

# Los Angeles Times



TRACY LEE SILVERIA / Los Angeles Times

SIGHTSEEING: An American tourist takes pictures upon arriving in the Dominican Republic. That nation's tourism-related revenue is projected to fall sharply.

## Fearing for the island jaunt

A looming U.S. passport rule threatens to harm tourism-dependent Caribbean economies.

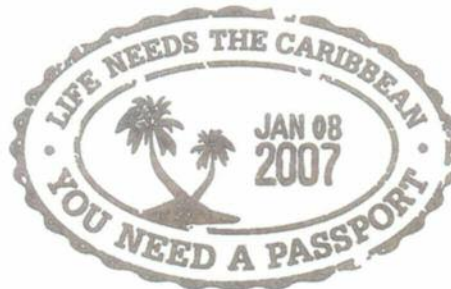
By CAROL J. WILLIAMS  
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NASSAU, Bahamas — "Life Needs the Caribbean. You Need a Passport."

That advertising slogan, posted at airports throughout the Caribbean, has this tourism-dependent area bracing for a hurricane-force blow.

For decades, U.S. citizens have escaped winter's ravages for the white-sand beaches on a whim. When reentering the United States, they have needed to show only a driver's license or birth certificate. But post-9/11 security concerns led Congress to pass a law requiring travelers entering the country by air or sea to carry passports. That provision takes effect Jan. 8. The law also calls for people who cross by land from Canada and Mexico to show passports beginning Jan. 1, 2008.

Hotels, airlines, restaurants and tour operators across the region were forecasting \$2.6 billion



**NEW RULES:** The Caribbean hospitality industry is trying to remind American travelers to get their paperwork in order.

in lost revenue and massive layoffs when the U.S. government last month added what Caribbean nations considered insult to injury. Under pressure from the primarily U.S.-based cruise ship industry, Washington granted a reprieve from the passport requirement until June 2009 for arrivals by land and sea.

The moves have triggered cries of injustice among those catering to air travelers.

"The U.S. Congress has effec-

tively laid off 188,300 Caribbean workers" in the region's \$21-billion tourism industry, World Travel & Tourism Council President Jean-Claude Baumgarten said, citing a study last year by the council and the Caribbean Hotel Assn. on the passport requirement.

The study projected the harshest consequences for the Bahamas and Jamaica, where U.S. visitors account for 87% and 73%, respectively, of the tourism

market.

Caribbean Tourism Organization chief Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace compared the effect on the islands to "a Category 6 hurricane."

With 80% of U.S. visitors to Jamaica arriving without passports, the Jamaican tourist board has launched an education campaign about the new law. Tourism marketers plan to take their message — and complimentary cups of the country's famous Blue Mountain coffee — to commuter terminals in New York, Chicago and Washington beginning Nov. 15 to urge potential visitors to Jamaica to get passports.

According to the tourism council study, Jamaica stands to lose more than half of its \$2-billion annual tourism revenue and 14,000 tourism-related jobs unless its U.S. visitors react quickly to the new Department of Homeland Security requirement. First-time applicants typically must wait eight weeks for a passport, unless they add a \$60 expedited-service fee to the standard charge of \$97 for an adult or \$82 for a child.

To mitigate the new costs, [See Caribbean, Page C8]

# Islands worry about effect of U.S. security rule

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some Jamaican hotels have created a "Passport to Rewards" program, offering a \$97 credit redeemable for spa treatments, golf green fees, room upgrades and other goodies for adult guests who can show Jamaica is the first stamp in their new passports.

One region-wide resort chain has embraced the impending change to make its vacation packages truly all-inclusive.

"Our message to our guests is clear: 'Go out and get your passports and SuperClubs will pay for it,'" said John Issa, executive chairman of the company, which has 10 resorts in Jamaica, the Bahamas, Curacao and the Dominican Republic.

The effect of the law on the Caribbean's dominant industry is expected to vary from island to island, with little disruption expected in places such as French-speaking Martinique and Cuba, the latter largely off-limits to U.S. citizens, thanks to Washington's economic embargo of the island. But the tourism council projects revenue could fall \$1.13 billion for Jamaica, \$485 million for the Do-

minican Republic and \$446 million for the Bahamas.

High-end destinations such as Turks and Caicos, Antigua and Barbuda and St. Kitts and Nevis are expected to weather the passport change better than islands catering to the budget-minded.

"Antigua is not a destination that typically attracts the first-time traveler. We're not an impulse destination," said Derede Samuel-Whitlock, U.S. director of tourism for Antigua and Barbuda.

She recently acquired passports for her U.S.-born children and deemed the process speedier and more efficient than she had expected, though not cheap at nearly \$300 for the 3-year-old twins.

Even at upscale hotels like Antigua's Hawksbill by Rex Resort, innkeepers worry that the cost of acquiring passports for a whole family might discourage some travelers.

"Only 27% of Americans have passports — that's worrying," said Hawksbill manager Richard Michelin, adding that occupancy at his resort had just begun to



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**SEA TREK:** Off Miami, a passenger begins a Caribbean cruise. The passport rule was deferred for those entering the U.S. by water.

bounce back after a major falloff following the 9/11 attacks that made the hotel's U.S. clientele fearful of air travel.

Airlines serving the Caribbean also stand to lose business but have taken the passport issue in stride, viewing it as just the latest in an ever-changing stream of security measures to affect air travel since 9/11.

American Airlines and its American Eagle subsidiary, which have 130 flights daily to the Caribbean, have posted a notice of the passport requirement on

their website and mailed out reminders to 650,000 customers with records of international travel, said spokeswoman Minnette Velez.

"People who fly, fly. People who are on cruise ships take cruise ships," said Delta Air

Lines spokesman Anthony Black, predicting little effect on air travel to the region. "Typically, people who travel internationally have passports."

In the short term, the region's tourism purveyors fear losing hotel guests to the thriving cruise industry, which brings more tourists to the Caribbean than airlines.

Although 18 million cruise ship passengers visited the 23 nations that make up the Caribbean Tourism Organization last year, compared with 15 million overnight visitors, Vanderpool-Wallace noted that the seafaring day-trippers accounted for only about 5% of tourist spending.

Richard Kahn, a spokesman for the Caribbean tourism group, said the region's governments and tourism businesses planned a last-ditch lobbying effort in Washington this month in hopes

of persuading State Department officials to rescind the January deadline.

"Nobody understands what the difference would be in letting a cruise passenger go into the Caribbean and back to the United States without a passport as opposed to an air passenger, if it's a security issue," Kahn said.

The campaign is being backed by the cruise industry and even destinations unaffected by the passport rule, such as the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, because of fears of a region-wide loss of patronage.

Kahn said: "If people think they cannot travel without passports, they are going to stop thinking about the Caribbean in general and that will affect everyone."

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