

Now, India opens up three N-E states to foreigners

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New Delhi: In a significant decision aimed at boosting tourism revenues and opening up the northeast, the government has done away with permits required by foreign nationals to visit Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland.

The home ministry has relaxed a more than 50-year-old rule to allow free movement of foreign tourists in the northeast, with the exception of nationals from Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Myanmar. The permit regime is being dismantled for a year to begin with. The move to amend the "inner line" or protected and restricted area permit has been in the works for a few months following the PMO pushing for the changes, which have been discussed with the tourism and home ministries.

While travel in these northeastern states will become easier, tourists will still have to register themselves with the Foreigners Registration Officer (FRO) of the



The govt has done away with permits to visit Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland

district within 24 hours of arrival.

The much-needed move to liberalize tourism in a region rich in natural diversity and adventure tourism comes just as the curtain came down on the first-ever international travel mart in Guwahati, organized to promote tourism in the northeast.

The government and states are eyeing a substantial market with about 58,000 foreign tourists visiting the region last year, up by 18% from 2011. Estimates are that tourist arrivals can increase by

25% within a year following relaxation of rules.

Union tourism minister K Kharanjeevi said, "The decision will address the long-pending demand of the three state governments and the travel industry. This would also help in increasing tourist traffic to the northeast and give a fillip to campaigns of the tourism ministry on the northeastern region of India."

Under the foreigners (protected areas) order 1958, all areas in the states of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim and parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand are declared "protected areas" for which foreign nationals need permissions.

This has long been a bone of contention for the travel industry, which feels the permits discourage tourist traffic to northeastern destinations while states have taken the view that the red tape does not serve any significant purpose.