

How to Guarantee That You Miss Your Honeymoon!

By Jennifer Prymula

A Romantic Voyage by Sand, Sun & Savings

Want a surefire way to miss your honeymoon? Just procrastinate on that passport application. Even if you already have a passport keep reading, as you too may find yourself stuck on this side of the border! Recent changes in passport rules have created such a backlog of applications that many people are waiting more than four months for their passports to arrive. Sure, you can spend your honeymoon in Hell, Michigan or Sandusky, Ohio or any other domestic destination, but more than likely that isn't what you had in mind, is it? If you're like most honeymooners you're dreaming about an exotic, romantic, perhaps once in a lifetime locale -- maybe Cabo San Lucas, the Amalfi Coast of Italy or the beautiful island of St. Lucia. Well, if you're not careful, you and your fiancée may be out of luck.

For the past several years, the U. S. State Department has been advising citizens that passports will soon be required for re-entry into the United States after travel to many popular honeymoon destinations, including Mexico, the Caribbean, Bermuda and Canada. The long notice period seemed like a good idea, considering that only 25 percent of U.S. citizens currently hold a passport.

The new passport rules went into effect in January 2007 for just air travel and the State Department is now swamped with applications! This has created a tremendous back log, currently estimated at 500,000. In 2006, before the new rules went into place, the average turnaround time was six weeks. By June 2007 that time frame has jumped to approximately 16-20 weeks! Many are predicting that this will get far worse before the end of 2007 and throughout 2008, as a passport will be required for land and sea (cruises) border crossings by June 2008-- keep tuned though as this date keep fluctuating! I'm no math genius but even I can see that there is going to be a problem, considering there is an estimated 6 million Americans who travel abroad by air and sea but don't yet have a passport! That doesn't even take into account the land crossings or the estimated additional 1 million new travelers yearly!

To compound the problem, many passport acceptance centers are erroneously telling citizens that they will receive the passport back anywhere from 10 to 12 weeks. This simply isn't true, and hasn't been for some time. In February 2007, when I booked a cruise for my mother and several of her friends, I advised them to expedite their passports as they had only 12 weeks before the start of the cruise. But when they submitted their passport applications, the clerk told them that there was no need to expedite, citing a turnaround time of just 8 to 10 weeks. They didn't expedite

and – sure enough -- the passports didn't arrive until a week after they sailed! The sad part is this is not an isolated incident! Speaking with travel agents across the country has revealed that passports being returned to consumers in the 10-12 week timeframe is a rare occurrence and that most people are getting them back anywhere from 16-20 weeks.

Moral of the story: Don't rely on the clerk's advice; ask your travel agent for an objective estimate on turnaround time.

Fortunately, my mom and her friends were able to go on their vacation anyway because the new passport requirements do not yet apply to Caribbean cruises (currently, cruise passengers need only produce a certified birth certificate and a government-issued photo ID, like a driver's license). But had the ladies been *flying* to the Caribbean -- or Mexico, or Bermuda, or Canada -- they would not have been allowed to travel and they would have lost the entire cost of the trip. I recommend a passport to all of my cruise clients even though it is currently not required because if they have an emergency and need to fly back to the United States, they will be denied re-entry.

Here are eight passport tips for honeymooners.

- **Apply for your passport early!** I recommended that you apply at least 6 months before your intended travel dates. This provides the time to work out any kinks that might come up in your application process. I've heard horror stories of people being denied passports because paperwork was submitted incorrectly or missing. Then there are those that are denied due to mistaken identification and need additional time to clarify the situation.
- **If you are traveling in less than six months, pay the \$60 fee to expedite the passport application.** Don't forget to also pay for overnight delivery to and from the processing center. Make sure that the clerk writes "Expedited" both on your application and on the sealed envelope -- I've heard stories about people not receiving their passports on time because the clerk did not properly label the envelope and application.
- **If you are traveling in less than four months, use a company that specializes in passport-expediting services.** These companies are permitted to file a certain number of rush applications per day. Keep in mind that most of their clients are businesses on contract, so you may not be their first priority. And yes, it will cost you – typically \$100 to \$350 in additional fees, i.e., on top of the government's passport and expediting fees. To be sure you're getting good service for your money, ask the company how long it has

been in business and check whether they belong to the National Association of Passport and Visa Services, www.napvs.org.

- **Sign up for cancel-for-any-reason insurance if your travel supplier offers it** (not all do). This is in addition to your regular travel insurance. Regular travel insurance will not cover your losses if you fail to get your passport on time, but it offers broader travel protection, so you need both.
- **Check in with your travel agent.** Ask what kind of delays his or her clients have been experiencing, and remember, the turnaround time is expected to increase throughout 2007 and into 2008.
- **If you owe child support– pay up!** You will not be issued a passport if you are in arrears.
- **Note any holidays that fall between your application and your travel date.** Federal agencies traditionally slow down during holiday periods as the employees, like most Americans, take extra time off to spend with their families or go on vacation. This will extend your processing time.
- **If you already have a passport, check the expiration date.** Many travelers realize too late that their passport is not valid for the time they plan to travel. Moreover, many countries require your passport to be valid well beyond the dates of your stay. A good rule of thumb is that your passport should be valid for six months past your return date. Also make sure you have enough empty pages in your passport for your trip and that you have obtained any necessary visas.

To download a passport application, visit www.travel.state.gov. Pay little attention to the turnaround times posted there as the website is not updated frequently enough to reflect current backlogs. In my experience, the posted time estimates are almost always optimistic.

To check the status of your application you can visit www.travel.state.gov. You will need to enter your last name, date of birth and last four digits of your social security number. If your application is still showing as being processed and you are within three weeks of traveling, contact your senator or congressman. They are there to assist their constituents, and many have been able to help travelers get their passports on time. Persistence is key, however, as the legislators are also getting overloaded with requests for help!

My advice? Don't procrastinate! Weddings are stressful enough as it is. Make your life easier and get your passport now. Remember, that dream honeymoon just won't be the same without you!

About the author: *Jennifer Prymula is certified as a Honeymoon & Destination Wedding Specialist by The Travel Institute; she is also a Certified Sandals Specialist, Hawaii Destination Specialist and an Accredited Cruise Counselor. She is a member in good standing with the West Michigan Wedding Assoc. and Kalamazoo Bridal Assoc. Jennifer welcomes any comments or questions, you can contact her via e-mail at jennifer@sandsunandsavings.com. Or visit her website at www.sandsunandsavings.com .*

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