

---

# New Visa Rules for Russians Traveling to the U.S.

by Joanna Reynolds

*Recent changes, effective August 1, 2003, in the process of applying for visas, are described at this page of the website of the American Embassy in Moscow: [www.usembassy.ru/consular/wwwhcnp.html](http://www.usembassy.ru/consular/wwwhcnp.html). These instructions are quoted in full below:*

“The United States welcomes citizens from around the world who want to visit, study, and do business in our country. However, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 we have had to make the following changes in processing visas for visitors. These changes in procedures reflect our concern for ensuring the safety of U.S. residents and visitors alike, not a desire to make it more difficult for legitimate travelers to enter the U.S.

1. New Personal Appearance Requirements for Non-Immigrant Visa Applicants: As of August 1, 2003, virtually all non-immigrant visa applicants worldwide will be required to appear in person before a consular officer. As this will significantly increase the workloads of all consular sections, applicants should expect the waiting time for appointments to increase significantly. We advise travelers to check the Embassy website ([www.usembassy.ru](http://www.usembassy.ru)) before applying to find out the earliest available date for appointments and plan accordingly. We recommend that you submit your visa application at least 6-8 weeks prior to your estimated travel date. The only people who might be eligible for a visa without an interview are: a) Children 16 years of age or under; b) Persons 60 years of age or older; c) Applicants who

seek reissuance of the same classification of U.S. visa within twelve months of the expiration of a previously issued visa at the Embassy or Consulate for the district in which they are resident [applicants need to submit the original previous visa used to qualify]; d) Applicants for diplomatic or official visas.

However, any applicant may be subject to interview at the discretion of an officer. Once called for an interview, you must appear before a consular officer before a visa can be issued; the interview cannot be waived. If you do not fall into one of the categories listed above, you should plan on being interviewed in order to receive a visa. Once you do receive a visa, we recommend that you keep it current to avoid future delays. Emergencies and expedited interviews will be limited to cases involving death or serious medical problems.

2. Change in Photo Standards: All visa applicants must continue to submit two photographs with their application. However, as of July 22, 2003 the photo standard will change.

a) As of July 22, 2003 the photograph of each visa applicant must be an unmounted full-face photo taken within the past six months. A “full face” photo is one in which the applicant is facing the camera directly, not looking down or to either side. In addition, the face should cover approximately 50 percent of the area of the photo. This means that the head of the applicant, including both face and hair, should be shown from the crown of the head to the tip of the chin on top and bottom, and from hairline side-to-side. It is also preferable that the ears be exposed.

b) The photograph should measure 2 inches square (approximately 50 mm square) with the head centered in the

frame. The head (measured from the top of the hair to the bottom of the chin) should measure between 1 inch to 1 3/8 inch (25mm to 35mm), with the eye level between 1 1/8 inches to 1 3/8 inches (28mm and 35 mm) from the bottom of the photo. Photos may be in color or black and white, but must be taken against a white or off-white background. Photos may be stapled or glued to the application form, but staples should be placed as far away as possible from the applicant’s face.

3. Change in Application Form: As of July 22, 2003, the Embassy will be using a new visa application form. These forms will be available at all ELF-91 offices and on the Embassy’s website [www.usembassy.ru](http://www.usembassy.ru) to be downloaded. All visa applicants will now be required to submit two (2) application forms. One form may be photocopied after the form has been filled in; however there must be an original signature on both copies of the application. Additionally, ALL fields on the application form MUST be completed and should be completed in block letters. Incomplete or unsigned application forms will not be accepted by the Embassy. All other documentation requirements (including the DS-157 and DS-158) remain the same.

4. Machine-Readable Passports Required for all Visa Waiver Travelers: Beginning October 1, 2003, each Visa Waiver Program traveler must present a machine-readable passport in order to enter the U.S. visa-free. While the Visa Waiver Program does not apply to citizens of the Russian Federation, it does apply to many third-country nationals currently resident in Russia. Twenty-seven (27) countries currently participate in the Visa Waiver Program: Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium,

---

---

Brunei, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.”

The United States government believes that the resultant increased security for those living and working in America will outweigh the inconvenience of these new procedures. However, the necessity of traveling to one of four consular offices in all of the Russian Federation can cause hardships for some seeking to come to the U.S, and a journey could prove prohibitive for some.

The conclusion of stricter screening of visa applications has caused a noticeable slowdown in the processing pipeline. Many Chamber companies are being negatively affected by the creation of an additional inadvertent trade barrier – the constriction of the free flow of people across borders for business purposes. The Chamber is aware of many hold-ups in normal business transactions as a result of excessive delays, unexpected denials, and the inability of people to travel great distances to comply with the new requirements.

Consular personnel in Moscow are responsive to concerns that companies have to the extent they can be. A follow-up query by the Chamber yielded the response that only the requirements concerning the photographs had actually changed. Thus, this may be perceived among Embassy personnel as simply a change in the discretionary implementation of the interview requirement. It should be

pointed out, moreover, that this apparent broadening of the interview requirement has been put in force everywhere, not just in Russia, and should not be construed as a deliberate effort to impede travel directed towards citizens of the Russian Federation.

Nevertheless, at a time when the United States government has strained relations with even some of its closest allies, the diplomatic and political fallout from these requirements, which could prove grievously burdensome. The Chamber believes that legitimate travel for legitimate business purposes is in the interest of both the American and Russian economy, and commercial processes should be granted a higher priority, with a streamlined process, over ordinary tourist travel.□

*Joanna Reynolds is a graduate student in economics at the University of Colorado, Denver. She served as a 2003 Summer Intern at the Chamber.*

---