

# Turkish Tourists Flock to Greek Islands Using Express Visas

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Greece's seven-day 'express visa' scheme has made its islands a popular summer destination for Turkish citizens fleeing high prices at home – but whether the scheme will continue is up to the EU.

Pythagoreio, a village on the Greek island of Samos in the north Aegean, owes its name to the famous Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras.

But that's not the main reason why Turkey couple Senem, 38, an economic academic, and Guray 37, a lawyer, chose it for their summer getaway.

"Greece is very similar to Turkey, especially the parts that we like about Turkey," said Guray, adding also that it's now cheaper than Turkey.

"Travelling to Samos, although you have to pay for a visa and the ferry, and although euros are more expensive than Turkish lira [1 euro equals 37.99 lira], it is still cheaper here than in Turkey," he told BIRN.

Experts say Turkey's failure to control the foreign exchange rates and sky-high inflation have seriously damaged price stability in the country.

One consequence of that is that the Turkish tourism sector, like other sectors in the country, has become expensive compared to Greece.

The price differential has prompted many Turks to take vacations this year in Greece, using the "territorially limited validity visa" scheme [announced](#) in December 2023 within the framework of the 5th Greece-Turkey Cooperation Council in Athens.

Greek experts told BIRN that the seven-day express visa scheme is an important component of the agenda that both Greece and Turkey put forward, intended to consolidate a positive climate in bilateral relations. It also constitutes a big plus for the Greek economy.

"It has contributed to increased contact between the two nations and has increased tourism revenue in the Greek islands ... Extending the agreement would be a helpful indicator of the course of the bilateral talks and the positive agenda at large," said Ioannis Grigoriadis, Jean Monnet Chair of European Studies at Bilkent University in Turkey and senior fellow and head of the Programme on Turkey at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, ELIAMEP.

Not all Turkish citizens are wowed by the seven-day visa offer. Some say the programme requires a lot of paperwork and has no value for money compared to the much more wide-ranging Schengen visa.

"It's not new for us. Before the pandemic, this visa programme already existed, and it was for more days," said Cagri, 35, a Schengen visa holder who visited the island of Samos this year together with his partner Binnur.

"The new programme is only for seven days," concurred Binnur a Schengen visa holder who can travel in the passport-free zone covering 29 countries for 90 days within one year.

“You also have to submit a lot of documents. It’s not an easy process and it costs a lot of money. And many people cannot get this visa,” she concluded.

## A win-win for both Greece and Turkey



Turkish tourists arrive at the port of Mytilini, Lesbos Island, Greece, April 2024. Photo: EPA-EFE/ELIAS MARCOU

But many Turks are still using the visas. More than 12,000 Turkish nationals visited Lesbos island in July to spend the three-day holiday for the big Muslim festival of Eid-el Fitr.

“According to our estimates, the amount spent per day by an average Turkish visitor is more than twice that of charter visitors, so all businesses, car rentals, hotels and restaurants, etc. have positive results from these visits,” Konstantinos Moutzouris, Governor of the North Aegean Region, told BIRN.

He estimates that the number of Turkish visitors will double within a year. “Facilitating the issue for non-Schengen citizens was something that we asked the Greek Prime Minister for,” he underlined.

In the context of [the 5th Greece-Turkey Cooperation Council](#) in December 2023 in Athens, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced that he had secured the European Commission’s approval to activate the possibility for Turkish nationals to visit Greece for seven days.

The pilot programme of the scheme – the only such exception in the Schengen zone allowed so far – was issued on April 1.

Turkish nationals can use it to visit any of 10 Greek islands in the Eastern Aegean: Chios, Kos, Lesbos, Rhodes, Samos, Leros, Limnos, Kalymnos, Kastelorizo and Symi, which are all only a few hours from the Turkish coast.

Both Turkey and Greece sought the scheme for a long time, for different reasons.

“This [scheme] is something that both countries want; Turkey wants to gain access to the EU and on the other hand Greece needs money for the islands of the eastern Aegean, which have suffered a lot of economic damage all these years due to refugee and migration flows,” said Maria Gavouneli, Professor of International Law at the Kapodistrian University of Athens and General Director of ELIAMEP.

But although the visa programme supports the Greek economy, it remains vulnerable to sudden developments in diplomatic relations between the two countries.



“This visa is not going to change the overall scope [of ties] and is obviously affected by the level of relations between the two countries. I suspect it will be the first to be affected, if things go badly,” Gavouneli warned.

## Turks flee rising prices at home



Turkish couple Binur [L] and Cagri [R] on Samos island, Greece, August 2024. Photo: BIRN

In June, the annual official inflation rate in Turkey stood at 61.78 per cent but [independent economists say](#) the real figure is likely as high as 100.88 per cent.

The cost of oil, taxes, utility bills and food has become sky high for many ordinary Turks, making lives almost unbearable.

“Price stability has been destroyed in Turkey due to failure to control the value of foreign currencies against the Turkish lira and unstoppable inflation. Furthermore, businesses in the Turkish tourism sector greedily increased their prices, being confident about a high number of tourists in 2022 and 2023,” Ozgur Hacıoglu, a Turkish tourism expert, told BIRN.

[The Association of Turkish Travel Agents, TURSAB](#), says holidaying in Turkey in 2024 is at least 60 per cent more expensive than it was in 2023.

Hacıoglu referred to recent [IPSOS research](#) on Turkish citizens’ holidays in 2023 and 2024.

“According to IPSOS, the number of Turks who went on holiday fell by 20 per cent in 2024 from 28 per cent in 2023. The main reason for was economic hardship. But, ironically, the number of Turks who went on holiday abroad increased to 14 per cent in 2024, up from 2 per cent in 2023. We see Turks flocking to the Greek islands,” he said.

During the summer months, videos made by ordinary Turkish citizens who went on holiday in the Greek islands went viral in Turkey. In these [videos](#), holiday makers noted that Greek islands are sometimes half as pricey as popular Turkish tourism destinations such as Bodrum, Fethiye or Cesme.

Cagri was among those who came to the Greek islands for cheaper prices. “In Turkey, the economy went crazy, especially in holiday places like Bodrum ... If you want to go there, it will almost cost you your whole monthly wage. Everybody in Turkey wants to go to the Greek islands,” Cagri said.

He had difficulties finding a place on Samos because of the competition. “Because of this visa programme, the islands are more crowded now. We couldn’t find a place on Samos,” he stressed. Eventually, he found one available room.



# Welcome boost to islands' economy



A bakery on Samos island, Greece, August 2024. Photo: BIRN

For the first time, Booking, the online platform on which hotels and other types of accommodations advertise rooms to travellers, had not a single room available on the entire island of Samos from August 7 to 10, Manos Valis, hotelier and President of the Association of Hoteliers of Samos, told BIRN.

“This year the Turkish tourists who mostly use Booking were a blessing, as they made a difference. EU tour operators made their reservations, but at the same time, every free room in a couple of hours was reserved by Turkish nationals,” Valis said.

Over 50,000 Turkish tourists had visited Samos this year by July and stayed from one to seven nights. Turkish reservations on the island are big in numbers right until the end of September.

Turkish tourists are known for spending a lot of money, and so contribute to the local economy.

“Turkish tourism helps Greece financially, especially the North Aegean islands. What every government, and especially the EU has been worried about is whether this measure is a way for Turks to migrate to Europe. However, from the data we have so far, no such thing is occurring,” added Valis.

He wants the scheme continued. “There is no reason to stop this measure. It is something that must be continued, as it will really help the islands of the northern Aegean. Tourism is important for this [region, which needs] another source of income besides [EU] tour operators,” he concluded.

However, Greek foreign ministry's sources told BIRN that it is up to the EU whether the scheme will continue.

“There will be consultations between the Greek government and the European Commission, which is responsible for approving the implementation and renewal of the programme,” said ministry sources under condition of anonymity.

## Too much red tape for some



A ferryboat transferring Turkish tourists arrives at the port of Mytilini, Lesvos Island, Greece, April 2024. Photo: EPA-EFE/ELIAS MARCOU

The short-stay permits are granted exclusively at the Greek islands' border points.

Some Turks complain of a lack of information and a lot of bureaucracy. "Getting the required documents together to apply for the visa was difficult, not because of the Greek government but because of the facilitatory agency in Turkey," Guray told BIRN, adding that there was not enough information on the shipping agency's webpage and little support over the phone either.

Cagri also found the process tricky. "It is hard to find information. ... Most European countries do not want Turkish people to come," he maintained.

The process to obtain the visa can be complicated. The interested parties need to scan all the necessary documents and submit them digitally. After receiving a confirmation email, they need to ship them to the agency office.

"They say you must have the documents 10 days prior to departure, but they only send you the confirmation email at the last minute, so you have to drop everything you are doing and rush to the shipping agency," Guray explained.