

# Lifting of COVID border curbs triggers rush to renew passports

People joined long queues outside immigration offices in Shanghai on Monday, eager to renew their passports after China dropped COVID border controls.

"I made a reservation on Friday," said a woman surnamed Xu. "My passport has expired for more than two years; I'd like to renew it today because my husband and I are planning a trip to Japan in the spring."

According to the Shanghai Exit-Entry Administration Bureau, exit and entry services such as passport applications and permits to enter Macau and Hong Kong for travel purposes have gradually resumed since Monday, the first working day after the National Immigration Administration announced the relaxation of immigration control measures.

The bureau has improved the application procedure and expanded manpower to deal with the application and reservation influx. "We have set

a limit for reservation according to our maximum capacity," said Shen Qiang, an official with the bureau.

"The first day is fully booked. We will release the reservation quota based on demand."

Currently, around 150 windows in the 20 exit-entry offices are open in the city.

All online reservation channels, such as the Suishenban app, the NIA app, as well as the mini-programs on WeChat, are open.

"I took my daughter to renew her passport," said a woman surnamed Guo, having learned about relaxed controls for travel a few days ago.

Guo and her family plan to visit Thailand over the week-long Spring Festival break, which begins on January 21.

Visa and resident permit services for expats are also in place, including the extension, renewal and re-issuance of documents.

"As of now, the volume of foreigners' applications and

reservations is stable," said Wan Yi, deputy director with the visa department, adding there have been no big fluctuations in recent days.

Wang reminded that expats need to make online reservations in advance and hand in documents to the designated window according to their booked time.

"We anticipate a peak later this year as more foreigners arrive in China, and require more immigration services."

Navin Alwani, an Indian businessman who has worked in Shanghai for 21 years, was one of a dozen foreigners in the visa section on the third floor of the agency.

"I'm here today for some information," Alwani said. "Relaxed COVID-19 restrictions will benefit cross-border tourism and businesses, so that more people can come to China in the future."

Meanwhile in Beijing, the Beijing Exit-Entry Administration Bureau's waiting hall was



People make inquiries at the Shanghai Exit-Entry Administration Bureau on Monday. — Jiang Xiaowei



People fill in their application forms at the Shanghai Exit-Entry Administration Bureau on Monday. — CFP



A throng of people waits for services at the Shanghai Exit-Entry Administration Bureau on Monday. — Jiang Xiaowei

packed with people who had made online appointments on Monday.

Waiting to renew his passport in a line of more than 100 people in China's capital, 67-year-old retiree Yang Jianguo said he was planning to travel to the United States to see his daughter for the first time in three years.

"She got married last year but had to postpone the wedding ceremony because we couldn't go over to attend it. We're very glad we can now go," Yang said, standing alongside his wife.

The move to drop quarantine requirements for visitors is expected to boost outbound travel, as residents will not face those restrictions when they return.

"It's a huge relief just to be able to go back to normal ... just come back to China, get off the plane, get myself a taxi and just go home," Michael Harrold, 61, a copy editor, said at Beijing Capital International Airport on Sunday after he arrived on a flight from Warsaw, Poland.

Harrold said he had been anticipating having to quarantine

and do several rounds of testing on his return when he left for a Christmas break in early December.

State broadcaster CCTV reported on Sunday that direct flights from South Korea to China were close to sold out. The report quickly shot to the most-read item on Weibo.

In the near term, a spike in demand from travelers will be hampered by the limited number of flights to and from China, which are currently at a small fraction of pre-COVID levels.

Flight Master data showed that on Sunday, China had a total of 245 international inbound and outbound flights, compared with 2,546 flights on the same day in 2019 — a fall of 91 percent.

China's domestic tourism revenue in 2023 is expected to recover to 70-75 percent of pre-COVID levels, but the number of inbound and outbound trips is forecast to recover to only 30-40 percent of pre-COVID levels this year, China News reported.

(Reuters/Shanghai Daily)