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Russian Tourists' Luxury Cars Fill Up Helsinki Airport

By Elias Huuhtanen for AFP

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Expensive cars with Russian plate numbers in the premium parking area of the Helsinki airport in Vantaa, Finland. **Alessandro Rampazzo / AFP**

Porsches, Bentleys and other luxury cars with Russian license plates are filling up the parking garage at Helsinki's airport as Finland becomes an important transit country for Russian tourists flying to Europe.

The European Union shut its airspace to Russian planes after Moscow invaded Ukraine, forcing anyone who wants to travel to Europe to drive across the border or take a circuitous route using non-Western airlines.

Since Russia's Covid-19 restrictions expired in July, there has been a boom in Russian travelers and a rising backlash in Europe against allowing in Russian tourists while the war continues.

A quick stroll through the carpark at the Helsinki airport revealed dozens if not hundreds of high-end cars with Russian license plates, including a new Mercedes-Benz S-class sedan and Porsche 911 Turbo S.

"It boggles me," Finnish traveler Jussi Hirvonen said after leaving the garage. "I wish they weren't here before Ukraine's situation is solved."

Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto told AFP that the Nordic nation has become a "transit country" for Russian tourists.

"Helsinki airport is seeing a lot of Russian tourism at the moment."

Finland wants EU decision

Finland said last week it would limit Russian tourist visas to 10% of current volumes as of Sept. 1 due to rising discontent over Russian tourism amid the war in Ukraine.

But Russians continue to enter Finland with visas issued by other EU countries in the Schengen borderless travel area for their journeys.

"They come here on Schengen visas issued by various different countries and then continue further via Helsinki airport," Haavisto said.

Related article: Russians Scramble for Visas as EU Mulls Travel Restrictions

According to a survey conducted by the Finnish border guard in August, around two-thirds of Russians crossing Finland's eastern border do so with a Schengen visa issued by a country other than Finland.

"Hungary, Spain, Italy, Austria, Greece and Spain normally issue visas to Russians, and are generally among the top issuing countries each year," border guard official Mert Sasioglu told AFP.

Schengen rules do not allow Finland to close the border to specific nationalities, Haavisto said. Such sanctions can only be decided jointly by the EU.

"As Finland and the Baltic countries are planning to restrict these visas, it would be good if all EU countries took similar decisions," Haavisto said.

This sentiment was shared by many Finns at the airport.

"There should be an EU decision to close the border," said Finnish traveler Jussi Hirvonen.

Finland intends to raise the issue at the next meeting of EU foreign affairs ministers in the Czech Republic on August 30.

'Everybody should travel'

After Russia lifted its Covid travel restrictions on July 15, the number of Russian tourists heading to Finland has surged.

While the numbers are still well below pre-Covid levels, there were more than 230,000 border crossings in July – up from 125,000 in June.

For many Russian travelers, the idea of not being able to travel to Europe is met with disappointment.

"Everybody should travel, because when you see how other peaceful countries live then you become more peaceful too," said Pavel Alekhin, a 32-year-old Russian professional athlete on his way to a bike festival in Basel.

Russian traveler Vadim wan der Berg said the situation is "very difficult" for normal Russians, as many now lack the opportunity to fly for work or studies.

"We're all waiting for this to stop and want a normal situation in the whole world, in our country and Ukraine too."

Europe divided

The European Commission acknowledged last week that discussions were underway to see if a "coordinated approach" on Russian visas could be reached.

Eastern EU countries Latvia, Lithuania and Poland stopped issuing new tourist visas to Russians shortly after the war started.

Estonia has gone a step further and is looking at stopping Russians who have visas delivered by other EU states.

But German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has expressed reservations about such restrictions.

"This is not the Russian people's war, it is Putin's war," Scholz noted.

He said limiting tourist visas would also penalize "all the people who flee Russia because they disagree with the Russian regime."

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