoint paper aims to explore the past, present and future of travel visas granting permission to travel. Visa restrictions are used by governments as an efficient method of restricting access in advance of travel. This paper explores how this may change in the future resulting in a shift of power from tourist to destination.

Design/methodology/approach – The Futures Triangle method was used to create a scenario incorporating the three dimensions of the triangle, i.e. the pulls of the future, the pushes of the present and the weights of the past. An artefact of the future was created to help visualise this future.

Findings – This analysis suggests that the role of visas may change in the future such that visa regimes may become part of a destination strategy. A future scenario is postulated in which destinations demand proof of fit with the destination strategy before granting a visa.

Originality/value – This viewpoint paper develops an artefact of the future based on the changing role of travel visas. It suggests that tourists might need to market themselves to the destination, proving that they are a good destination fit, before they are granted a visa to travel.

Keywords Futures triangle, Travel visa, Scenarios, Future artefact, Overtourism

Paper type Viewpoint

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Introduction

Passports and travel visas may be ubiquitous travel documents in the 21st century, but their global use is relatively recent. Both, however are key tools that nation states use to control travel out of; and in to; their territories. Passports allow the exit and re-entry of nationals, whilst travel visas are issued by the prospective host nation allowing entry usually for a specific time frame and purpose of travel. Since 1975, the need for a visa to travel has been the rule rather than the exception, with only the last decade seeing an increase in visa free travel, albeit for a select group of passport holders (Czaika *et al.*, 2018). Travel visas grant permission to travel into a country. Documents giving permission to travel have been used for a number of purposes and are influenced by the political and economic ideas of their time. Governments grant visas based on a range of factors thus controlling who can enter, or how long and for which purpose (work or leisure).

International tourism organisations have consistently advocated for visa-regime changes to boost tourism. Visa restrictions are a disincentive for travel and thus countries wishing to boost visitor arrivals have been re-reviewing their visa restrictions to ensure they are not barriers to in-bound travel (Bangwayo-Skeete and Skeete, 2017). Recently, however, some tourism destinations have felt overwhelmed by tourist arrivals. In destinations suffering from over-tourism, citizens feel negatively impacted by large numbers of tourists and are in fact advocating for a reduction in tourism arrivals. These affected destinations are seeking to preserve the quality of life for local

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citizens (Mihalic and Kuščer, 2021). An emerging trend noted, is that destinations wish to focus on the value of tourism rather than volume of tourism (Hartman *et al.*, 2020). Destinations have thus begun increasingly talking about attracting “quality tourists” as they begin to focus on tourists that are deemed “the right fit” for their destination.

Using the Futures Triangle, this paper explores the past, present and future of travel visas granting permission to travel. The insights generated are used to build a future scenario in which tourists are required to market themselves as a good destination-fit traveller in order to gain permission to enter the country. The scenario is brought to life by presenting an artefact from the future: The Permission to Travel App.

The futures triangle

Developed by Sohail Inayatullah, the futures triangle helps map today's view of the future through three dimensions; the past, the present and the future. By analysing the interaction of these three forces, we are able to explore plausible futures around the topic at hand (Inayatullah, 2008). This strategic foresight method has been used in a wide range of settings. Its value lies in understanding the interaction of the three dimensions and using these inputs to populate a scenario of the future (Fergnani, 2020). The weights of the past acknowledges and seeks to understand past events that may be barriers to change. The pushes of the present are drivers and trends that are changing the future. The pulls of the future looks at possibilities that may open up in the future (Inayatullah, 2008).

Permission to travel: the weights of the past

Earliest travel documents tended to convey protection to the traveller. In their earliest forms, documents were designed to grant passage in- and out-of kingdoms at war allowing negotiations to take place (Pines, 2017). The word “passport” emerged in the 16th century, derived from the French word “*passepport*”, originally conveying permission to pass through a port (Gelin, 2022). In the late 19th century states began switching from emigration control (controlling citizens that leave a country) to immigration control (controlling populations that wish to enter a country) (Czaika *et al.*, 2018).

Passports vary as to the ease of travel they command. Whilst they may allow you to exit your home country the need for a destination specific visa to enter another country is directly dependent on the type of passport one owns. A Japanese passport, for example, allows visa-free travel to 193 countries, whilst an Afghan passport allows visa free entry to just 27 (Henley Global, 2022).

The concept of a standardised global travel system only gained traction after the First World War when the League of Nations needed to administer the large numbers of post-war people displaced in Europe (Pines, 2017). Passports are now normalised and entrenched as a form of managing global cross-border travel.

Visa restrictions are used by governments as an efficient method of restricting access in advance of travel. In general, countries are able to implement visa restrictions without lengthy judicial and parliamentary procedures. Visa regulations are thus an expeditious and unobtrusive tool for sovereign countries to restrict or enable access (Czaika *et al.*, 2018). Governments globally have thus used the tourist visa to restrict entry and to filter for travellers deemed undesirable for the destination (Bangwayo-Skeete and Skeete, 2017).

Permission to travel: the pushes of the present

There is no single country that allows visa free entry for all passport holders. Authorities currently use a range of metrics when issuing visas including health status, financial position, age, purpose and length of travel.

Health status. In the late 1800's health checks at Ellis Island, USA, were standard for arriving immigrants. Those diagnosed with infectious diseases faced mandatory quarantine in isolation wings on Ellis Island (Bateman-House and Fairchild, 2008).

Yellow Fever vaccination certificates are currently a requirement of travel to and from countries in South America and Africa deemed as Yellow Fever risk areas. During the AIDS crisis in the 1980's many countries introduced HIV related travel restrictions. In 2019, 48 countries and territories still impose some form of restriction and/or mandatory HIV testing which prevents people living with HIV from legally entering working, studying or transiting through (UNAIDS, 2019). Australia requires screening for TB if requesting a travel visa for longer than six months and arriving from a high risk country (Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs, 2020). Recently, global tourism destinations almost unanimously required various forms of proof that the traveller was either Covid-19 free and/or had been vaccinated before granting entry to the country.

Financial status. Many destinations require proof that the traveller has enough means for subsistence in country for duration of their stay and for return to their home country. This can be in the form of bank statements, proof of employment, proof of prepaid accommodation and in-destination travel, credit cards and cash. Recently, the Tourism Council of Bhutan instituted a minimum daily spend of \$200–\$250 per person per night (Parliament of Bhutan, 2022) required in order to have a travel visa granted.

Demographics. Australia requires a medical examination of visitors aged over 75 years when applying for a visitor visa for travellers who believe they have pre-existing medical conditions that may be of concern when travelling (Australian Government, Department of Home Affairs, 2020).

Other visa requirements. Some countries, such as the Republic of Congo, require a letter of invitation from the host country before issuing a visa. Many countries require proof of insurance as part of the visa application process and it is common that the purpose of travel is declared. Travellers with criminal records may find it difficult to gain an entry visa. A wide range of pre-application requirements may be asked for; proof of employment, proof of residence (both at home and in the destination country), family and parental details, letter of invitation from business associates and conference organisers, details of past trips abroad and more. In the final instance, an in person interview may be required. All of these requirements are based on the host country and passport holder details rather than a universal agreement.

At present, countries are able to set their own requirements for the issuance of a travel visa and these vary depending on the country of origin and type of passport held. Visas may be declined for a number of reasons including health status and financial status. Permission to travel is not guaranteed.

Permission to travel: the pulls of the future

Pre-pandemic, many tourism destinations felt overwhelmed with over tourism, a situation where local citizens are negatively impacted by large numbers of tourists. Tourism researchers have noted that alternate metrics of tourism success are required (Sheldon, 2021). Destinations are starting to focus on the quality of tourist rather than the quantity of tourist. Quality of tourist may be assessed in many ways, but at its base is the fact the destination sees this visitor as someone they wish to host.

During the global shutdown of travel, citizens got a taste of how spaces would feel without tourism – and many liked it! More than 60% of Hawaiian residents indicated concern in returning to pre-pandemic tourism numbers and the state is using the opportunity to look at how it manages tourism in destination once travel opens again (Girma, 2021).

Countries have begun exploring using the travel visa process to manage the quality of tourist permitted to enter. The Kingdom of Bhutan has controlled visitor numbers by instituting a minimum daily spend resulting in “only” 550,000 tourists visiting annually thus “protecting” the kingdom against over tourism (Petranovic, 2019).

The Republic of Palau government modified its immigration policy and since 2017 requires tourists to sign a mandatory eco-pledge to visit the country. The environmental pledge is stamped into ones passport and requires signature before entry is permitted.

Iceland aims to attract “high earning professionals that can help stimulate the economy without overcrowding” (Eskins, 2021) and will grant six months visas to tourists earning more than a million Icelandic Krone a month (approx. USD 7700). The hope is that this visa regime will entice high earning tourists who stay longer, travel slower, visit less popular Icelandic attractions and consider travelling out of the peak tourism season (Eskins, 2021).

In the future, destinations may grant travel visas to only those tourists that match the destination strategy. For example, Barcelona acknowledged that its famous Las Ramblas, which saw 80 million tourists walk its 1.2 km length create a tourism mono-culture as the street was transformed to cater for tourists only. The city is seeking to move towards a more diversified offering that will appeal to local residents by creating a cultural hub along Las Ramblas appealing to locals (Borgen, 2020). The city may seek to attract visitors that specifically show an interest in its cultural offerings.

The future of permission to travel documents

Conversations are emerging where destinations ideally want tourists that are free from communicable diseases, healthy, able to spend money on site, young and have interests that support that which the host destination wishes to build for its local citizens. For example; Barcelona seeks cultural tourists that will spend money on, and in, its new cultural precincts thus supporting a new investment meant for local citizens.

Will destinations start issuing visas based on interests that match those of the host destination? Instead of countries marketing themselves to potential tourists, tourists will need to start marketing themselves to potential destinations. *“Pick me! I am young, healthy vaccinated, have money and want to spend it on the arts in your city!”*

Permission to travel scenario 2035

By looking at the interplay within the three forces of the futures triangle, a plausible future is imagined in 2035. In this future, destinations are far more selective as to the type of tourists they will allow in. Destinations openly seek quality tourists over quantity and the tourist will need to prove that they are desirable to the destination in order to gain a travel visa. It is now common place that destinations issue travel visas to tourists they deem “quality tourists”. The definition of a quality tourist may vary from destination to destination and will be based on factors such as health status, demographics, ability and willingness to spend in destination and a good match in terms of interest of the tourist to interest of citizens in host destinations. Many destinations now use this tool to manage overtourism, both in-country and in-destination.

The result will be a shift in power from the tourist – which chooses from a wide variety of potential holiday destinations-to the destination which will issue visas to only those tourists they wish to host. See [Table 1](#). There will be an inversion of marketing. Tourists will need to prove that they are desirable to the host destination rather than the destination marketing its offerings as desirable to the tourist.

Whilst this may aid the destination in selecting tourists with spend and interest in the destination, it may also preclude other tourists from travelling. Some countries may not want unfit and ageing tourists who consume less in destination and have a risk of requiring health care.

Artefacts from the future

Artefacts from the future provide a tangible experience of the future in the form of a concrete experience that aids the immersion into the imagined future. They draw on familiar objects of today to understand what life may be like in the future. The scenario is brought to life by presenting an artefact from the future: The Permission to Travel App.

Artefact of the future – 2035: permission to travel APP

Before a booking can be made for a wide range of travel experiences you will need to provide proof that you have permission to do so. The *Permission to Travel App* allows you to collect, provide and authenticate proof that you are good match for the destination.

1. Proof of vaccination for relevant diseases
2. Proof of health status
3. Proof of finances
4. Proof that your interests and thus your spend matches that of the destination

Early adopters of the app include Chile and Europe.

Destination Chile

Want to hike the 110 km Torres del Paine National Park in Chile? Prior to booking you will need to log 20,000 steps per day for six months to prove you are fit enough. The park rangers are tired of rescuing hikers.

Table 1 Scenario 2035: Power shifts from tourist to destination		
	2019 pre-pandemic	2035
From quantity to quality	Tourism success measured by quantity of international arrivals	Tourism success measured by quality of in destination tourist
	Decision making lies with the <i>tourist</i> as they research and compare destinations	Decision making lies with the <i>destination</i> as they research and compare the type of tourist they grant permission to travel to
	Competition for tourists – high investment in destination marketing	Low investment in marketing as tourists apply for privilege of travel to desirable destinations
Power shifts from tourist to destination	Destinations need to market in destination safety	Individual needs to prove safe health status for travel
	Destinations market themselves as desirable destinations	Individuals market themselves as desirable tourists
	Destinations compete on price	Individual travellers compete on ability and willingness for in-destination spend
	Permission to travel has become progressively more open over the past 50 years	Permission to travel becomes progressively more restrictive
From democratisation of travel to the exclusivity of travel	Passport is a form of permission to travel with many allowing visa free travel	Passport is a means of identification only
	Travel is open to all	Travel is open only to a select group of desirable people thus conflicting with the call to accessible tourism and the "right to tourism" (article 7 of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism)

Source(s): Figure by author

Destination Europe

Want to visit a city that was overtouristed? Places such as Barcelona, Venice and Prague are no longer interested in bachelor party tourism. They are looking for cultural tourists who will enjoy and invest in the culture of their city. In order to gain permission to book a ticket you will need to log a range of cultural activities in your own home town. Proof that you have visited X number of museums and attended a few cultural events will be required.

Like a fitness app, this Permission to Travel App conveniently keeps you up to date as to what the necessary travel requirements are and help you log activities by suggesting activities and planning your goals for you. It will also highlight to you when some sites have quiet periods and reduce their travel hurdles. So “Travel to Barcelona” may require fewer cultural points during their winter months when demand is low.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests that in the near future, travel destinations will be far more selective with the type of tourists they allow in as destinations openly seek what they deem as quality tourists over quantity. Travel visas will likely adjust to require a range of criteria prior to granting a travel visa. Permission to travel encodes the health and financial status, age and destination fit as standardised feature of the digitalised of travel document.

Whilst this may aid the destination in selecting tourists with spend and interest in the destination, it may also preclude other tourists from travelling. The fuller implications of such changes will require further investigation.

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