

America Extends a Warm Welcome to Visitors: Travel Since 9/11

“Four years ago, our government took dramatic new actions to secure America from an unprecedented new threat. Since that time, while continuing to increase border and travel security, we have made significant changes to ensure that America remains also hospitable to the tens of millions of foreign visitors who enter our country every year.”

*Condoleezza Rice
U.S. Secretary of State*

“When we enhance U.S. border security, we make the United States safer for our citizens and the millions of people who visit us from all over the world each year.”

*Maura Harty
Assistant Secretary of State for
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U.S. Department of State*

Even after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States remains a welcoming country to visitors from all over the world. This article from the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Consular Affairs outlines recent changes to the U.S. visa process designed to promote more efficient and expedited travel for those entering the United States, while ensuring border security and safety.

When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice joined with Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff to inaugurate the Rice-Chertoff Joint Vision for Secure Borders and Open Doors in the Information Age in January 2006, they were showcasing four years of remarkable improvement to the U.S. visa process in support of U.S. border security and international travel. They emphasized the U.S. government’s commitment to continuing the innovative changes initiated after 9/11, as well as to looking at ways to leverage technology to further improve the efficiency of visa and entry processes.

The United States also is developing new and more secure travel documents that will protect personal identity and expedite secure travel. Smarter screening at every point



A passenger at Bush International Airport in Houston, Texas, has his fingerprint scanned as part of a federal test program designed to speed frequent flyers through security checkpoints.

AP/WIDEWORLD

at which U.S. officials encounter travelers will also help ensure that the United States remains a secure and welcoming country that encourages visitors from all over the world.

To augment both the security and facilitation of the visa process, the Department of State has added staff and improved consular space at many visa sections abroad. Visa applicants now have significantly more information available on the Department of State’s Web site (<http://www.travel.state.gov>) to help them plan their travel and prepare for the application process.

The Department of State has devoted significant resources to assist students and business travelers, in particular. To renew America’s welcome to students, professors, and researchers, all U.S. visa-processing posts have in place a mechanism to ensure that each qualified student has a visa in hand in time for the start of his or

her academic program. As part of the Rice-Chertoff Joint Vision, students are now able to apply for a visa 120 days in advance of the beginning of their studies (up from 90 days) and to enter the United States 45 days in advance (up from 30 days).

U.S. consular offices have developed individual business facilitation plans to address the specific needs of the U.S. business communities in their host countries. For example, more than 400 companies that are members of the American Chamber of Commerce in China are also members of the Business Visa Program managed by the U.S. embassy in Beijing. More than 10,000 applicants were processed through this expedited channel last year.

The State Department also is conducting a pilot program in Sapporo, Japan, that will allow residents of Hokkaido, who in the past had to travel long distances to Tokyo for their visa interviews, to be interviewed in Sapporo instead. The passports of the approved applicants are sent from Sapporo by courier to Tokyo, where the visa is printed and placed in the passport. Such a system could help to expand the reach of limited resources and minimize the travel time required of applicants.

U.S. consular affairs officials in Washington, D.C., partnered with U.S. embassies and consulates abroad last year to create a Business Visa Center, which clarifies the visa process for U.S. companies and convention organizers that wish to invite employees, clients, and partners to the United States.

The Department of State is exploring ways to use cutting-edge technology to further transform the visa application process. The department will soon introduce an online application process and explore the use of digital videoconferencing as an interview tool.

And to enhance the welcome that visitors receive when they arrive in the United States, the Departments of State and Homeland Security introduced a pilot “model airport”

program in partnership with the private sector and with state and local governments at Washington (D.C.) Dulles and Houston (Texas) airports.

The results of these efforts to renew America’s welcome are incontrovertible. For the vast majority of qualified applicants—more than 97 percent—visas are processed within two days of the interview. For the small minority of applicants who require additional security screening, processing times have improved dramatically. For example, clearance for a scientist in a sensitive

technology field has been reduced from 72 days to 14.

Despite lingering misperceptions about visa and border security changes, international travel to the United States continues in an upward trend that extends back to 2001. According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Commerce, international visits increased 7 percent from 2004 to 2005, to 49.9 million visitors, following a 12-percent increase from 2003 to 2004. Visitor visa issuance rose 12 percent in fiscal year 2005. U.S. embassies in Seoul (13 percent), Mexico City (16 percent), and Beijing (25 percent) are seeing the greatest growth in visa demand.

During fiscal year 2005, student visa issuances increased 8.7 percent from 2004. Even more importantly, the number of applications received last year increased a full 7 percent after declining each of the previous three years. The first part of fiscal year 2006 has shown an even more dramatic increase, with both applications and issuances up more than 20 percent, compared to the same period last year.

The United States is a nation of nations. The ongoing commitment to innovation and to further improvements to the visa application process honors the history of the United States and extends a warm welcome to new generations of visitors, who contribute so much to the nation. The Department of State, working with its colleagues in the interagency, academic, and private-sector communities, is committed to making sure that the United States remains the welcoming nation it has always been. ■



This poster at the entrance to the customs area at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York explains the fingerprinting process in English, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, and Portuguese.