

Visa Policy Reforms and International Tourist Arrivals in Cross River State, Nigeria: Assessing Effects and Associated Challenges

By

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Abstract

This study critically examined visa policy and tourism development, with specific focus on Cross River State, one of Nigeria's foremost tourism destinations, endowed with rich cultural heritage, ecotourism resources, and internationally recognized events such as the Calabar Carnival. Two research hypotheses were developed for the study in line with the objective of the study. A mixed method research design was adopted for the study. The study population consists of all international tourist and visitors to Cross River State, Nigeria, during the specific period which is six-month period (July to December 2025). The sample size was 211 respondents. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires and supplemented with key informant interviews involving tourism stakeholders, visitors, and relevant officials across selected tourism destinations and urban centers in Cross River State. The data were analyzed using Pearson Product moment correlation Analysis. The findings of the study revealed that visa policy plays a significant role in shaping tourism development outcomes in Cross River State. Liberal visa measures, particularly electronic visa systems and visa facilitation arrangements, were found to positively influence international tourist arrivals, enhance the attractiveness of the state to foreign investors, and improve its global tourism image. However, the study also identified persistent challenges, including bureaucratic bottlenecks such as lengthy processing times, inconsistent policy implementation, limited awareness of visa reforms, and concerns related to security and infrastructure, which continue to constrain the full realization of tourism growth. The study concludes that while Nigeria's visa policy reforms provide a viable framework for tourism development, their impact remains limited without effective implementation, inter-agency coordination, and complementary investments in tourism infrastructure and destination marketing. Therefore, the study recommends among others that the government should streamline visa requirements and reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks to make travel into Nigeria, and by extension Cross River State, more convenient for international tourists..

Keywords: Visa Policy, Reforms, International Tourist, Arrivals, Assessing Effects, Associated Challenges

Introduction

In an era where nations are increasingly defined not only by the firmness of their borders but by the openness of their doors, Nigeria's evolving visa policy stands as both a mirror and a map reflecting the country's aspirations for global integration, while charting pathways for tourism-led development in culturally vibrant regions such as Cross River State. A visa policy refers to the set of rules and guidelines established by a country to regulate the entry, stay and exit of foreign visitors or nationals. It determines who can visit, how long they can stay and the purpose for which they are admitted. Visa policy plays a vital role in shaping the movement of people across borders. It acts as a gate-keeping tool that influences international tourism flows by affecting travel costs, levels of uncertainty, and visitors' sense of welcome. Recent study by Rossello and Santana (2024) ,on Visa Policy and Visitors intentions to travel, have shown that not all visa policies have the same effect. Some requirements, especially those involving lengthy or complex processes, can significantly reduce tourist flows, particularly toward developed destinations. Interestingly, this research highlights the administrative burden and uncertainty associated with visas and stronger deterrent effect it has from actual fees charged.

Around the world, trends have been moving toward greater visa facilitation. According to the United Nations Tourism (2023), formerly UNWTO), the past two decades have seen a steady liberalization of visa regimes, with many destinations adopting electronic visas and visa on arrival schemes. This shift became even more pronounced after the COVID-19 pandemic, when most countries began removing travel restrictions, leading to destination openness that matched or even exceeded pre-pandemic levels (UN Tourism, 2023; UN Tourism, 2024). The 2023 Tourism Visa Openness Report by UN tourism indicates that although traditional consular visas are still required for a large share of the world's population, the availability of e-visas and visa on arrival systems has grown substantially.

Countries that have simplified entry processes by expanding visa waiver lists or adopting e-visas often experience faster tourism recovery. For instance, China's gradual relaxation of visa rules in 2023 and 2024 helped revive her inbound tourism (Gu, 2024). In France, the country issued short stay tourist visas for stay up to 90 days in a bid to strengthen her tourism sector (The Guardian, 2023). Okafor (2023) also reported that South Africa implemented waiver agreements and e-visa systems to improve her tourism access. Ibrahim (2023) reported that Rwanda adopted highly open visa regime to increase African mobility in order to woo

tourism in her region. Apart from this, simplified visa requirements adopted by these countries has reduce compliance costs, online systems challenges, made applications more convenient, and predictable timelines made travel planning easier. In addition, reducing the risk of rejection encourages potential tourists, particularly those considering leisure travel, to choose destinations that feel more accessible and welcoming (Neumayer, 2010).

In Nigeria, a major reform came with the launch of the Nigeria Visa Policy (NVP) 2020 on 4 February 2020. This policy introduced 79 visa classes, expanded access to e-visas, and formalized visa on arrival facilities for African Union nationals alongside business and short-visit categories (Nigeria Immigration Service, 2020; KPMG, 2020). The NVP 2020 was designed to support economic diversification, attract investment, encourage tourism, and strengthen regional integration (Nigeria Immigration Service, 2020). The Nigeria Immigration Service has since published clear and detailed entry categories, including those for tourism, with online application options. This shift moves Nigeria closer to international best practices in visa facilitation (Neumayer, 2010; UN Tourism, 2023; Rossello and Santana-Gallego, 2024). Nigeria also benefits from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free movement protocol, which allows visa-free entry for up to 90 days for citizens of member states. This framework has long supported cross-border leisure trips and visiting friends and relatives tourism within the region (Awumbila, Teye & Yaro, 2018; Schans, Nijenhuis & Zoomers, 2023).

However, Nigeria's ability to increase its tourism arrivals depends not only on visa reforms but also on other enabling factors such as safety, air connectivity, quality tourism products, and service standards, all of which have been identified as critical determinants of international arrivals in recent Nigerian studies (Akinyemi, 2024). By global standards, Nigeria still lags behind in tourism performance. In 2023, the country welcomed only 1.2 million international visitors compared to 8.48 million for South Africa and 1.95 million for Kenya (The Guardian, 2023). Among Nigeria's states, Cross River stands out as a leading tourism hub, under the administration of Governor Bassey Otu, the state has made major investments to boost its tourism profile. In July 2025, the government approved 18 billion naira, approximately 20 million US dollars, for the revitalization of major attractions including Obudu Mountain Resort, Kwa Falls, Marina Resort, and Tinapa Resort. Plans also cover the upgrading of the Amber Tinapa Hotel, construction of a new pier harbor, improvements to convention facilities, enhancement of waterfront activities, and expansion of hotel capacity ahead of the Calabar Carnival's 20th anniversary in December 2025 (News Cross River State Government, 2025; Guardian Nigeria, 2025).

Neumayer (2010), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2022), which emphasize that simplified visa procedures and reduced administrative burdens encourage international mobility and enhance destination attractiveness. Other measures, such as seasonal incentives, group visas, and multiple-entry visas, received less attention, indicating that immediate ease of access is more influential than additional benefits.

The study further shows that current visa policies have positively influenced tourist arrivals, with many respondents reporting significant or moderate increases in visitor inflow. Growth was observed among both repeat and first-time visitors, while a smaller proportion indicated that visa restrictions discouraged certain tourist segments. These findings highlight the dual impact of visa policy: facilitative measures encourage new and repeat visits, while restrictive elements may deter potential tourists. Czaika and Haas (2017), note that cumbersome visa procedures create perceptions of unwelcomeness, reducing a destination's global competitiveness. Evidence from Cross River State corroborates this, demonstrating that streamlined visa policies support both initial and repeat tourism. Visa policies were also found to influence foreign investment in tourism. Respondents indicated that current arrangements encouraged higher investment interest, attracting both short-term and long-term investors, while only a few believed that visa challenges discouraged investment. This supports the assertions of Neumayer (2010), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2022), that transparent and predictable visa procedures reduce uncertainty for international business actors. African tourism studies further confirm that relaxed visa regimes stimulate foreign direct investment in hospitality and cultural tourism (Adeola & Evans 2022), reflecting similar patterns in Cross River State.

Ibrahim and Ayodele (2022) argued that visa systems shape international perceptions of openness, and Edu (2023), who emphasize that digitalized visa procedures enhance a destination's modern image and visibility. Despite these benefits, respondents identified challenges in obtaining visas, including long processing times, high fees, complex application forms, limited online options, corruption, inadequate information, and poor customer service. Neumayer (2010) and Czaika and Neumayer (2017), noted that administrative inefficiencies and financial barriers reduce international travel. It was equally stressed the importance of transparency and responsive visa services, reinforcing Adeola and Evans' (2022) assertion that clear communication and efficient visa processes improve tourist confidence and encourage repeat visits.

Visa facilitation was also shown to enhance festivals and cultural events, attracting more foreign visitors, boosting ticket sales, encouraging cultural exchange, and drawing

international performers and media coverage. These results align with the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2022) and African studies (Cele & Zou, 2025), which note that accessible visa policies promote participation, longer stays, repeat attendance, and international partnerships. Respondents suggested several reforms to improve the state's global image, including simplifying visa requirements, promoting e-visa accessibility, enhancing transparency, reducing fees, offering multi-entry visas, and harmonizing regional procedures

Cross River State is complementing national visa facilitation efforts with destination-level strategies that leverage digital transformation and community-based tourism. In 2024, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture signed an agreement with Sterling Consortium to digitalize tourism services, launch the "Visit Cross River" platform, and prepare key attractions for both domestic and international visitors aligning with Nigeria's e-visa and visa on arrival systems by making trip planning and site access more seamless. Planned developments such as Bamba Cave, Kendeshua Lake, and upgraded facilities at Agbokim Waterfall and Kwa Falls, including zipline adventures, are designed to attract high-value leisure travelers who can now enter the country more easily under the Nigeria Visa Policy 2020 (Negroid Haven, 2024). The state's renewed participation in international tourism fairs, including its award-winning "Rediscover Cross River" stand at the AKWAABA African Travel Market in 2024, directly supports the marketing potential unlocked by visa liberalization. With a tourism portfolio spanning natural wonders like the Obudu Plateau, heritage sites such as the Residency Museum, and the globally recognized Calabar Carnival, Cross River demonstrates how subnational investment in infrastructure, branding, and service quality can operationalize national visa policy reforms. When such local initiatives are coordinated with streamlined entry systems, they can extend visitor stays, spread tourism benefits more evenly across destinations, and strengthen Nigeria's international competitiveness and Cross River State in Particular.

Statement of the problem

Tourism has become one of the fastest-growing industries worldwide, generating billions in revenue and fostering cultural exchange, yet its growth is significantly shaped by government visa policies. Across the globe, some destinations have experienced tourism booms after introducing visa-on-arrival or e-visa systems, as seen in countries like Thailand and the United Arab Emirates, while others have suffered declines due to restrictive entry requirements. This paradox raises a compelling question: why do some governments maintain complex and time-consuming visa processes despite overwhelming evidence that streamlined systems encourage more international visits and higher spending (United Nations World

Tourism Organization, 2023). In Africa, for instance, nations such as Rwanda and Seychelles have adopted liberal visa regimes that have attracted unprecedented tourist flows, whereas others with strict policies struggle to compete on the global tourism stage. Beyond visitor numbers, visa rules influence foreign investment in tourism infrastructure, shape global perceptions of a destination, and affect its competitiveness in an increasingly borderless travel market. However, the interplay between visa policy, tourism growth, and destination image remains underexplored in comparative global contexts, particularly regarding how political, security, and economic factors justify these policies despite their potential to limit tourism development

Visa policy is a critical determinant of tourism flows, as it influences the ease of entry, cost, and perception of welcome among potential visitors (Neumayer, 2010). Globally, destinations with liberal visa regimes such as visa-on-arrival and electronic visas have recorded significant growth in tourist arrivals and revenue generation, while restrictive policies have often deterred potential tourists (UNWTO, 2022). In Nigeria, and specifically in Cross River State, tourism holds immense potential due to attractions such as the Obudu Mountain Resort, Cross River National Park, and the internationally recognized Calabar Carnival. However, despite these assets, the sector's growth is hindered by bureaucratic visa processes, high application costs, lengthy approval times, and perceived insecurity, which collectively discourage international visitation (Ezenagu, 2021).

Besides, Cross River State depends heavily on domestic tourists, while foreign tourist numbers remain low compared to other African destinations with similar attractions. This underperformance raises concerns about the effectiveness of Nigeria's visa policy in fostering tourism development at the subnational level. With global tourism becoming increasingly competitive, a rigid or poorly implemented visa regime could limit the State's ability to attract high-spending international visitors, enhance its global visibility, and stimulate local economic growth. Addressing these policy gaps is crucial to unlocking the full tourism potential of Cross River State

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Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to evaluate the visa policy and tourism development in Cross River State. The specific objectives are as follows. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between visa policy changes that attract international tourists and visitors in Cross River State.
2. Examine how Current government visa policy relate to visitors' arrival in Cross River State.

3. Ascertain the relationship between visa policy changes that attract international tourists and visitors and the challenges faced by international tourists and visitors in obtaining visas to visit Cross River State

Research Hypotheses

Based on the objectives of the study, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

1. There is no significant relationship between visa policy changes that attract international tourists and visitors in Cross River State.
2. Current government visa policy has no significant relationship between visitors arrival in Cross River State.
3. There is no significant relationship between visa policy changes that attract international tourists and visitors and the challenges faced by international tourists and visitors in obtaining visas to visit Cross River State

Methods

This study adopted a survey research design to answer the research questions of this study. Two research hypotheses were developed for the study in line with the objective of the study. A mixed method research design was adopted for the study. The study population consists of all international tourist and visitors to Cross River State, Nigeria, during the specific period which is six-month period (July to December 2025). The sample size was 211 respondents. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires and supplemented with key informant interviews involving tourism stakeholders, visitors, and relevant officials across selected tourism destinations and urban centers in Cross River State. The data were analyzed using Pearson Product moment correlation Analysis.

Results

Hypothesis

HO₁

Based on the outcome of Hypothesis 1, which states that there is no significant relationship between visa policy changes that attract international tourists and visitors and the effect of the current government visa policy on tourist and visitor arrivals in Cross River State, further analysis presents a contrary finding. Examination of the data reveals a strong positive correlation between the two variables, with a correlation coefficient of ($R = 0.862$; $P < 0.001$).

This indicates a statistically significant and linear relationship between visa policy changes and the effect of the current government visa policy on tourist and visitor arrivals.

Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, confirming that a substantial relationship exists between the visa policy measures implemented and their influence on tourist and visitor arrivals in Cross River State.

The findings further underscore broader implications, emphasizing the strong connection between government visa policy reforms and the overall effectiveness in attracting international tourists and visitors. The results of Hypothesis 1 were analyzed using data from the relevant tables, while detailed findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation analysis between visa policy changes and tourist/visitor arrivals in Cross River State

Parameter	N	R	p-value
Visa policy changes that attract international tourists and visitors	11	0.862**	0.001
Effect of current government visa policy on tourist and visitor arrivals	11		

Source: Pearson correlation computational output, 2026

HO₂

Similarly, based on the outcome of Hypothesis 2, which states that there is no significant relationship between the effect of the current government visa policy on tourist and visitor arrivals and the impact of visa policy on the global image of Cross River State as a tourism destination, further analysis indicates a significant positive relationship. Examination of the data presented in Table 11 reveals a correlation coefficient of (R = 0.764; P < 0.01), demonstrating a statistically significant linear association between tourist arrivals influenced by visa policy and the global image of Cross River State.

As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, confirming that the current government visa policy not only affects tourist and visitor arrivals but also positively contributes to enhancing the global image of the state as a tourism destination. The analysis for this hypothesis was conducted using data from Tables 3 and 5, with detailed findings presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation analysis between effect of current government visa policy on tourist/visitor arrivals and impact of visa policy on global image of Cross River State

Parameter	N	R	p-value
Effect of current government visa policy on tourist and visitor arrivals	11	0.764 ^{ns}	0.001
Impact of visa policy on global image of Cross River State	11		

Source: Pearson correlation computational output, 2026

HO₃

Based on the outcome of Hypothesis 3, which states that there is no significant relationship between visa policy changes that attract international tourists and visitors and the challenges faced by international tourists and visitors in obtaining visas to visit Cross River State, further analysis reveals a significant relationship. The data presented in Table 12 indicate a positive correlation ($R = 0.653$; $P < 0.01$), showing that visa policy changes designed to attract tourists also influence the ease or difficulty experienced by these visitors in obtaining visas.

This result demonstrates a linear and statistically significant relationship, confirming that while visa policy changes aim to attract international tourists and visitors, certain administrative or procedural challenges may still affect accessibility. As a result, the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis, establishing that visa policy changes and visa acquisition challenges are meaningfully related. The analysis for Hypothesis 3 was conducted using data from Tables 2 and 6, with detailed statistical results presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation analysis between visa policy changes that attract international tourists and visitors and challenges faced in obtaining visas.

Parameter	N	R	p-value
Visa policy changes that attract international tourists and visitors	11	0.653 ^{ns}	0.001
Challenges faced by tourists and visitors in obtaining visas	11		

Source: Pearson correlation computational output, 2026

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study reveal that visa policy is a critical determinant of tourism development in Cross River State, significantly influencing international tourist arrivals, foreign investment, the state's global image, participation in festivals and cultural events, and overall accessibility. Analysis of the data indicates that visa on arrival and e-visa applications were the most preferred policy measures, while reduced visa fees and longer visa validity were also important facilitators of travel. These results suggest that tourists prioritize convenience, affordability, and efficiency in visa processing, supporting the observations of Neumayer (2010), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2022), which emphasize that simplified visa procedures and reduced administrative burdens encourage international mobility and enhance destination attractiveness. Other measures, such as seasonal incentives, group visas, and multiple-entry visas, received less attention, indicating that immediate ease of access is more influential than additional benefits.

The study further shows that current visa policies have positively influenced tourist arrivals, with many respondents reporting significant or moderate increases in visitor inflow. Growth was observed among both repeat and first-time visitors, while a smaller proportion indicated that visa restrictions discouraged certain tourist segments. These findings highlight the dual impact of visa policy: facilitative measures encourage new and repeat visits, while restrictive elements may deter potential tourists. Czaika and Haas (2017), note that cumbersome visa procedures create perceptions of unwelcomeness, reducing a destination's global competitiveness. Evidence from Cross River State corroborates this, demonstrating that streamlined visa policies support both initial and repeat tourism. Visa policies were also found to influence foreign investment in tourism. Respondents indicated that current arrangements encouraged higher investment interest, attracting both short-term and long-term investors, while only a few believed that visa challenges discouraged investment. This supports the assertions of Neumayer (2010), and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2022), that transparent and predictable visa procedures reduce uncertainty for international business actors. African tourism studies further confirm that relaxed visa regimes stimulate foreign direct investment in hospitality and cultural tourism (Adeola & Evans 2022), reflecting similar patterns in Cross River State.

The study highlights visa policy's effect on the global image of Cross River State. Respondents reported that current visa procedures enhance the state's attractiveness, improve perceptions of security, and portray it as a welcoming destination. However, some respondents felt visa regulations could foster perceptions of bureaucracy or reduce global competitiveness. These insights align with Ibrahim and Ayodele (2022), who argue that visa

systems shape international perceptions of openness, and Edu (2023), who emphasize that digitalized visa procedures enhance a destination's modern image and visibility. Despite these benefits, respondents identified challenges in obtaining visas, including long processing times, high fees, complex application forms, limited online options, corruption, inadequate information, and poor customer service. These findings echo Neumayer (2010) and Czaika and Neumayer (2017), who note that administrative inefficiencies and financial barriers reduce international travel. Respondents stressed the importance of transparency and responsive visa services, reinforcing Adeola and Evans' (2022) assertion that clear communication and efficient visa processes improve tourist confidence and encourage repeat visits.

Visa facilitation was also shown to enhance festivals and cultural events, attracting more foreign visitors, boosting ticket sales, encouraging cultural exchange, and drawing international performers and media coverage. These results align with the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2022) and African studies (Cele & Zou, 2025), which note that accessible visa policies promote participation, longer stays, repeat attendance, and international partnerships. Respondents suggested several reforms to improve the state's global image, including simplifying visa requirements, promoting e-visa accessibility, enhancing transparency, reducing fees, offering multi-entry visas, and harmonizing regional procedures. These recommendations are consistent with global evidence that flexible and technologically supported visa systems enhance competitiveness, attract repeat visitors, and strengthen investor confidence.

The socio-economic characteristics of respondents reveal a balanced gender distribution, predominance of middle-aged adults, high education levels, and strong representation of civil servants and businesspersons. Most were domestic tourists familiar with Cross River State, with many having visited multiple times, indicating well-informed travelers capable of assessing visa processes and tourism quality.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that visa policy is a strategic tool that significantly impacts tourism, investment, destination image, festival participation, and accessibility. Facilitative measures such as visa on arrival, e-visas, reduced fees, longer validity, and transparency encourage tourist arrivals, attract investors, and enhance the state's global reputation. However, challenges such as high fees, complex procedures, long processing times, and limited digital platforms highlight the need for policy reform. Implementing efficient, flexible, and technology-driven visa policies will foster tourism growth, strengthen

global competitiveness, and maximize the socio-economic benefits of tourism in Cross River State.

Conclusion

The study examined the impact of government visa policy on tourism development in Cross River State and revealed that visa regulations play a critical role in shaping the state's global image, accessibility, and attractiveness to international tourists. Evidence from the analysis showed that reforms such as simplifying visa requirements, promoting e-visa accessibility, reducing visa fees, enhancing transparency, and introducing visa exemptions have strong potential to stimulate tourism growth. The findings further indicated that improvements in visa-related services, including better communication, increased foreign consular presence, and the introduction of innovative options like a "festival visa," can significantly enhance tourists' willingness to visit the state.

The results also demonstrated that tourism development in Cross River State is closely linked to how welcoming, affordable, and convenient the visa acquisition process is for foreign visitors. Where visa processes are complex, expensive, or poorly communicated, tourist inflow declines; however, where policies are clear, digitalized, affordable, and visitor-friendly, tourism experiences measurable growth. Respondents overwhelmingly emphasized that visa simplification and digitalization would strengthen Cross River State's global competitiveness, improve its reputation, and encourage higher international patronage of tourist attractions such as the Obudu Mountain Resort, Tinapa, the Marina Resort, and cultural events like the Calabar Carnival. Effective implementation of these policies is therefore essential for positioning Cross River State as a leading tourism destination in Nigeria and across Africa.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the impact of visa policy on tourism development in Cross River State:

1. The government should streamline visa requirements and reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks to make travel into Nigeria, and by extension Cross River State, more convenient for international tourists.
2. Wider adoption and promotion of e-visa platforms will make the visa process faster, more transparent, and accessible to tourists from any part of the world.
3. Lowering visa charges, especially for tourists from key markets, will encourage more international travelers to consider Cross River State as a viable destination.

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