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Image credit: Viacheslav Lopatin/ Shutterstock If you are navigating the intricacies of the Schengen visa application and wondering how to proceed, we have got you covered. Visa application processes can be cumbersome and often leave travellers confused. However, our comprehensive, step-by-step guide to the Schengen visa application process is sure to assist you if you are planning to travel to Europe soon. What is a Schengen visa? Schengen is the term used for the European Union passport-free zone covering most countries in Europe. It is the world's largest free travel area. A Schengen visa is the most common visa for travelling to the continent and is issued for a short stay for business or tourism purposes. It allows a person to stay for up to 90 days in most European countries, enabling entry, free movement within, and departure from the Schengen zone through any of the Schengen member countries. Which countries come under the Schengen area? Image credit: James Ting/ Unsplash The Schengen Zone operates without border controls, facilitating visits to 27 European countries. These countries include Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. From March 31, 2024, Bulgaria and Romania joined the Schengen Area, allowing visa holders to seamlessly cross the borders through air and water routes while travelling in Europe, even though road entry is not yet permitted. Find out more here. Types of Schengen visas Image credit: Bruno Abatti/ Unsplash There are four types of Schengen visas: A, B, C, and D. The most popular is the Uniform Schengen Visa, covering types A, B, and C. It provides airport transit, allows commuting through a Schengen country, and permits living in a Schengen country for up to 90 days within six months. This is the visa required for a short vacation in Europe. Type A Type A is an airport transit visa. For instance, if you are travelling from one non-Schengen country to another non-Schengen country with a connecting flight via a Schengen country, you need a Type A Schengen visa. However, with this visa, you can't leave the airport and enter the concerned Schengen country. Type B This type allows commuting through a Schengen country to reach a non-Schengen country. The transit period is restricted to five days. Type C This is a short-term visa, allowing you to stay in a Schengen country for a fixed duration. Type C is further divided into Single Entry visas, Double Entry visas, and Multiple Entry visas. Single Entry Visa: Allows entry to a Schengen nation within the specified time on your visa, expiring upon leaving that country. Double Entry Visa: Similar to the Single Entry Visa but permits entering and leaving a Schengen country twice within the stipulated time. Multiple Entry Visa: This enables you to freely enter and exit the Schengen area as many times as you wish, valid for 90 days every six months. Other types include Limited Territorial Validity Visa (LTV) and National Visa. The LTV visa allows travel only in the Schengen country specified, while the national visa is for those wanting to study, work, or seek permanent residency in any Schengen country. Also Read How To Get 5 Year Multiple-Entry Schengen Visa Benefits & Process Guide How to apply? Image credit: H Ko/ Shutterstock According to official rules, you can apply for a Schengen visa six months before your date of travel. However, it is advisable to apply no later than three to four weeks before your trip, and earlier if you are visiting popular countries such as France and Germany. During peak seasons, processing time may exceed a few weeks. Follow these steps for a smooth application process: Check your eligibility for a Schengen visa and determine the type. Decide on the place of application and book your appointment accordingly. Collect the required documents and fill out the form diligently. Attend the interview and pay the fees. Europe Destinations What is the processing time? To apply, fill out an application form and book an appointment at a consulate, embassy or visa application centre. The minimum processing time is around 15 days. However, during the peak season, the processing time can extend to 30 days or even 60 days in case of complicated cases or if there is a backlog of applications. It is advisable to start the process approximately three months before your planned visit to your European destination. Documents required for application To apply for the visa, you need to submit the following documents: Signed visa application form Two recent passport-size pictures A valid passport Trip itinerary, including dates, flight details, hotel bookings or accommodation proof Proof of application fee payment Proof of travel and medical insurance Everything to know about the application fee You have to pay a non-refundable mandatory visa fee to apply for a Schengen visa. The application fee depends on your age and the type of visa you are applying for. The fee is payable at the designated embassy or consulate using cash, debit, or credit card. The fee for different categories of visa applicants is listed below. Adult: EUR 80 (INR 7,237.08) Children between 6-12 years: EUR 45 (INR 4,070.86) Children younger than 6 years; holders of diplomatic, official or service passports travelling for official purposes; pupils, students and teachers accompanying during a school trip; researchers travelling for scientific research; and family members of an EU or EEA national are excused from paying the application fee. Tracking your application If the Schengen visa process is taking longer than usual, the best way to check the status of your application is by contacting the concerned embassy via their website or offline. You can also visit the website of the outsourced visa application centre where applied for the visa. Schengen countries outsource visa application processing to VFS Global in India. At VFS Global, you have to submit your application, deposit the documents, and give your biometrics. You can track your application here. Keep your reference number ready. Schengen visa validity and extension Schengen visas can be extended under various circumstances, as allowed by the European Parliament and Council Regulation (EC) No. 810/2009 dated 13 July 2009, establishing the Community Code on Visas (EU Journal of Laws 2009 L243/1), according to Schengen Visa Info. Based on the rules, your visa can be extended only if you have resided in the Schengen area for less than 90 days for 180 days, provided it hasn't expired. Some reasons for which your visa can be extended include late entry, professional compulsions, medical emergencies, valid personal reasons, or unforeseen events including war, civil unrest or natural calamities. Here's a step-by-step process on how to apply for an extension: Find out whether you are eligible based on the criteria. Apply at least 15 days before you intend to leave. Get in touch with local authorities after collecting all the necessary documents. Submit your application and attend all scheduled appointments. Adhere to all the conditions laid down by authorities while waiting for confirmation. Accept the decision followed by planning your departure and renew again if required. Schengen visa rejection Image credit: Uladzimir Zuyeu/ Shutterstock Your Schengen visa application may be subject to rejection if certain mistakes are made in the filing process. These include improperly filling out the application form, submitting a passport without checking its validity, omitting information or providing incomplete details, having insufficient funds, or lacking information related to your travel insurance. Additionally, failure to provide proper information regarding reservations, accommodation, sponsor details, or neglecting to book return tickets could lead to the rejection of your application by the authorities. For more details on Schengen visa application rejection, refer to this link. (Feature image courtesy: Viacheslav Lopatin / Shutterstock) Related: These Countries Offer Golden Visa To Indians And Here's How To Get It Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) What is the minimum bank balance for a Schengen Visa? You need to submit a bank statement with a minimum balance of EUR 3,000 over the last 6 months. Do I need a Schengen visa for airport transit? Yes, you need a type A Schengen visa for airport transit. Is the Schengen visa valid for multiple entries? Yes, you have to apply for a multiple-entry visa in that case. Can I extend my Schengen visa? Yes, you can extend it by following the rules set by the authorities. What happens if I overstay my visa? You cannot overstay without proper permissions or extensions. Can I move freely between Schengen countries with this visa? Yes, you can move freely between Schengen countries with this visa, provided you abide by the rules. Where do I obtain the application form? You can get the application form here or from the official website of the outsourcing agency that you plan to consult for your application. When should I apply for a Schengen visa? If you are planning a trip to Europe, you should apply for it at least six months before travelling to avoid chaos. Note: The information in this article is accurate as of the date of publication. We may earn an affiliate commission when you shop through links on our site. If you are a South African looking to travel to any of the countries in the Schengen area, obtaining a Schengen visa may be more cost-effective than having separate permissions for each country. IAS can smoothen the process for you. If you would like advice or assistance with a visa application, contact us today. Call 0333 305 9375 or fill our contact form to get a callback. EXCELLENT Immigration Advice Service 4.4 rating 1030 reviews South African citizens require a Schengen visa to enter the Schengen zone. The exception is if you have a visa from the specific countries you plan to enter or a passport from another country with a visa liberalisation agreement with the area. Suppose you hold dual citizenship with one of the Schengen countries or a country with a visa waiver agreement with the zone. In that case, you can travel with the passport of the Schengen-visa-exempt country rather than your South African passport without needing to apply for a visa. Residents of South Africa that have a permanent or temporary residence permit can also apply from within South Africa if they do not meet the above visa requirements for visa-exempt travel. 26 countries signed the Schengen agreement to allow citizens of member countries to travel freely within the zone without passing through control at the internal borders. Those countries are: Austria