



NEW PASSPORT RULES TAKE EFFECT FOR TRAVELERS TO U.S.

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In an effort to increase border security, the United States is changing the rules for those traveling in the Western Hemisphere -- now they'll need passports.

The new passport rules go into effect Tuesday for all air travelers entering the United States. In the past many travelers coming from Canada, Mexico and most Caribbean destinations only needed a driver's license and sometimes a birth certificate to enter the country.

Now they'll need a passport.

New rules

It's all part of what is being called the Western Hemisphere travel initiative, part of legislation passed by Congress in 2004 in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and recommended by the 9/11 commission, a group that analyzed the U.S. response to the attacks.

And air travel is just the beginning. By June 2009, people entering the country by land and sea also will be required to have passports.

The original date had been June 2008 but Congress delayed the start to allow the installation of technology to read passports at all U.S. border crossings.

The government has proposed creating a new card that could be used for land and sea entry into the United States, but the decision has not been finalized. At \$45 for adults and \$35 for children, the card would be cheaper than a passport, which costs \$97 for adults and \$82 for children.

Tourism worries

Tourism experts worry that confusion about the new rules and the high cost of getting a passport will keep some travelers at home.

"There's a lot of confusion," Monica Vejar Corona, a spokeswoman for the tourist agency in Baja California, Mexico's northernmost state, told the San Diego Union Tribune.

One confused American is Russell Black, a Minnesota kayaker who canceled a trip to Canada after learning he would need a passport.

"I don't even know what the process is," Black told USA Today. "I don't want to get out there and get caught without a passport. I'm unclear about the rules. I just know enough to make me nervous."

Black is not alone in not having a passport.

According to the U.S. State Department, the agency charged with processing passports, about 73 million U.S. citizens -- less than a third of the population -- currently hold valid passports.

But record numbers of Americans are applying for passports as the deadline looms. The State Department processed 12.1 million passports in 2006 and expects to process up to 18 million this year.

One area that is expected to be hit hard by the new rules is Caribbean destinations like Jamaica, where 73 percent of tourists are Americans, and the Bahamas, where Americans make up 87 percent of visitors.

Some tourism winners

While some travel destination spots in the Caribbean and elsewhere are offering incentives, such as free spa days, rebates on passport fees or free nights at their hotels, other destinations expect to see an increase in bookings.

Places such as Guam, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are U.S. territories and, therefore, do not require a passport from Americans.

These places are spending a lot of money to advertise themselves as "no-passport destinations" in the U.S. market.

Megan Ziemba, a bride-to-be, ended up choosing Puerto Rico over other Caribbean destinations for her upcoming wedding.

"We have a lot of family coming down and I know they don't have passports," the 27 year old told the Associated Press.

Getting a passport

If you need a passport, the State Department recommends starting the process early. Applying for a passport takes six to eight weeks and may take even longer as the number of applications increases.

First-time passport seekers need to apply in person at passport centers or one of the 9,000 individual sites set up at post offices and libraries. The State Department Web site lists locations: <http://travel.state.gov/>.

All children under age 14 must apply in person, usually with one or both parents.

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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