

U.S. Working on Its Welcome

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In February, Eric Rozenberg, a Belgian travel executive, was en route to a convention in Cancún, Mexico, from Brussels when, he says, he experienced firsthand what other foreign travelers had told him about the problems of getting into the United States.

He said an official took him aside with no explanation as he went through immigration in the Dallas-Fort Worth airport and sent him to a separate room.

After waiting there nearly 90 minutes, Mr. Rozenberg, who travels to the United States on business at least six times a year, said, he “very politely” asked another officer what was taking so long. The officer glanced at Mr. Rozenberg’s passport again, told him to wait another 10 minutes, then handed it back to him without explaining what had happened.

The officer asked if he had missed his connecting flight, Mr. Rozenberg recalled. When he replied that he had, “he said casually: ‘Oh, sorry about that; just tell them you were detained at immigration,’ ” Mr. Rozenberg said.

Similar complaints from foreign business and leisure travelers have led the United States government to take steps to improve the treatment of travelers upon arrival. In February 2006, the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security announced a program, called Secure Borders and Open Doors, aimed at balancing the increased need for security after the 2001 terrorist attacks with the desire to ease travel to the United States.

Last February, the Homeland Security Department started the Traveler Redress Inquiry Program, or TRIP (trip.dhs.gov), which provides an online form travelers can use to file complaints electronically about any travel-related government entity. “It offers more transparency and a one-stop location for travelers who feel, say, they weren’t treated properly or missed a flight because of a D.H.S. employee’s actions,” said Kelly Klundt, a spokeswoman for Customs and Border Protection, which is part of the Homeland Security Department.

But while government officials say they are trying for change, there is no way to tell if progress has been made. Ms. Klundt said she did not know if the government kept statistics on complaints about poor treatment by customs and border officials.

Geoff Freeman is the executive director of the Discover America Partnership, a Washington lobbying group of leaders from the Travel Business Roundtable, Marriott International, Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, the Travel Industry Association and other

companies and organizations. Since the organization was formed last September to promote the United States abroad, it has received hundreds of phone calls and e-mail messages, he said, from foreign travelers complaining of poor treatment by customs and border officials.

But, Mr. Freeman said, while “most people who’ve come here from overseas since 9/11 say the entry experience is poor,” beyond the airport, “their U.S. experience is good enough that they’ll probably come back.”

The partnership also found, however, that if foreigners had not visited the United States since Sept. 11 or had never visited, “the stories they’re reading or hearing about the poor entry experience are discouraging them from visiting,” Mr. Freeman said.

He said statistics from the World Trade Organization showed a 17 percent increase in worldwide travel since Sept. 11, while data from the United States Office of Travel and Tourism Industries showed travel to the United States declining the same percentage over the same period.

Former Gov. Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania, who served as the first secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, is working with the Discover America Partnership to find ways to improve the entry experience. “By and large, my former colleagues do a good job,” Mr. Ridge said. “But anecdotally, I’ve heard we have to be a lot more sensitive. If even one traveler in 10,000 has a bad experience, that ripple effect is harmful.”

Prakton Mal, who was born in India, lives in Oslo and is a Norwegian citizen, said many of his colleagues would rather participate in a videoconference “than travel to the United States and risk embarrassment and ill treatment.”

In March, he said, while on a business trip, he was treated rudely by a “very sour and impolite” immigration official at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport because he had forgotten to sign and date his immigration form. “It was a small incident, but it could have been avoided,” Mr. Mal said. He said he takes 18 international business trips a year, “and I sometimes feel that the United States stands out with their arrogant behavior toward innocent incoming businesspeople.”

One executive, an American citizen who was born in France, said he presented his American passport to a customs official at Miami International Airport after returning from an overseas business trip. The official noticed he was also carrying a French passport.

“He told me it was illegal to carry two passports,” the executive recalled. “He held both passports in front of me and asked, ‘Which one do you want me to destroy?’ like it was a game.”

The executive, who did not want his name disclosed because he was concerned that might affect his business dealings, said he insisted he had the right to carry two passports because he was a dual citizen. (A State Department spokesman confirmed this; the law specifies only that American citizens must present their American passport when entering the United States.)

The official kept him waiting about half an hour, then returned both passports, the executive said. “But he said he’d put a note in my file that I was breaking the law and I’d get stopped the next time I traveled.” He said he filed a complaint electronically, “but they didn’t even acknowledge receiving it.”

Ms. Klundt said all customs officials were required to take an annual professionalism training course, which is updated every year. “We’re concerned about these negative situations and want to address them,” she said. “But we also need to focus on our mission, which is keeping bad people and bad things out of the country.”

Mr. Ridge said it was “that occasional rude person who creates all these horror stories.”

“The welcome mat has a little dust on it right now,” he added. “We have to spruce it up a bit.”