

Paper Chase

Don't dally if your destination requires a visa

BY LAURA DAILY

So you're headed on that dream vacation. All packed? Passport, toothbrush, change of underwear? Check, check, and you betcha. How about a visa? And we're not talking credit card, but that piece of paper stuck into your passport that gives you entrance into a foreign country. Never needed one before? You aren't alone. And, if you do, don't panic. A visa may seem mysterious and scary, if you imagine some mustachioed official demanding, "Papers, please," at a rural checkpoint, but the truth is most visas aren't that difficult to obtain. Here are some tips for visa success.

Does your destination require a visa? The U.S. Department of State (travel.state.gov/visa) maintains a list of countries that do and don't. Or ask your travel agent. Russia, China, India, and Brazil are some of the countries that require visas. Expect to shell out anywhere from \$15 to \$170.

If so, bone up on the requirements. You may need a copy of your round-trip airline ticket or extra passport-size photos. Russia requires an "invitation letter"—some sort of official government-sanctioned document that indicates your reason for visiting (tour groups and cruise lines provide them to clients)—as well as pages of forms that make completing your tax return seem easy by comparison.

Can I obtain a visa upon arrival? Many countries let you purchase one at the border. And note that some places don't require a visa, per se, but instead charge a "reciprocity tax" (identical to that paid by its citizens to enter the USA) for entry. For example, right now it costs \$140 (credit cards

accepted, thank you very much) for an American to enter Argentina. But it's absolutely, positively not a visa, as signs plastered across immigration control in the Buenos Aires airport remind you.

Need that visa before departure? Allow plenty of time if you plan to do it yourself. Check the country's website for instructions, and follow them to the letter. One goof on your application will see it denied. Unless you live in a city with that country's consulate (Los Angeles has several), you'll need to apply by mail by sending documentation, payment, and your passport to the country's consulate or embassy. Be sure to track your package in case it gets lost or delayed.

Save time with an expeditor. Expeditors boast daily standing appointments at foreign consulates. They know where to go, what to bring, and how to cut through the red tape. They'll not only proofread your application but will literally walk it to the proper authorities. Yes, you'll pay an additional processing fee (starting at about \$55 for nonrush service), but expeditors are a proven value since each foreign embassy has its own ever-changing rules, hours, forms, and accepted methods of payment (some take only cash, others only postal money orders). To find an expeditor, check the member listing on the National Association of Passport and Visa Services website (napvs.org). If using the Internet makes you squeamish, simply call the specific expeditor's toll-free phone number or check with your travel agent. **W**

Denver-based Laura Daily writes about consumer travel strategies.

More information about visas is available at your local Auto Club branch, at AAA.com/travel, or by calling (888) 345-9965.

