

Secure Borders, Open Doors

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Current Visa Issues



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Visa processing by the U.S. State Department is carried out by the Bureau of Consular Affairs, an organization of some 8,000 people working in 211 embassies and consulates around the world, in Washington, D.C., and in two visa processing centers in the United States. We are charged with thoroughly

and fairly adjudicating immigrant and nonimmigrant visas for citizens of foreign countries who seek to come to the United States. In performing this function, we play a key role in enhancing U.S. border security while facilitating legitimate travel to the United States.

America's approach to visa and immigration issues reflects our history and our common ideals. The United States is a "nation of nations" and has always welcomed visitors from all over the globe. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in her confirmation hearings, reaffirmed the department's commitment to that tradition when she said:

Our interaction with the rest of the world must be a conversation, not a monologue, and America must remain open to visitors and workers and students from around the world. We do not and will not compromise our security standards, yet if our public diplomacy efforts are to succeed, we cannot close ourselves off from the rest of the world.

Secure Borders, Open Doors

The context for current visa procedures is, quite simply, September 11, 2001. On that terrible day, when so many Americans—and citizens from 90 other nations—lost their lives, we saw the lengths to which some would go to do us harm. We had to act swiftly and decisively to address our nation's border security needs and make America safe for our citizens and our foreign visitors.

While security must always be our primary concern, we must also ensure that our country's doors remain open to those whose presence we encourage and value. Welcoming visitors is central to U.S. national security. Last year some 50 million foreign visitors accounted for \$104.8 billion in spending and other economic activity in the United States. International students contribute an additional \$13 billion each year.

The United States welcomes international visitors because we know that the best advertisement for America *is* America. The best way for foreign visitors and students to understand America, to truly appreciate our country and our people, is for them to see America with their own eyes. The understanding that comes from such exchange is priceless. Visitors return home usually with positive impressions of the United States based on first-hand experiences, rather than third-hand stories.

The challenge of securing our borders while keeping our doors open is not an easy one, but these objectives are not mutually exclusive. We must and we can do both. Every day, consular officers around the world are on the front lines of the Global War on Terror and actively implementing our policy of Secure Borders and Open Doors.



U.S. Department of State/Kenneth White

Amy Senneke plays the part of a consular officer and Kelly Daniel that of a visa applicant having her fingerprints scanned in a training session at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute in Arlington, Virginia. The facility was designed to resemble an overseas consular section, complete with interview windows, computers with functioning consular applications, fingerscanners, and a waiting room.

Improvements in the Visa Process

Since 9/11, the Bureau of Consular Affairs has worked tirelessly to improve the transparency, predictability, and efficiency of the visa process. We have a lot of good news to report. For example:

- More than 97 percent of all visa applicants who are interviewed and approved receive their visa in one or two days. For the 2.5 percent of visa applicants who need extra screening, we have streamlined the process to ensure a prompt response.
- We have invested heavily in technology to speed the adjudication process, as well as to enhance access to information from other U.S. government agencies and share our information with them.
- We devoted increased resources to visa processing by creating 570 new consular positions since September 2001.
- We publish current visa appointment wait times and processing times for each visa-issuing post on our Internet Web site at <http://www.travel.state.gov/>, so visa

applicants will have more information to plan their travel.

Student Visa Issues

The United States is preeminent in the field of higher education and gained that standing with the contributions of countless students and academics from all over the world. The United States welcomes more international students than any other nation—and the Department of State plays a key role in making that welcome possible.

In 2006, we issued 591,050 student and exchange visitor visas—an all-time high. The increases from China, South Korea, India, and the Middle East are particularly notable, but we've seen increases from every region in the world.

Here are just a few of the ways we continue to encourage international students to choose our country:

- All of our embassies and consulates give students and exchange visitors priority in making visa appointments and processing visas.
- Students can now apply for visas 120 days before their studies begin.
- Many of our embassies provide educational counseling services to foreign students. The department's Web site, <http://www.educationusa.state.gov>, provides a wealth of information on the excellent educational opportunities in the United States.

Business Visas

Recognizing that a vibrant business relationship with all nations contributes to progress toward a more secure and prosperous world, the Department of State has developed several initiatives to assist business travelers:

- We expanded visa reciprocity agreements with many nations so that we have flexibility to issue visas that are valid for a longer period.
- We instructed our embassies and consulates to establish mechanisms to expedite appointments for legitimate business travelers. Consular sections from Buenos Aires to Bratislava have imaginative programs to facilitate business and tourist travel.
- The Business Visa Center (BVC) in Washington, D.C., explains the visa process to U.S. companies and convention organizers who invite employees or current and prospective business clients to the United States. The BVC receives hundreds of inquiries, and



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Chinese visa seekers look through U.S. visa application forms outside the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China, in April 2006. More Chinese received U.S. visas last year than in any other year over the past century.

we estimate that it indirectly assists more than 20,000 international travelers each month.

Visa Appointment Wait Times

The first step in applying for a nonimmigrant visa (NIV) is to make an appointment for an interview. To keep the wait time for an NIV appointment as short as possible, the department has added staff, improved space in consular sections at many posts, and streamlined visa processing procedures. Most posts now have appointment wait times of less than one week, but we urge applicants to apply for appointments as far in advance of planned travel as possible. Posts with waiting periods have established mechanisms to expedite appointments for students and exchange visitors, applicants seeking emergency medical care, and legitimate business travelers with urgent needs.

While these steps have proven effective, there are still some posts where the wait for an appointment can exceed 30 days, especially during peak travel times. We are working with these posts to devise creative solutions to reduce appointment wait times.

Visa Refusals

One of our most frequently asked questions is why visa applicants are refused, and whether a refusal is permanent. Under U.S. immigration law, all applicants for nonimmigrant visas must satisfy the interviewing officer that they are entitled to the type of visa for which they apply. While the requirements of each nonimmigrant visa category differ, one of the most common is for applicants to demonstrate they have a residence in a foreign country that they do not intend to abandon. Applicants usually meet this requirement by showing the consular officer that they have strong professional, employment, educational, family, and/or social ties overseas that would ensure their return to a foreign country after a temporary visit to the United States. Applicants can demonstrate these ties in a variety of ways; there is no specific document that an applicant must have to demonstrate such ties, nor does lack of a document necessarily mean an applicant cannot obtain a visa.

If an applicant cannot demonstrate that he/she qualifies, the consular officer is legally required to refuse the visa. This type of refusal, however, is never permanent. The applicant may reapply if he or she believes there is additional evidence to demonstrate his or her qualifications for a visa, or if personal circumstances change and the applicant develops such ties in the future.

A Welcoming Country

There have been many changes in U.S. visa procedures over the past four years. What has not changed, however, is that America is still the welcoming country it has always been. We want visitors from every corner of the globe to continue to visit the United States and experience everything this country has to offer. The Bureau of Consular Affairs will continue to work every day to facilitate legitimate international travel while protecting U.S. national security. ■

<http://travel.state.gov/>