



Everything You Need to Know about Visas

A "visa," as described by the U.S. State Department, "is an endorsement made in a passport by the proper authorities denoting that it has been examined and that the bearer may proceed to a country's port of entry." This definition, however, can be a little confusing. For example, a visa does not entitle its holder to enter the United States. It only permits the visa-holder to travel to a U.S. border or point of entry, at which point an officer of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has the sole authority to permit entrance into the country.

It is recommended that visas be obtained in the applicant's country of residence although it is possible to obtain a visa while outside of the applicant's home country. The application is made to a U.S. Consular office or section of the U.S. Embassy.

Visa Waiver Program

Not every foreign visitor is required to obtain a visa to enter the U.S. According to the U.S. State Department's web site, "travelers coming to the U.S. for tourism or business for 90 days or less from qualified countries may be eligible to visit the U.S. without a visa.

The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) enables nationals of certain countries to travel to the United States for tourism or business [visitor (B) visa purposes] for stays of 90 days or less without obtaining a visa. The program was established in 1986 with the objective of eliminating unnecessary barriers to travel, stimulating the tourism industry, and permitting the Department of State to focus consular resources in other areas. VWP eligible travelers may apply for a visa, if they prefer to do so. Not all countries participate in the VWP, and not all travelers from VWP countries are eligible to use the program. VWP travelers are required to apply for authorization through the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), are screened at their port of entry into the United States, and are enrolled in the Department of Homeland Security's [US-VISIT](#) program.

Currently, 35 countries participate in the Visa Waiver Program, as shown below:

Andorra	Iceland	Norway
Australia	Ireland	Portugal
Austria	Italy	San Marino
Belgium	Japan	Singapore
Brunei	Latvia	Slovakia
Czech Republic	Liechtenstein	Slovenia
Denmark	Lithuania	South Korea
Estonia	Luxembourg	Spain
Finland	Malta	Sweden
France	Monaco	Switzerland
Germany	the Netherlands	United Kingdom
Hungary	New Zealand	

Nationals of the 35 countries participating in the Visa Waiver Program may use VWP if:

- They have received an authorization to travel under the VWP through the [Electronic System for Travel Authorization](#) (ESTA)

- They present the appropriate type of passport valid for six months past their expected stay in the United States (unless [country-specific agreements](#) provide exemptions). This is a requirement in addition to other [passport requirements](#) for all categories of passports -- regular, diplomatic, and official - when the traveler is seeking to enter the United States for business or tourist purposes, for a maximum of 90 days;
- The purpose of their stay in the United States is 90 days or less for tourism or business (Visitor (B) visa) purpose of travel. (If in doubt, travelers should check with the nearest Embassy or Consulate to verify that what they plan to do is considered tourism or business.) Transit through the United States is generally permitted. **Important Notice:** Foreign media representatives planning to engage in that vocation in the United States are not eligible for VWP travel, as the purpose of their stay does not qualify as "business". These professionals must obtain a nonimmigrant [media \(I\) visa](#). Note also that travelers planning to work or study cannot travel on VWP, and they must obtain the appropriate visa to travel to the United States.
- If arriving by air or sea, they are traveling on an approved carrier and have a return trip ticket to any foreign destination;
- They can demonstrate the intent to stay 90 days or less in the United States and demonstrate sufficient funds to support themselves while in the United States.

VWP travelers who have been admitted under the Visa Waiver Program and who make a short trip to Canada, Mexico or an adjacent island generally can be readmitted to the United States under the VWP for the balance of their original admission period. See the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP) website for additional details. Also VWP nationals resident in Mexico, Canada or adjacent islands are generally exempted from requirements to show onward travel to other foreign destinations.

All VWP travelers, regardless of age or type of passport used, must present a machine-readable passport. In addition, depending on when VWP travelers' passports were issued, other passport requirements apply:

- Nationals of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Republic of Korea, and the Slovak Republic require passports with an integrated chip containing the information from the data page.
- Nationals of other VWP countries:
 - Machine-readable passports issued or renewed/extended on or after 10/26/06: passports must have integrated chips with information from the data page.
 - Machine-readable passports issued or renewed/extended between 10/26/05 and 10/25/06: passports must have digital photographs printed on the data page or integrated chips with information from the data page.
 - Machine-readable passports issued or renewed/extended before 10/26/05: no further requirements.
- Passports, regardless of the type, must be valid for six months past the expected stay in the United States (unless country-specific agreements provide exemptions). This is a requirement for all categories of passports - regular, diplomatic, and official - when the traveler is seeking to enter the United States for business or tourist purposes, for a maximum of 90 days.
- If you are a traveler from a VWP country and your passport does not meet these requirements, you may want to consider obtaining a new VWP-compliant passport from the passport issuing authority in your country of citizenship. Otherwise you cannot travel under VWP and you must obtain a visa in your valid passport for entry into the United States.

For detailed information on the program go to:

http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/without/without_1990.html#vwp

Changes since 9/11

Many international businesspersons apply for, and receive, multiple-entry visas. The period of this type of visa is determined in part by the reciprocity agreement between the United States and the specific country, but ranges from less than a year to as much as ten years. Multiple-entry visas are still valid for multiple visits. The process may be lengthier and a more extensive review of the applicant's documentation may be required for first time visitor visas to the United States than for those previously issued visas.

Before a consular officer may issue a visa, he or she must run the name of the applicant through a database that contains the names of persons ineligible to travel to the U.S. under the provisions of the Immigration and Nationality Act. Consular Officers are prohibited from issuing a visa to anyone whose name appears in the database unless they take appropriate action that permits the visa issuance.

Consuls are now required to interview more applicants. Individuals must present themselves for interviews as well as complete and submit documentation on themselves and their reason for wanting to visit the United States. Since 9/11 an extensive review process has been put in place which has created delays in the process for some applicants, and in some areas requires that an application goes through a much more rigorous review, including checks by U.S. Government agencies in the USA. Consular Officers have always used their discretion to determine whether an applicant will require a personal interview. However, Section 306 of the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act of 2002 (EBSVRA) requires interviews of aliens from countries designated as state sponsors of terrorism. Seven countries are now designated as such. They are North Korea, Cuba, Syria, Sudan, Iran, Iraq, and Libya. All applicants from state sponsors of terrorism age 16 and over, irrespective of gender, must without exception complete form DS-157, in addition to form DS-156, and must appear for an interview with a consular officer.

While the number of visa applications has decreased overall since September 11, the workload in the consular offices and embassies of countries where fraud and other risks are higher has increased with no commensurate increase in staffing. Despite these challenges the turnaround time for most visa applications is within 30 days but in some cases may take considerably longer. Exhibition organizers must take this extended lead-time into consideration when issuing invitations and executing their foreign buyer promotional campaigns. Beginning such efforts at least two months earlier is recommended as well as stressing to visitors the need to apply early in order to avoid delays in processing.

Compiled and edited from Everything You need to Know about Visas from the U.S. Dept. of Commerce, International Trade Administration and the U.S. State Dept. website
http://travel.state.gov/visa/temp/without/without_1990.html#vwp.