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16 HOURS AGO

Thursday, March 1, 2018 - edition no.  
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## BIZCUITS | VISA HIKE: FOR OR AGAINST THE POWERLESS?

✍ LEANDA LEE 📅 FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2018 - 7 DAYS AGO 💬 NO COMMENTS 👁 934 VIEWS

Transit visa fees from China over Macau increased last Sunday from RMB50 to RMB340 – a surge of over 600 percentage. This has come without warning and strangely in the middle of Chinese New Year when Chinese travellers are on the move.

Transit visas allow Chinese passport holders with a valid air ticket to transit over Macau to a third destination. These visitors can stay in Macau for a total of two weeks; one week on the way out of Macau and one week on the return trip. There are also no restrictions on the number of applications that can be made, unlike the Individual Visitor Scheme which has over time been reduced to only one visa application every two months for a total of seven days' stay. So, although ostensibly for transit visitors, the transit visa was handy for a variety of visitor types.

China has been gradually restricting the access to Macau for Chinese visitors, and on the face of it this new restriction appears to be a new method to curtail gamblers. Gamblers have been using this visa category to gain access to gaming tables more frequently and for longer periods thus circumventing the IVS restrictions. It is also incidentally believed to be one of the reasons for the growth in popularity of casino destinations in South East Asian countries such as Danang.

The increase in transit visa fees, as reported by freelance journalist, Vitor Quinta, this week, suggests analysts are scratching their heads over this policy change that would do little to deter a gambler, particularly the higher stakes, wealthy gambler who habitually uses this category of visa. Where minimum bets at baccarat sit between HKD300 and HKD500 depending upon the casino, a 290 yuan increase in visa fees for potentially two or more weeks of play hardly constitutes a deterrent.

Further, this increase only applies to the land-based entry points over Hengqin and Gongbei. Passengers arriving from Shenzhen via ferry or air, according to the article, continue to pay between 50 and 60 yuan. Something is strange here. Why should there be no hike for the visitor who has the resources to travel and in style? Visitors from further afield, who can afford more, pay less than those walking across the border. No, this measure is not intended for gamblers.

There are other categories of visitor who used and abused the transit visa. They are predominantly junket staff, illegal POS peddlers and sauna or spa workers who are unable to gain work visas to ply their trades. Typically young mainland Chinese, the transit visa has allowed them access to Macau where they have been working – see no evil – under the radar. Each week, groups of workers would board planes on boomerang flights, hardly land in places like Bangkok, Danang and regional airports in Taiwan and the Philippines before doing a U-turn to Macau to complete their second week of work. Then, back to China and another visa application, and the work/travel cycle continues.

As these expenses are unlikely to be covered under the corporate expenses of such employers, it constitutes a significant burden to our most exploited workers.

But why now? This policy is suggestive of another clean-up. Is the moral cultural shift that brought about the demise of Chicken Alley and Wynn, amongst others, having an impact here too?



Leanda Lee

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Structurally, the visa system is facilitating the illicit economy and exploitation of its own Chinese workers. Is the government really concerned for its workforce, or is it preparing to clean-up Macau's act in the lead-up to establishing criteria to assess concession allocations? It is certainly difficult to cast the first stone if one's moral integrity is in doubt.

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