

## Easier Access to Visa Programs

Canada's visitor visa system could better facilitate economic trade and tourism and the business opportunities for British Columbia and Canada would result.

At Canada's airports, information received from the Canadian Airports Council (CAC) is that over the past few years that visas have a tremendous but underappreciated impact not only on aviation but also on the trade and tourism related industries. Visas impact Canada's competitiveness as a tourism destination, the attractiveness of our international airport hubs for connecting traffic, the viability of potential new international routes, and the capacity, traffic volume and competition on existing routes, both international and domestic. This is important not just for our international gateways, but also for making smaller centres, which receive business travellers, international students and visiting family members from around the world.<sup>1</sup>

There is broad interest in visas in two ways: Making the process easier for travellers who need visas, and low risk ways to get legitimate visitors out of the need for a visa altogether for travel to or through Canada. This is increasingly relevant to Canada's aviation sector because some of this country's biggest business opportunities for both the tourism industry and trade are with countries whose residents require a visa to visit Canada.

It is appreciated that visas play an important role in Canadian security and controlling who enters Canada. There are countries with tremendous tourism potential for Canada from which we currently require visas – countries like Brazil, China, Mexico, Turkey and India. In terms of economic trade and tourism growth, we suggest visa free travel from these countries, but we do recognize that visa requirements are in place for valid security reasons.

There is a balance involved. The right balance is in place, but that through greater use of technology and international best practices, we can be even more precise in facilitating the trade and tourism markets without sacrificing security and in a fiscally conservative manner.

It is also important to note that there is progress being made today. 130 Visa Application Centres are being opened, bring visa services closer to applicants and helping to reduce and helping to reduce application errors in important markets like China. We now have ten-year multiple entry visas, as well, visa requirements were just lifted for the Czech Republic. And while the introduction of a visa requirement for visitors from Mexico definitely had a negative impact on the tourism sector, we are hopeful that enough progress has been made to mitigate risk in other areas that this requirement can also be lifted soon as well. Mexico alone could deliver more than 130,000 additional visitors a year.

The Electronics Travel Authorization (ETA) requirement we understand to be implemented in 2015 will involve a new step for visitors from countries that currently require no visa today. This is a concern. That ETAs be low cost and low hassle is an imperative to soften its impact on travel demand, but ETAs also represent an opportunity if they are used as an intermediate screening tool that can allow for formal visa requirements to be lifted from some lower-risk markets.

So there are positive developments to report and we see this as an indication that the government is hearing what the air carrier, business and tourism sector have been relaying over the past few years about the importance of improvements in visa policies and procedures.

There are still ample opportunities for improvement. The current visa application process today is cumbersome. It asks a lot of information, is paper based, often requires a traveller to surrender his or her passport, and may entail long distance travel for in person interviews. It also can take a long time which is a huge problem for business travellers in particular. Business travel often needs to be arranged within days – not weeks or months – and a visa delayed is essentially a visa denied. Surrendering of passports can be a non-starter for many travellers and it is important that alternatives be both available and well communicated.

<sup>1</sup> Discussion regarding citizenship and immigration is drawn from a presentation by Daniel-Robert Gooch, President, Canadian Airports Council, before the House of Commons Committee on Citizenship and Immigration December 3, 2013.

There are reports from foreign airlines, governments and from travellers themselves about how visas are impacting business and leisure travel, and Canada's reputation abroad. The Tourism Industry Association of Canada notes in its recent report that visa restrictions on travel are estimated to negatively impact inbound visits by up to 31 percent, which means about 250,000 fewer visitors each year from Brazil, China, India and Mexico alone. Considering the average long-haul visitor spends nearly \$1,600, this would mean an additional \$375 million in foreign spending in the Canadian economy from just these four countries if we could significantly improve the visa process.

Improvements could include increased reliance on electronic visa application processing and issuance such as it exists in Australia and elsewhere, procedures that allow applicants to keep their documents, regardless of application method and improved foreign language services. Also, consider taking a different approach to potential visitors who we have already screened or who have been screened by other countries. Visitors should be able to transfer Canadian visas to a new passport, for example. And while it is appreciated that Canada evaluates potential visitors based on different risk factors than other countries, a visa to the U.S. or to the European Union nevertheless demonstrates a certain amount of pre-screening, which should be a consideration for less complicated entry into Canada.

As well, there are individuals who have been granted long-term or permanent residency in a country from which we do not require visas – like the United States. For instance, a Chinese student studying at the University of California who would like to visit Vancouver for a weekend faces the same process that we would apply to a potential visitor who has never travelled outside of his or her country. A second area of visa policy of interest to our sector is getting travellers out of the visa and border queues altogether. In particular, Transit Without Visa is a program in place today that allows travellers from certain Asian cities visiting the United States on certain airlines to transit through Canada without a visa. This program has been successful and with very few abuses or violations of the program. Its expansion and improvement have been areas in we have seen some progress in our work with both Citizenship and Immigration and CBSA, but it is important that this progress continue as there are additional opportunities for Canada to take advantage of.

While it may not be obvious how a traveller who spends just a few hours at a Canadian airport connecting to somewhere else is good for Canada, Canadian airports and air carriers are direct beneficiaries of these passengers. These additional passengers make viable international routes that might not otherwise be viable. On existing routes, they grow demand, which can grow both capacity and competition. New routes, more capacity and greater competition, in turn, help bring more travellers who are destined for Canada, which delivers benefits throughout the economy. In fact, a recent Conference Board of Canada study estimated that expansion of the existing Transit Without Visa program could have a \$270 million benefit in GDP and 3,200 jobs if Canada is able to attract just 5% of the connecting traffic between Asia and the United States. Canada's aviation sector isn't content to just stop there, however, there are tremendous opportunities available to flow travellers from Central and South America to Asia and Europe if we are able to expand Transit Without Visa to these travellers as well. Other countries understand this, which is why we have seen countries in the Middle East grow their market share of traffic between the Americas and both Europe and Asia exponentially in recent years – at the expense of North American hubs and airlines.

## **Recommendations**

That the federal government support the amendment of the Visitor Visa program by:

1. Streamlining the process for travellers who need visas and remove the obstacle of surrendering passports for visitors who pose no threat to Canada's security.
2. Considering low risk and proven ways, based on international best practices, that allow legitimate visitors to forego a visa altogether for travel to or through Canada.
3. Expanding the Transit without Visa program.