

Another Pain Point in a Summer of Travel Woes: Getting a Passport

If you're urgently in need of a new or updated passport, brace yourself: Options have narrowed — and it's likely going to cost you.

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It's a summer of headaches for travelers: Airfares are surging, checked bags are disappearing, and flights are being canceled in record numbers. And now there's another pain point to add to the mix. If you're in need of a new or updated passport, your options are limited — and it's likely going to cost you.

Like the price of gas and groceries, passport fees have gone up across the board: As of January, a first-time adult passport now costs a total of \$165, including the \$35 acceptance fee; a renewed adult passport costs \$130 and a passport for a minor costs a total of \$135. Each is an increase of \$20 over 2021 prices.

Monthslong delays and a severe shortage of in-person appointments have plagued passport applicants since early 2020. Now, more than two years in, wait times are still longer than before the pandemic, and for those who need a passport in five weeks or less, solutions are more limited than ever.

The elusive last-minute option

The online booking option for appointments at U.S. Passport Agencies — the only way to obtain a same-day passport for emergency travel — was eliminated last summer following reports of scammers using bots to stockpile and resell appointments. Those with urgent travel needs are now consigned to spending long wait times on the phone attempting to secure a spot. You can only book an appointment if you have proof of imminent travel within 14 days, and the appointment itself must occur within three business days of your departure.

And even when an appointment can be found within the proper time frame, there's no guarantee it's in the same city or even the same state as the applicant, forcing those in need of travel documents to fly or drive several hours just to get their passport on time.

“It's a disaster,” said Michael Wildes, the managing partner of the law firm Wildes & Weinberg, P.C., which specializes in immigration law. He says that although his office has seen the number of urgent requests for passport help dip slightly in recent months, he is still fielding several hundred a month.

Mr. Wildes, like many immigration attorneys, often relies on private courier companies to help process rushed passports. But this option has also narrowed.

The services of courier companies, often called passport expeditors, were temporary halted in March 2020 as part of a wider pandemic shutdown. After coming back online last summer, the number of applications that each individual U.S. Passport Agency now allows to be handled by a courier has been reduced. And with fewer slots available, prices have gone up in tandem.

In some cases, said David Alwadish, the founder of ItsEasy.com, a passport and visa expediting service, the number of passports that these private companies can now handle each day has been cut by as much as 75 percent. As a result, some private expeditors are now charging up to \$3,000.

“Their fees are through the ceiling,” Mr. Wildes said.

For applicants who take the more traditional route and apply for renewal or a new passport directly through the U.S. State Department, routine passport service, which once took as little as six weeks is now taking between eight and 11 weeks. Rushed service, which costs an additional \$60 and took anywhere from a few days to three weeks before Covid-19, is currently running between five and seven weeks. This is an improvement from last year, when the State Department, struggling to make headway on a massive backlog of passport applications that piled up in early 2020, admitted processing times for passports had stretched to as long as 18 weeks.

Efforts to end “passport purgatory”

“It’s moved some, but there’s still a huge backlog,” said the Senate majority leader, Chuck Schumer, whose office, he said, has been fielding a steady stream of requests from constituents for help pushing passport applications through bureaucratic red tape. Over the past year, Mr. Schumer has been vocal about the challenges facing passport applications. He called on the State Department to end “passport purgatory” by increasing staffing and helped negotiate a budget increase of nearly \$211 million for the Bureau of Consular Affairs for 2023 to help ease the crunch.

“There’s a lot of pressure from all parts. I think this is bipartisan,” he said in a phone call. “So many people are now applying for passports. It’s like for two years the dam was up and now the dam is broken.”

Rena Bitter, the assistant secretary for consular affairs at the State Department, said in an email that the infusion of cash was necessary because the department’s budget had been dealt a real blow by the pandemic.

“We have taken several steps to reduce wait times during the pandemic, including instituting overtime for our employees, temporarily assigning additional staff to adjudicate passports, and hiring additional staff,” she wrote in the email.

Navigating the imbroglio

For some Americans who booked summer travel, the passport imbroglio isn’t just costing them money. It’s also costing them time.

In May, Paula Knight, 33, was gearing up for a family trip to Mallorca when she realized she, her husband and her 11-year-old daughter would all need to renew their passports before traveling in early July. And her son, who is 8 months old, didn't have one at all.

She first reached out to a private passport expeditor in her hometown, Austin, Texas, but after paying them more than \$500 in hopes of getting the passports within a few days, she was surprised to be told that they expected the process to take five to seven weeks, and she'd have to deliver the paperwork to a passport office herself.

But all of the local passport offices require an appointment and were booked solid for months. The closest passport office that took walk-in appointments was two hours away, in Lampasas, Texas, and she made the drive there twice to get her family's documents processed and sent off to the State Department.

A month later, she realized she might not get the documents in time. So Ms. Knight began calling the National Passport Center's appointment line every morning, where hold times can stretch past the 15-minute mark, in hopes of securing a same-day appointment at a U.S. Passport Agency. For a week, she called, waited on hold, and each time was told the only available appointments in the entire country were in Hawaii.

"We have a government passport agency in Houston, which would be a two-hour drive for me. We have one in Dallas, which would be a five-hour drive, and I could do that, too," she said. "But there's nothing available. I'm feeling pretty powerless over it all. We're doing everything we were told to do, and it's taken since early May."

Ms. Knight finally secured an appointment in El Paso, which is 11 hours away by car. She pushed her family's trip back four days to accommodate the appointment and, opting not to drive such a long distance with a baby, spent \$800 on a hotel and \$1,600 on airfare for herself, her husband and her two children to make it to the appointment before her departure to Spain. In early July, with just days to spare,

the family's passports arrived by mail and they ended up not requiring the same-day appointment after all. (They received credit for the canceled flight, and a refund on the hotel room.)

Mr. Alwadish, of ItsEasy.com, said that nearly 75 percent of his customers are now choosing to expedite their passports as Ms. Knight did, creating a Catch-22 in which travelers seeking to circumvent one backlog are now creating another.

In the meantime, Americans should not risk going abroad with a passport that will expire soon. An emergency measure allowing U.S. citizens to return home on an expired passport, enacted last year after reports of tens of thousands of U.S. citizens getting stranded abroad, was allowed to lapse in late June.

By the end of the year, however, travelers may be able to renew their passports online: President Biden signed an executive order in December mandating the creation of an online passport renewal system, but it's not up and running yet. State Department officials say they launched a pilot program in February with a limited audience of 25,000 volunteers, and are planning for a nationwide launch before the end of 2022.

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