



Consul-General Peter G. Kaestner

Answers Your **Visa Questions**

We've heard it now costs less to get a U.S. visa. Is this true for all visas?

Almost. The \$50 issuance fee was eliminated for the vast majority of visas, including all tourist visas. The total savings for Indian travelers based on last year's visa issuances would equate to Rs. 71 crores (\$16 million).

To get a good deal on my air fare I must book in advance, but then I am worried that I won't get my visa in time and will lose the money I spent on the ticket. How can you help?

First, you should apply for your visa early. Worldwide, approximately 97 per cent of all visas are issued within 48 hours. I believe that in India we meet or beat that worldwide average. Even more importantly in India, at the end of September 2006 the U.S. mission made a historic commitment to eliminate the six-month-long, non-immigrant visa appointment backlog. Our goal is to always have visa appointments available in India.

We continue to work hard to improve visa services in several areas, including decreasing processing times that had been extended in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks. Since tourist visas are routinely issued for 10 years' validity, and appointments are now available within two weeks, it should be easy to take advantage of the good deals on air

fares, but advance planning is crucial.

I am a young man in my 20s and I want to go to the United States to visit my friends and see the sights before I start my working life here at home, just like young Americans take foreign trips after they graduate from university. But I was rejected for a visa because the officer said he wasn't sure I would come back to India. Why does the United States discriminate against people like me?

The United States traditionally has been a very popular destination for immigrants, legal and otherwise. As a result, the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act included a provision, Section 214 (b), that requires that most temporary visa applicants prove to the interviewing consular officer that they have a "residence in a foreign country that they have no intention of abandoning." Since it is so hard to read someone's mind to know their intentions, vice consuls look for tangible evidence of ties, interests or obligations that could reflect the intentions of the applicant to return to India. Since people just starting their careers and adult lives have accumulated fewer ties and obligations, it is therefore harder everywhere—not just in India—for them to get visas. It is not a question of discrimination, it is just a requirement of our law that temporary visa applicants must show that they intend to

return to their home country before they can get a visa.

Is it true that because my surname is the same as one of the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center that there is no point in seeking a visa to the United States, where I would like to study?

No, you should apply for the visa and, assuming that you are not a terrorist, there should be no problem. The only complication could be that if your name were exactly the same as a terrorist we would have to refer the case for administrative processing to show that you and the terrorist are not the same person. That process usually takes about a month. So in the worst case, there could be a delay. If you have reason to believe that your name will cause a problem, you would be well advised to give yourself at least two months between the date of your application and the date of your travel. Since you can now be issued a student visa 90 days in advance, that should be easy.

Please advise where we can find the best agents to help us through the visa process, and how much we should pay?

I want to be clear about one thing—you do not need a visa agent and you should not pay one paisa to anyone who tells you that they can guarantee you a visa. Every day at the visa window we see eligible applicants who are refused visas because they presented fake documents to a vice consul—on the advice of their "visa consultant" or "friends." In addition, one of the main reasons why we have had a visa appointment backlog was because touts were abusing the system by taking and then selling appointments.

I realize that one reason that such "consultants" thrive in India is because the U.S. Government has not been as effective as it could be in getting useful information out to the Indian public. Consultants have entered the information vacuum and have thrived. The U.S. Embassy has reinvigorated its efforts to better inform Indians about



Ambassador David C. Mulford (left) interacts with visa seekers at the consular section of the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi.



Peter G. Kaestner, minister counselor for consular affairs and consul-general, arrived in New Delhi in August 2006 for his third stay in India. From 1967 to 1968 he attended Friends School and the American International School in New Delhi. Kaestner, a native of Baltimore, Maryland, graduated from Cornell University in 1976 with a B.A. in biology, served as a Peace Corps science teacher in Zaire and entered the Foreign Service in 1980. His first posting was to New Delhi, where he served as a vice consul from 1981 to 1982. Other assignments took Kaestner to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Colombia, Malaysia, Namibia, Guatemala, Brazil and Egypt. He is fluent in five languages, including Hindi. From 1994 to 1996, he was the deputy director of the State Department's Office of Ecology and Terrestrial Conservation. Kaestner is a well-known bird-watcher, and is ranked fourth in the world in the number of species (8,059) he has sighted. In 1989, he discovered a new species in Colombia that was named in his honor, *Grallaria kaestneri*.



our visa rules, regulations and procedures. It is important that Indian applicants get good information from a trusted source—for free.

We read stories about Indians and others being mistreated when they reach the U.S. airport. What will happen to me when I land in the United States? Will they strip-search me?

One of the sad realities of the news business is that good news isn't newsworthy. While there have been a few regrettable incidents over the years, you never hear about the millions of people who pass through U.S. airports without incident. Just because a car accident is reported in the press, does that mean that you would never ride in a car again?

The vast majority of people who run into problems at U.S. ports of entry do so because they are breaking the law. A couple of pieces of advice: It is very important that you are always 100 percent truthful. You may not use a non-immigrant (temporary) visa to immigrate permanently to the United States. You cannot work on a tourist visa. You must be careful not to try to evade customs by bringing in contraband or by not declaring dutiable items. (The rules are written on the customs boarding documents given on arrival to every traveler.)

On the question of strip-searching, that is more a question of lore than reality. Only if you are smuggling something on or in your body would there be any need to strip-search you. Routine security searches are much like those in Indian airports, though it is sometimes required to remove your shoes. I've been identified for extra security screening several times. Even as a senior government official, I am treated just like everyone else. We do not single out any nationality or ethnic group for additional scrutiny. Again, as long as you are not doing anything illegal, there is no worry. Every day, lakhs of people fly in the United States without any problems.

When I apply for a visa, must I state

what my religion is? Will I be asked tougher questions and will it take longer, depending on my religion or my surname?

No, we never gather or retain information on the religion of visa applicants. There is no question about religion on the visa application. As you point out, the applicant's surname may indicate their religion. There is no difference in visa interviews depending on the applicant's surname. There is no provision of our visa law that requires or even permits someone to be refused a visa because of their religious affiliation.

I am a Muslim woman. Will it help my chances to get a visa if I remove my veil or head scarf?

No. Visa officers are not interested in religion or the applicant's particular customs. For security purposes, the identity of the applicant must be verified, and the photograph of the applicant must show his or her full face. Since we have several female vice consuls, a veiled applicant can be interviewed by a woman, easing somewhat the issue of modesty.

If I only speak an Indian language, will the visa officer reject me?

Absolutely not. Many of our visa officers in India speak indigenous Indian languages. When I was a vice consul in New Delhi in 1981-1982, I did thousands of visa interviews in Hindi and Punjabi. Even back then, the large majority of the applicants interviewed in Indian languages received visas. *Koi baat nahin!*

If I have already been rejected once, should I reapply or just forget about ever visiting the United States?

Assuming that you were rejected because you could not convince the visa officer that you had a settled residence outside the United States (Sec 214 (b)), you have two possibilities. If you really

How to Apply for a U.S. Visa

Visa Application Forms

http://travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/forms/forms_1342.html

New Delhi

Visa Services

http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/visa_services.html

Immigrant Visa Unit

http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/immigrant_visas.html

Non-Immigrant Visa Unit

http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/nonimmigrant_visas.html

Mumbai

Visa Services

http://mumbai.usconsulate.gov/visa_services.html

Immigrant Visa Unit

http://mumbai.usconsulate.gov/immigrant_visas.html

Non-Immigrant Visa Unit

http://mumbai.usconsulate.gov/gn_url.html

Calcutta

Visa Services

http://calcutta.usconsulate.gov/how_to_apply.html

Immigrant Visa Unit

http://calcutta.usconsulate.gov/iv_general_info.html

Non-Immigrant Visa Unit

http://calcutta.usconsulate.gov/general_information.html

Consular / Visa Section Contacts

http://calcutta.usconsulate.gov/visa_contact.html

Chennai

Immigrant Visa Unit

http://chennai.usconsulate.gov/immigrant_visas.html

Non-Immigrant Visa Unit

http://chennai.usconsulate.gov/general_information.html

believe that you are well established here, with a bright future, and no intention of living or working abroad, you could get another interview. One thing that is very important, however, is to ensure that you have new, significant, information to present to the visa officer. Without new information, it is just about impossible for the officer to come to a different conclusion. Assuming that the officer considered everything, then your only option is to wait until you are better established in India. That is a matter of time.

