

Passport cards popular for Canada/Mexico travel

Nearly 740,000 Americans have ordered passport cards, a new document being offered by the U.S. State Department to speed border crossings by U.S. citizens traveling to Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean.

Beginning in June 2009, travelers will be required to present documents proving both citizenship and identity when entering the U.S. through a land or sea border. (A passport is already required for all international air travel.) A birth certificate and driver's license, currently used by many travelers, will no longer be sufficient for adults crossing land or sea borders.

For Americans who drive to Canada or Mexico or cruise regularly to the Caribbean, but who do not expect to fly abroad, the passport card is a cheaper, smaller, more portable alternative to a conventional passport.

The passport card is especially popular with Americans who live in border states with Mexico or Canada, including Washington.

The passport card is the size of a credit card or driver's license, and has a photo and identification information printed on it, like a driver's license. It also contains a chip with a unique number that allows border officials to instantly retrieve your data from a government database. It's not valid for international air travel.

Passport cards are good for 10 years and cost \$45 (\$35 for children under 16). Applications can be made at any passport-processing site. If you already have a passport but want the card anyway because of the convenient size or quick scanning, it's only \$20 and can be ordered by mail.

For details on how and where to get a passport card, see www.travel.state.gov.

Processing time for applications for both passport books and passport cards are about three weeks for routine applications. Expedited service is not available for passport cards, but for passport books, expedited service takes about two weeks.