



VISA WAIVER PROGRAM

Overview

The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) was created by Congress in 1986 and welcomed its first two countries (UK and Japan) two years later. This critical program permits business and leisure travelers from 27 countries to visit the U.S. for up to 90 days without the expense and wait of obtaining a non-immigrant visitor visa. The program is intended to facilitate and promote overseas travel to the U.S. while simultaneously allowing the State Department to shift visa screening resources to higher risk countries.

First established as a “pilot” program, the VWP was permanently reauthorized in 2000. In August 2007, President Bush signed into law legislation that strengthens security requirements for VWP countries and offers the opportunity for several new countries to qualify for the program. This very positive development had the strong and active back of the U.S. travel community.

Economics

In 2006, approximately 14 million overseas visitors arriving in the United States originated from one of the 27 VWP countries, representing approximately two-thirds of all overseas visitors (“overseas” excludes visitors from Canada and Mexico).

With several new countries being considered for entry into the VWP – and the resultant dropping of non-immigrant visa requirements – it is very possible that over the next 3-5 years the U.S. could see a significant jump in the number of VWP travelers and billions more dollars in overseas visitor spending.

Outlook

The U.S. government has signed formal Memorandums of Understanding with several “roadmap” countries that aspire to join the VWP. The nine countries currently expected to join the VWP in early 2009 are: Czech Republic; Estonia; Greece; Hungary; Latvia; Lithuania; Malta; Slovakia; and South Korea.

Before a country is granted admission to the VWP there is a rigorous review process that includes sending U.S. teams to those countries to conduct on the ground security assessments. As part of bilateral negotiations with these aspirant countries, new security requirements will also be introduced, including the use of an Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) system to pre-screen travelers before they fly to the U.S. The introduction of the ESTA system is supported by the travel community.

The Visa Waiver Program strikes the correct balance between security and travel facilitation, and we look forward to seeing the program grow to at least 35 countries in the near future.

These countries currently participate in the Visa Waiver Program: Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and United Kingdom.

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