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Applying for a US Visa During the Pandemic: Things You Should Know

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Practices: Immigration

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, international travel has been difficult or, in some cases, impossible. As a result, it has been difficult for non-US Citizens to apply for visas, either new visas or renewals. At the present time, many US Embassies and Consulates remain closed and are not processing visas or are processing visas on a limited basis. In the case of travelers from Europe, most travel related restrictions remain in place, most notably the travel bans in place for the “Schengen” countries. Similarly, travelers from certain Asian, Middle Eastern and South American countries are subject to similar travel bans. Persons who have been residing in these countries continue to be prohibited from entering the United States unless they first obtain a “national interest exception” from the US Consulate in their place of residence. Depending on the country where a person resides, the National Interest Exception process can take anywhere from 1 day (Luxembourg) to 28 days (London). It should be noted that travel restrictions are not based on citizenship, but residence, and it is possible to avoid the travel ban or application for a National Interest Exception by staying in a country that is not subject to a travel ban for 14 days.

With regard to applying for work related visas, most Consulates in Europe have either ceased processing applications or are only processing select applications. Registering for E status at the European posts is particularly problematic as the US Embassy advises that registration applications are taking up to eight months, and the US Consulate in Istanbul is not accepting registration applications. Potential visa applicants will be disappointed to know that most US Consulates are limiting third country nationals from applying at the Consulate unless they are residents of the country. A bright spot in visa processing is that the US Consulates in Japan continue to accept and process all work visa applications, allow for the filing of renewals by mail, and process E visa registrations in approximately 3 – 4 weeks.

Consequently, individuals who are planning to travel internationally for the holidays should start the visa application or renewal process well in advance of their intended trip to account for potential delays taking into account the travel restrictions currently in place.