

Henley Passport Index: African countries introduce reciprocal measures to improve SA passport strength

The latest Henley Passport Index shows that the South African passport remains stable in Q3, ranking 50th globally and occupying third place in the sub-Saharan Africa region - following Seychelles, ranked at 24 and Mauritius at 28 globally. Somalia, Libya, and Eritrea sit at the bottom of the index in Africa, each only able to access 35 or fewer destinations visa-free.



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The Henley Passport Index is based on data from the International Air Transport Association (IATA), which maintains the world's largest and most accurate database of travel information.

Amanda Smit, director at Henley & Partners South Africa, explains that South Africa has dropped 18 places since its historical high-point of 35th place on both the 2008 and the 2009 global ranking: "While South Africa has gained access to a number of new travel destinations since 2009, it is not improving its global access levels as quickly as other high-performing countries on the index, leading to an overall decline in its passport power."

Ryan Cummings, director of Signal Risk, explains this decline as follows: "Driving the downward spiral since 2009 have been concerns over the unlawful replication of South African passports documents, with replication often abetted by corrupt officials within the Department of Home Affairs (DOHA). These concerns saw visa regulations being enforced by several countries, including the UK and Colombia."

There is cause for optimism, however. Cummings says: "The implementation of widespread reforms at the DOHA since 2014 – focused on improving security features both in the application process and within the passport document itself – is expected to enhance confidence in the South African passport and may relax visa restrictions for its holders going forward. Other factors that could strengthen the South African passport over the short-to-medium-term include President Cyril Ramaphosa's intention to ease visa restrictions for African passport holders so as to induce greater intra-Africa trade."

The latter intervention could see other African countries introducing reciprocal measures for South Africans, thereby improving their passport strength.

Africa prioritises foreign direct investment

In June, Ethiopia introduced a universal e-visa system for all travellers entering the country, following in the footsteps of Zimbabwe, which implemented a similar system in May.

Cummings says that these developments reflect growing efforts on the part of new African heads of state to strengthen trade partnerships and stimulate foreign direct investment: "Key to selling the idea of reform touted by the newly inaugurated administrations of Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa and Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed is publicly strengthening their ties to the international community and presenting their respective governments as adhering to international governance norms."

Ethiopia, in particular, is easing entry requirements for foreign investors and privatising a number of key state-owned enterprises after years of a strong nationalist agenda.

Global trends

Japan and Singapore share first place on the index, enjoying visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to 189 destinations. Both countries gained access to Uzbekistan earlier this year, knocking Germany off the top spot and kicking the latter into second place for the first time since 2013. 2018 is the first year in the index's 13-year history that either Japan or Singapore has had the most powerful passport in the world.

The rest of the top 20 on the Henley Passport Index remains fairly stable as the northern hemisphere enters the big summer holiday season, with no new visa-waivers processed for the UK and the US, who both remain in fourth place. Nationals of these countries, like nationals of most EU member states, have not seen any improvement in their global access since 2017.

South Korea shares third place with six EU member states Sweden, Finland, Italy, Spain, Denmark, and France. Austria, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Portugal share fourth place with the US and the UK, while Russia, which opened its borders to World Cup fans this summer, has not yet gained reciprocal access to any new destinations, but it nonetheless rose one place to 46th position, benefitting from an upward climb by the Pacific island nation of Tuvalu, which gained visa-free access to Taiwan.

The UAE has continued its remarkable performance and gained access to four new destinations since May, rising to 21st place globally on the Henley Passport Index and fast approaching the top 20.

Despite gaining access to two new destinations, China has fallen one place to 69th on the index: improved scores for countries such as Nauru, Belarus, and Indonesia, which sit directly above China, have made it difficult for the country to ascend the ranking.

Citizenship-by-investment changes your passport power

Smit says that a passport is much more than a simple travel document: "It is a gateway to international opportunities or a barrier to those same opportunities. The Henley Passport Index enables individuals to assess where they lie on the spectrum of global mobility and helps governments understand the relative value and power of the passports they provide."

Smit stresses that a poor-performing passport need not constrain your potential: "Far from being something we are powerless to change, citizenship is much more flexible than many people realize. Citizenship-by-investment programmes allow individuals to drastically improve the strength of their passport and, in turn, their global access."

"In participating in these programs individuals are also able to make an exceptional economic contribution to often smaller nations that require foreign direct investment in order to support their populations and remain competitive and sustainable in the long-term. It is a mutually beneficial exchange, and it is also very much the direction in which the world is heading, as globalisation becomes an undeniable feature of modern life," adds Smit.

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