



International Travel

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The U. S. Government's Representatives Abroad

Embassies are the official diplomatic representation of one sovereign government to another. The principal person in charge of an embassy is usually an ambassador. An ambassador is the official representative from the head of state of one country to the host country. Embassies are primarily responsible for maintaining government-to-government communications and business. Embassies generally do not perform functions directly for nationals from their home country who may be travelling or residing in their host country.

Supervision of U. S. embassies is the job of the U. S. Department of State (DOS), under the administration of the U. S. Secretary of State. The DOS is the large governmental department that manages relations with foreign governments and helps to interpret and implement U. S. policies around the world. It also assists U. S. citizens abroad. The DOS divides its embassies, consulates, and other diplomatic posts into six geographical regions. These are:

- Africa
- East Asia and the Pacific
- Europe
- Near East
- South Asia
- The Western Hemisphere

There is an embassy in almost every country with which the United States maintains diplomatic relations; the embassy is usually located in the capital. Each embassy contains a consular section. Consular officers in consular sections of embassies perform two primary functions:

- They issue visas to foreigners wishing to travel to the United States, and
- They help U. S. citizens abroad.

In some countries, the United States may have a consulate general or a consulate to assist the embassy in handling its business. These are different from the consular section within embassies. Consulates General or consulates are regional offices of embassies. When U. S. citizens travel abroad, they may want to register at the U. S. embassies or consulates at the countries they visit. When they register at an U. S. embassy or consulate, it makes their presence and whereabouts known, in case it is necessary for a consular officer to

contact them. It is a good idea for them to register at the Consular Section of the nearest U. S. embassy or consulate, especially if their stay in a country will be longer than one month. They should also consider registering at the nearest U. S. embassy or consular office if they are traveling in a country or area that is experiencing civil unrest, is politically unstable, or has experienced a recent natural disaster.

American consular officers can help evacuate U. S. citizens from a country were that to become necessary, but they cannot help them if they do not know where the travelers are. Registration also makes it easier for travelers to apply for a replacement [PASSPORT](#), if theirs becomes lost or stolen. Sometimes, registration will be done for them if they are traveling with an organized tour to areas experiencing unrest or political upheaval.

Consulates

U. S. consulates are a special division or office located at U. S. embassies and sometimes in other important cities or regions in foreign countries. The officials who work at consulates are known as consular officers. They can give advice and assistance if travelers are in serious trouble. Their services are loosely grouped into none-emergency services and emergency services. Non-emergency services include providing information about Selective Service registration, travel safety, [ABSENTEE VOTING](#), and how to acquire or lose U. S. citizenship. Also, they can arrange for the transfer of Social Security and other Federal benefits to beneficiaries residing abroad, provide U. S. tax forms, and notarize documents.

Emergency services are often the most crucial functions of the consulate. Travelers may need the emergency services of a consulate in the following situations:

- If travelers need emergency funds, consulates can help them get in touch with their families, friends, bank, or employer and tell them how to arrange for money to be sent.
- If travelers become ill or injured, the nearest U. S. embassy or consulate can provide them with a list of local doctors, dentists, medical specialists, clinics and hospitals. If the illness or injury is serious, they can help travelers find medical assistance and can inform their family or friends of their condition. Because travelers must pay their own hospital and other expenses, they may want to consider purchasing additional or supplemental medial insurance before they travel abroad.
- If travelers get married abroad, their marriage must be performed according to local law. There will be documentary requirements to marry in a foreign country, and in some countries, they may be asked to complete a lengthy residence requirement before their marriage may take place. Before traveling, U. S. citizens need to ask the embassy or consulate of the country in which they plan to marry about the marriage regulations and how best to prepare to marry abroad. Once abroad, the Consular Section of the nearest U. S. embassy or consulate may be able to answer some of their questions, but it is the travelers' responsibility to comply with local laws and to interact with local civil authorities.
- If a U. S. citizens child is born abroad, their children generally acquires U. S. citizenship at birth. As soon as possible after the birth, they should contact the nearest U. S. embassy or consulate to obtain a Report of Birth Abroad of a Citizen of the United States of America. This document will serve as proof of U. S. citizenship, and is acceptable [EVIDENCE](#) for obtaining a U. S. passport for a child. It is also acceptable for most other purposes where parents must show a birth certificate or proof of citizenship for their child.
- If U. S. citizens plan to adopt a child overseas, they should know that the U. S. government looks on foreign adoptions as private, legal matters subject to the sovereign [JURISDICTION](#) of the nation in which the child is residing. U. S. embassy or consular officers may not intervene on prospective parents' behalf in the courts of the country where the [ADOPTION](#) takes place. Even so, there are a ways in which U. S. embassies and consulates can assist them in an overseas adoption. These officials

can provide them with information on the adoption process in that particular country, inquire about the status of their case in the foreign court, help to explain the requirements for documents, try to ensure that they will not be discriminated against by foreign courts, and provide them with information about the [VISA](#) application process for their adopted child.

- If the death of a U. S. citizen occurs abroad, the consular officer reports the death to the [NEXT OF KIN](#) or [LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE](#). The consular officer will prepare a Report of the Death of An American Citizen. This document will provide the facts concerning the death and the [CUSTODY](#) of the personal effects of the deceased. The consular officer also arranges to obtain from them kin the necessary private funds for local burial or return of the body to the United States because the U. S. Government will not pay for local burial or shipment of human remains to the United States. However, travelers may purchase private insurance to cover these expenses. As a first step toward simplifying the process for their loved ones in the event of a death while traveling abroad, travelers should complete the address page in the front of their passports, and do provide the name, address and telephone number of someone to be contacted in an emergency.

Other Travel Information

Health and Immunizations

Depending on their destination abroad, travelers may need to show proof that they were immunized against certain diseases. It is a good idea to check with representatives of the countries they intend to visit to make sure they comply with any immunization requirements they may have. The requirements vary based on specific diseases. Travelers may find that countries with more tropical climates may require international certificates of vaccination against yellow fever and cholera. Generally, typhoid vaccinations are not required for international travel, but may be recommended for countries where there is a risk of exposure. Smallpox vaccinations are not required anywhere. And it is a good idea for travelers to check their health care records to make sure that their measles, mumps, rubella, polio, diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis immunizations are current. Preventative measures are advisable for certain areas, such as quinine in areas prone to outbreaks of malaria. Regardless of where U. S. citizens travel, the United States currently requires no immunizations for citizens returning from travel abroad.

If travelers must receive vaccinations, they should keep a record of them on approved forms. An increasing number of countries require that people entering their countries be tested for Human Immune deficiency Virus (HIV) prior to entry. The HIV test is usually included in a medical exam for long term visitors (i.e., students and workers). Before people travel abroad, check with the embassy or consulate of the country that they intend to visit to learn about the health or immunization requirements for visiting their countries, and whether they require an AIDS/HIV test as a condition to enter their countries.

Foreign Laws

When U. S. citizens are in a foreign country, they are subject to its laws. It helps to learn about local laws and regulations and to obey them. Travelers should learn the local laws and customs before they consider selling their personal effects like clothing, cameras, or jewelry. The penalties for disobeying local laws can be quite severe, regardless of how such an act would be viewed or treated in the United States. Some governments are especially sensitive about tourists taking photographs. Basically, it is a good idea to avoid photographing police, and anything to do with the military and industrial facilities, including harbors, railroads, and airports. Taking pictures of these subjects may result in travelers' being detained, their cameras and film being confiscated, and their being fined. People need to check with the country's embassy or consulate for information on restrictions on photography.

Drug Arrests

About 1,000 Americans are arrested abroad on drug charges each year. Many countries strictly enforce their drug laws and impose very severe penalties for drug violations. When people travel abroad, they are subject to the laws of the countries in which they travel, not to U. S. laws. **CRIMINAL PROCEDURE** in other countries can be very different from U. S. criminal procedure, especially in cases of drug-related offenses. If travelers are arrested, they will find the following is the case:

- Jury trials are often not allowed.
- Trials can be very long, with many delays and unaccountable postponements.
- Most countries do not have a system for accepting bail.
- Pre-trial detention, which is often carried out in solitary confinement, may last for many months.

If U. S. citizens are convicted on a drug charge, they face the possibility of the following:

- 2-10 years in jail,
- In some countries, there is a minimum of 6 years hard labor and a steep fine, and, in a number of countries,
- The death penalty (e.g. Malaysia, Pakistan, Turkey, Thailand, and Saudi Arabia).

Getting Legal Assistance

If U. S. citizens become involved in legal difficulties abroad, there is little that the U. S. embassy or a consular officer can do for them. American officials are limited by foreign as well as U. S. laws. In short, a consular officer cannot get them out of a foreign jail, nor can they serve as their attorney or give them legal advice. They can, however, provide them with a list of local attorneys. These lists of attorneys are compiled from local [BAR ASSOCIATION](#) lists and responses to United States Department of State questionnaires, although the embassy or consular staff cannot vouch for the competence of any particular local attorney.

If U. S. citizens are arrested, they should ask the local authorities to inform a consular officer at the nearest U. S. embassy or consulate. International agreements and diplomatic practice give them the right to talk to the U. S. consul. If the local authorities refuse to inform the nearest U. S. embassy or consular office, try to have someone else get in touch with the U. S. consular officer for. Once they know that U. S. citizens has been arrested, U. S. officials will visit them, advise them of their rights under the local laws, and contact their family and friends, if they wish. Additionally, U. S. consuls can arrange to send money, food, and clothing to the appropriate authorities from their family or friends. If they are being held in unhealthy or inhumane conditions, they will work to get relief for them.

Passports

A passport is "a document issued by competent authority (which is a state or the United Nations Organization), evidencing the right, arising from law, of the person named and described in the document to travel abroad, and, in relation to a state, authenticating his right to diplomatic protection and consular services" (Stephen Krueger, *Krueger on United States Passport Law* [Hong Kong: Crossbow Corporation, 2001], 6). "State" in this sense means a nation state or country, not one of the fifty states in the United States.

Who Needs a Passport?

U. S. citizens need passports to depart or enter the United States and to enter and depart most foreign countries. There are a few exceptions for short-term travel between the United States and Mexico, Canada, and some countries in the Caribbean, where a U. S. birth certificate or other proof of U. S. citizenship may be accepted. But even if people need not have a passport to visit a foreign country, the United States requires one to prove U. S. citizenship and identity to reenter the United States. Hence, travelers need to provide documentation when they pass through United States IMMIGRATION upon their return. U. S. passports are the best proof of U. S. citizenship. Travelers may also use one of the following:

- An expired U. S. passport
- A [CERTIFIED COPY](#) of a U. S. birth certificate
- A Certificate of Naturalization
- A Certificate of Citizenship
- A Report of Birth Abroad of a Citizen of the United States

All U. S. citizens must have their own passport. Family members may not be included on any passport. This applies to everyone, even newborn babies. To obtain their first passport, citizens must appear in person at one of the 13 U. S. passport agencies, along with a completed Form DS-11, Passport Application. They may also apply for a passport at one of many federal and state courts, [PROBATE](#) courts, county/municipal offices, or at U. S. post offices authorized to accept passport applications.

If applying for the first time, applicants who are 16 and older must appear in person when applying for a passport. Minors aged 13, 14, and 15 must also appear in person, and must be accompanied by a parent or legal [GUARDIAN](#). Applicants ages 16 and 17 may apply on their own as long as they have acceptable identification. The passport agency may contact their parent or legal guardian to confirm that the parent or legal guardian gives permission to issue the passport. If a passport applicant is a minor and has no identification, then the parent or legal guardian must accompany the applicant. For children under age 13, a parent or legal guardian may appear and apply for a passport on their behalf. If individuals previously had a U. S. passport and wish to obtain a new one, they may be able to apply by mail.

It may take many weeks to process the application for a passport. If possible, individuals should apply for their passport several months before they plan to depart on their trip abroad. If they also need to apply for visas, they need to allow approximately two weeks per visa. Finally, if their U. S. passport becomes altered or mutilated, it may be invalid. If they alter or mutilate it themselves, they may be prosecuted (Section 1543, Title 22 of the [U.S. CODE](#)).

Keep a Passports Safe

Carelessness is the principal reason travelers lose their passports. People may need to carry their passport with them because they must show it to cash traveler's checks or the country that they are visiting requires them to carry it as an identity document. When they must carry their passport, they must conceal it securely on their person. It should not be put in a purse, handbag, or in an outer pocket. When possible, it should be deposited in the hotel's safe. It should not be left in the hotel room or m, and do not try to conceal it in pieces of luggage. One member of a group should not carry all the passports for the entire group.

Criminals sometimes use stolen U. S. passports to enter the United States illegally or to help them establish false identities. This can cause distress and embarrassment to innocent U. S. citizens whose names become associated with illegal activity. Travelers should be aware that consular officers overseas may take certain precautions to process lost passport cases. Should they lose their passport while traveling abroad, these precautions may in turn cause them some delay before their new passport is issued.

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If their passports are lost or stolen abroad, travelers should report the loss immediately to the local police and to the nearest U. S. embassy or consulate. It will help speed the replacement process if travelers can provide the consular officer with the information contained in their passport. Their passport is the most important document that they will carry abroad. It is proof of their U. S. citizenship. It should never be used it as [COLLATERAL](#) for a loan, nor should someone lend it to anyone. It is the best form of identification. Travelers may need it when they pick up mail or check into hotels, or when they register at embassies or consulates.

When entering some countries or registering at hotels, travelers may be asked to fill out a police card listing their names, passport numbers, destinations, local addresses, and reasons for travel. They may be required to leave their passport at the hotel reception desk overnight so that the local police may check it. These are normal procedures required by local laws. However, if the passport is not returned the following morning, immediately report the seizure to the local authorities and to the nearest U. S. embassy or consulate.

Passport Records

Passport Services maintains records of passport information on individuals for the period from 1925 to the present. These records contain applications for U. S. passports and supporting evidence of U. S. citizenship. The records' contents are protected by the Privacy Act. The Privacy Act permits individuals to obtain copies of passport records in their own name. The National Archives and Records Administration maintains records for passports issued prior to 1925.

Visas

A visa is an endorsement by a foreign country that permits individuals to visit that country for a defined purpose and for a specific duration. It usually comes in the form of a stamp placed in their passport. Their visa to visit a foreign country will indicate the length of time of their visit, as well as the scope of activities they may perform while in that country. Probably the most common visas are travel visas that identify people as tourists visiting the country for leisure purposes. But, there are also visas that permit them to work and earn income in a country or visas that allow them to attend a college or university in that country, or possibly a visa that indicates they are members of the U. S. diplomatic corps on official business. It is best to apply for visas before individuals leave the United States. They may not be able to obtain visas for some countries after they have left the United States.

U. S. citizens should apply for a visa directly to the embassy or nearest consulate of each country they plan to visit. Visas are stamped directly onto a blank page in their passport, so they will need to give their passport to an official of each foreign embassy or consulate along with their application for a visa. When applying for a visa, individuals will usually be asked to fill out a form and submit one or more photographs with the form. They should also be aware that many countries require a fee to accompany visa applications. The application process may take several weeks, depending on the country where they apply for a visa.

Customs

U. S. customs laws help regulate the conduct of business, protect U. S. citizens from harmful diseases, and protect U. S. crops and livestock from damaging foreign diseases, infections, and other pests. The customs laws also reflect U. S. policy on environmental issues. The United States Customs Service is the agency with primary responsibility for protecting the nation's borders. It has an extensive air, land, and marine interdiction force and with an investigative branch supported by its own intelligence resources. Among its areas of

responsibility, the U. S. Customs Service is charged with overseeing the importation of goods into the country.

Before Departing the United States

Before individuals travel abroad, it is helpful to learn about U. S. Customs regulations. The regulations apply to things they take from the United States as well as items they bring into the United States from abroad. Foreign-made items taken abroad (e.g. a Swiss watch or Japanese camera) are subject to U. S. Customs duty and tax upon return, unless they have proof they possessed them before they left the United States. A receipt, [BILL OF SALE](#), insurance policy, or a jeweler's [APPRAISAL](#) usually is sufficient proof of prior ownership. In some cases, it may be necessary to register their foreign-made goods that they intend to take on their trip abroad. If they do not have sufficient proof of prior ownership, but their property includes foreign-made items that can be identified by serial number or some other permanent marking, travelers can take them to a Customs office or to the port of departure for registration. There they can obtain a certificate of registration, which can expedite free entry of these items when they return to the United States.

Bringing Foreign Products into the United States

The United States prohibits travelers from bringing many fruits, vegetables, meats, plants, soil, and other products from abroad into the United States. These products may carry harmful insects or diseases that could damage U. S. crops, forests, gardens, and livestock. In general, travelers may not bring the products in person, nor can they import them through the mail. In addition to these items, it is a crime to bring many wildlife souvenirs into the United States. These crimes are specified in U. S. laws and in international treaties. The list of prohibited items is long, and includes those made from sea turtle shell, reptile skins or leathers, ivory, furs from endangered species, as well as items manufactured from coral reefs. Consequently, travelers should not purchase wildlife souvenirs, especially if they are unsure about being able to bring them legally into the United States. The penalties for violating these laws are severe; at the very least, the purchases could be confiscated.

When returning to the United States from a trip abroad, if travelers needed their passport for their trip, they will need it when they go through U. S. Immigration and Customs. If they took other documents with them such as an International Certificate of Vaccination, international driver's license, medical documents, a customs certificate of registration for foreign-made personal articles, they will need them upon their re-entry to the United States.

Tax Considerations

When individuals buy goods abroad and bring them back to the United States, they are subject to [TAXATION](#) on the value of those goods. Currently, travelers may bring back \$400 worth of foreign-acquired goods without having to pay a duty on those goods, known as "duty free" merchandise. There are some important limitations to the duty free exemption:

- Travelers must have been outside the United States for at least 48 hours,
- They may not have imported duty free goods within 30 days, and
- They must be able to present the purchases for inspection upon their arrival at the port of entry.

After travelers have used their exemption on their first \$400 worth of duty free goods, the next \$1,000 worth of items they bring back for personal use or gifts are subject to duty, taxed at 10%. For some products, there are additional limits on the quantity they may bring into the United States duty free:.

- 100 cigars,

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- 200 cigarettes, and
- One liter of wine, beer, or liquor.

Depending on where travelers purchased some items, their duty free exemption may be higher. The exemption is \$600 for goods purchased in any of 24 specific countries in the Caribbean and Central America. For a group of U. S. possessions (the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and Guam), the exemption is \$1,200.

Additional Resources

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Organizations

United States Customs Service

1300 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC 20229 USA
Phone: (202) 927-1000
URL: <http://www.customs.ustreas.gov/index.htm>

United States Department of State

2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520 USA
Phone: (202) 647-4000
URL: <http://www.state.gov>

United States Department of State

Public Inquiries, Visa Services
Washington, DC 20522-0106 USA
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