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Kerala: only Indian pick in UK travel magazine list

KOCHI: It is Kerala yet again---after becoming the only place in the country to be named a must-visit destination in 2026 by both Lonely Planet and Booking.com, the state has now been chosen as one of the 26 best places in the world to travel this year by Rough Guides. Kerala is 16th in the list that has Marrakech, Crete, Bali and Tokyo in the top four.

A British company headquartered in London, Rough Guides is known for publishing travel guidebooks and offering personalised travel trips. As per the travel book, the destinations were selected based on the analysis of



over 30,000 tailor-made trip enquiries sent to the company's local travel experts.

Welcoming the state's inclusion in the list, Jose Pradeep, president of Kerala Travel Mart (KTM), said the reason why tourists are increasingly preferring to travel to the state is because it offers a "whole package". "We have the

ocean, beaches, rivers, lakes, hills, villages, traditions, culture and a vivid and diverse cuisine. In the past, the only places foreign tourists mostly knew about were Agra, Jaipur and Kashmir. Now, Kerala has become more visible.

This tourism season, we have been seeing a surge in foreign tourist arrivals compared with the years

before," he told a TV channel. As per Rough Guides, Kerala has to be visited for its backwater serenity. The book asks the traveller to start the morning in Kerala on a slow-moving rice barge while it passes through the mist that lifts from the canals, and "end the day in the hills with a cup of chai in a quiet tea village."

It says this easy shift from waterways to mountains is one reason travellers picked the state as one of the best places to travel in 2026, especially for slow, relaxed trips. "Despite its size, Kerala packs a wide range of landscapes. A tourist can go from the coast to the

mountains in a few hours, with stops along the way for wildlife reserves, spice plantations and Ayurvedic retreats," adds the book.

The guide also lists out the best things to do in Kerala. "Watch longboats during the Onam festival in Alappuzha, wake early for a guided hike in Parambikulam Tiger Reserve, sign up for a Kalaripayattu lesson in Kozhikode, sleep in a treehouse in Thenmala's forest and listen for hornbills overhead, stay up all night for a Theyyam ritual in the north, walk the Fort Kochi shore at dusk, watch the fishing nets drop, and find a place nearby that will grill your fish while you wait," says the book.

Saudi tourism employment surpasses 1mn as hospitality sector expands

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's tourism workforce surpassed one million in the third quarter of 2025, underscoring the sector's rapid expansion as the Kingdom continues to develop its hospitality infrastructure and visitor economy.

According to the latest Tourism Establishments Statistics report released by

the General Authority for Statistics, the total number of employees in tourism activities reached about 1,009,691 in the third quarter of 2025, marking a 6.4pc increase compared with the same period in 2024, when employment stood at 948,629.

The growth in employment comes alongside a

significant rise in the number of licensed tourism hospitality facilities, which increased by 40.6pc

Year on year to reach 5,622 in the third quarter. Of these, serviced apartments and other hospitality facilities accounted for 52.6pc while hotels represented 47.4pc.

(Cont. on page - 2)

Akasa Air becomes IATA member

MUMBAI: Akasa Air has now become a member of International Air Transport Association (IATA), the trade association representing over 360 carriers across the world that account for more than 80pc of global air traffic.

That within three years of commencing operations the airline is admitted to IATA shows the airline's remarkable achievement of the IATA Operational Safety Audit (IOSA), a major safety milestone recognising its global operational

standards, which is a mandatory prerequisite for the membership.

The achievement underscores Akasa Air's strong safety culture and adherence to internationally benchmarked operational processes. "Through this membership, we will actively participate in industry-wide dialogue, contribute to the development of best practices and collaborate on initiatives related to safety management, digital transformation and sustainable aviation which are the key focus areas for the future of global air travel" said the company in a statement.



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Goa sets new tourism record, foreign visitors cross five lakh

PANAJI: Goa recorded its highest-ever tourist footfall in 2025, with more than 1.08 crore visitors coming to the state. This included over 1.02 crore domestic tourists and more than 5.17 lakh foreign tourists, according to data released by the Goa Tourism Department.

Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte said the numbers show strong growth and recovery after the pandemic years. He added that the government is focusing on quality tourism, new markets and Regenerative Tourism, which means tourism that also helps local people and

protects nature. Before COVID-19, Goa received around 80 lakh tourists a year in 2018 and 2019. The numbers dropped sharply during the pandemic. But tourism started to recover from 2023 onwards. In 2023, tourist arrivals reached 86.28 lakh. In 2024, the number crossed 1.04 crore. In 2025, it went up further to 1.08 crore, setting a new record. Foreign tourist numbers also improved. In 2025, Goa received 5,17,802 foreign visitors. Many of them arrived through international flights, charter flights

(Cont. on page - 2)

India poised to lead global hospitality growth with 15-17pc CAGR

NEW DELHI: India's hospitality industry is set to significantly outperform global growth trends through the end of the decade--2030--supported by strong domestic travel demand, rising incomes,



Viceroy Hotels recently announced the acquisition of Marriott Executive Apartments Hyderabad. The agreement was signed in the presence of (from left) Ravinder Reddy Kondareddy, SP Reddy, Anirudh Reddy Kondareddy and Amarender Reddy Bandaru.

IATA says 5.7pc air passenger demand growth in Nov 2025

GENEVA: The International Air Transport Association (IATA) released data for Nov 2025 global passenger demand with the following highlights:

Total demand, measured in revenue passenger kilometres (RPK), was up 5.7pc compared with Nov 2024. Total capacity, measured in available seat kilometres (ASK), increased 5.4pc year-on-year. The load factor was 83.7pc (+0.3 ppt compared with Nov 2024), a record high for Nov. International demand rose 7.7pc compared with Nov 2024. Capacity was up 7.1pc year-on-year, and

the load factor was 84.0pc (+0.4 ppt compared with Nov 2024). Domestic demand increased 2.7pc compared with Nov 2024. Capacity was up 2.7pc year-on-year. The load factor was 83.2pc (unchanged compared with Nov 2024). "November 2025 saw continued strong demand for

air travel with year-on-year growth of 5.7pc. Load factors reached a new record of 83.7pc for the month as airlines continued to satisfy growing passenger demand amid continuing capacity constraints stemming from challenges in the aerospace supply chain.

Saudi tourism employment surpasses...

(Cont. from page - 1)

The robust growth reflected in the latest tourism statistics aligns directly with the goals of Vision 2030, as the Kingdom aims to double tourism's gross do-

role. It handled more than 1,100 international flights in 2025, helping Goa connect with more global cities. This improved travel options made Goa easier to reach for foreign tourists. Goa also received tourists through cruise ships. In 2025, 37 cruise vessels arrived, carrying 51,510 passengers. This included both Indian and foreign tourists, adding to the state's tourism income.

mestic product contribution to 10pc. The sector is also seeking to create 1.6 million jobs and attract 150 million visitors annually by 2030. The report showed that non-Saudi employees made up the majority of the tourism workforce, numbering 764,520 and accounting for 75.7pc of the total. Saudi nationals employed in the sector reached 245,171, representing 24.3pc of all tourism workers.

In terms of gender distribution, male employees dominated the sector with 875,658 workers, while female employees totaled 134,033, making up just 13.3pc of the workforce. Hotel performance showed

sustained investment in tourism infrastructure, the continued rise of leisure and MICE tourism, and the country's unparalleled demographic and cultural diversity, which has historically been a powerful driver of travel, tourism and hospitality consumption, says Anirudh Reddy, Director, Viceroy Hotels.

Anirudh Reddy adds: "Hospitality sector recorded a strong recovery in FY 2024-25, delivering revenue growth of around seven to nine per cent alongside rising occupancies in premium and upper-upscale hotels, despite supply constraints in key urban markets. Looking ahead, India's hotel mar-

ket revenues are expected to grow at a robust 15 to 17pc Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) through 2030, nearly double the projected global growth rate."

Globally, the hospitality sector is entering a steady growth phase following a strong post-pandemic recovery. Travel and tourism are expected to contribute nearly US\$15 trillion to global GDP by 2030, while the global hotel industry is projected to grow at a CAGR of approximately eight to nine per cent between 2025 and 2030,

according to estimates by the World Travel & Tourism Council. Domestic travel is forecast to reach nearly five billion trips annually by 2030. This expansion will be supported by rising disposable incomes, expanding middle-class consumption, enhanced air and road connectivity, and continued public and private investment in tourism infrastructure. Collectively, hospitality and tourism are expected to contribute over Rs 40 trillion to India's GDP by the mid-2030s, as per projections from the India Brand Equity Foundation and the World Travel & Tourism Council.

(Cont. on page - 6)

Mumbai airport attains record 55.5mn passengers in CY25

MUMBAI: Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA) handled a record 55.5 million passengers in calendar year 2025, marking its highest-ever annual traffic amid sustained demand and capacity pressure at the country's second-busiest airport, operator Mumbai International Airport Ltd (MIAL) said.

Passenger volumes com-

prised 16.3 million international and 39.2 million domestic travellers, translating into a 1.3pc year-on-year growth over CY24 and a 7.6pc increase compared with CY23. The performance came despite infrastructure constraints at the world's busiest single-runway airport.

Traffic momentum was driven by peak travel periods. Jan 2025 emerged as the busiest month on record, with close to five million passengers, followed by Nov with around 4.9 million. November also saw a key operational milestone, with CSMIA recording its highest-ever single-day passenger throughput of 1,75,925 on Nov 29. The October-Dec quarter was the busiest of the year, with 14.36 million passengers handled.

Operational intensity rose in tandem. CSMIA handled 3,31,011 air traffic movements (ATMs) during CY25, including 92,141 international and 2,38,870 domestic movements. A new daily record of 1,036 ATMs was logged on Nov 21, underlining the pressure on airport operations. Overall ATMs have increased by around 25pc since CY22.

Goa sets new tourism record...

(Cont. from page - 1) and cruise ships. In 2025, about 1,784 international scheduled flights came to Goa through Dabolim and Mopa airports, bringing nearly 2.36 lakh foreign tourists. Charter flights brought over 40,000 foreign tourists during the year, though this was lower than earlier years. The Manohar International Airport (Mopa) in North Goa played an important

positive momentum, with the average room occupancy rate rising to 49.1pc during the quarter, an increase of 2.9 percentage points from 46.1pc in the same period a year earlier.

In contrast, serviced apartments and other hospitality facilities experienced a slight dip in occupancy, recording 57.4pc compared with 58pc in the same quarter of 2024.

The average daily room rate in hotels decreased by 3.6pc to SR341 (\$90.9), down from SR354 in the third quarter of 2024. Meanwhile, serviced apartments and similar facilities saw their average daily rate rise by 4.1pc to SR208, up from SR200 a year earlier.

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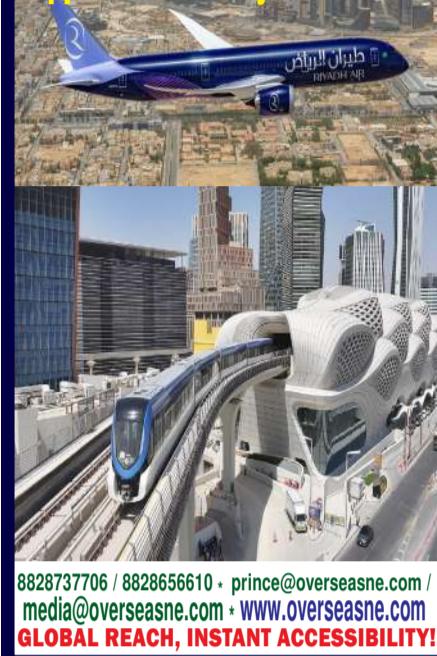
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Australian Dollar	59.64	60.95
Norwegian Krone	8.76	9.02
Swedish Krona	9.58	9.86
New Zealand Dollar	51.05	52.2
Hong Kong Dollar	11.32	11.67
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What NRIs expect from Union budget

DUBAI: The Union budget 2026–27 is approaching fast at a time when global uncertainty remains high and India's growth story is still holding firm. For UAE expats and NRIs, this budget matters most for how it shapes taxes, investment flows and long-term economic direction.

Early signals from policymakers, economists and business groups now offer a preview of what could shape the Feb 1 budget (Feb 1 being Sunday, the budget may be presented next day - Monday). These include fiscal discipline, higher investment, tax certainty, job creation, and support for new-age industries.

Fiscal discipline

The government plans to anchor Budget 2026 to fiscal discipline and debt control under the "Viksit Bharat" roadmap. Mahen-

dra Dev, Chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister, said the budget would continue to prioritise the fiscal deficit and debt-to-GDP ratio. "The budget is part of the Viksit Bharat roadmap and the drafters will stick to the fiscal deficit. Also, the debt to GDP is the main indicator, so they will stick to that," Dev said while speaking on the sidelines of a SKOCH Group event.

He said India has made steady progress since the pandemic, with the fiscal deficit falling from about nine per cent during COVID to around 4.8 pc this year. The government is now targeting a deficit of about 4.4pc going forward. Central government debt stands at 56.1pc of GDP, while combined central and state debt is about 80pc. Dev said this could decline to around 76pc

by 2030, signalling long-term efforts to strengthen India's balance sheet.

For UAE-based NRIs and overseas investors, this points to policy continuity and a focus on macroeconomic stability rather than sudden fiscal shifts.

Higher investment

Dev said sustained high growth will need a stronger investment push across the economy. He explained that achieving eight per cent growth requires an investment rate of about 35 pc, compared with the current level of around 30pc.

He also underlined the need to improve how efficiently capital is used. "The capital-output ratio has to be improved from the present five to about 3.5 to four per cent," Dev said, highlighting better utilisation of infrastructure and industrial assets.



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GULF FAQS

Why nearly a third of UAE divorces Happen within the first year?

Can you please explain the divorce pattern (including expats) of couples in the UAE?

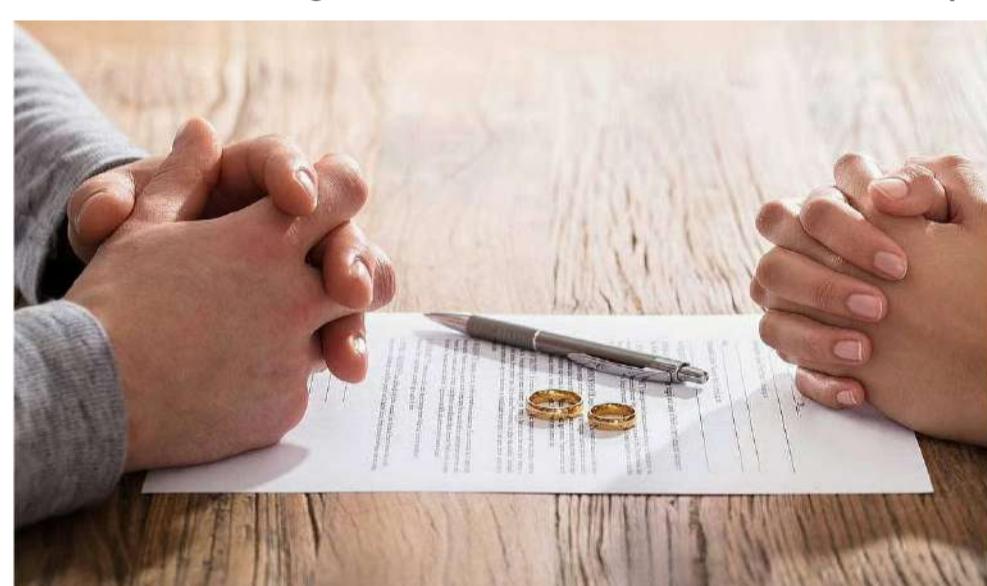
New data shows that nearly a third of divorces in the UAE happen within the first year of marriage. Family lawyers say these early separations are often linked to unmet expectations, poor preparation for married life and a gap between legal commitments and emotional readiness, with problems emerging soon after couples start living together.

Between 2020 and 2024, federal courts in Sharjah, Ajman, Fujairah and Umm Al Quwain recorded 2,857 divorce cases, with 851 of them taking place within the first year of marriage. The figures point to a pattern of early marital breakdown that cuts across nationality and family structures, including Emirati and mixed nationality marriages.

Family lawyers say the trend reflects issues that often exist long before the marriage formally begins. Byron James, a partner at Expatriate Law and an international family law expert, said many early di-

vorces reveal structural weaknesses rather than a sudden relationship collapse.

"In my experience, many couples enter marriage having devoted considerable attention to the emotional momentum of the relationship, while giving far less thought to its legal, financial, and cultural architecture," he said. "The marriage is, therefore, not so much breaking down as



revealing fault lines that were present, but unexamined, from the outset."

James noted that this is especially common among internationally mobile couples, a reality that is particularly visible in the UAE. Differences in nationality, religion, family expectations and legal systems often intersect at the point of marriage, sometimes

alongside relocation pressures or immigration concerns.

"Marriage often occurs against a backdrop of social expectation or practical necessity, creating an illusion of stability that has not yet been tested by ordinary domestic reality," he said. "When that reality asserts itself, the relationship can unravel with remarkable speed." Cultural factors can further shape

"Especially in Arab culture, where the time to truly get to know a person before marriage may be limited due to cultural reasons, the shock for couples can be greater," he said. He added that pre marital counselling should not be viewed as a luxury, but as a necessity.

According to Samara Iqbal, Founder of Aramas International Lawyers, early divorces are most frequently linked to gaps in preparedness rather than a "single triggering event". She said that statistics con-

sistently show that disputes arise within the first year around finances, housing arrangements, work expectations and the level of involvement of extended family, areas that are often not addressed in sufficient detail before marriage.

She also noted that couples opt for divorce with limited awareness of how UAE family law operates in

practice, "including financial responsibilities and the legal consequences of separation". This lack of understanding can intensify conflict once problems emerge, particularly when expectations do not align with legal realities.

Psychological experts also stress that the first year is often the most critical test of a marital relationship, as many factors that make or break a partnership tend to surface during this period. Hiba Salem, a psychologist and adult and families specialist at Sage Clinics, told a TV channel that many couples romanticise marriage when entering it, with their thoughts heavily influenced by curated social media narratives and cultural pressures.

"The surge in early divorces is a complex phenomenon, and from a psychological standpoint, it often boils down to a profound discrepancy between expectation and reality," she said. "Couples frequently fail to grasp the true emotional and logistical labour required for a successful partnership."

Court upholds Dh1mn compensation in medical negligence

Dubai courts have upheld a judgment in a medical malpractice case, dismissing appeals and ordering compensation for a patient who suffered severe and permanent disability following a joint-replacement surgery performed by a physician.

The patient underwent the procedure on Dec 20, 2021 and soon after experienced severe pain and difficulty moving his leg. He later travelled abroad for further treatment,

where specialists performed corrective procedures after documenting ongoing complications. His right leg reportedly lost about 80pc of its original function and he continues to experience pain and mobility limitations.

The Supreme Committee for Medical Liability reviewed the case and, on Dec 26, 2023, concluded that the attending physician was grossly negligent and deviated from recognised medical stan-

dards, resulting in permanent disability to the patient's right leg.

The patient subsequently filed a civil lawsuit seeking Dh20 million in compensation. The treating physician disputed liability, while the hospital also contested any legal responsibility, arguing that the physician worked independently. The hospital also filed a counterclaim for Dh312,000 in unpaid treatment fees, which the court rejected. The court

held that legal liability may extend to the treatment facility under principles of vicarious liability. It ruled that hospitals may be held accountable for treatment outcomes when they provide facilities, equipment and nursing staff, and refer patients to doctors working on their premises — even if the doctor is not a direct employee of the hospital. The Dubai Civil Court ordered Dh1 million in compensation for the patient. After appeals

filed by the physician and the hospital, the Dubai Court of Cassation upheld the original judgment. The court emphasised the finality of the Supreme Committee for Medical Liability's report regarding the physician's conduct and reaffirmed the court's discretion in determining compensation for bodily harm and psychological suffering. The court also ordered the appellants to cover legal expenses and attorney fees.

Saudi's economy to grow by 4.5pc

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's GDP is expected to expand by 4.5pc in 2026, outperforming the global growth average of 3.4pc, according to a StanChart Global Research analysis.

In its latest report, the firm said the robust outlook will be driven by sustained momentum in both the Kingdom's hydrocarbon and non-oil sectors. The forecast places the Kingdom's growth above that of many major economies and broadly aligns with the IMF's October outlook, which projects Saudi Arabia's GDP to expand by about four per cent in both 2025 and 2026.

Mazen Bunyan, CEO of Standard Chartered, Saudi Arabia, said: "While the 2026 growth outlook for Saudi is strong, it comes with elevated downside risks to oil prices, a sector

set to make a comeback in the next year." He added: "In this context, continued non-oil sector growth will ensure sustained financial stability whilst diversifying growth sources across the Kingdom."

Strengthening the non-oil sector is a key objective of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda, as the Kingdom continues to reduce its long-standing reliance on crude revenues.

According to the report, Saudi Arabia's hydrocarbon sector returned to growth this year after OPEC+ eased production cuts that had been in place since 2023.

The non-oil sector is also expected to expand steadily at 4.5pc, supported by investment and consumption, and will continue to underpin economic growth.

India poised to lead global...

(Cont. from page - 2)

Reflecting confidence in these long-term sectoral fundamentals, Viceroy Hotels recently announced the acquisition of Marriott Executive Apartments Hyderabad, strengthening its presence in the premium and extended-stay hospitality segment.

Revenue from Marriott Executive Apartments is expected to start flowing into the company from Q4, providing near-term earnings visibility alongside long-term growth po-

tential.

The acquisition agreement was signed in the presence of Ravinder Reddy Kondareddy, SP Reddy, Anirudh Reddy Kondareddy, Amarender Reddy Bandaru.

Viceroy Hotels has been looking ahead to expand its portfolio to 1,000 keys by 2030, supported by its existing portfolio of about 550 keys and the addition of approximately 200 keys through an upcoming greenfield project in Hyderabad.

"Follow the rules and don't jeopardise your travel. A US visa is a privilege, not a right," the US embassy in India said in a tweet.

"Breaking US laws can have serious consequences for your student visa," the embassy wrote, adding, "If you are arrested or violate any laws, your visa may be revoked, you may be deported, and you

could be ineligible for future US visas."

"The message comes at a time when thousands of Indian students are preparing for the 2026 academic intake amid rising visa fees, stricter social media monitoring, new compliance rules, and a proposed time limit on stu-

Amid projections for twin deficits between 2026 and 2028, Stan Chart expects Saudi Arabia's public debt-to-GDP ratio to rise to 36pc by the end of 2026, from 26pc at the end of 2024, bringing it closer to the Kingdom's self-imposed

ceiling of 40pc.

"Even so, Standard Chartered Global Research believes that recent fiscal deficits have not been a setback, but rather a catalyst for structural macroeconomic transformation," said the report.

It added that policymakers are expected to continue diversifying funding sources in 2026, seeking to attract greater foreign direct investment alongside increased foreign participation in domestic debt markets.

Qatar Airways launches world's first Starlink-equipped Boeing 787

DOHA: Qatar Airways, the operator of the world's first and largest Starlink-equipped widebody fleet, has become the first carrier globally to enable Boeing 787-8 with Starlink. The airline has also equipped its entire Airbus A350 fleet within record-breaking eight months in Dec last.

To date, Qatar Airways is operating three Dreamliners with the fastest Wi-Fi in the sky, bringing the total of its Starlink-connected widebody aircraft to nearly 120. Marking the fastest and most ambitious Starlink widebody rollout programme in global aviation history, the airline is progressing at an unsurpassed pace. Within just 14 months, Qatar Airways started and completed the Boeing 777 and Airbus A350 Starlink installation programmes, and then expanded to its Boeing 787 Dreamliners.

The World's Best Airline, as voted by Skytrax in 2025 for the ninth time, is



also the first in the world to secure Starlink certification for Boeing 787-8.

Furthermore, the airline is extending the fastest Wi-Fi in the sky across an increasing number of routes,

H-1B, OPT, green card premium processing fees hiked

WASHINGTON: US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced higher premium processing fees for several immigration benefits, including the H-1B visa, with the revised rates taking effect from March 1.

The agency said the increase reflects inflation between June 2023 and June 2025 and applies to widely used employment-based and non-immigrant filings, many of which are used by Indian professionals and

including flights to the majority of destinations served by Qatar Airways in the Americas and Australia, and on prominent routes in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

students in the US.

Premium processing fees revised from March 1: Under the updated schedule, premium processing fees will rise across multiple forms and visa categories.

• For Form I-129 petitions for H-2B or R-1 non-immigrant status, the fee will increase from \$1,685 to \$1,780. • Premium processing for other Form I-129 classifications, including H-1B, L-1, O-1, P-1 and TN visas, will go up from \$2,805 to \$2,965.

If you break law, you will be deported, US embassy warns Indian students

"Follow the rules and don't jeopardise your travel. A US visa is a privilege, not a right," the US embassy in India said in a tweet.

"The message comes at a time when thousands of Indian students are preparing for the 2026 academic intake amid rising visa fees, stricter social

media monitoring, new compliance rules, and a proposed time limit on stu-

dent stays."

US officials have repeatedly flagged student visa violations, including illegal work, overstaying after course completion, and failure to maintain academic requirements. As Indian students form one of the largest international student groups in the US, they are directly affected by stricter monitoring.

From Dec 26, 2025, mandatory biometric checking of all non-US citi-

zens, including Green Card holders, at border points came into effect. Under the new rule, US Customs and Border Protection officials will take photographs of non-US citizens at every entry and exit point across airports, land crossings and seaports.

The new rule applied to all non-US citizens entering or exiting the country, including children below 14 years and adults over 79 years. The biometric

system aimed to address security and visa-overstay concerns.

At the centre of the changes was the "One Big Beautiful Bill", signed by US President Donald Trump on July 4, 2025.

The bill introduced a "Visa Integrity Fee" of \$250 (Rs 21,463) and a mandatory charge of \$24 (Rs 2,060) for Form I-94, a key document that tracks the movement of foreign nationals.