

**VISA PLAN THREATENS CITY'S TOURIST TRADE;**  
**INS proposal to shorten visits to U.S. could hurt local coffers**

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
July 10, 2002 Wednesday, Home Edition

Copyright 2002 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
ajc.com

**Section:** Atlanta & the World;

**Length:** 1022 words

**Byline:** DAN CHAPMAN

## **Body**

---

The Bush administration is considering a slew of new visa rules, including the abolition of routine six-month visas, that could further skew the precarious post-Sept. 11 balance between national security and economic recovery.

Travel agents, airline officials, tour operators and others worry that a weak international visitors market will grow more feeble if the administration further limits who stays, and for how long, in the United States.

Atlanta, while better insulated than tourism-dependent cities, already feels the pinch and could lose millions of dollars and thousands of jobs if foreigners stay away.

All foreign visitors will face more exact questioning and longer lines as border control agents try to ensure that terror like that of Sept. 11 is never revisited. But thousands of cash-rich tourists and businesspeople may discover that America's traditional welcome mat has been removed.

AJC

Upendra Patel worries that Indians who visit Atlanta each year might choose to stay home if their plans for weeks-long visits to relatives and tourist sites are curtailed.

"Somebody visiting from India has a lot of relatives, and they're not all in one city," said Patel, general secretary of the 70,000-member Federation of Indian Associations in Georgia. "They may have family in Atlanta and Houston and California and New York and New Jersey. Our wedding ceremonies go on for one week. And then the family reunion goes on for days."

Fifteen of the 19 suspected Sept. 11 hijackers entered this country on travel visas.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service wants to eliminate the routine six-month visas.

Instead, immigration agents would interview new arrivals to determine how much time they really need to "accomplish the purpose of the trip," in many cases 30 days, according to the proposal.

The INS also wants to further restrict visitors coming from certain Arab countries.

## VISA PLAN THREATENS CITY'S TOURIST TRADE; INS proposal to shorten visits to U.S. could hurt local coffers

"The immigration process has changed since 9/11, and we now are taking a closer look at this individual coming to us and making sure he's here for legitimate reasons and purposes and he intends to do no harm to us," **INS** spokesman Chris Bentley said recently. The **INS** "is committed to being able to allow individuals to fully come to the **United States** and, as always, experience the wonderful opportunities here."

International **tourists** spend about \$80 billion a year **in** the **United States**, according to the Travel Industry Association of America, and help employ 1 million Americans.

Until recently, the **United States** was the second most **visited** country **in** the world, after France. Spain now ranks ahead of the **United States**.

The travel association estimates the proposed **visa** rules could slice foreigners' spending **in** this country by \$2 billion. Aware that international travel has dropped 10 percent to 15 percent since Sept. 11, the association proposes a compromise: reduce the **visa** period from six months to three.

"While we take every opportunity to work and cooperate with the federal government to enhance **U.S.** national security, we do not see any way this new proposed rule will deter overstays and enhance national security," said Rick Webster, the association's director of government affairs. "What we're seeing is the early development of a Fortress America, unfortunately."

Atlanta, known more for business than tourism, nonetheless feels the post-Sept. 11 hardship.

Hartsfield welcomed 76 million passengers last year, down from 80 million the year before. Delta Air Lines' international traffic dropped 9.4 percent from June 2001 to June 2002.

While fewer than one of every 10 Hartsfield visitors is international, roughly 2 million of them spend at least one night **in** or around Atlanta. And they spend big money here.

"They tell us at the North Georgia Premium [Outlets] mall that one visitor from Latin America is worth, **in** spending, seven times a domestic visitor," said Bill Howard, a vice president at the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau. "Inter- national visitors to the **United States** tend to stay **in** your better hotels, eat **in** your better restaurants and spend a lot of money shopping."

More than 104,000 hotel, transportation, shopping and recreational jobs depend upon the largess of visitors, the Atlanta bureau reports. Visitors **in** 2000 added \$350 million **in** tax revenues to the **city's coffers**.

Until recently, the number of international visitors to Atlanta --- 701,000 **in** 2000, the last year for which figures are available --- rose more than 10 percent a year. But the proposed **visa** changes would likely crimp Atlanta's tourism and convention business.

"The hassles of obtaining a **visa**, the inconvenience of longer lines, the greater scrutiny, particularly for those from some countries, all those things might be a deterrent for international visitor growth," Howard said. "But it will probably not discourage those who must come for business."

Daryl Buffenstein disagrees.

While the proposed rules would have a direct impact on visitors from Iran, Iraq, Libya and Sudan and probably about 30 other countries with significant Muslim populations, immigration attorney Buffenstein says the regulations would have a chilling effect on businesspeople from all countries.

"There might be a Japanese company coming here to set up a manufacturing plant employing Georgians, and that sometimes takes six months," said Buffenstein, an Atlantan and the general counsel for the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

## VISA PLAN THREATENS CITY'S TOURIST TRADE; INS proposal to shorten visits to U.S. could hurt local coffers

"If these rules are not made a little more user-friendly for the business community, they will impact the ability of cities like Atlanta to continue to attract the best and the brightest and the wealthiest from around the world for our own benefit."

Under the **proposal**, once the initial **visa** ends, a visitor must apply for an extension, which will be more difficult to obtain, the **INS** says. Failure to apply could lead to arrest and immediate deportation.

The **INS**, increasingly pressured by Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and other politicians from tourism-heavy states, is expected to wrap up the rule changes this year.

## Graphic

---

Photo: A visitors line Friday snakes its way around the World of Coca-Cola. Atlanta could feel a tourism pinch if **visa** rules tighten. / BITA HONARVAR / Staff; Graphic: BY THE NUMBERS

2.8 million

International passengers served by Hartsfield **in** 1994.

5.6 million

International passengers served by Hartsfield **in** 2001.

2 million

International passengers who stayed one night or longer **in** and around Atlanta **in** 2000.

481,000

International visitors to Atlanta **in** 1995.

701,000

International visitors to Atlanta **in** 2000.

45.7 million

International arrivals to the **United States in** 2001, down 11 percent from previous year.

## Classification

---

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** PASSPORTS & **VISAS** (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK (89%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (87%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); INTERVIEWS (78%); HIJACKING (77%); TRAVEL & HOSPITALITY SECTOR PERFORMANCE (77%); FAMILY (77%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (73%); NATIONAL SECURITY (72%); BORDER CONTROL (72%); ECONOMIC RECOVERY (72%); BUSINESS & PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS (66%); WEDDINGS & ENGAGEMENTS (65%)

**Industry:** INTERNATIONAL TOURISM (90%); TRAVEL AGENTS (77%); TRAVEL & HOSPITALITY SECTOR PERFORMANCE (77%); TOUR OPERATORS (72%); AIRLINES (57%)

VISA PLAN THREATENS CITY'S TOURIST TRADE;INS proposal to shorten visits to U.S. could hurt local coffers

**Geographic:** ATLANTA, GA, USA (92%); NEW YORK, USA (79%); GEORGIA, USA (79%); NEW JERSEY, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); **UNITED STATES** (96%); SPAIN (79%); INDIA (79%); FRANCE (58%)

**Load-Date:** July 10, 2002

---

End of Document