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Get Your Passport!

By Pete Peterson
04/15/2005

If you plan to travel outside of the United States any time after Dec. 31, 2005, you might want to start getting your documents together so you can apply for a passport within the next couple of months.

The U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced on April 5, 2005, the new Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative. It will require all U.S. citizens, Canadians, citizens of the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda and citizens of Mexico to have a passport or other accepted secure document to enter or re-enter the United States by Jan. 1, 2008. This initiative will be phased in over a period of time.

The proposed implementation timeline is as follows:

Dec. 31, 2005 – Passport or other accepted document required for all travel (air/sea) to or from the Caribbean, Bermuda, Central and South America.

Dec. 31, 2006 – Passport or other accepted document required for all air and sea travel to or from Mexico and Canada.

Dec. 31, 2007 – Passport or other accepted document required for all air, sea and land border crossings.

More information on this initiative can be found on the Department of Homeland Security Web site at <http://www.dhs.gov>.

In the past, U.S. citizens have always had to present a passport when traveling overseas, but none was required when traveling to Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, the Bahamas, Bermuda and a few other places in the Western Hemisphere. All you needed was a driver's license and an original birth certificate. But all this is changing because of an increase in security awareness caused by the events of 9/11.

Getting a passport is a relatively simple and painless process. You need a passport photo, which can now be easily obtained at most photo processing stores for about \$10. Then you'll need an original birth certificate, not a photocopy. If you can't find yours, they are easy to obtain through the vital records department in the state in which you were born. Or, if you don't have a lot of time, there are several Web sites where, for a small fee (about \$12) plus the cost of the document, you can apply for a birth certificate online.

You can usually pick up a copy of the Application for Passport (Form DS-11) at your local post office, or you can go online at the U.S. Department of State Web site and download a copy (www.travel.state.gov). However, you must personally sign the application in the presence of a Passport Acceptance Agent.

The Department of State Web site also has lots of useful information, such as how to apply for a passport, where to go to apply, travel warnings and tips for traveling abroad.

Once you have your Application for Passport, passport photo, birth certificate and driver's license (or other acceptable documentation), you can go to the nearest passport processing site. You can find where to go in your area at <http://iafdb.travel.state.gov>. I recommend you call first, as most places are open to passport applications during limited times or by appointment only.

The cost for the passport is \$97 for those 16 and over, and \$82 for those under 16. It usually takes about six weeks to get your passport, but you can pay an additional \$60 for expedited service.



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One of the major impacts of this new initiative is how it will affect last-minute travel. No longer will people be able to decide on the spur of the moment to go skiing in Canada, visit one of the Mexican border towns or take a cruise in a couple of weeks to the Bahamas. After Dec. 31, 2007, you won't be going unless you have a passport.

With the implementation of these new regulations, there will be a rush toward the end of this year to get passports, and the waiting time may be stretched even further. So, if you plan on traveling out of the country (or even if you don't plan on it but might want to at some time), I would highly suggest you get started now and avoid the rush. As I always say, "It's better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it."

Pete Peterson is a cruise specialist with Cruise Planners Inc. To contact Pete, e-mail him at dreams@storybookcruises.com, or call 703-858-9898 or 866-786-7926.

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