

DO YOU NEED A PASSPORT?

The answer to that question has changed somewhat since the events of 9/11. With travel between countries being scrutinized more carefully, there are more destinations than ever that now require a passport for entry. So, if you're toying with the idea of heading off to Europe next summer, or Australia this winter, the answer is a definitive "yes". If you have your sights set on the Caribbean or Central America, I still recommend a passport, even if you're simply going on a cruise.

Why is a passport important? It's important because it is the most recognized form of identification you can carry and it will cause you the least number of headaches once you have one. It also saves you having to carry and keep track of multiple documents such as a birth certificate, drivers' license, and marriage license.

So, if you're thinking that now would be a good time to bite the bullet and finally get that passport that you've been planning to get for years, your right. Fall is one of the least busy seasons for passport processing, which means a shorter line for you to wait in at the post office and a quicker turn around from the processing center. It's easy to obtain the forms that you need to apply. Simply go to the US State Department website at <http://travel.state.gov> and follow the links under "Passport Applications & Forms" at the bottom of the page.

In addition to your filled out form, you'll need to supply proof of citizenship, a set of identical color passport photos, (You have to have these professionally done. The passport office will not accept digital photos that you have taken yourself.) proof of identity, and the appropriate fees for obtaining a passport (currently \$85 for persons over the age of 16 and \$70 for children 15 and younger). The average processing time is usually four to six weeks, though it can take as long as two months in the peak spring processing month.

Once you receive your passport, it is important that you sign it immediately. The passport is not valid unless it is signed. Adult passports are valid for 10 years from the date of issue. Those issued for children are valid for 5 years from the date of issue.

If you've had a passport previously but have let it expire, you can renew your passport at a current cost of \$55 as long as you were at least 16 years of age when your previous passport was issued and it has not been expired for more than five years. In addition to it being less expensive than applying for a brand new one, the paperwork is also only about half as much when applying for a renewal. The biggest advantage is that you can simply drop it in the mail yourself instead of having to apply in person at the post office. However, you still have to submit new, current passport photos. Passport renewals are usually processed in about four weeks or less.

It is extremely important that once you make the move to using your passport as your main form of identification when traveling, that all of your travel documents match your name as it appears on your passport.

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