

Visiting the United States

If you are planning a trip to the United States, you need to prepare your travel documents before you arrange your travel. Make sure your passport is up-to-date and confirm whether or not you need a visa for the duration of your stay.

Note: this page is intended for people coming to the United States for the first time. The following information is not meant for returning lawful permanent residents or United States citizens.

Passport Requirements

First, check that your passport is current and will be valid for at least six months after the date that you intend to be in the United States. Some countries are exempt from this requirement. U.S. Customs and Border Protections (CBP) keeps a list of these countries on their website.

If you need to renew your passport, many countries have consulates in the United States where you can do so. However, it is often easier to renew your passport in your home country.

Border Crossing Cards

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Do You Need a Visa?

In addition to having a valid passport, you need to make sure that you are allowed to enter the United States. An airline will not allow you to board the plane unless you have some way to lawfully enter the country. In other words, depending on where you are from, you may need a visa to enter the United States.

There are many types of visas. However, all visas are divided into two categories: immigrant visas and non immigrant visas. **Immigrant visas** will allow you to stay permanently in the United States. **Nonimmigrant** visas are meant for you to stay in the United States for only a defined period of time.

For more information about the different types of visas, visit the United States Department of State's website at travel.state.gov. Their [Frequently Asked Questions](#) page is a great resource that also includes sample pictures of visas.

The Visa Waiver Program

Countries that do not need a visa to enter the United States are called visa waiver countries. However, just because you can come here on a visa waiver, it does not mean that you should because the U.S. visa waiver program has strict limitations. Most importantly, people who come on the visa waiver program **cannot later change to another status**. For example, you cannot come on the visa waiver program and later change your status to a student visa.

Read our Visa Waiver article for more information. You can also visit the United States Department of State's [webpage about visa waivers](#).

Contact the U.S. Consulate In Your Home Country

If you need a visa, you will need to figure out which U.S. consulate you use to apply for it. You can find a list of consulates at usembassy.gov. Each consulate works a little differently, so follow your consulate's directions carefully.

Forms DS-260 and DS-160

Your U.S. consulate will require you to complete an online form at some point. For **immigrant visas** it is **Form DS-260** and for **nonimmigrants** it is **Form DS-160**. The information that you give on either form becomes part of your permanent record. If Immigration thinks that you lied, they may accuse you of visa fraud.

For example, if you are coming to the United States to get married but you don't want to wait for the processing times, you might be tempted to use a tourist visa and then do all the paperwork once you get here. However, tourist visas are **nonimmigrant visas**, which means you must promise on your application that you do not intend to immigrate. If you promise that you do not intend to immigrate and then immediately file the forms needed to immigrate, Immigration will easily say that you lied. This could lead to Immigration accusing you of visa fraud.

No Guarantee for Entry

Remember that a visa just allows you to try to come to the United States. **It is not a guarantee that you will be allowed in.** People often compare having a visa to knocking on the door.

Arriving in the United States

Customs Declaration Form

When you land in the United States, you must complete a customs declaration. To see a sample of the form you will need to complete, visit cbp.gov. Their web page will also list what questions you need to answer on the customs declaration.

Be careful about bringing food and alcohol into the United States. Failing to tell the CBP officer that you are bringing food into the country can result in a \$10,000 fine. For more information about bringing food and other items into the United States, visit aphis.usda.gov.

I-94 Card for Refugees and Asylees

If you are traveling as a refugee or asylee, you will need to complete an I-94 card. Here is an [example of this form](#) from cbp.gov.

Customs Inspection

A CBP officer will inspect you when you arrive in the United States. For non U.S. citizens and non lawful permanent residents, the CBP officer may ask you questions about why you are here and how long you plan to stay.

The CBP officer will stamp your passport and will note how long you can stay. The date the officer writes in your passport is important because it determines how long you can stay in the United States. Before that time, you must either leave or apply to extend your stay.

Remember: your visa just tells you the dates that you can travel to the United States. **It does not tell you the dates that you can be inside of the United States.**

Once in a while a CBP officer may take someone out of the line to ask them for more information. Catholic Charities has had clients who have been pulled aside and taken into a separate room for hours. If you are pulled aside, there may not be anything wrong. Sometimes you will never know why it happened. But don't panic. Stay calm, and try not to get into an argument with the officer. Doing so might make things worse.

Other Helpful Links

Traveling with Pets

Did you know that your pet can get a passport? Learn more about traveling with your pet at: <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/pet-travel>.

Bringing Your Car into the United States

Learn about exporting and importing vehicles at:
<https://www.cbp.gov/travel/clearing-cbp/automobiles>.

Driving in the United States

Be aware of fake International driver's licenses. For more information, visit:
<https://www.usa.gov/visitors-driving#item-37267>.

Waiting Times at Airports and Land Crossings

If you have family meeting you at the airport they can get some idea of how long it will take you to get through customs with this resource:
<https://www.cbp.gov/travel/advisories-wait-times>.

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[Travel Papers](#) [Options for Status, Visas, Permits & Papers](#) [Immigration](#)

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