

India opens to fully vaccinated foreign tourists

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To encourage travelers to visit India, the government plans to issue 500,000 free visas through next March [File: Pawan Sharma/AP]

New Delhi, November 15 (RHC)-- India began allowing fully vaccinated foreign tourists to enter the country on regular commercial flights, in the latest easing of coronavirus restrictions as infections fall and vaccinations rise.

Tourists entering India, starting on Monday, must be fully vaccinated, follow all COVID-19 protocols and test negative for the virus within 72 hours of their flight, according to the health ministry. Many will also need to undergo a post-arrival COVID-19 test at the airport.

However, travellers from countries that have agreements with India for mutual recognition of vaccination certificates, such as the United States, United Kingdom and many European nations, can leave the airport without undergoing a COVID-19 test.

This is the first time India has allowed foreign tourists on commercial flights to enter the country since March 2020, when it imposed one of the toughest lockdowns in the world in an attempt to contain the pandemic. Fully vaccinated tourists on chartered flights were allowed to enter starting last month.

It came as coronavirus infections had fallen significantly, with daily new cases hovering at just above 10,000 for more than a month.

To encourage travellers to visit India, the government planned to issue 500,000 free visas through next March. The moves were expected to boost the tourism and hospitality sector which has been battered by the pandemic.

"The pandemic devastated the industry but things will return to normal once foreign tourists start to arrive," said Jyoti Mayal, President of the Travel Agents Association of India.

Mayal said coastal states like Kerala and Goa in the country's south and Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh in the Himalayan north are already witnessing a surge in domestic tourists. All four states are heavily dependent on earnings from tourism, and Mayal said foreign travellers scheduling their visits there would also help lift the local economy.

"Tourism is a very resilient industry and the upcoming season looks very promising. We are hopeful of generating more jobs than we lost during the pandemic," she said.

With more than 35 million reported coronavirus infections, India is the second-worst-hit country after the US. Active coronavirus cases stand at 134,096, the lowest in 17 months, according to the health ministry.

Nearly 79 percent of India's adult population has received at least one vaccine dose while 38 percent is fully vaccinated. The federal government has asked state administrations to conduct door-to-door campaigns to accelerate the vaccine campaign.

Fewer than three million foreign tourists visited India in 2020, a drop of more than 75 percent from 2019, when tourism brought nearly \$30bn in earnings.

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