

# WHAT IS THE VISA WAIVER PROGRAM?

The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) allows citizens from designated countries to travel to the United States for business or leisure trips for up to 90 days without first obtaining a “tourist” (B-1/B-2) visa from a U.S. Embassy or Consulate. There are 38 countries currently participating in the program.<sup>1</sup>

The VWP is an important tool for increasing security standards, advancing information sharing, strengthening international partnerships, and promoting legitimate trade and travel to the United States.

In 2014, more than 20.3 million visitors to the United States, 60 percent of all overseas visitors—i.e., international visitors other than those from our next-door neighbors Canada and Mexico—arrived through the VWP.

While visiting the United States, they generated \$190 billion in economic output for the U.S. economy and supported nearly one million jobs. Largely as a result of the VWP, travel is our nation’s number one services export, generating a trade surplus of \$75.6 billion in 2014.

The Secretary of Homeland Security, in consultation with the Secretary of State, is authorized to designate those countries eligible to participate in the VWP, based on a determination that the country meets the applicable statutory and policy requirements.

The U.S. government supports expansion to countries able to meet the statutory and policy standards and willing and able to enter into a closer partnerships with the United States.

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## Key Statutory and Policy Requirements for VWP Membership

- A visa-refusal rate below 3 percent as a condition for initial designation.
- Issuance of International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)-compliant electronic-passports.
- Timely reporting of all lost and stolen passports to the United States via INTERPOL or other means as designated by the Secretary of Homeland Security.
- Completion of information sharing agreements with the United States on travelers who may pose a terrorist or criminal threat and on lost and stolen passport reporting.
- Repatriation of citizens ordered removed from the United States.
- Initial and continuing reviews to determine that country’s VWP designation does not compromise U.S. security, law enforcement, and immigration interests. These reviews are conducted by the Department of Homeland Security. The reviews’ findings and the overall determination are transmitted to the U.S. Congress.
- Independent intelligence assessment of each VWP country in conjunction with the DHS reviews noted above.

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VWP travelers must first obtain approval through DHS’s Electronic System for Travel Authorization prior to commencing travel to the United States. Through ESTA DHS is able to identify matches to the Terrorist Screening Database maintained by the FBI and to thousands of lost and stolen passports before a traveler is allowed to board a flight to the United States.

Furthermore, Nationals of countries designated into the VWP may only be admitted to the United States under the program if the country extends (or agrees to extend) reciprocal visa-free travel privileges to U.S. citizens and nationals.

<sup>1</sup> Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Republic of Malta, San Marino, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan and the United Kingdom