

The UKZN Griot. Of Visas and Trauma

The UKZN Griot



...of Visas and Trauma

Many of my colleagues gabble on about globalisation. American and TV dramas show their characters jetting off across the world without the need for visas, queuing for visas, being sent off by embassy officials to get yet more documentation, returning to stand in yet more lengthy queues, getting again yelled at by stressed embassy officials, and paying extortionate rates for the application.

Then waiting for three weeks for their passports to be processed.

Sometimes securing a visa can take multiple hours of form filling, and stupidly, the requirement by many that applicants turn up personally as embassies for biometric surveillance and proof of existence. Apart from Australia, which does the process electronically without even holding one's passport, the rest of the world remains in the dark ages. Actually, it's the age of modernity that is the problem as the dark ages never required anyone to have passports, to get permission from their employers to travel, did not insist on travel insurance and return tickets, bank statements or proof of financial probity.

Attila the Hun had nothing on an Italian Embassy official I had to endure in Washington DC in 1990 when I was returning from a sabbatical. I was inquiring about a day pass on a stop-over in Rome. Followed by two minions, she ranted and raved at all the folks in the waiting room, demanding to know why they wanted to visit Italy. She threw out most of us – especially those who seemed to be North African. When I got to Rome, on applying for a day visa, I was interrogated by a police officer on why I could not speak fluent Italian. Sounds like home!

I have previously commented on my experience with the Norwegian Embassy [1]. Now, South Africa has surpassed this insanity with its own. It's tit for tat. That's what the prominent notice states in the Russian Embassy in Pretoria. We treat South Africa in the same way they treat us. With contempt. One would think that the BRICS countries would ease up on the humiliating visa ritual.

But Ruth and I did have a wonderful 40 minute conversation with Ahmed Bawa on the pavement while we waited for the Russian Embassy gates to open. We talked about fallism, insourcing and associated high costs and that fact that Brazil no longer requires visas from us. Something positive has thus fallen. Inside in the Embassy, we all had to deal with polite and sometimes seemingly impolite officials who were mystified why the documentation our respective hosts had sent them could not be found. Mentions were made of telex reference numbers (remember that

technology?), emails taking three days to arrive, etc. One Russian official was exceedingly polite, while the other barked, yelled and commanded all the while gesticulating wildly. He was not being rude, that's perhaps the stereotypical Russian way. Or, maybe he's watched too many Hollywood movies with Russian characters?

Getting a UK visa is worse, even if the agents bristle with barely concealed polite officiousness. The last time I went to get a visa the new agent was in Overport. It did not start well. My appointment for an 'interview' was 11am. At 10.30am, I got a call from someone who told me that she had found my passport pack on a ledge at the centre. Having recovered from my astonishment, I asked her to take them to my visa agent on the 5th floor who had lost them in the first place. When I arrived, the building was under reconstruction and I could not find the lifts. Having finally been taken there by a guard, I walked slap bang out of the lift into throngs of people all milling about in the corridor, waiting for their 9am interviews at the British Consulate.

I struggled through this mass and found the visa agent, who was unrepentant on losing my documents. I then scrummed my way into the Consulate's visa agent offices, where, in front of everyone (standing, seated, muttering) I declared that I was there for my 11am appointment. I was told by the officials to get to the back of the queue that snaked along the outside corridor back to the lifts. My response was to offer a short tutorial on Britishness and punctuality - theirs. This raised applause from inside the seated massed would-be travelers, and their muttering got louder, especially when I queried their extortionate fee from the country that made the Empire rich during colonial times.

Fearing the beginnings of a riot, I was whisked away into a booth, finger-printed, eye-printed and printed in every which way. I then gave another tutorial on the unfairness of queue-jumping, and was whisked out lest the applause develop into a full-blown riot. My subsequent entry on the Consulate agent's website inviting customer experience did not even merit an acknowledgement. So much for British efficiency, fair-play and level playing grounds.

The Ethiopians have the right idea. They mix extortion with efficiency and pragmatism. Unlike Home Affairs that has been known to jail incoming billionaire investors because they did not have sufficient blank pages (sic), the Ethiopians herd visa-seekers into a room on disembarkation: i) show you passport here, ii) they stick the visa into the passport over a previous one if no blank pages iii) pay your US dollars at the next station, iv) exit to the passport officer, then v) to baggage claim, then vi) scanning, and then exit. Then, if you are in luck, get mobbed by a 100 screaming taxi drivers all desperate for your fare. And, don't even think of finding a taxi that is even minimally roadworthy. The whole process takes less than an hour.

Some African countries are indeed very efficient.

· Keyan G Tomaselli is UKZN Professor Emeritus and Sometime Fellow. For the rest of his time he is writing war stories about visa applications.

1. Of Visas and Travels. <http://ndabaonline.ukzn.ac.za/UkzndabaStory/NdabaOnline-Vol2-Issue44/The%20UKZN%20Griot%20Of%20Visas%20and%20Travels/>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.

[Keyan G Tomaselli](#)