



## Passports And Visas

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### Background

The U. S. Department of State issues nearly seven million passports to U. S. citizens every year. For most people, obtaining a [PASSPORT](#) is a fairly routine experience. In fact, a passport is more than just a personal identification document. A passport is actually a guarantee to the bearer that he or she can travel freely and securely through other countries.

Not all countries are willing or able to grant unimpeded travel and protection to others. Countries that are at war with each other or whose diplomatic ties are strained or broken will likely not permit their citizens to travel to territory designated as dangerous or unfriendly. Visas, or endorsements, indicate that a government has examined the traveler's passport and that the traveler can continue on. Some countries do not require a formal [VISA](#) process; others insist that visitors obtain visas, sometimes well in advance of their trips.

Because a passport is an important identification document, applicants must prove that they are who they are, and they also must prove citizenship. Proof can be established through birth or baptismal certificates or other documents; sometimes [AFFIDAVIT](#) from people who know the applicant are necessary. Passports are the property of the governments that issue them and must be returned on demand.

### Obtaining a Passport

Anyone who wishes to travel abroad needs a passport, as does anyone whose work requires overseas travel. Some countries, such as Canada and Mexico, do not require U. S. citizens to show passports upon crossing the border; other forms of identification such as a driver's license will suffice. Still, it is a good idea to have a passport because it is a much more re-liable means of establishing identity and nationality.

The fee for a first-time passport is \$60, which includes a \$45 passport fee and a \$15 [EXECUTION](#) fee. Applicants under 16 pay \$40 (the passport fee is \$25). Renewing a passport costs \$40.

The average wait for a passport is six weeks. For those who need a passport sooner, expedited service is available (the waiting period is only two weeks) for an additional \$35. Passport officials recommend that to further expedite a passport, the application should be sent via overnight delivery and the applicant should include a pre-paid overnight delivery envelope in which the passport can be sent. This cost must be paid by the applicant in addition to the expedited service fee.

### ***Applying in Person***

Individuals can apply for their passports by mail unless they are applying for the first time. If a previous passport was issued more than 15 years ago or when a person was under the age of 16, the individual will also need to apply in person; likewise if the person's name has changed or if the old passport was lost, stolen, or damaged. Minors under the age of 14 do not need to appear as a matter of course, but passport officials have the right to ask the child to appear.

There are 13 Regional Passport Agency offices across the country; they are located in Boston, Chicago, Honolulu, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, New York, Norwalk (Connecticut), Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, DC. These offices are open to the public by appointment only, and appointments are usually only granted to people who need urgent action on a passport application (for example, if they need a passport in less than two weeks). For routine passport applications, there are 4,500 designated passport application acceptance facilities across the United States.

### ***Proof of Citizenship***

To obtain a U.S. passport, individuals must prove that they are U. S. citizens. A previous U. S. passport will suffice, but if they do not have one they will need to supply either a certified birth certificate, a naturalization certificate, or a consular report of birth abroad. A birth certificate must have been issued within one year of their births to be acceptable. A later, or delayed certificate may be valid if it comes with affidavits from an attending physician or midwife or the parents.

If individuals do not have certified birth certificates, they will need a "letter of no record" issued by the state and listing their name and date of birth while also noting that there is no birth record. In addition they will need as many other documents as they can provide, including baptismal certificates, school or family Bible records, or physician's records. A parent or other older relative can submit an "Affidavit of Birth" claiming personal knowledge of when the individual was born. In addition, individuals can ask a friend to vouch for them. This friend must be a U. S. citizen and a permanent resident, have a valid identification, and have known them for at least two years. He or she must fill out a special form in the presence of the passport agent.

### ***No-Fee Passports***

Certain travelers may be able to receive a passport free of charge, known as a "no-fee" passport. Those eligible for no-fee passports include members of the armed services and their dependents, diplomats or other government officials, family members of a deceased member of the U. S. Armed Forces, and Peace Corps volunteers. (Anyone who applies for a no-fee passport in person may have to pay the \$15 execution fee, but that fee can be waived.) Essentially these passports are sponsored by the agency or group that the applicant represents.

The no-fee passport is valid only for specific travel. Peace Corps volunteers can use no-fee passports to go to and from the countries in which they are working. Members of a deceased soldier's family must be traveling to visit that soldier's grave. Diplomats and other government officials must be traveling on government business. For personal travel, a regular passport is required. It is acceptable to hold both a regular and a no-fee passport. No-fee passports are not sent directly to the applicant; they are mailed to the sponsoring organization and applicants must pick them up.

### ***Photographs***

Two copies of a current (no older than six months) photograph are required as part of the passport application. It should be full face, front view, and be 2x2 inches in size. (There should be between 1 inch and 1 3/8 inches

from the bottom of the chin to the top of the head.) Passport photos should be taken in normal street attire, and officials remind applicants that photos showing the applicant smiling or looking relaxed are welcome. Hats are not acceptable, nor are non-prescription glasses that are dark or tinted. Uniforms are not allowed although members of the clergy can wear religious attire if it is worn daily. Photos can be either color or black-and-white.

Photos from vending machines are usually not acceptable for passport photos. It is usually quite easy to find a photo service near a passport acceptance center, where photos are taken for a nominal fee. Regarding application for a passport for a baby or youngster, be aware that some photographers will not take pictures of infants or toddlers because it can be difficult to get them to cooperate.

### ***Children Under 14***

Children are required to submit the same forms for passport application as adults, but their parents or guardians must submit identification to ensure that they are in fact the child's parents or guardians. Each parent must submit identification forms; if only one parent is submitting forms he or she must have [EVIDENCE](#) that the other parent has consented or a court order showing sole [CUSTODY](#) of the child or a valid death certificate if the other parent is deceased.

For adoptive parents whose children were born overseas and who do not acquire U. S. citizenship at birth, the Child Citizenship Act confers citizenship automatically as soon as the ADOPTION DECREE is final. A [CERTIFIED COPY](#) of this decree needs to be presented to obtain a U. S. passport for the child. Because this law has only been effect since February 2001, there is still some lack of familiarity, and occasionally there might be confusion as far as which documents to submit and in what form. It is probably best to err on the side of caution; for example, adoptive parents should not send originals of any adoption document when mailing material to a passport agency office. It is probably a good idea to speak to the adoption agency and someone knowledgeable in [IMMIGRATION](#) law, as well as passport officials, when applying for a passport for an adopted child.

## **National Passport Information Centers (NPIC)**

In the 20 years between 1975 and 1995 the number of passports issued by the U. S. Department of State more than doubled, from just over 2.3 million to nearly 5.3 million. The workload increased more that 70 percent, but the number of employees handling the work remained unchanged. In 1996 the State Department opened the National Passport Information Center (NPIC) to answer the public's questions about passports. NPIC is a fee-based service; callers either dial a 900 number for up to \$1.05 per minute or an 888 number for a flat rate of \$4.95 per call. The money collected goes toward running NPIC; the State Department receives no income from the center, nor does the government provide it with tax dollars. The reason the State Department decided to create NPIC was service. With more passport-related calls coming in but no additional staff to handle the volume, callers often had to wait on hold, sometimes for lengthy periods. While there was no charge for the service, many callers were frustrated at what they saw as a waste of their time. Thanks to NPIC, waits are shorter and callers are greeted by people who are not nearly so overextended. Today, people calling for anything other than the most basic information about passports will need to call NPIC. The phone numbers are 1-900-225-5674 or 1-888-362-8668. (For the hearing impaired, the TDD numbers are 1-900-225-7778 and 1-888-498-3648.)

## Visas

### ***From the United States***

Each country has different passport and visa requirements for U. S. citizens. The most commonly visited countries, such as those in Western Europe, generally do not require visas; other countries do require visas, sometimes with specific stipulations. Still other countries require some sort of additional or substitute documentation, usually to ensure that the traveler is merely visiting as a tourist.

Countries with which the United States has troubled relations may require more documentation, from both that country and from the United States. The United States will not allow its citizens to travel to certain countries except for clearly defined business purposes. Because governmental changes in some countries can happen with remarkable speed, it is advisable for travelers to know whether their visit will put them at risk. The Bureau of Consular Affairs at the U. S. State Department keeps an updated list of visa requirements for traveling to every country at its web site <http://travel.state.gov/foreignentryreqs.html>. Travelers should also contact the foreign embassy or consulate of the country they wish to visit; most often these offices are in Washington, D. C., or New York. Although some countries, such as Canada, Mexico, and certain Caribbean nations, do not require a U. S. passport, it is still a good idea to carry one because of its value as an identification document.

### ***To the United States***

Overseas visitors who wish to visit the United States usually require a visa. Most people come to the United States for business or tourism; others, taking advantage of highly skilled American medical facilities, may come to the United States for medical treatment. In general, a visa application asks the individual to state the purpose and length of the visit. It also asks for proof that the applicant has a domicile outside the United States, along with binding ties such as family members; this is to ensure that he or she plans to return home after the visit.

To obtain a visa, a foreign visitor must submit an application form with a nonrefundable \$45; a valid passport, and two photographs 1.5 inches square. Some 29 countries around the world participate in the Visa WAIVER Program, which allows visitors to travel without applying for a visa. These countries include most of Western Europe, as well as such countries as Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Argentina, and Iceland. Travelers visiting under the Visa Waiver Program may only stay for 90 days and must submit proof of financial [SOLVENCY](#). Overseas travelers can get information from the nearest U. S. Embassy office, or they can visit <http://travel.state.gov/visa:visitors.html>.

Travel agents are often able to provide many of the forms and applications necessary, in addition to updated travel guidelines and advisories.

## **Additional Resources**

*The United States Passport: Past, Present, Future.* U. S. Department of State, 1976.

## **Organizations**

*American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA)*

1101 King Street, Suite 200  
Alexandria, VA 22314 USA  
Phone: (703) 739-2782  
Fax: (703) 684-8319  
URL: <http://www.asta.org>  
Primary Contact: Richard M. Copland, President  
and Chief Executive Officer

***United States Customs Service***

1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20229 USA  
Phone: (202) 927-1000  
URL: <http://customs.ustreas.gov>  
Primary Contact: Robert C. Bonner, Commissioner  
of Customs

***U. S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs***

2201 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20520 USA  
Phone: (202) 647-4000  
Fax: (202) 647-5225 (Overseas Citizens Services)  
URL: [http://travel.state.gov/passport\\_services.html](http://travel.state.gov/passport_services.html)  
Primary Contact: Georgia Rogers, Deputy Assistant  
Secretary for Passport Services

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