

Obama eases visa rules to boost U.S. tourism

By Bart Jansen, USA TODAY

President Obama on Thursday declared that "America is open for business" and laid out steps to make it easier for some foreign visitors to travel here.

By Julie Jacobson, AP

Using Walt Disney World in Florida as a backdrop, the president announced an executive order designed to reduce the time it takes for travelers from China and Brazil to get visas to the [USA](#).

His order would eliminate the need for visitors from Taiwan to get visas at all to visit — something at citizens of 36 nations, mostly in western Europe and from Japan and Australia, now enjoy.

And he is making permanent the Global Entry program, which allows travelers who undergo rigorous background checks to breeze through customs.

"We want to welcome you," Obama said from in front of Disney's Cinderella Castle. "We've got the best product to sell. I mean, look at where we are. We've got the most entertaining destinations in the world. This is the land of extraordinary natural wonders."

He ordered the Commerce and Interior departments to develop a national tourism strategy that highlights national parks, and cultural and historic sites. And he's adding business executives to a tourism advisory board.

All the steps, Obama said, are designed to create jobs.

Easing the way for foreign tourists and business people has been sought by the nation's tourism and business sectors for years. They've argued that tight [U.S.](#) travel restrictions imposed after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks are costing the nation travel dollars and jobs.

"The steps the president took today are significant and will boost travel to and within the [United States](#)," said Roger Dow, president of the U.S. Travel Association. "Most importantly, they will lead to new American jobs and get our economy moving."

Obama's visit to one of the nation's biggest tourist attractions to make the announcement comes as Republican presidential candidates prepare to blanket Florida ahead of the state's Jan. 31 primary. And Republican presidential candidate [Mitt Romney](#) said that "perhaps there's some poetic justice in the president speaking from Fantasyland."

But Dow said, "His (Obama's) timing could not be better. Travel is an essential industry for our nation and a bipartisan issue that can unite our country and rally us forward."

Foreign visitor numbers have been flat since the terrorist attacks. The United States issued 7.6 million visas in 2001, compared with 6.5 million in 2010.

Restoring tourism to 2001 levels could create 1.3 million jobs and add \$860 billion in economic activity by 2020, tourist and business groups like Dow's say.

Obama specifically ordered the State and Homeland Security departments to boost the capacity for issuing visas in China and Brazil by 40% this year. He said he wanted to ensure that 80% of non-immigrant visa applicants from foreign countries are interviewed within three weeks by U.S. consular staffs.

And he wants an experimental program to waive interviews for low-risk travelers, such as anyone renewing a visa or, in Brazil, younger or older first-time applicants.

The USA is a popular destination for Brazilians and the Chinese, both for leisure and business. But delays in getting visas discourages them, travel executives say.

Nelson Martin, who worked for Disney for 16 years before leaving in August to start Highstar Travel Group that targets tourists from [Latin America](#), called the president's announcement a "huge step" in attracting Brazilians.

Distances and wait times for interviews to get a visa at one of four U.S. consular offices in Brazil take so long that it's easier for them to go to Europe or the Caribbean.

"We describe it as going on vacation before going on vacation," Martin said. "If you go to these offices, the lines go out the door and around the corner. The demand is incredible."

<http://travel.usatoday.com/news/story/2012-01-18/Obama-expected-to-shorten-tourist-visa-process/52652668/1>