



# The Consular Communiqué

## US CONSUL GENERAL SAYS GOODBYE

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### Attention All U.S. Citizens Resident in Colombia!

The American Citizen Services Unit at the U.S. Embassy invites you to register with the new State Department online Travel Registration Website.

Remember, giving us this information now makes it easier to assist you later and keep you informed.

See Page 3 for details and sign up!

Next July, when I finish my work here as U.S. Consul General, I will be leaving Colombia for the second time, and it will be just as hard as it was ten years ago.

The country I saw when I was American Citizens Services Chief, from 1990 to 1993, was very different. In contrast to those times, Colombians today are optimistic about the future and confident in their ability to build a peaceful and prosperous nation. Most of all, I will miss the close friends I made here and the good work we did together.

The year 2003 marked a major service improvement in the non-immigrant visa section. The wait for a tourist visa appointment in Colombia dramatically dropped from a high of nearly 18 months in 2001 to only 6 weeks by the end of last year.

The creation of the Call Center, more interviews completed by each officer, and our efforts to better communicate with the public were all decisive factors in this success. Most of all, it would not have been possible without the sustained effort and huge amount of work every person in this section did. And for that, I will always be proud.

Another key event during my time here was the emergence of the US-Visit Program, the collaborative effort between the United States Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security. This program aims to protect our

citizens and the millions of visitors that come to the U.S. every year. Every U.S. Embassy in the world will begin taking every visa applicant's biometric data, that is, their fingerprints and, eventually, their photograph. In Colombia, this process had a smooth beginning last month.

Throughout my time here, it has been particularly rewarding to work with the American community.

Through our warden system, U.S. citizens living in Colombia keep each other safe and informed, and in contact with the Embassy. I congratulate them on their commitment to this goal and thank them for their help.

As I leave Colombia, I feel honored for having had the opportunity to serve here twice, and proud of the achievements we accomplished together.

Most of all, I am grateful for the friendships I made here, in particular with Colombians and Americans dedicated to helping others. The work of charitable organizations like the Colegio Santa Franciscana, the Asociacion Defensora de Animales, and the American Society of Bogota give us all the opportunity to contribute and see how Colombians are dedicated to build a better future, one person or, in some cases, one animal, at a time.

I thank you all for a fascinating and rewarding experience. I say goodbye confident that, next time I visit Colombia, it will be a prosperous nation at peace, the result of the hard work and commitment of every Colombian citizen.



## Consular Communique

### BIOMETRICS: OFF TO A STAR STUDDED START

In the company of Adriana Vargas, host of *La Noche*, the stars of the popular nightly soap “*Mesa Para Tres*,” Daniel Ochoa and Maria Cristina Galvis, and representatives from the print and broadcast media, Ambassador William Wood and Consul General Patricia Butenis launched the implementation of US-Visit in Colombia.

“This program will increase our security and protect millions of visitors to the U.S. Every person applying for a visa will be asked to have his or her fingerprints taken,” Ambassador Wood said. “In this century, each person’s digital information – their biometrics – is what the written signature was in the last. It identifies us and protects us. And it does it more accurately and reliably than ever before.”

US-Visit starts at the Embassy when applicants’ prints are taken. Prints are taken again at the point of entry and exit from the U.S. Eventually, applicants will have their photos taken digitally.

US-Visit is a worldwide effort being implemented in all U.S. Embassies around the world. It is already underway in U.S. Embassies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.



Above left: The press waits for Ambassador Wood and guests to launch the US-Visit Program in Colombia. Above right: From left to right, Consul General Pat Butenis, Ms. Maria Cristina Galvis, Mr. Daniel Ochoa and Ms. Adriana Vargas listen as Ambassador Wood explains how the program will help protect U.S. and Colombian citizens against fraud and identity theft. Below left: Ambassador Wood demonstrates the simple procedure by which biometric information is taken from each applicant. Below right: Daniel Ochoa smiles as he places his index finger on the sheet of glass. The procedure is fast, easy and clean, as it requires no ink.



## SHARING INFORMATION TO STOP DOCUMENT FRAUD

The United States will soon provide information on lost and stolen passports to Interpol. In association with the U.S. National Central Bureau of Interpol and Interpol General Secretariat in Lyon, France, the U.S. Department of State announces a new program that will contribute substantially to worldwide travel document security and our ability to impede the movement of terrorists and other criminals.

“The United States is joining other countries in providing current information on issued passports that have been reported lost or stolen to the Interpol's lost and stolen document database,” says the American Citizens Services (ACS) Chief. “This information is available to border authorities worldwide, making it easier for them to spot impostors.”

Issued U.S. passports reported lost or stolen are immediately invalidated, added to an electronic database, and may not be used for travel. Only the passport number, country of issuance and document type will be provided to Interpol.

“It is very important to us to protect the passport holder's privacy,” the ACS Chief explains. “The name and biographical data from the passport will not be given to Interpol. Should a hit occur against the Interpol database, the hit will be verified with U.S. authorities before action is taken against the bearer of the passport.”

To prevent identity theft and misuse of the document, U.S. citizens are encouraged to notify the Department of State's Passport Office of the loss or theft of their passport at the earliest possible moment. Passport holders can easily report their documents stolen by visiting the Department of State's website: <http://www.travel.state.gov>, or by calling 202-955-0430.

In Colombia, people can visit our website, <http://bogota.usembassy.gov>, for instructions on how to report a lost or stolen passport with a U.S. visa. The website has a form which people can fill out and fax to the Consulate at 315-2127, along with the police report (denuncia). If the person does not have internet access or wants to talk to a consular employee, he or she can call the consulate at 315-0811, ext. 2518.

“We believe this is a significant step toward curbing not only terrorism but also crimes of many types including identity theft,” the ACS Chief says. “And we encourage every person who lost a passport or had it stolen, to help us keep track of them by notifying us immediately.”



### REGISTER AND GO!

The U.S. Embassy in Bogota and the Department of State place a high priority on delivering accurate, up-to-date travel information and assistance to American citizen travelers. On April 27 the State Department launched a new online Travel Registration website in limited release for American citizens traveling or residing abroad. Travel Registration allows you to record foreign trip and residence information that the Department of State can use to communicate and assist you in case of an emergency

The new Internet travel registration service for American citizens allows you to register and update your contact information on the Internet, making it easier for you to keep your information current. The site also provides up-to-date travel information customized to your unique travel agenda and itinerary. The data you provide is

secured and Privacy-Act protected behind Department of State firewalls, accessed only by cleared personnel in Embassies and Consulates in order to assist you.

In order to improve the information and protection we provide to our own local community of American citizens, we would like to encourage our currently registered U.S. citizen residents and their families to access this site and register. Registration is voluntary and free. Access the website at <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs> and get acquainted with travel registration.

Let us know how you like the new site. If you encounter any difficulties or have any questions about the Travel Registration website, please send an e-mail to [CAIbbs@state.gov](mailto:CAIbbs@state.gov). If you have specific questions about your registration with this Embassy please contact us at [ACS\\_Bogota@state.gov](mailto:ACS_Bogota@state.gov).



## BIG BUCKS FOR FAKE DOCS: CRACKING DOWN ON SCHEME TO SWINDLE APPLICANTS

The Fraud Prevention Unit (FPU) recently received alerts from our staff and members of the public regarding several schemes to swindle visa applicants out of large sums of money in exchange for false documents.

“Last month, for example, Embassy employees noticed a large sign posted in the parking lot across from the visa entrance advertising the services of an U.S. immigration lawyer, catering specifically to refused visa applicants,” the FPU Chief explains. “When an FPU investigator called the number listed, posing as a would-be client, the lawyer’s office demanded an upfront payment of US \$ 50 for visa processing.”

During the conversation with the under cover FPU investigator, the lawyer’s office promised to send the client’s information to the U.S. for visa issuance, after which the client could pick up the visa in Bogota for an additional fee of \$1000. “We contacted the U.S. immigration lawyer, informed him that only the Embassy can issue visas, and asked him to remove the sign from the parking lot,” says the FPU Chief. “Hopefully that will keep this particular group from trying to take advantage of innocent applicants.”

But many others seem to be waiting to take its place. “In late April, DAS Immigration inspectors called me to the national El Dorado Airport because a 35-year-old Colombian woman was trying to board a flight with a suspicious visa,” the FPU chief explains.

“Upon inspection, the visa turned out to be a color photocopy of a visa that had been previously issued to a 23-year-old male and then altered.”

The traveler, an unemployed cosmetologist, insisted she had never broken the law before, but had paid a staggering \$8000 U.S. dollars to a fraudulent document vendor for the false visa.



“People who sell fraudulent documents prey on the hopes and, at times, desperation of applicants,” the FPU Chief says. “It is sad. But buying false documents is a violation of Colombian and U.S. law. People wanting to go to the U.S. should not be

tempted into a criminal act that can have serious consequences for them. There is an easy and legal way to apply for a visa, the only way, and it is with the United States Embassy.”

For more information on how to apply for a visa, please visit our web site at <http://bogota.usembassy.gov>. Our web site and the Visa Information Call Center are the only authorized sources of official visa information from the U.S. Embassy. No visa information is available through the U.S. Embassy’s telephones.

### How to contact the Consular Section

For all consular information on visas, supporting documents, how to schedule an appointment, stolen/lost passports, etc., visit our web page: <http://usembassy.state.gov/colombia>.

**Non-immigrant visas:** Call the Visa Information Call Center by obtaining a PIN code at any Colpatria bank. Then call the Call Center at 01-8000-12-32-32. From the U.S., dial 1-877-804-5401. There is a credit card access fee for U.S.-based numbers. From within Bogotá, dial 346-9150.

For **Immigrant Visas** information, call 571-315-1566 between 3 to 4 p.m., on Tuesdays. Priority dates for all immigrant visas are listed at [http://travel.state.gov/visa\\_bulletin.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa_bulletin.html). The e-mail address is [IVBogota@state.gov](mailto:IVBogota@state.gov).

For the **Fraud Prevention Unit**, call 571-315-2497.

For **American Citizens Services**, e-mail questions to [acs\\_bogota@state.gov](mailto:acs_bogota@state.gov).

**No visa questions will be answered at any of these numbers.**

**SECRETARY POWELL: "U.S. REMAINS WELCOMING TO FOREIGN VISITORS"**

The United States must continue to be a "welcoming" country even as it takes steps to secure its borders, Secretary of State Colin Powell says.

Speaking May 12 to U.S. travel industry representatives in Washington, Secretary Powell said that openness, which has enriched U.S. democracy, culture and economy, is a "vital" part of U.S. foreign policy and will become even more important as globalization progresses.

"Because if people think that America is hiding behind a fence, that America is not engaged in the world, if America is so concerned about its security that it is not open to people in other lands coming to visit, then it is not the same America we've been telling them about for all these years," Secretary Powell said.



AP, with permission for DoS

The secretary of state reported on "very encouraging" signs of the turn-around in international travel both to and from the United States.

He said, however, "we still have a very long way to go" before the number of applications for U.S. visitor visas will return to the level preceding the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The Commerce Department projects that the number of international travelers visiting the United States should return to nearly peak levels by 2007, according to an April 27 news release.

Secretary Powell noted that the number of international students enrolled in the United States has risen more slowly in recent years. He said the country must do a better job of attracting such students to U.S. schools and universities in an increasingly competitive international market for students.

Secretary Powell also spoke about the value of the personal and professional relationships developed in the United States by participants in U.S. exchange programs, relationships that can form a foundation of understanding and lasting partnerships, he added.

"If we lose legitimate foreign scholars, if we lose them to procedural frustrations ... we risk losing their goodwill, and that is a priceless thing to lose," he said.

Secretary Powell said that the Bush administration is working to minimize the negative impact of new security procedures on legitimate travelers.

He suggested, however, that some procedures might require getting used to. For example, a U.S. border security program -- U.S.-VISIT -- that initially raised concerns and negative reactions in some countries, has gained "acceptability" since it was introduced in January, he said.

Secretary Powell suggested that explaining border security systems "in ways that people will understand" will depend mostly on the administration's and Congress' efforts to fine-tune security laws, regulations and procedures. For example, he said, it is "essential" that Congress delays implementation of new passport requirements for visitors from the 27 countries covered by the U.S. visa waiver program.

"Together, we will guard our country with vigor and vigilance just as the Statue of Liberty has guarded New York Harbor for all these years," Secretary Powell said. "And even as we hold high a welcoming light to good people across the globe, we will protect ourselves. But above all, let them see that welcoming light. Come, visit, travel, stay, if you will. Enrich us and we will enrich you."

## COMMUNITY NEWS: PET FEST!

Last month, our departing Consul General and some of our vice-consuls took a little time off their duties to welcome the Asociación Defensora de Animales to our quarterly Embassy Bazaar.

“These are sweet animals that have been abandoned and are now up for adoption,” said our CG, while handling a gang of canines pulling in opposite directions. “The shelter is doing a great job rescuing them from the street and taking them from people who no longer want them. We welcome them here and hope these animals get a good home.”

The shelter brought dogs of different breeds and ages, as well as other quadrupeds. “I prefer cats,” a vice-consul says while holding a kitty in her arms. “They are interesting, and count as carry on in planes.”

Whether it is a canine or a feline, the shelter will be happy to help you select the perfect pet for you. Please call them at 212-8497 for more information. They welcome visitors and donations of all types, from Monday to Saturday.

### PETS: GOOD FOR YOU!

Several studies have linked better physical and mental health to having a pet. In a Cambridge University study pet owners reported fewer minor health problems like headaches, colds and hay fever. In another study involving Medicare patients, seniors who owned dogs actually visited their doctors less than those patients who did not have canine companionship and experience less feelings of depression. Other studies have shown that pet owners have lower cholesterol levels.

Interested? Here is a couple of things to think about:

*Lifestyle:* Do you just go home for the needed disco nap and then out again till all hours? If so, cats, birds and fish are for you. Although not all together.

*Activity level:* Find an animal suited to your sloth factor. Dogs are great for joggers, not so much for channel cruisers.

*Housing:* Space is the final frontier. A ‘studio’ in New York will probably not be enough for you and White Fang. But with a little space, quadrupeds are great.

*Health care:* Was the last time you saw someone vaguely medical three years ago, at that free LASIX examination at the mall? If so, be aware that pets do require some regular care for which you’ll have to do minimum planning.

So, is it worth it? “Completely,” says a vice-consul. “Pets are good company. And there is nothing nicer after a hard day than coming home to a sweet puppy happy to see you.”

