

PRACTICAL TRAVELER) DOCUMENTS

New U.S. Passport Rules Worry Industry

By AMY GUNDERSON

PATRICIA SAIZAN, a travel agent who books about 250 cruises a year, wasted no time in reacting to the recent announcement that passports would be required for American visitors to the Caribbean by year end.

"I put out an e-mail blast telling my clients to start getting their passports now to avoid the rush," said Ms. Saizan, who estimates that only about 40 percent of travelers she works with have passports.

The rules proposed by the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security will eventually require travelers from the United States to carry passports or other secure travel documents to all foreign destinations, including Canada, Mexico, Bermuda and the Caribbean — destinations that previously did not require such documentation.

The rules will be phased in over the next few years, beginning Dec. 31, when travelers returning from the Caribbean and Panama will need to have a passport to re-enter the United States. On Dec. 31, 2006, the requirement will be extended to Americans traveling by air and sea from Mexico and Canada, and on Jan. 1, 2008, to travelers returning by car or bus from those countries.

The rules are in a comment period and will be completed this summer, but already tourism professionals in the affected countries, as well as the cruise industry, are voicing concern. Even President Bush recently said that the rules could hinder the "honest flow of traffic" and requested that the policy be reviewed.

"This is ludicrous in every sense," said Tony Pollard, the president of the Hotel Association of Canada. "What we foresee is people not going across the border."

But with some 1.1 million people crossing the borders of the United States each day, mostly by land, standardizing the documentation may actually shorten wait times, according to United States Customs and Border Protection. "The last thing we want is to hinder travel along the border," said Christina Halsey, a deputy assistant commis-



Katherine Streeker

sioner at the agency, noting that now most travelers present a driver's license to border agents, along with a birth certificate, of which there are many variations.

According to the State Department, about 60 million Americans have passports. Julie LaLonde isn't one of them, though she makes frequent trips to Canada from her home in Grand Island, N.Y., with her family.

"We don't have passports. We have a stack of birth certificates, Social Security cards and school ID's," Ms. LaLonde said.

"The expense is a concern." (The passport fee is \$67.)

The Caribbean islands are among the first areas affected by the proposed rules, and the cruise industry is balking. "It is a good thing to have a standard ID, but the first deadline is too tight," said Lyndsay Rossman, spokeswoman for the International Council of Cruise Lines trade association. She noted that many passengers had already booked cruises for 2006 and may not have factored in the cost of passports.

Tourism operators are concerned that last-minute travel will be curtailed. "A minimum of 25 percent of our overnight visitors do not enter with a United States passport," said Frank Comito, a vice president of the Bahamas Hotel Association. "Many come over for a long weekend. They aren't international travelers — they live in Florida and almost treat us as a next-door neighbor."

Not all destinations are surprised. "We sort of expected this," said Regina LaBega, of the St. Maarten Tourist Bureau. "People tend to book trips not as far in advance, so it might affect those."

Some resorts are already taking action. The SuperClubs all-inclusive resorts are crediting passport costs to packages booked next year at 10 Caribbean properties.

Other organizations and businesses are also expressing concern. According to the Student and Youth Travel Association, a nonprofit trade association, everything from class trips to summer exchange programs could be deterred by the cost of securing a passport.

And Darrell Bryan, general manager of Clipper Navigation, a Seattle-based company that runs the Victoria Clipper, a high-speed ferry service that transports 300,000 passengers a year between Seattle and Victoria, British Columbia, says the new requirements will deter travel.

"We view it as having a devastating effect on our business," said Mr. Bryan, who notes that the many ferry passengers take last-minute day trips.

But some in the tourism industry are not worried. The Mexico Tourism Board said in a statement that it did not anticipate that the requirements will have any real effect because most Americans visitors already carry passports.

Hotel operators in Bermuda echoed that sentiment. "Most of the travelers here are pretty sophisticated," said John Harvey, chief executive of the Bermuda Hotel Association. "They will have that already."

One sure thing is that more people will be getting passports. The State Department estimates that as many as 12 million people will get passports next year, up from an estimated 10.5 million this year. ■