

More Changes in Passport Rules for 2007

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NASSAU, Bahamas - The Caribbean tourist industry is reacting sharply to changes in U.S. rules extending the time that American cruise passengers can travel without their passports — but not those who journey by air.

The changes — signed into law Oct. 4 by President Bush — allow U.S. citizens to return from visits to Canada and Mexico, or from cruises throughout the Caribbean, without a passport until June 1, 2009.

But the law maintains that air travelers to those areas must carry a passport starting Jan. 8, 2007.

"It is incomprehensible that the United States government would approve an amendment that excludes air arrivals from the Caribbean," said Vincent Vanderpool Wallace, secretary-general of the Barbados-based Caribbean Tourism Organization.

Tourism officials worry that the change will discourage air travel to the Caribbean, while making it easier for cruise passengers.

Cruise travelers tend to spend less money in a single port than a visitor who travels to the country by air.

Prior U.S. travel requirements allowed American citizens to go to Canada, Mexico or most Caribbean countries and re-enter the U.S. using a driver's license and birth certificate.

The new requirements will not affect travel between the U.S., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

About 27 percent of Americans have current, valid passports. But the State Department is experiencing unprecedented demand for passports, due in part to this new regulation.