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Raising Barriers

Global travelers beware: The challenges around international travel documents are only getting more complicated

By Gillian Upton

People risk management and duty of care have never been so high on a company's priority list. The global pandemic awakened corporations to the challenges of looking after traveling employees. But what's required now is very different to the pre-pandemic period, in large part due to geopolitical unrest and consequent changes in cross-border travel.

We all know to avoid holidays and seasonal peaks and troughs at consulates, but the government roadblocks are being exacerbated by the failure of consulates to return to pre-pandemic staffing levels and beyond that, the tightening up of cross-border security with new visa requirements and requests for biometric data up front.

"Governments want to know whose foreign nationals are in their border," says Brendan Ryan, partner at Fragomen and CEO of Nomadic, a technology solution of Fragomen, a leading global provider of immigration services.

Samantha McKnight, VP of enterprise sales at visa and passport service provider CIBT, echoes his opinion: "Rules and regulations are changing all the time. This year alone there have been 150 changes to immigration rules which means requirements for new documentation and so on." Qatar has recently requested insurance policies by specified insurers, while the Do Not Travel list is being added to all the time.

Ryan adds, "The longer waiting times are an issue but it's not a uniform problem across the world." While the likes of Japan, Canada and Australia have remained stable in this regard, Ryan cites some of the world's hotspots for changing rules: Brazil is re-introducing visas for US nationals later this year, and the European Union is introducing the European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) next year, which is equivalent

Photo: Shutterstock/AI Generated



Global Visa Wait Times

Below are estimated wait times to receive an appointment at a US Embassy or Consulate in a dozen cities across the world, broken out by visa category.

City	Petition-based Temporary Workers (H,L,O, P Q)	Crew and Transit (C,D,C1/D)	Visitors (B1/B2)
Calgary	64 days	828 days	828 days
Chennai	35 days	3 days	507 days
Dubai	43 days		350 days
Istanbul	104 days	4 days	553 days
Lagos	14 days	429 days	429 days
London	15 days	15 days	150 days
Madrid	32 days	37 days	738 days
Manila	29 days	23 days	50 days
Mexico City	14 days	14 days	836 days
Mumbai		2 days	477 days
Ottawa	90 days	150 days	913 days
Shanghai	2 days	17 days	119 days

Source: US Department of State

to the US ESTA process. This marks the end to the visa-free access US nationals enjoy when traveling to most EU countries. Meanwhile, the UK is also introducing an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) later this year which applies to UK visitors who do not need a visa for stays of less than six months, or who do not have a valid UK immigration status prior to traveling.

And the list goes on...

"The EU is also introducing exit checks to have a complete picture of how long visitors are in the region and this is being rolled out now," Ryan says. "They'll do everything they can to smooth its roll-out but it is 100 percent more scrutiny which makes a joke of freedom of movement. The official line is that 'it facilitates genuine travel.'"

"We have a lot of employees in India and we're experiencing real visa issues there, sometimes up to a six-month waiting time."



— Michael Hill, Head of Indirect Procurement & Global Travel Services, Kantar

CIBT's McKnight notes others on the horizon: "The BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are flexing their muscles, too, while there are also challenges around Turkey impacted by events happening geopolitically."

Deep Impact

What these new regulations don't do is facilitate what our industry thrives on: Face-to-face meetings, building client relationships, clinching and signing deals and augmenting business pipelines. It is making undue nonsense of scheduled travel let alone last-minute business trips which characterize this segment of the travel industry.

"We have a lot of employees in India and we're experiencing real visa issues there, sometimes up to a six-month waiting time," explains buyer Michael Hill, head of indirect procurement and global travel services at Kantar, a global consulting and data research firm. "We use CIBT to help expedite the waiting time and they're very good, but I have people complaining, even though it is the embassies and the consulate who drive the appointment schedules."

While leisure travelers have more flexibility on trip dates and destinations, the impact on the business travel world is being far more deeply felt as they often have no choice. McKnight warns travelers not to opt for the visa with the shortest queue – most likely a leisure visa – as it will inevitably lead to repatriation or deportation. The same advice applies to the trend of visa shopping where a traveler applies to the country with the best availability as, she warns, "countries are smart and check for flight and hotel confirmations, so the risks are too high and could lead to more rejections in the future."

Business travelers are now bogged down in the world of the workaround, not all of which translates to success. One such example comes from Donna Liptock, director of corporate accounts at Boscov's Business Travel, part of Globalstar.

"We had one instance where one of our corporate travelers did not get their visa for South Africa in time and the company had to send someone else in their place," Liptock says. "I don't know that there really is a workaround to these wait times but we recommend working with a reputable visa service such as CIBT and have everything expedited."

The longer wait times are generally for the more complex visas as these require in-person interviews. The B1 Business Visitor visa for incoming business travelers to the US on a temporary, non-immigrant basis has waiting times of up to 12 months. Getting appointments for a Schengen visa into Europe have expanded significantly, while trying to secure an appointment for an Indian visa is nigh-on-impossible, the earliest being June 2025. Planning a business trip to Latin America? Then bank on an eight-month wait for an interview to secure a visa.

"The drivers of long wait times include extra volume, different requirements and new workers," notes Tanya Green, SVP, NORAM Operations at BCD Travel.

Sue Berman, senior VP, service delivery for ALTOUR, the corporate travel division of Internova Travel Group, blames the extra volume on the returning travel after the shutdown during

“There are too many moving parts for the travel departments to know what to do. The issues are very nuanced.”



— Samantha McKnight, Vice President,
Enterprise Sales,
CIBT

the pandemic. “Pent-up demand for travel is likely still driving the volumes to be higher – thus wait times are longer.”

These challenges have played into the hands of specialist third party visa and passport companies such as CIBT and Nomadic who claim expedited services and robust working relationships with consulates to curry favor and, with that, the ability to jump to the front of the line. It’s obvious that the issue of getting the right visas and passport renewals is a minefield and for peace of mind, corporates are contracting to an expert in the field.

“There are too many moving parts for the travel departments to know what to do,” says McKnight. “A traveler might have an expired passport with a valid visa inside. Is that valid? Or they might not know what type of visa to apply for, a business visa or a work permit. The issues are very nuanced,” she says.

It also means corporate travel programs are leaning hard on their TMCs for the same service, and to remind them of passport renewal dates and the need for greater business trip planning.

Naturally that increases trip cost, but that may be a small price to get in front of the client. Or maybe not so small in some cases. Liptock recalls one example when a client paid as much as an additional \$700-plus for a same day passport.

The Waiting Game

Wait times for receiving passports vary according to region. BCD’s Green says wait times for passport delivery in the NORAM region are up to 14 weeks. “The wait times are starting to decrease, although the process still takes longer than normal,” she says. “Many countries globally have moved to e-Visas, which are completed quickly.”

In most of the APAC region, where BCD clients use CIBT, delays tend to be more nationality-related but still subject to consulate/embassy operations and holidays/seasonality.

“Others leverage BCD APIs to flag trips with passport requirements, identify expiring passports and proactively notify the traveler when the booking is made,” says Green. “They can even initiate the application process from a link in the message, saving time and money for the customer company.”

The US State Department recommends renewing your passport nine months in advance and TMCs can automatically send reminders for this. The key is to avoid last-minute renewals. Visas are more complicated as each country has specific requirements based on length of stay and citizenship.

Best practice is to rely on third party companies and your TMC, to absorb the extra cost, plan ahead and, in extreme

cases, re-route. “We do have clients that will look at routing due to passport or visa needs as well as political unrest,” explains ALTOUR’s Berman. For trips to China, for example, a good workaround is to apply for a ten-year multiple entry visa.

The other workaround is to explore whether business can be done elsewhere so the trip can no longer be deemed a business trip. If traveling to sign a business contract, for example, Nomadic’s Ryan suggests signing the contract on the plane and not on the ground. “Then it’s not a business trip. That’s super pedantic, but there is a lot of gray area in business travel.”

McKnight highlights the complexities surrounding visa types. “If a traveler is speaking at a conference and it’s unpaid, in some countries that’s counted as work, such as in Germany, but in others it’s not. In some countries mergers and acquisition teams on a trip are counted as work and some countries offer a specific visa for that.”

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— Tanya Green, Senior Vice President, NORAM Operations,
BCD Travel

The entire visa process is an ordeal, says Nomadic’s Ryan. “The complexity of this means that it’s too much for the travel department,” he says, noting that the current challenging situation calls for the global mobility function to take responsibility for business travel and leave the business travel desks to the nuts and bolts of a trip – the air, hotel, car rental, FFPs, compliance management and reporting.

As these new visa requirements roll out, it’s likely that travel departments could face the specter of even more red tape. However, digitalization of processes at consulates could improve the excessive bureaucracy. “It’s an impractical system of consulates that require in-person interviews,” says Brenda Debiasio Romeo, key account and marketing manager at TravelDesk Business Travel Management in Genoa, part of Globalstar. “We hope that over time more and more consulates will opt for online procedures.”

However, she sees no signs of improvement so far. “Perhaps we can hope for some streamlining in passport issuance, as it is a topic often addressed by newspapers and television,” she says. “But we are not very optimistic in any case.”

McKnight is less confident that digitalization will improve wait times. “It’s not faster but less painful. ‘E’ does not stand for easy,” she says.

With immigration such a highly politicized issue and the current geopolitical challenges, the status quo will prevail for the foreseeable future. You have been warned. ■