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Posted on Sun, Mar. 14, 2004

Patriot Act behind the change in passports

By BEVERLY BEYETTE Los Angeles Times

You won't be able to tell by looking, but by mid-2005 new U.S. passports will be "biometrically enabled."

Embedded within your passport will be a microchip containing your facial features, reduced to digital form from your passport photo. As you enter a country, the inspector will simply wave the passport across an electronic reader and your face will pop up on the computer screen, making possible an instant comparison with your passport photo.

Under the USA Patriot Act, Congress decreed that by Oct. 26, citizens of 27 visa-waiver countries – mostly European nations, but also Australia, New Zealand, Brunei, Iceland and Singapore – will need visas to visit the United States if they do not have biometric passports.

Oct. 26 is the target date for rolling out biometric passports, but it probably will be mid-2005 before they are routinely issued, said Stuart Patt, spokesman for the State Department's consular affairs bureau.

"Congress didn't require us" to issue biometric passports, Patt said, "but we are, because it is most secure form of protecting identity. And if we're expecting our visa-waiver friends to do it should do it."

The visa-waiver countries send 15 million visitors to the United States annually. The order has created controversy abroad, where some deem the deadline unrealistic.

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Security concerns also prompted the last major change to U.S. passports, which was before Sept. 2001. Starting early in 1999, the agency began phasing out the old-style passport, in which the photo was glued to the first page and sealed with a plastic laminate. On newer passports, photos are digitally transferred onto the laminate.

"The number of photo substitutions we've had using this new digitized style you can count on one hand, whereas photo substitutions on the older passport were really pretty common – worldwide easily in the thousands" in a given year, Patt said.

Last year, the bureau's Passport Services issued 7.3 million passports, up slightly from 2002. Passports are valid for 10 years – five years for those who are 15 or younger when they get them. Here's what you need to know to get one:

The State Department handles only expedited requests for those who can prove they need a passport or visa within two weeks. Appointments are mandatory and can be scheduled at the National Passport Information Center's toll-free number, (877) 487-2778.

For others, passport acceptance facilities, such as post offices and government offices, take applications at specified hours; no appointment is needed. A complete list by ZIP Code is available on the Web site travel.state.gov/passport_services.html.

The State Department advises allowing six weeks to get a passport.

First-time applicants must apply in person, but renewals may be made by mail. Applications can be downloaded from the above Web site.


You will need:

- Proof of citizenship, such as an original birth certificate with raised seal or a naturalization certificate. For a renewal, your old passport is acceptable.
- Two identical front-view photos, 2-by-2 inches, black-and-white or color, taken in the last six months.

Fees for a first passport issued at a passport acceptance facility are \$85. Accepted forms of payment vary by location. Renewals cost \$55 by mail, payable by check or money order. The fee for expedited service at a passport agency is \$60, making the total \$145 for a new application and \$115 for a renewal. Agencies accept credit cards.

Customer service representatives are on duty at the National Passport Information Center from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Central time Monday through Friday to answer questions.

If your passport is lost or stolen while you're abroad, you should notify the nearest U.S. consulate or embassy.

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