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PRACTICAL TRAVELER; Tighter Borders, More Delays

By SUSAN STELLIN

SECURING the nation's borders -- keeping out those who are not welcome without dissuading those who are -- is a daunting task.

As with any barrier, there are inevitable downsides. Recent measures to tighten security at United States borders are no exception, not only angering foreign visitors but also making it harder for Americans to venture abroad and return with the ease they once had.

These new obstacles include measures other countries have adopted in response to American policies, such as higher fees for travel visas or increased scrutiny of visa applications, as well as the potential for delays re-entering the United States. Tighter security at American borders can mean longer lines to cross from Canada or Mexico or pass through customs and immigration at the airport, particularly when the threat level is raised, as well as extra screening even for some travelers carrying United States passports.

For the most part, these are merely inconveniences, not a reason to pass up bargain fares to foreign destinations or an invitation to visit a friend in Canada. But they're worth factoring into your travel plans.

Higher Visa Fees

After the United States raised its application fee for a tourist visa to \$100 in December 2002 (the second increase that year), a number of countries responded by raising their charges for Americans applying for travel visas, based on a longstanding principle of reciprocity in these matters. The State Department said the higher fees were needed to cover the cost of more rigorous security.

Since then, Brazil, Russia and Turkey have raised their fees for a basic tourist visa for Americans to \$100, and Chile has imposed a \$100 entry fee, payable on arrival. Other countries that have matched or exceeded the \$100 charge tend to be less popular travel destinations, such as Liberia and Pakistan, while a few nations still courting American tourists have raised their fees but have not matched the United States increase. For instance, China now charges United States citizens \$50 for a tourist visa (compared with \$30 for those from other countries), and India charges Americans \$60 for a tourist visa (\$40 for others).

Beyond the higher fees, there is a trend toward stricter enforcement of bureaucratic requirements that might have been overlooked in the past. "Some countries have gotten tighter and are now scrutinizing documents very thoroughly," said Aaron Caplan, information technology officer for Perry International, a Chicago company that facilitates passport and visa services for travelers. Mr. Caplan monitors other countries' travel policies and updates the company's Web site (perryvisa.com) with the latest changes. The State Department's Web page listing foreign entry requirements, at travel.state.gov/foreignentryreqs.html, hasn't had a thorough update since June, so some information is out of date.

Countries with recent policy changes include China, which no longer accepts visa applications by mail, so travelers must appear in person at an embassy or consulate or pay extra to send someone on their behalf. Russia, which requires confirmation from a hotel saying a traveler

will be staying there, is being more picky about that paperwork, Mr. Caplan said, adding that Russia and Brazil are more carefully scrutinizing the reason given for the trip. Brazil, piqued by the United States policy of fingerprinting and photographing visitors from some foreign countries that began Jan. 5, now does the same to Americans.

Closer to home, on March 1 Barbados began requiring Americans to have a valid passport when visiting, and Mr. Caplan said he has heard from clients who were asked for a passport or proof of citizenship when traveling to Canada. (Katherine de Vos, a spokeswoman for the Canadian Border Services Agency in Ottawa, confirmed that since the Sept. 11 attacks, border agents have been more vigilant about checking documents and conducting interviews.) Even the United States is getting stricter about issuing passports: as of Feb. 5, parents applying for a passport for a minor must take the child with them. Another frustration travelers crossing the border may find is a longer line to get back in. At the Canadian and Mexican borders, lines have been an issue since security was increased after Sept. 11, particularly when the threat level is raised.

"Coming back into the U.S., you can wait hours and hours," said Brian Maule, a consultant who lives in Poulsbo, Wash., near Seattle and frequently drives to Canada for work and to spend time at a vacation home on Vancouver Island. "They're looking into each car, talking to each person, they're getting more critical if you don't have the right documents," he said, though he doesn't think the extra scrutiny is worth the inconvenience. "The system is still so easy to defeat. That's what makes you cringe."

While United States Customs and Border Protection, a division of the Department of Homeland Security, could not provide statistics about average wait times at border crossings, the agency posts current wait times for more than 50 locations on its Web site, www.customs.gov, and drivers can also call local numbers to find out about delays.

"If and when we do go to an orange alert, it means more intensive inspections of all arriving cars, trucks and pedestrians," said Vincent Bond, a spokesman for Customs and Border Protection's field office in San Diego. "It is possible it would increase the wait times, and people really need to adjust their schedules accordingly."

But Mike Milne, a spokesman for the division in Seattle, pointed out that the threat level isn't the only factor determining wait times, citing the value of the Canadian dollar, the season, whether it's a holiday and border staffing levels as other variables.

Longer Lines

The situation at international airports is more difficult to assess. Customs and Border Protection posts data on its Web site about average waiting times to pass through the initial immigration inspection point at 16 airports, citing an average of 33 minutes at those airports from Jan. 1 through Feb. 10. But the data does not include wait times for passengers selected for secondary screening, or the wait to collect luggage and pass through the secondary inspection point, or the time to recheck luggage for connecting flights.

David Morse, a business owner from Santa Monica who travels for work or pleasure once a month, said he is regularly pulled aside for a secondary screening when re-entering the United States and now builds that time into his travel plans. "The problem is also when you exit customs and have to recheck your bags," he said. "That can take 45 minutes." He's considering writing the government to ask about his situation but is sanguine about delays.

"Patience is a virtue in this," Mr. Morse said. "One of the problems is, we're learning a new culture and nobody knows the rules anymore. Half the game is, just be prepared. The other thing is, always be nice. It's like a roller coaster: you may hate the ride but it's going to end."