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Your Passport May Not Be Enough To Travel Abroad

A passport alone often isn't enough to travel internationally these days.

Countries around the world are changing document requirements for entry because of heightened security and child-trafficking concerns. Travelers who don't check for the latest regulations can easily get tripped up.

As you start planning your travel, consider the recent experience from an American family. They made it as far as Dubai before learning that South Africa and Botswana, where they had booked photo safaris, required not just passports, but also raised-seal birth certificates for minor children for entry. The mistake cost them thousands of dollars and days of anxiety.

"It was absolutely devastating," We had been anticipating this trip for a year and a half, and we didn't think we were going to get to do our trip." The trip was salvaged with a four-day scramble by a neighbor who shipped the birth certificates and a travel agent who rebooked safaris that usually fill a year in advance.

Some travelers assume that if a country doesn't require a visa, all you need is a passport. Actually, they may also require birth certificates, immunization records or documentation on when you'll depart or prescription drugs you carry.

It's the countries that don't require visas where snags often happen. If you have a visa, immigration officers know you've been vetted. If you show up with just a passport, they may ask for additional information. This is becoming more common.

Parents traveling with children should always have official copies of birth certificates, as tedious as getting them can be, even if they aren't required.

Immigration authorities may not be aware of current regulations and can always ask for additional documentation. U.S. passports for minors don't show parents' names.

Sometimes rules change because the U.S. has been tightening requirements on foreign visitors. In travel, reciprocity is often the rule, so when the U.S. tightened requirements on Chinese visitors, for example, China made it more difficult for U.S. citizens to get a visa to visit.

Requirements change frequently. In 2021, the European Union will begin requiring U.S. citizens heading to Europe for short stays to fill out a request for a "travel authorization" permit as a stepped-up security measure, mirroring a requirement the U.S. has imposed on European visitors. It will have to be completed at least three days before a trip-essentially a pre-departure security clearance. It's not a visa, and it'll be good for three years.

And restrictions are by no means limited to border crossings. Different airlines and airports have varying luggage policies, and those change, too. Johannesburg's airport, for example, banned soft-sided irregular-shaped luggage on Monday. Luggage must have at least one flat side, even though many safaris allow only soft-sided duffel bags.

The U.S. State Department website offers basic information about other countries and entry requirements but can be incomplete.



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Its page on the Republic of South Africa, for example, seems detailed, noting that a tourist visa isn't required if visiting for 90 days or fewer, for example. It offers a link to the South African embassy's website for more information on traveling with minors. The link goes to a page that no longer exists.

The State Department says it doesn't keep a list of countries with birth-certificate requirements. The South African embassy in Washington says their country's requirements changed again in November. Parents are no longer required to have birth certificates with raised seals for their minor children, but a South African immigration officer could request them. In effect, parents still need to have the documents, even though it isn't spelled out as a requirement. Birth certificates for minors may be necessary to prove that the parents really are the parents so that they avoid kids being taken across the border. You should always check the destination embassy's website. As a result, panicked parents have been calling embassy's more frequently from airports. Travelers must update themselves.

The American family flew from the US to Dubai last summer to start their adventure, which cost more than \$50,000 and included nonrefundable reservations at three safari camps in Botswana and Zambia. Emirates didn't ask for their documentation for South Africa because they planned a three-day stop in Dubai. After a heritage camel tour and hanging out at the Dubai Mall, they went to the airport to fly to Johannesburg. Emirates said it couldn't fly them to South Africa without authenticated birth certificates.

The family called their travel agent from the check-in counter, furious that the agent hadn't told him of the country's birth-certificate requirement. The travel agent went to work rebooking and was also able to send the birth certificates via FedEx, thanks to a helpful neighbor who had a key to their house. After four unplanned days in Dubai, the trip resumed.

In the end everything worked out but it could have gone much worse, financially and personally

Do They Take Visas?

Here are some timely international travel tips:

- Make sure your passport is valid for at least another six months from the end of your travel.
- Carry extra passport photos with white background. Sometimes countries require visas on the spot and need photos.
- Carry at least \$30 to \$50 cash for crossing a border for on-the-spot visa requirements, which can be really just be an entry fee.
- Register with the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, or STEP. It's a free program that provides safety updates and puts you in contact with local embassies and consulates in an emergency.
- Carry a copy of everything in a secure spot-passports, itinerary, birth certificates, medical prescriptions, credit cards you might need to cancel if stolen.
- Have a contact in the U.S. who knows where you are and can help in an emergency.