

## *TARCian Speaks:*

# Visa-free Policy Transforms Travel, Streamlines Processes for Tourists

FROM Dec 1, Malaysian citizens holding ordinary passports can enjoy 15 days' visa-free travel to China for purposes such as business, tourism, family visits and transit stops. Concurrently, Chinese citizens intending to visit Malaysia are granted entry without a visa for a stay of up to 30 days. It is worth noting that China has been Malaysia's largest source of tourists outside Asean countries for seven consecutive years.

The introduction of the visa-free policy is accompanied by the implementation of smart border control measures for both countries including biometric and facial recognition to streamline and enhance security measures. The technology behind this plays a pivotal role in modernising travel procedures and ensuring efficient processing at entry and exit points.

For example, a Chinese traveller arriving in Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) undergoes biometric scanning, such as fingerprint or iris recognition, during immigration clearance. The system matches the traveller's biometric data with information stored in the database, ensuring a secure and efficient entry process. Biometric recognition involves the use of unique physical or behavioural characteristics for identification; and together with facial recognition, which analyses facial features for authentication, contributes to a more secure and automated experience.

For instance, at a border crossing between China and Malaysia, a facial recognition system compares the facial data with stored information to confirm the traveller's identity, allowing a swift and accurate immigration clearance. These advancements not only strengthen border security, but also contribute to the overall digitalisation and efficiency of customs procedures.

Another boon to travellers between the two countries is Alipay, which is widely used in both China and Malaysia. Alipay, operated by Ant Group (an affiliate of the Alibaba Group), is a popular mobile and online payment platform that originated in China. It is widely accepted by various merchants, including shops, restaurants and online platforms in China. In recent years, Alipay has expanded its services internationally, and Malaysia is one of the countries where it is commonly accepted. Many businesses, particularly those catering to Chinese tourists or involved in cross-border trade, have adopted Alipay as a payment option.

One notable benefit is the easing of challenges related to currency exchange and the necessity to carry physical currency. Traditionally, international travellers often need to convert their home currency to the currency of their destination country, for instance from the Chinese yuan to Malaysian ringgit or vice versa. This process can be time-consuming and may involve fees or less favourable exchange rates. Furthermore, the reliance on physical currency is lessened as a result of improved border control measures. Tourists are not compelled to carry large amounts of cash, mitigating concerns related to security and potential loss or theft.

Instead, with the use of biometric technology, travellers can rely on electronic payment methods, credit/debit cards, or mobile payment solutions. This transition to digital and cashless transactions contributes to a more convenient and secure travel experience for tourists, aligning with modern trends in global travel and financial technology. In addition to being a widely-used payment platform, Alipay also provides features for travel and exploration.

Users can find information on local attractions, services, and activities. Imagine a tourist exploring Malacca. Through the online travel platform Fliggy, he can access a detailed guide to popular attractions such as Jonker Street, A Famosa and the Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum. The page for each attraction would typically include historical information, opening hours, ticket prices and user reviews, providing a comprehensive overview to help plan a visit.

Similarly, when a user arrives in Shanghai and needs transportation information, such travel services may provide details on local transportation options such as metro routes, bus schedules and available ride-sharing services. Additionally, users could find information on nearby hotels and restaurants, as well as essential services such as pharmacies or hospitals. The role of digital platforms extends beyond the administrative sphere.

Social media, travel apps and online forums have become vital tools for tourists from China and Malaysia to share their experiences, recommendations and insights. This digital exchange of information has not only served as a resource for travellers but has also contributed to building a virtual bridge between the two cultures, fostering deeper understanding and appreciation.

As both countries continue to reap the rewards of enhanced tourism, digitalisation will likely play an increasingly prominent role in shaping the future of cross-border travel. The utilisation of big data analytics and artificial intelligence can further optimise tourism management, allowing better forecasting, personalised travel recommendations and improved infrastructure planning.

In conclusion, the visa-free policy is a testament to the intersection of international relations and digitalisation. The positive impact of easing travel restrictions is amplified by the efficiency and connectivity enabled by technological advancements.

As nations consider similar initiatives, the integration of digital tools and platforms is likely to be a key element in fostering cross-border cooperation, cultural exchange and the continued growth of the global tourism landscape.

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