

Belize-CARICOM passports finally arrive

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In 2005 CARICOM countries began converting their passports to a regional document. Suriname was the first country to do so and today Belize became the last. It was that reason why Belizeans have been having trouble renewing or obtaining new passports as the Ministry of Immigration and National Security awaited the arrival of a shipment of the new travel documents. Tonight the Belize-CARICOM passports are being issued... and as News Five's Kendra Griffith found out, it comes with a modern look and special perks.

Kendra Griffith, Reporting

This morning Minister of National Security Carlos Perdomo was one of the first Belizeans to be issued the new CARICOM passport in a ceremony where the travel document was officially unveiled in Belmopan.

Carlos Perdomo, Minister of National Security

"This new passport is a part of measures aimed at promoting hassle-free travel for CARICOM nationals within the region. It is intended that the Belize CARICOM passport will create awareness that we are an integral part of the regional Caribbean Community as well as of being uniquely a Belizean citizen."

Gareth Murillo, Director of Immigration

"It is still a Belize passport; it is still a national document. The difference is that this one now is a CARICOM passport, it is a regional passport. It is intended to be a symbol of regionalism and integration with the other CARICOM countries. The pages have a lot of our national symbol on them, we have updated to more modern technology the security aspects of the passport."

Kendra Griffith

"in what regards?"

Gareth Murillo

"In several regards in terms of the printing of the passport, in terms of the manufacturing of the passport."

There are three colours: blue for ordinary citizens, green for service personnel, and red for diplomats. The passport will be valid for ten years, has forty-eight pages, and entitles Belizeans to an automatic six month stay in member states. But if you haven't already applied for yours, you'll have a long wait ahead of you.

Gareth Murillo

"We haven't been processing passports over the last several weeks and a significant backlog has developed. We will need time to clear that backlog. We are intending to work late evenings and on weekends to clear that backlog. We should get through with clearing that backlog within six to eight weeks and at that time, we can resume with the normal processing time."

Kendra Griffith

"So if I need a passport right now, I probably won't be able to get one?"

Gareth Murillo

"What we are saying right is if you are intending to travel, give us at least a month, give us at least four weeks to process your passport."

Director of Immigration Gareth Murillo is nonetheless encouraging residents to update their passports for the newer version.

Gareth Murillo

"We have been issuing machine readable passports now since 2005, but we still have a significant number of people who have not as yet upgraded their passports. I believe that now is an appropriate time to move away from those handwritten passports and go up to the machine readable passport now."

Belize was the last member country to implement the regional passport, but we were among the first six countries to sign on to the CARICOM Single Market and Economy in 2006. The C.S.M.E. allows the free flow of labour, goods, and capital among participating states.

Shawn Richards, Focal Point, C.S.M.E.

"People are still not aware of this animal we call the C.S.M.E. I think we still have to put more effort in putting

it out there and selling it to the people of Belize.”

Shawn Richards is the Focal Point for the C.S.M.E. in the Directorate of Foreign Trade... She says passport aside, Belize is on track with its implementation.

Shawn Richards

“We have complied with everything so far. Right now we are in process that we have to really get doing some more legal adjustments as respect to the free movement of persons. They have added some more categories to the five, so now we have nine categories that can move freely within the whole spectrum of the region from member state of member state.”

The category of persons able to move around now includes artists, musicians, university graduates, athletes, persons, media workers, artisans, nurses and teachers, and persons with associate degrees. Richards says there are several Belizeans who are already utilizing the free movement... but others are still wary.

Shawn Richards

“Most people I think are afraid of the issue of free movement. I don’t know if you might get that sense too as a part of the media and when you’ve done your interviews and you’re moving around. That’s basically what—every time you go out there, that is the issue you hear out there. People will come and take away the jobs.”

Kendra Griffith

“Is that likely?”

Shawn Richards

“To me it’s not a reality. I believe that the C.S.M.E. would be like an enhancement because you always hear people say we don’t have capacity with respect to human capacity to do certain things. People can look at this as a way to enhance because now you can look at your labour force not only being of Belize, now you can go to Jamaica. We don’t have to restrain to Belize and similarly the people there can say they don’t have to stay in Jamaica they can come out and work. And to me it will be that you will build capacity.”

Kendra Griffith reporting for News Five.

To utilize the free movement you have to get a skills certificate. That is currently being done through the Ministry of Education, however, there are plans to establish an accreditation board.