

Visa Waiver Travelers Now Required To Use Electronic System For Travel Authorization

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As of January 12, 2009, Visa Waiver Program ("VWP") travelers will be required to use the Electronic System for Travel Authorization ("ESTA") to obtain an electronic travel authorization before boarding a carrier to travel by air or sea to the U.S. under the VWP.

What is the Visa Waiver Program?

The VWP enables foreign nationals of certain countries to travel to the United States for business or tourism for stays of 90 days or less without obtaining a visa. The Visa Waiver Program was introduced in 1986 with the aim of facilitating tourism and short term business visits to the United States, and allowing the **U.S. Department of State** to focus consular resources on addressing higher risks. To be eligible for a visa waiver under the VWP, the traveler seeking admission to the United States must be a citizen of a country that has been designated by the **Secretary of Homeland Security** as a "program country".

As of now, the following countries have been designated as program countries: Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

What is the Electronic System for Travel Authorization?

The ESTA is an automated system that assists in determining eligibility to travel to the United States under the VWP and whether such travel poses any law enforcement or security risk. At least 72 hours before traveling to the U.S. under the VWP, one must access the ESTA website at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov/> and complete the online application. In most cases, applicants will receive one of the following responses within seconds: (1) Authorization Approved: Travel is authorized, (2) Travel Not Authorized: The traveler must obtain a nonimmigrant visa at a U.S. Embassy or Consulate before traveling to the U.S., or (3) Authorization Pending: The traveler will need to check the ESTA Web site for updates within 72 hours to receive a final response. An approved ESTA will be valid for multiple entries within a two year period or to the expiration of the traveler's passport, whichever is sooner.

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