

# 8 MILLION TOURISTS USED VISA WAIVER PROGRAMS BUT NEW FEES SUGGESTED



The ESTA is supposed to make it easier for visa free tourist to visit the U.S. However several senators now want to establish a fee for international tourists to fund a government-run tourism advertising campaign.

The US has launched the ESTA for **Visa Waiver Program** travelers on August 1, 2008. According to US officials, the system makes traveling to the US easier and it also brings more security as the officials receive important info about the travelers. The ESTA should eventually replace paper forms but it has not yet done so completely.

The introduction of the system has definitely **influenced the tourism sector**. With the VWP expanding in 2008 more tourists come from the new member countries. For example the number of visitors from the Czech Republic has increased by 50 per cent. It is expected that some 70 000 Czechs will visit US this year which makes the country the only world's destination to record a steep growth in the number of Czech visitors. According to the US Customs and Border Protection officials, **eight million international travelers have already used the ESTA**.

The Visa Waiver Program certainly helps the incoming tourism industry in the U.S. There is, however, an act that could go against the aims of the VWP. The US Senate will vote on the Travel Promotion Act of 2009. The intention is to charge international tourists from visa waiver countries with a compulsory 10 USD fee. The money would be then used for a government-run tourism advertising campaign.

It does not make much sense to first allow the foreigners to enter the country without paying visa fees and consequently establish another fee. This act would certainly not do the best promotion for the US tourism, especially in time of crisis when the traveler's budgets are tightened.

## **All about the Electronic System of Travel Authorization (ESTA)**

There is no fee for the registration in the system so applicants should not let themselves mislead by companies that offer facilitation of this service for money. ESTA serves 35 members of the Visa Waiver Program, which are mainly European countries. Registration in the ESTA does not enable foreigners to work in the US. It enables travelers to stay in the US for 90 days but only for business trips, tourism, or transit. A visitor needs to apply online at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov> 72 hour prior to their trip to the US. The "permit" is then valid for 2 years or till the traveler's passport expires. It is important to mention that the passport needs to include biometric data.

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