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Travel Pulse: Qatar Offers Visa-Free Entry to 80 Nationalities

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PHOTO: Citizens of 80 different countries will have an easier time visiting Qatar. (photo courtesy of Thinkstock)



Qatar has officially become the most open country in the Middle East.

According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), the country has introduced a visa-free entry program to 80 nationalities in an effort to boost travel and tourism amid its ongoing diplomatic crisis with neighboring nations.

The new visa waiver program is effective immediately and comprises countries from all over the world, including the U.S., U.K., Mexico, China, France, Germany, Spain and Cuba, among others.

Nationals of the 80 eligible countries will only need a valid passport to gain entry to Qatar, Interior ministry official Mohamed Rashed al-Mazrouei said during a news conference in Doha.

Citizens of 33 of the countries on the list are now authorized to reside in Qatar for up to 90 days, while nationals of the remaining 47 countries are approved for up to 30 days.

Countries were selected based on security and economic factors. However, officials also took citizens' buying power into consideration.

"This historic announcement comes at a time of historic significance while some countries in the region have decided to close their skies and their borders, Qatar has instead opened its borders," said Qatar Airways CEO Akbar al-Baker via AFP.

"Easing entry to Qatar is a key enabler for the growth of Qatar's tourism industry," the Qatar Tourism Authority's Chief Tourism Development officer, Hassan Al Ibrahim, said in a statement.

"Together with our partners in the public and private sectors, we have examined all of the elements needed to create a smooth and enticing experience that can attract visitors from around the world. There is no doubt that facilitating and streamlining access at all ports of entry are key factors in creating a positive first and lasting impression of Qatar."

Wednesday's announcement comes just over two months after several Gulf nations, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, cut diplomatic ties with Qatar over allegations the country was supporting terrorist groups.

The countries have since closed their borders to Qatar and prohibited Qatar Airways and other Qatari-registered aircraft from entering their airspace.

Qatar's new program is the latest step taken to facilitate easier access for visitors. It recently launched an e-visa platform and is considering waiving visa requirements for select holders of a residence permit or a valid visa.