

TRAVEL WEEKLY

247 Days to Obtain a U.S. Visa? Travel Groups Outraged by Waits

Johanna Jainchill

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WASHINGTON -- The travel industry is calling wait times for visitors to obtain U.S. visas, which has swelled from 17 days on average in March 2020 to 247 days this summer, "shameful" and a roadblock to a full travel recovery.

Concerns were raised at U.S. Travel Association's [Future of Travel Mobility conference](#) here last month, where panelists decried waits of more than 500 days in some markets just to get an interview for a visa.

Every day a visitor waits "is a day they might decide to go somewhere else," said William Hornbuckle, CEO of MGM Resorts, citing wait times in Mexico of up to 556 days. "People don't come when they have to wait 556 days.

"There's an urgent need to increase staff in consulates, develop virtual visa processing and hold the State Department accountable to reduce processing times," Hornbuckle said.

Geoff Freeman, the freshly appointed CEO of U.S. Travel, said that reducing visa wait times is a top priority for U.S. Travel.

"The visa wait times right now, to put it frankly, are shameful," he said. For "people who want to do nothing other than come here, spend their money and go home with a better impression of the United States, there's absolutely no excuse for making them wait to these extraordinary lengths to do that."

A report from the Cato Institute in July referred to a "wait times apocalypse" for tourist and business traveler visas of 247 days on average, up from 17 days before March 2020.

"This is an astounding eight-month wait to visit the United States for a period of at most just 90 days and usually much less than that," the report's author wrote, citing figures showing that in July,

more than half of consulates were scheduling tourist and business traveler interviews six months out or more, and 27% were scheduling a year or more away.

Impact on inbound groups

The National Tour Association (NTA) also said that addressing extreme visa wait times is among its top priorities. Catherine Prather, president of the NTA, is encouraging members to reach out to their representatives on the issue.

"What many people may not understand is that while leisure travel has recovered and actually surpassed 2019 levels, the recovery of packaged travel has lagged," Prather said. "And many of our international, inbound visitors experience the United States as part of a package or a group."

Prather is getting firsthand experience in how visa wait times prevent travel: At least four tour operators who wanted to attend the NTA's Travel Exchange conference in November are unable to get appointments for visa interviews in time.

"It's a loss for them, for our U.S. businesses, our economy and for the travelers who would have been given the opportunity to explore all we have to offer," she said.

Prather recently meet with State Department officials to discuss what is being done. "I know they understand our pain points," she said, but she added that the goal conveyed to her of being fully staffed by the end of 2023 is not soon enough.

Travel advisors that book international travelers on domestic tours are also being impacted. Craig Hsu, vice president of Travel Design USA, which specializes in Asia, decided to drop its business that involved getting visas for clients coming to the U.S. due to the amount of time it was taking to get them processed.

"We decided, strategically, for our business model it's probably better to not do that at the moment," he said. "We had to call and call and be on hold and it just it just took too much of a toll on our on our time. With the return we got, we weighed it and decided it's not worth it."

Why are the wait times so long?

Like many slowdowns and snags in travel, Covid is at least partly to blame.

A State Department official said that the pandemic resulted in "profound reductions" in its visa processing capacity.

"Many of our embassies and consulates were at times only able to offer emergency services," the official said. "Some of our embassies and consulates are still facing Covid-19-related restrictions, and many continue to face staffing challenges that began during the pandemic."

Freeman acknowledged that embassies worldwide face the same workforce issues businesses have at home, but he added that those issues can't "become an excuse."

"Everybody in the industry is suffering from a workforce issue," he said. "But guess what? These hotels are running at 90%-plus occupancy. Look at airlines, look elsewhere. They're having to find a way to make it work. Workforce shortages cannot become an excuse. For these wait times that are exponentially worse than they've ever been before, find the solution."

Freeman said that U.S. Travel has long encouraged the use of videoconferencing to conduct visa interviews and for years "heard every excuse in the book" for why it can't work.

"Our entire globe moved to videoconferencing during the pandemic. And it worked," he said.

He pointed to a time during the Obama administration, when wait times had increased to more than 100 days in China and Brazil.

The travel industry helped convince the administration to take the necessary steps to lower the waits, and the State Department made it a priority, he said.

"We need that same type of leadership within the State Department today," he said. "We need a clear message from the White House that this is unacceptable. That this is an area in dire need of attention."

State Department: Things are getting better

According to the State Department official, the situation is improving.

"We are reducing appointment wait times in all visa classes as quickly as possible, worldwide," the official said. "In fact, visa processing is rebounding faster than projected, after a near-complete shutdown and freezing of resources during the pandemic."

"The wait time for a routine visa appointment at half of our overseas posts is less than four months, and at some posts is far shorter than that," the official said, adding that such visas are at 80% of pre-pandemic levels and "growing steadily."