



## ETOA Comment: Travel Restrictions and China, 9 January 2023

### Is Europe open for business in 2023?

European tourism's recovery is in the balance. Demand is strong, but pre-departure and border formalities must work smoothly. For long-haul visitors who have a choice of where to go, they must also be rational and respectful.

European visa processing in Asia still has a poor record; delays are causing numerous last-minute cancellations (we will be publishing a report on this topic soon). Now, the EU is advising re-introduction of Covid-19 restrictions in respect of travel to and from China, contrary to latest scientific advice.

Yesterday, China's foreign travel restrictions began to fall away. Anticipating this, on 3<sup>rd</sup> January the ECDC, the EU's agency for disease prevention and control, issued commentary on the current surge in Covid-19 cases and its relevance to Europe.<sup>1</sup> It concluded that:

*The variants circulating in China are already circulating in the EU, and as such are not challenging for the immune response of EU/EEA citizens. ... Given higher population immunity in the EU/EEA, as well as the prior emergence and subsequent replacement of variants currently circulating in China by other Omicron sub-lineages in the EU/EEA, a surge in cases in China is not expected to impact the COVID-19 epidemiological situation in the EU/EEA.*

ECDC also noted that EU/EEA citizens have "relatively high immunisation and vaccination levels."

Unless aggravating factors are detected, the EU's health agency sees no scientific basis to conclude that travel from China presents a significant risk to public health in Europe.

Nevertheless, on 4<sup>th</sup> January, the European Council issued a statement<sup>2</sup>:

*Member States agreed on a coordinated precautionary approach in the light of COVID-19 developments in China, especially considering the need for sufficient, reliable data and the easing of travel restrictions by China starting on 8 January 2023.*

Use of masks on flights to and from China is recommended, and "Member States are strongly encouraged to introduce, for all passengers departing from China to Member States, the requirement for a negative COVID-19 test taken not more than 48 hours prior to departure from China."

What is the prospective Chinese visitor to Europe to make of this? A precautionary approach should still be proportionate and rational, led by evidence. The Council's guidance is at odds with its own agency's analysis.

Commercial demand for Europe in China has been non-existent for three years. Its return remains uncertain. We urge the EU to reconsider its guidance on travel to and from China pending further scientific advice.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/news-events/impact-surge-china-covid-19-cases>

<sup>2</sup> <https://swedish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/presidency-statement-on-the-coordination-of-covid-19-travel-measures/>