



FRAGOMEN

LATIN AMERICA

Worldwide Immigration
Trends Report 2023



LATIN AMERICA

1. COVID restrictions update - restrictions are waning, delays persist.

In Q2 and Q3 2022, we saw an environment of relaxed COVID-19 travel and entry rules in Latin America and the Caribbean – aimed at easing travel to foment tourism. Many countries with restrictive travel rules, especially in the Caribbean, drastically eased their travel restrictions these past six months as concerns grew about their effects on the economy. Notably:

- ▶ Many countries removed all COVID-related entry bans and testing and quarantine requirements: **Aruba, Bahamas, Barbados, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Curacao, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Trinidad and Tobago.**
- ▶ Countries that maintain pre-travel COVID-19 testing requirements now impose them only on unvaccinated travelers: **Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Uruguay**



- Only vaccinated travelers can enter this jurisdiction
 - Only vaccinated or recovered travelers can enter this jurisdiction
 - All travelers regardless of their COVID-19 immunization status can enter this jurisdiction but unvaccinated travelers are subject to additional entry rules
 - All travelers regardless of their COVID-19 immunization status can enter this jurisdiction*
- *Exceptions may apply

Entry and stay rules continue to change. Individuals considering travel should consult their country's consular posts and seek case-specific advice from their immigration providers. Consult Fragomen's COVID [website](#) for up-to-date information.

Delays continue

Delays following re-openings of government offices that shut during the pandemic persist due to high demand, workforce shortages, implementation issues for new online programs and processing backlogs. For example:

- ▶ In **Costa Rica**, the General Immigration Directorate canceled appointments to obtain initial or renewed Residency Identity Cards (DIMEX) until 2023 due to a shortage of materials. Foreign nationals are already experiencing significant delays booking DIMEX appointments in 2023.
- ▶ In **Mexico**, foreign nationals are facing delays of up to two months (up from the usual 15 to 20 days) in obtaining visa appointments at Mexican consulates in **Argentina**, **Brazil** and **India**, among other countries, due to high demand.
- ▶ Processing delays persist in **Chile**, where processing times are reaching up to six months for initial visa applications, up from four months.
- ▶ In **Peru**, high demand and application backlogs are causing biometric appointment delays for foreign nationals applying for in-country initial visas, impacting work start dates (all in-country visa options involve submitting biometrics). Additionally, foreign nationals applying for initial consular visas are experiencing adjudication delays of three months or more, up from the legal standard processing time of 30 business days.
- ▶ Nationals of Latin American countries are also facing outbound challenges caused by ongoing delays. Applicants in Latin America, for example in **Brazil** among other countries, are facing significant delays applying for visas at U.S and Canadian consular posts.

What's next?

Vaccination rates are dwindling in some Caribbean countries, but economic remobilization will likely keep travel restrictions at bay. While around 70% of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean is fully vaccinated, many lower-income countries in the Caribbean are still short of World Health Organization vaccination targets despite their dependency on tourism. However, the need for economic remobilization post COVID-19, especially in countries reliant on tourism, is likely to continue to keep the use of travel bans and quarantine requirements at bay. Even with the potential rise of new variants, countries may not implement significant new travel restrictions and focus more on routine vaccination campaigns.

Delays to continue. As delays have now stretched over two years, foreign nationals and their employers should be prepared for continued delays into 2023 until governments in the region can stabilize staffing, clear backlogs and deal with online systems and other pervasive issues.

Travel restrictions will be used as a reactionary tool to world events. As COVID travel restrictions wane, we are seeing a return to pre-pandemic use of travel restrictions to control migration, but with more speed and special intentions. Conversely, some countries are relaxing travel restrictions in order to generate revenue. The pandemic has provided governments with new tools (and the confidence to act quickly and reactively) to stem the flow of legal immigration to their country should the need arise or to create avenues to attract specific foreign nationals when needed. Further, travelers may begin to seek out countries who are able to adapt to an ever-changing global landscape, which can provide more reliability when making plans.

2. The economic downturn and its impact on immigration policy

In the context of the economic downturn following the devastating effects of the pandemic on the region's economies, outward and intra-regional migration persists and continues to be more complex. Over the past 2.5 years, the migration of Venezuelan nationals to South American countries continued, albeit at a slower pace than in previous years. By April 2022 there were more than 5 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants recorded in Latin America. Also notable is the emerging pattern of irregular migration (in transit to the United States) by Caribbean, South American and extra-continental migrants, reaching record levels in 2021 and 2022.

As a result, restrictive immigration policies persisted in 2022, implemented to both improve the control of irregular migration (because of continued dislocation of migrants) and more broadly to protect local workers. In the last six months, these include:

- ▶ In **Mexico**, Brazilian nationals are no longer eligible to apply for an e-Visa to enter Mexico for tourism or business and need to obtain a consular Visitor Visa instead.
- ▶ Immigration officials in **Colombia** have been strictly scrutinizing Mexican nationals' documentation upon arrival. The measure is likely based on reciprocity, as Mexico now requires all Colombian passport holders to complete an online pre-registration prior to traveling to Mexico, and an increasing number of Colombian nationals have recently been ruled inadmissible to Mexico.
- ▶ In **Colombia**, a new immigration law decreased the maximum period of stay for technical visitors; introduced stricter documentary requirements such as passport validity, proof of medical insurance for most visa types and a bachelor's degree requirement for Migrant Worker Visas; and stricter eligibility criteria for Resident Visas.
- ▶ **Bermuda** extended its suspension of issuance of initial work permits for foreign nationals in certain job categories for a second time.
- ▶ In **Costa Rica**, the General Immigration Directorate (DGME) published a resolution that reduces the maximum period of stay to 30 days per visit, down from 90 days, for certain visa-exempt tourists and business visitors.

Economies in the region are still recovering from the pandemic and are already beginning to suffer the consequences of the war between Russian and Ukraine, reflected in slower growth and high inflation. Rising inflation and the rising cost of living are also factors that may affect immigration strategy decisions.

Minimum salary and wage increases

Minimum salary levels in many countries were explicitly tied to inflation, and some countries that have not raised their minimum salary levels in years, have had to raise them to account for inflation and pandemic-related economic effects.

- ▶ **Argentina** hit 58% inflation in May 2022 and the government pushed up the minimum salary increase from August to June, with a second increase in August. While it is unclear whether these increases are in response to inflation (as the government has not stated this explicitly), but it is safe to assume they are in fact related.
- ▶ **Chile** approved a minimum salary increase in two stages (the first effective May 1, 2022, and the second August 1, 2022). While this is not proportional to inflation (which is running over 10%), this is the biggest raise in the last 25 years.
- ▶ **Colombia** raised the minimum salary for 2022 a historic 10% (the most significant one in the last 50 years). Though visas are not subject to a minimum salary requirement for immigration purposes, host companies sponsoring work visas must provide bank statements for the past four months, showing a monthly average balance of the equivalent of 100 times the minimum wage – so salary increases may affect sponsoring employers in this sense.

What's next?

It remains to be seen how long the effects of the economic downturn will last, but inflation, along with economic and political instability in the region, will continue to add to existing drivers of mobility. Some restrictive policies are expected over the next 12-18 months as governments balance attracting foreign investment and talent with protection of local workers and controlling irregular migration.

3. Global competition for talent continues on a slow path

Gaps in skills and workers are taking a toll on global economies and immigration policy has been at the forefront as a solution to this problem. Latin America, albeit slower than other regions, is not an exception.

While Latin America and the Caribbean have seen a significant recovery in employment following the COVID-19 pandemic, the region's labor markets still face an insufficient labor market recovery marked by high unemployment and a predominance of informal jobs. Despite restrictive immigration policies mentioned in the previous section, 2022 has also seen governments balancing these restrictions with the need to attract foreign investment and talent into the region.

- ▶ **Argentina** implemented an expedited processing option for in-country visa applications (including Short-Term Work Permits, Temporary Residence Visas and Mercosur Temporary Residence Visas, among others), available for sponsoring companies registered with the RENURE.
- ▶ **Brazil** expanded the validity of the Real Estate Investment Visa to four years, up from the previous two-year validity. It also relaxed eligibility requirements (applicants no longer need to prove their investment has the potential to create jobs) and travel restrictions for visa holders.
- ▶ **Brazil** also implemented a new visa for professionals in sports (athletes, coaches, trainers) with a local contract in Brazil.
- ▶ **Brazil** also extended the availability of the special humanitarian visa for Ukrainian nationals until March 3, 2023. It was originally implemented in March 2022 and initially expected to end on August 31, 2022.
- ▶ In **Colombia**, a new immigration law introduced new visa subcategories which offer additional entry options to sought-after visitors including agricultural workers; film production personnel; journalists; and those fostering international innovation in Colombia.
- ▶ **Panama** extended the availability of a reduced minimum investment amount of USD 300,000 for foreign nationals seeking to apply for the Permanent Residence for Qualified Investors category through investments in tangible property or purchase agreements until October 16, 2024. The minimum investment amount was initially expected to raise to USD 500,000 after October 16, 2022 for these types of investments.
- ▶ Also in **Panama**, the Ministry of Labor is now allowing foreign nationals with expired passports to submit a work permit application or any process with the Ministry of Labor, provided the foreign national has already applied for a new passport or an extension.
- ▶ **Uruguay** authorized a one-time extension of the short-term work permit for an additional 180 days (previously renewals were not available).

What's next?

- ▶ As governments continue to prioritize economic recovery, more initiatives are expected to attract qualified foreign workers and facilitate the transfer of knowledge to local labor forces. **Ecuador** and **Peru** are awaiting the implementation of the Andean Immigration Statute, which, once implemented, will offer new nationality-based temporary and permanent residence options to nationals of Bolivia, Colombia and Peru.
- ▶ Globally, countries are seeking to attract talent to fill local skills gaps, spark innovation across a variety of sectors and help support sluggish post-pandemic economies. As part of that effort, countries are increasingly rolling out special visa pathways for individuals with extraordinary abilities or talent. For example, **Brazilian** nationals can take advantage of a new jobseeker visa to find work in Portugal and benefit from a streamlined visa application process as Portuguese speakers.

4. The digital transformation continues, with online systems and remote work visas growing

The digital transformation is continuing to pick up pace around the world. Systems are becoming more sophisticated and inter-operability of online systems with other government departments is increasing. Several online systems were developed in Q3 and Q4 2022:

- ▶ In **Argentina**, the National Immigration Directorate implemented an online service (called *Tramitación de Ingreso Electrónica – TIE*), which allows foreign nationals who are outside Argentina to apply for a short-term (24 h) 1170 work permit online (valid for 30 days) and submit electronic copies of their application documents without an in-person consular post appointment.
- ▶ In **Guatemala**, the Ministry of Labor introduced an electronic work permit filing system that employers (or authorized third parties) must use to file initial or renewal work permit applications on behalf of foreign nationals. The online process has reduced work permit processing times to approximately one month, down from the previous two to three months.
- ▶ In **Mexico**, the Department of Security introduced a new online system for the procurement of federal police records, which includes a process to pay the government fee on the portal. The new process is expected to reduce processing times to approximately one to five business days if the applicant's information is available via the electronic records of the Department, whereas previously, applications for police records were submitted on a different online system and would usually take up to 60 days to process after the related appointment.
- ▶ Also in **Mexico**, the National Immigration Institute at several airports has been requiring travelers to complete an electronic Multiple Immigration Form (FMM) when entering Mexico, instead of a paper FMM. The measure is part of a pilot program to promote digitalization and expedite the immigration process at Mexican airports.

Nevertheless, challenges remain with digital systems. Online processing provided a way for governments to remain fully or partially operational during COVID-19-related closure periods and limit person-to-person contact. In some cases, it also streamlined immigration processes by eliminating in-person visits to various government departments. However, as mentioned in previous Latin American Trends Reports, outdated technological systems and change management challenges continue to disrupt and delay immigration processes in several countries.

Digital nomadship continues to be a favored option to attract foreign investment

Remote work continues an upward trend. Fragomen and the Migration Policy Institute conducted a survey of 70 companies working in six regions in January 2022 (Future of Work Pulse [survey](#)). The survey found that a majority of the surveyed companies think that remote work has increased their geographical footprint, and as a result, rendered larger candidate pools.

Many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean continue to implement visa and programs to attract foreign investment and talent to revitalize hurting tourism sectors. Despite a slower pace of digital nomad and remote work policy changes than in 2020 and 2021, the list of countries with remote work/digital nomad visas continues to grow.

The most recently enacted programs in Latin America include:

- ▶ **Ecuador** introduced a two-year temporary residence visa for digital nomads, which offers foreign nationals of 182 countries/territories who own a company or work for or provide services to a company outside Ecuador, the option to reside in and work remotely from Ecuador without local sponsorship.
- ▶ **Colombia** implemented a Digital Nomad Visa, which allows foreign nationals who are employed outside Colombia to reside in and work remotely from Colombia for up to two years. The visa is also available to those seeking to start a business in Colombia in the field of digital technology.
- ▶ **Uruguay** made the short-term work permit (valid for 180 days and renewable one time) available to foreign nationals seeking to work remotely from Uruguay for their foreign employer or company without local company sponsorship. Previously, this type of work permit could only be issued to foreign nationals directly employed and sponsored by an entity registered in Uruguay.

There are currently at least 16 other countries in Latin America that have adopted such policies: Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Aruba, the Bahamas (program suspended January 2022), Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Brazil, Cayman Islands (suspended October 2022), Costa Rica, Curacao, Dominica, Montserrat, Panama, and St. Lucia.

There are also currently at least 20 countries outside the region that have adopted such policies: Cape Verde, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Georgia (program suspended April 2022), Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Malaysia, Malta, Mauritius, Namibia, Portugal, Romania, Seychelles, Spain, Sri Lanka, Thailand (under the Long-Term Resident Visa), and the United Arab Emirates.

Programs are pending in Albania, Czech Republic, Grenada, Indonesia, Italy, Montenegro, Slovakia, and South Africa.

What's next?

Several of these digital nomad programs were introduced in the past quarter, and the current list of pending programs suggests that this steady pace will continue in 2023 as countries come to grips with the new hybrid/remote work environment. As the region continues to prioritize economic remobilization, governments will likely continue to update, extend or create more remote work or other policies to attract foreign nationals.

Remote work visa warning. In countries where remote work is unregulated, workers and employers may unknowingly put themselves at risk of noncompliance with many aspects of the law, exposing them to possible fines or other penalties, depending on the country. Importantly, noncompliance with regulations could result in employers losing their rights to hire foreign labor. Additionally, this type of work arrangement may have employment or tax law impacts. It will become increasingly important as such policies are developed (and in many countries where remote work is unregulated) for employers to analyze strategies and assess risks associated with implementing and/or continuing remote work policies with a trusted immigration partner.

5. Emerging trends

High influxes of digital nomads could create more restrictive policies as cost of living and property prices rise

Countries continue to bet on digital nomads to bring economic benefits and boost innovation. However, digital nomadism is not without its challenges for governments. In many places, locals perceive remote workers as direct contributors to rising costs of living, fueling housing demand and displacing residents, and resentment of newcomers is growing.

For example, the remote work boom has lured large numbers of digital nomads from the United States to Mexico, drawn in part by lower housing costs, and relaxed COVID-related restrictions and immigration rules for visitors (the number of digital nomads in Mexico City in 2021 grew 125% over the previous year). But their arrival has fueled concerns, and protests about gentrification, as rents and cost-of-living rise. Portuguese activists in Lisbon – another hot spot for digital nomads – have protested evictions and rising rents caused in part by the influx of foreign nationals. While Georgia is experiencing an economic boom following a significant influx of Russian citizens who have emigrated there so far this year (more than 112,000), this has also resulted in increased cost of living for Georgians including housing and rental prices.

As governments are forced to consider the medium- and long-term impacts of digital nomadism, governments may increasingly take steps to protect residents. On the one hand, there are countries like the United Arab Emirates, where established remote work visa programs have attracted digital nomads who remain in the country by converting their visa into a more permanent option (and therefore being economic benefits for longer terms). On the other hand, in countries where remote work remains largely unregulated and digital nomads may tend to stay for shorter periods (like Mexico), governments will need to consider if their temporary positive impact outweighs longer term concerns.

While governments may amend tenancy laws to mitigate negative housing impacts in affected Latin American countries, examples of policies that attempt to compensate for the negative impacts of short-term immigrant stays are surfacing in other regions:

- ▶ **Austria** and **Switzerland**, which impose limitations on property purchases by non-EU citizens or residents.
- ▶ **Canada**, where a rule starting January 1, 2023 will prohibit non-residents from purchasing residential real estate for a two-year period.
- ▶ **Singapore**, where foreign nationals are subject to a 35% premium when buying homes; and
- ▶ **Thailand** and **Bali**, which do not allow non-residents to buy freehold properties

Other countries facing similar issues may start to mirror these and other restrictive measures.

Migrant regularization will continue to play a role in Latin America's immigration landscape, with a new focus on regional cooperation

As predicted in our Q 2021 Latin America Trends report, migrant regularization policies have increasingly been included in immigration policy in the region. Migrant regularization will continue to play a role in Latin America's immigration landscape, with a new focus on regional cooperation.

For example, 21 countries from the Western Hemisphere signed the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection (LA Declaration) at the Ninth Summit of the Americas in June 2022. This was the first agreement to include so many countries from the Western Hemisphere and to directly involve the **United States** and **Canada**. Signatory countries committed to expanding legal migration pathways, supporting immigrant integration, investing in migration management, and coordinating responses to mass migration movements.

Signatory countries are already taking steps to deliver on their commitments. **Colombia** has granted regularization documents to over 1.2 million individuals, legalizing their work status. **Ecuador** launched a regularization program for Venezuelans. **Chile's** president has also announced that the government is analyzing a regularization process for migrants in the country.

The regularization of migrants and control of irregular migration flows will continue to play a large role in Latin America's immigration policy and economic recovery plans, as economic hardships and political instability continue to trigger mass migration in the region and countries aim to assist these communities to ensure economic and political stability. These changes will likely lead to other indirectly- or directly-related immigration policy changes.

6. Flashpoints

CURRENT CRISIS

- ▶ **Bolivia:** Tensions over the timing of a population and housing census have resulted in strikes and protests in several cities. Leading civic groups threatened to hold a national strike to pressure the government; a potential escalation of protests that have already brought the city of Santa Cruz to a near standstill. There are limited mobility and service disruptions at airports and government offices in several cities.
- ▶ **Venezuela:** Venezuela's political and humanitarian crisis (under the authoritarian rule of Nicolas Maduro) continues. It has resulted in a large displacement of people – more than 5 million people are estimated to have left the country over the past five years. Most have fled to other Latin American countries, putting pressure on fiscal policy, health care systems, and the labor market there. To control irregular migration, several countries have implemented restrictive policies (such as visa requirements for Venezuelans in **Mexico** and **Costa Rica**). A failing economy in Venezuela often results in shortages of food and medicine, declines in purchasing power, and the collapse of social services.

7. Conclusion

Economic hardship and political instability have changed the landscape of migration in the region and triggered irregular migration patterns and non-compliance, but governments are working toward coordinated strategies and creating opportunities for improvement.

While Latin American countries continue to grapple with the effects of the pandemic and from the war in Ukraine, growth momentum is currently positive, reflecting the return of service sectors and employment to pre-pandemic levels, and the overall support of favorable external conditions – high commodity prices, strong external demand, and remittances, and rebounding tourism. This can pave the way for countries to keep pursuing immigration reforms to attract foreign investment and strengthen their labor market.

To access worldwide trends and projections, order the Worldwide Immigration Trends Report [here](#).

APPENDIX

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