

More Indians than ever are going on holiday abroad. Where are they heading and why?

September 10 2024, by Ross Bennett-Cook



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Travel is on the rise again. According to the UN's tourism agency, international travel for all purposes [reached 97%](#) of its pre-pandemic level in the first quarter of 2024. In some regions such as Africa and

Europe, arrivals are already surpassing these levels.

Indian travelers, in particular, are adding to this growing trend—no nation's [outbound tourism market](#) is growing faster. In response to this rapidly expanding travel boom, Indian airlines ordered [record numbers](#) of new planes in 2024.

The Indian travel market is gigantic, with its [middle class](#) now representing [31% of the country's population](#). This figure is expected to increase to 60% by 2047, meaning there will be more than 1 billion middle-class Indians by the middle of the century.

For budding Indian tourists, the future of travel looks exciting. But for the many destinations already besieged by [overtourism](#), this new market may be viewed through a more [skeptical lense](#).

Nonetheless, Indian tourists spent [US\\$33.3 billion](#) (£25.3 billion) in 2023, and many destinations are recognizing their potential. In April, for example, Japan introduced a new e-[visa](#) system for Indian tourists in the [hopes of increasing arrivals](#).

Two months earlier, Dubai created a five-year, multiple-entry tourist visa tailored to Indian visitors. South Africa's [simplified visa scheme](#) will also start in 2025, while other nations including [Malaysia](#), [Kenya](#), [Thailand](#) and [Iran](#) have scrapped visa requirements for Indian tourists entirely.

The evidence suggests these schemes work. Tour operator Thomas Cook reported in May that Indian demand for holidays in Georgia has [surged](#) by a staggering 600% year-on-year since the country launched its e-visa system for Indian tourists in 2015.

Other European markets have been slower to adjust. Europe's border-

free Schengen zone has [introduced](#) a new "cascade" system, which will allow Indian visitors who have used a short-stay visa twice in the last three years to now apply for a two-year, multiple-entry tourist visa.

But, while this is a positive step towards easier travel for some Indian tourists, it will have no effect on new travelers. The Schengen visa process can also still take months, requires significant paperwork, and appointments are [notoriously difficult](#) to find.

The story is similar for British visas. Many people in India, as well as [other applicants](#), feel the process is too harsh and can be [humiliating](#). Endless amounts of paperwork are required, including bank statements and invitation letters, and rejections are often not explained.

In a study of travel trends in India, online travel platform [Booking.com](#) also found that Indian tourists typically book their trip at the last minute. They spend just 30 days planning a holiday on average, compared with 63 days for Americans and 90 days for Brits. Many simply cannot be bothered with time-consuming visa requirements, and are opting for easier and more welcoming destinations instead.

So, where are they going?

Budget airlines flying to relatively nearby destinations have contributed to India's tourism rush, with south-east Asia increasingly popular. According to [Google Trends](#), Vietnam was the most-researched [destination](#) by Indians in 2023.

That year, the Vietnam National Authority of Tourism [reported](#) a 231% increase in visitors from India compared with 2019. Other south-east Asian countries such as Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia are seeing similarly [huge jumps in arrivals](#).

Indian travelers are hugely influenced by television and movies, often opting to visit the places they have seen in Bollywood. Despite visa restrictions, the number of Indian tourists [visiting Spain](#) jumped by 40% in 2011 after the La Tomatina festival—where participants throw tomatoes at each other—was featured in the popular Hindi movie *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*.

It has been a similar story for Switzerland. Several Bollywood movies filmed there over the past 50 years have resulted in an Indian tourism [love affair](#) with the country. The Swiss tourist board even offers [Bollywood tours](#) to the various sites featured in Indian cinema.

While only 9% of Indian travelers focus on long-haul destinations in western Europe, Switzerland has been a [top-20 destination](#) for Indian tourists for over a decade.

Other destinations have started using Bollywood actors in their promotional campaigns. Dubai, for example, is promoted by the Indian acting superstar and film producer [Shah Rukh Khan](#). And the heartthrob actor [Siddharth Malhotra](#) has been New Zealand's brand ambassador since 2015.

By 2040, the number of international tourist departures from India could hit [90 million](#), not far from the 104 million Chinese tourists who [traveled in 2019](#). However, [research](#) suggests that Chinese holidaymakers are increasingly deciding to [travel](#) at home, meaning Indian tourists may soon overtake them.

As more people in India flock to airport departure lounges, [tourist](#) destinations around the world are jostling for position in the race to take their share.

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