

Free Guide

International Travel Documents eBook

For Americans & International Travelers



2015 EDITION

What You Need To Know

What Documents You Need

How To Apply, Tips & More

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About the Authors

Yem Ahiatsi is the author of *International Travel Documents* and the name behind many posts on the [Travefy blog](#). Yem is a graduate alumnus of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, a Fulbright fellow, and a globetrotter.

Editorial and visual support was provided by David Chait & Scott Rutz.

Introduction

What qualifies as a travel document? Which ones are essential to travel the world and which are (always) good to have? Are there any documents that act as master keys to the world's most popular destinations? Where can I find more information about my passport? What are the best practices when handling the visa process for travel groups?

The travel industry has been hurt by the economic and sociopolitical crises since 2000. However, 2010 was a record year for the airline industry and 2012 saw more than one billion trips, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization¹.

While more and more people are crossing borders, there doesn't seem to be a joint effort to harmonize travel or country entry requirements. *What it takes to get into the US is different from what is needed to enter a neighborly country like Canada or Mexico.*

Many travelers go through the visa or passport acquisition process without any other information than that given on the spot by officials. You can guess how long and misguiding the bureaucratic processes can be. Others try to hack their way through by crowdsourcing tips and tricks online from travel blogs and forums. Is it more effective? You be the judge.

Working in the group travel industry, one has the duty to answer every question consumers have. As so, one learns soon enough that it takes a combination of official information and experienced-travelers' ideas to avoid the most common pitfalls of travel. Among these, securing travel documents effectively is a major concern.

Thus, we put together this eBook together to serve as a guide when searching, identifying, and securing essential travel documents. The information you will find in this eBook will be mostly official instructions clarified or improved as often as possible with input from travelers, globetrotters, or professional of the travel industry.

This eBook follows the "usual" process one goes through to secure travel documents; from acquiring a passport, to securing a visa, and meeting health requirements. As a bonus, you will find at the end of this eBook, a travel document checklist to help you make your international travel planning as smooth as possible.

Also, we will try to have an approach as universal as possible in order to be useful to every travel regardless of their nationality, departure origin or destination.

What is a travel document?

A travel document refers to an identification document issued by a government or an organization to facilitate the movement of individuals across country bordersⁱⁱ.

However, note that not all identification documents are acceptable everywhere in the world. It is your responsibility as a traveler to check with your destination's officials and official tourism guides to make sure that you meet their requirements.

The most common form is the passport, but there are also other forms, some less popular, that will grant safe entry within a country's territory.

Types of travel documents

The passportⁱⁱⁱ often comes in the form of a booklet that serves as proof of nationality for the bearer. The passport is also the travel document that grants visa-free access to certain countries. Although the passport is the most widely accepted travel document, Country officials will reject passports issued by nations they do not recognize.

Laissez-passers^{iv} are special travel documents issued by governments and certain international organizations. These are issued often in special circumstances, such as for a stateless person, as emergency passport, or to grant access for humanitarian reasons. A laissez-passer does not have to state any mention of nationality other than that of the issuing authorities and they grant only restricted access and right of travel to the holder.

Conventional or Refugee travel documents (or Titre de Voyage) are issued in accordance with the UN Convention related to the Status of the Refugees of 1951. As so, only refugees and stateless people can typically receive this passport-like document.

The **National Identification card** could allow "international" travel. It is the case for citizens of the member-countries of the European Union or the Economic Community of West African States.

While these are the most common travel documents, travel is extremely difficult without a visa or, often, vaccination records.

Also, you will find that many travel bloggers and companies online refer to travel credit cards, travel insurances, and bookings as travel documents. While these items

are recommended, they are not required to gain entry into a country. Therefore they won't be covered in this eBook.

International Travel

In general, these are the requirements for going in and out of a foreign country. The following are common to, at least, the UK, the USA, and the Shengen (European Union) area.

- Passport validity
- Blank passport pages
- Tourist Visa Required
- Vaccination
- Currency Restrictions for Entry and Exit
- Narcotic Restrictions

Tip: Make sure your passport and other travel documents don't expire shortly after your trip. Russia for instance requires for all visa applicants to have a passport that is valid for 6 months beyond the intended stay. Also, common over-the-counter pain killers may be restricted in other countries and you won't be able to travel with them^v.

All smart travelers must learn to effectively meet these requirements. Regarding travel documents, it is time to learn the basics about passports, visas, and vaccination documents.

Passport

A passport is a critical travel document. Still, sometimes, it is possible to reach some destinations without it. Other times, you might have a passport but still won't be able to travel with it due to its validity. How do you determine if your passport is necessary and valid for a trip? How do you apply for (a new) one? Those are the questions that we will answer in this section.

Do you need a passport at all?

As a general rule, keep in mind that international travel is not possible without a valid passport. Therefore, if you do not have one, it will not hurt to apply for one as to have it close at hand. Most passports have a validity period that range from 5 years to a decade, giving you plenty of time to embark on many journeys. How do you know if a passport is required to travel to your destination?

First, check **the entry requirements for the destination country**. Every country has its own requirements and it would be inaccurate and misleading to try to generalize. However, note that countries that are part of economic communities tend to harmonize entry requirements within the zone (i.e. the European Union.)

Second, check with your departure country's authority for **re-entry requirements**. The U.S. Department of State (DoS) warns that under the requirements of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI)^{vi}, even American or Canadian citizens must present a standardized document when trying to enter the U.S. borders. The rationale behind this constraint is two-fold: secure the borders, and facilitate entry for citizens and legal aliens.

Finally, you could use a **third-party information resources** to know the passport requirements. For this search, the internet will be your best friend. For instance, IATA's travel center has a [web app](#) with an effective search engine that tries to estimate your requirements, not only for passports but also visa, and health.^{vii}

However, keep in mind that the **most accurate and updated information you can find is that provided by country officials**. Third-party apps, blogs, and other resources give estimations, or information accurate at a certain point in time.

How to figure out if your passport is still valid for traveling

In most cases, the validity of your passport depends on the answers to the following 3 essential questions: 1) Is my passport's expiration date close or past? 2) Do I have enough blank visa pages? 3) Is my passport in a usable physical state?

Tip: If you're traveling by train, make sure you have enough pages in your passport to account for all of the countries you will pass through—not just for your destination.

1. **Everyone needs to travel with a valid passport.** Often it means that your passport hasn't expired yet. However, other nations will only allow you access if your passport has a certain validity period left. Some calculate this according to the date of entry. However, other countries like all 25 Shengen (EU) countries will require 3 months of validity beyond the estimated date of exit. In general, that validity period is between 3 to 6 months.^{viii}
2. As a general rule of thumb, know that you will need **at least 2 blank visa / stamp pages to travel**. Some airlines will deny boarding if you do not meet this requirement.
3. **Normal wear is tolerated** as long as the book cover and the personal data page(s) are intact. The DoS travel webpage states the other conditions for passport replacement include but are not limited to: "water damage, significant tear, unofficial marking on the data page, hole punches and missing visa page.

So you need a new passport

After assessment, you realize that you need a new passport. No sweat. If you start the process early enough and arm yourself with enough patience and courtesy, you will get your new passport in due time.

Again, the passport acquisition process differs from a country to another. To illustrate some of the pitfalls and the best practices, we will focus here on the case of the US passport. Chances are, some (if not all) of the steps described here will also apply to you.

One quick note before applying for that new passport: if you are renewing because of lack of blank visa pages, note that the US might issue 52-page (instead of the usual

28-page) passport to frequent travelers. Citizens can also apply to have extra pages added into their passport book.^{ix}

Renewal

A renewal request can be submitted by mail as long as special conditions are met. These conditions include having a current passport that is less than 15 years of age, is undamaged and submitted with the application.

Special cases

Americans applying for their first passport (without counting any that they may have held as a minor), are required to submit the application in person. Same goes for minor under the age of 16 which must also present themselves accompanied by both parents, or legal guardians.

For a full listing of requirements and procedures, refer to the DoS travel page. It remains the most up-to-date resource you can find online. You can also go to a passport agency near you.

Passport tips and tricks

1. *Start the process early.* In the US, UK, and Canada, the application process time can be between 3-6 weeks. For other countries, government workers might not be as diligent.
2. *Check for the availability of an expedited service.* Some countries also offer their citizens an overnight passport processing. In the US, it can cost as much as \$100 additionally. A hefty fee for your procrastination or lack of organization.
3. *Triple-check your application.* Sometimes, you can save yourself a lot of hassle, time, and frustration just by putting an extra attention to detail with filling out that dreaded administrative form and accurately gathering the required documents.
4. *Use a passport handling service.* If you are just terrible with forms and document processing. You can pay a specialized service to take care of it for you in order to expedite the process. Briggs Passport & Visa Expeditors charge between \$50-250 to get that passport in your hands faster.

5. Do **NOT** use a passport book previously declared as lost or stolen. It cannot be stated enough. If you have declared a passport lost or stolen and then retrieve it, you cannot and should not travel with it. In the best case, it will be unusable simply because it has been cancelled. In the worst case, I hope you enjoy the time you will spend explaining to authorities what you are doing traveling with reported stolen travel documents.

Conclusion

The master key to the world is a valid passport. To figure out if your passport counts as a valid travel document, contact resources in charge of travel in both your home country and abroad.

Visa

A visa is often a document, a seal, or a stamp on a passport that grants the holder of that passport, entry, exit and stay in a foreign country for a specific period of time^x. Some passports will grant visa-free movement into and out of some countries. Unless it is the case, you will have to make the demand for a visa. When dealing with the visa process, the first step is to figure out if you actually need one, then which type suits your needs, and finally the proper process to secure it.

Do you need a visa?

Travelers should contact the nearest High Commission, Embassy or Consulate of the destinations they plan to visit well in advance of travel. The goal is to figure out as early as possible if whether or not you need a visa and what is the best way to secure it.

Of course, there are also, as mentioned in the previous section, third-party services that for gathering requirement information or facilitating the process. We mentioned A Briggs and the AITA travel center for passports. There is also Visa HQ that has a [web app](#)^{xi} service for figuring out visa requirements by citizenship.

Again, remember that the best source of information is always the official one.

What type of visa do you need?

If it turns out that you do need a visa after all, your next step would be to figure out exactly what type of visa would best suit your needs.

Believe it or not, **there are more than 50 specific types of visas** you could apply for when coming to the US. Around the world, visas are usually classified by purpose: immigrant visa or non-immigrant, transit, visitor.^{xii} The classification could also be based on duration of stay (short stay, visit, long stay, residence, etc.) or by method of issuance (electronic, paper, on-arrival, etc.).

However in practice, most common types of visa around the world can be sorted into 4 sub-categories:

Transit Visa

Referred to as C-1 in the US, this visa allows you to transit the United States on your way to a foreign final destination. It does not grant you entry in any way into the US.

However, without it, you won't be able to connect flights on the American soil. And you run the risk of being returned to your point of departure.

Visitor Visa

This visa allows the holder to reside on a foreign soil for a predetermined amount of time, usually, for leisure purposes.

Note that in the US, the B-type visas are for tourism (B-2), but also for business (B-1).

Student and Exchange Visitors

This type of visa is reserved for people who intend to study in a foreign country. This should be their main occupation. In most cases, like in the US or the UK, you will have to apply for a work permit even for part-time employment.

Americans make the distinction between visas for academic studies (F), visas for non-academic or vocational studies (M) and visas for exchange students and visiting scholars (J).

Other types of Visas

From spousal visa to asylum visa to visas issued to diplomatic, athletic, or artistic personalities, these "special" types of visas take care of very specific cases for which a foreigner will need entry into a country. Often it is for a longer period than the usual visas.

Visa-free visitors

Some passports are more powerful than others in that they grant visa-free entry to more destinations around the world. For instance, under the Visa Waiver Program, citizens of 38 countries can stay in the US for up to 90 days without requiring a visa. These [countries](#) include Brunei, Chile, Estonia, and the Republic of Malta, just to name the lesser known.^{xiii}

Where to apply for a visa?

Similar to how you need to contact officials of your home country to apply for or renew a passport, but a visa can only be issued by the officials of the country you intend to visit. Luckily, you don't have to deal directly with the government of those countries, unless you are eligible for on-arrival visa.

Rather, contact official representations in your home country or country of residence. Usually you will have to visit the nearest high commission, embassy or consulate of

the nations you will visit to gather information about the visa process and the requirements.

When it comes time to submit your application, remember that, depending on the countries, you could apply, online, by mail, or in person in one of their official representations. There are also, just like for passport handling, third-party services that will act as facilitators to expedite the visa application process.

Vaccination

From Black Death to Ebola, traveling has always contributed to the spread of the deadliest pandemics. Moreover, unprepared travelers are not safe from country or region specific diseases that natives have grown nearly immune to. For instance, Malaria and Dengue can ruin travel to the southern hemisphere, highlighting the significance of immunization.

All nations value the well-being of their citizens. To preserve it, most countries impose some sort of disease-screening conditions as entry requirements onto their territory. Sometimes, these health-related prerequisites even act, at times, as entry restriction factors. For instance, it is the case for the countries who restrict entry for HIV positive travelers: Russia, Australia, and Canada. For a comprehensive country-specific informative database, please refer to hivtravel.org or aidsmap.com.

Therefore, not only must a traveler know about the health requirements or restrictions enforced in the destination country, it is also your duty to research all about health risks and immunization recommendations in order to prepare oneself accordingly.

Doing your research

The very first step is to research your destination thoroughly. During this process, focus on the following points:

Vaccination requirements.

Contact your destination's officials to learn everything about the vaccinations, immunizations, as well as other health-related precautions they expect from you. Even with a valid passport and visa, you can be denied entry to a country if you fail to provide significant proof that you are not a threat to local public health.

Immunization recommendations.

Sometimes, prerequisites to entry are not intended to keep natives safe rather than the visitors. Still, some vaccines may not be required but always good to get in order to protect yourself and the community at large.

Health advisories.

A smart traveler is an informed traveler. Vaccines are another form of passport to world adventure in that they keep you healthy and able to enjoy yourself. To stay ahead of the latest development or disease outbreaks, you should include in your research health resources such as:

- The **World Health Organization** ([WHO](#)). With more than 56 years of experience dedicated to handling with international public health, this United Nation's specialized agency is dedicated to the "attainment by all people of the highest possible level of health"^{xiv}; especially you!
- The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** ([CDC](#)) and their Traveler's Health portal^{xv}
- Your local **Health Center**. If you are a student, the University's health center should be qualified to advise you on potential health risks according to your travel plans.
- The **International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers** ([IAMAT](#))
- The Department of State's **Smart Traveler Enrollment Program** ([STEP](#)^{xvi}). This service from the bureau of Consular Affairs will even provide you with assistance as well as travel alerts and warnings.
- Also, [travel blogs](#) and [forums](#) are boundless sources of infos from past and milled travelers like yourself. Their words of advice are always good to take as so: advice.

Preparing yourself

Know your vaccination status

First off, see a healthcare provider in order to assess your current vaccination status. Because once you have figured out which vaccines are required, it is time to figure out which you can or should take. For instance, if you are pregnant, breast-feeding or have special conditions, it could be actually bad for you to get some vaccines.

Remember that if you plan to visit several countries during your trip, you have to consider all the immunization requirements. Luckily enough, some of them will be the same.

Find a travel clinic

The CDC advises to reach out to professional medical organizations to find a suitable travel clinic. This is almost an obligation if yellow fever is among the potential diseases

you need to protect yourself against. Note that, only few authorized vaccine centers provide shots against yellow fever. For the online directories of suitable travel clinics in the US, visit the web portals of the International Society of Travel Medicine (ISTM) and the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (ASTMH). You can find both resources via the cdc.gov/travel/find-clinic.

Tip: Some university clinics offer vaccinations for travel to the general public at a much lower cost than private clinics.

Give yourself plenty of rest time

You need to give the vaccines at least 4 weeks to reinforce your immunization system. That period could be longer if you need multiple vaccine doses. Plan to take the shot way before the trip. A doctor will be the best expert as to the time the vaccines need to take effect.^{xvii}

Tip: Some vaccinations must be given in multiple doses with several weeks between each dose. Don't put off your vaccinations until the week before your trip—it might be too late and cost you a lot in rescheduling your travel.

Preparing your immunization documentation

It is your duty to provide valid certificates and proofs that you have gotten all required vaccines.

The yellow card

If immunization to yellow fever is among the prerequisite to entry, then you should have the famous yellow card also known as the International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis (ICVP). Travelers can get it from any yellow fever vaccination center. However, the yellow card serves as record of travel immunizations including the date and doses of vaccines received, as well as medical exemptions. It can (and should) also contain other personal medical information such as medications, prescriptions, and known drug allergies.^{xviii}

Medical Prescriptions

If you are on medication and/or are planning to travel with medication, you will be strongly advised to take the official prescriptions as well as copies of such prescriptions along with you. In fact, store these copies in the same case as the medications. The rationale for this precaution is that what qualifies as controlled substance, restricted drugs or narcotics, differs from one country to another. Some

common over-the-counter drugs in the US such as inhalers or pills containing codeine, or pseudoephedrine are illegal elsewhere, such as in Japan.^{xix}

Conclusion

With the right travel documents at hand, the world will be yours to travel and explore. These documents are meant to identify you, register you as an authorized visitor, and ensure that you comply with the public health measures in place in your host country.

Compliance with requirements and effectively securing travel documents will depend on your ability to reach out to the competent authorities in order to gather the relevant information. Such resources include the embassy and consular representation of the countries you plan to visit, your own government travel resources as well as official or expert information online.

While travelers will often find the most accurate or up-to-date information with official sources, there are third-party services that will help with providing travel insights, or expediting the passport, visa, and immunization processes.

Sometimes, you will hear people refer to travel health insurance, credit cards, and other payment options as travel documents. After reading this eBook, you understand that there should be a distinction between travel documents – which identify a person and allows them to travel- and travel essentials—which are highly recommended for every traveler to carry.

For more information on travel essentials, visit blog.travefy.com and be on the lookout for our next eBook which will be dedicated to that matter.

The Ultimate International Travel Checklist

Research

- Pick destinations I want to travel to
- Check for travel advisories and warnings
- Check for passport, visa, and health requirements

Passport

Passport is valid for every destination in my travel plan

- Cover and identification page are in good shape
- There are enough blank visa pages left
- Expiration date is more than 6 months away

Get new passport

- Research all the required documents specific to my status (first-timer, renewal, special cases, etc.)
- Prepare passport handling fees (nb: if you want expedited service or are using a passport handling service, extra fees will apply)
- Make passport request (by mail, online, or in person)
- Visa secured
- Inquire about visa requirements for all individual countries in your travel itinerary.
- Request visa

Health Precautions

Do your research

- Make list of required and recommended vaccines
- Make list of medication prescriptions

Get appropriate vaccines

- Consult with medical professional for eventual vaccination exemptions
- Schedule an appointment with a travel clinic

Prepare medical travel documents

- Vaccination records and other medical proofs
- Store authorized-for-travel medications with appropriate medical prescriptions

Prepared for emergency

- Enroll for STEP
- Make backup of all travel documents
- Share travel plans and itinerary with family, friends.

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