



By: **Harvey Morris**

An idiot's guide to travelling to the USA



Your intrepid correspondent recently booked a trip to the USA, casually dismissing concerns about tougher border controls and a new British government warning of the possible arrest or detention of anyone breaking US entry rules.

Alas, it was not to be. With time running out to obtain a valid visa, I fear I have missed the boat, or in this case the plane. My friend's Los Angeles wedding will have to go ahead without me.

To be clear from the start, the impasse is completely down to my own ineptitude. I had failed to realise that my previous stays in dubious destinations such as Cuba and Iraq would bar me from obtaining a fast-track online visa waiver under the so-called ESTA rules.

And now there is no time left to fix a face-to-face interview at the US embassy in London and wait the 10 days or so in which they might or might not grant me a tourist visa to get me to the nuptials.

I therefore absolve US Customs and Border Protection and also President Donald Trump, whose muscular approach to border enforcement has been blamed for a sharp fall in the number of Britons and other Europeans visiting the US.

Illegal alien

UK arrivals were down by 15 per cent in March, **according** to the US Commerce Department, while the number of western European visitors was down by 17 per cent.

With summer bookings from Europe falling by 25 per cent, the CEO of the Paris-based Accor travel group, Sébastien Bazin, **told** Bloomberg TV he blamed the downturn on the "bad buzz" from the US after reports of tourists being detained by US border agents.

They include British backpacker Rebecca Burke, who was **shackled** and taken to a detention centre for 19 days by US

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents.

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The 28-year-old's crime was that, having swapped housework for accommodation with families who put her up during a tour of the US, she had violated her tourist visa and was considered an illegal alien.

ICE made 32,089 enforcement **arrests** in the first 50 days of Trump's new term, more than the number carried out in the whole of 2024. That reflects a raft of measures announced by the president since he declared immigration a national emergency on the day of his inauguration.

Although the campaign is ostensibly targeted at asylum-seekers, drug cartels and criminal gangs, seemingly innocent foreigners have been caught up in the dragnet.

Lesson for the average tourist

Attention in the US has focussed on the plight of a Maryland-based Salvadorean man still mouldering in a mega-jail in El Salvador to which he was mistakenly deported in March, despite a Supreme Court **ruling** that the administration must facilitate his return.

Civil rights groups have also raised the alarm over the fate of Columbia University graduate Mahmoud Khalil, held in custody pending **deportation** for taking part in campus protests against the war in Gaza.

The Trump administration has not claimed that the Palestinian broke any law. However, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in a memo to a court that his presence in the US could jeopardise US policy to combat anti-Semitism internationally and at home.

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The obvious lesson for the average tourist, including citizens of the UK and the other 42 privileged countries entitled to a visa waiver, is to keep their opinions to themselves.

But even that is not as simple as it was. Under the stricter terms of the Terrorist Travel Prevention Act, adopted by the Republican-controlled Congress in 2015, the online ESTA form invites applicants to list their social media accounts.

It's optional, but that is no guarantee that some vigilant immigration official won't take a peek at your mobile phone. There has been a reported recent increase in visitors being asked to unlock their devices. A refusal can mean delays or denial of entry to the US.

A cartoon in the Seattle Times mocked the current situation. An oversized ICE agent is pictured plucking a new arrival from the passport queue. "Welcome to the USA!" he tells her. "Just remember, I can search your phone, revoke your visa, hold you in detention for insulting Trump or Israel, and ship you to prison in El Salvador...so, enjoy your stay!"

"These rules aren't really for people like you"

That is not how I imagined my own return to the US. As a former New York resident, I had visualised a smiling immigration officer waving me through with a cheery 'welcome back!'

I dutifully filled in the online visa waiver form with plenty of time to spare, ticking the boxes to confirm that I was plague-free and had no intention of committing terrorism or sabotage.

Sadly, I had to confess to a visit to Cuba and a three-month stint in Iraq in 2014, belatedly made aware that my presence there would void my application under another rule

introduced in 2015. Technically, my request is still pending.



In its latest move, the Department of Homeland Security has ended the protected status of thousands of Afghans and Cameroonians

Mine is very much a first world problem. Despite strained relations between Trump and traditional US allies, there is no evidence his administration actively wants to deter visitors from Europe and elsewhere who support a tourism sector that contributes \$2.5 trillion a year to US GDP.

Just remember to apply as early as you can and, above all, read the small print.

The targets of Trump's pledge to deport one million people a year are the usual suspects, principally from Latin America, who make up the population of asylum seekers, refugees and fortune seekers who have sought to make the US their home.

In its latest move, the Department of Homeland Security has ended the protected status of thousands of Afghans and Cameroonians.

I'm reminded of my first visit to the US in 1978. I had flown to Miami from Nicaragua after the collapse of the first Sandinista rebellion. There was no way to obtain a US visa in Managua in those troubled times, but it was the only way out.

The Miami immigration officer was unswayed by my argument that I would just be in transit for a few hours. I was dispatched to a holding room under the watch of one elderly guard.

Eventually an airline employee arrived, brandishing my passport and onward boarding pass. I was free to go, he said, as long as I promised to catch my flight.

“These rules aren’t really for people like you,” he said, glancing at the group of dispirited Latinos with whom I had briefly been detained. “They’re for people like them.”