

What you need to know about SOFA status and certificates

The Kaiserslautern Military Community (KMC) is the largest military community outside the Continental United States, which makes it easy to forget that you are actually a resident of a foreign country. Traveling within Germany and crossing International borders into neighboring European nations is as easy as crossing from one U.S. state to another. But what happens when you are stopped by police for a routine check or you board an airplane to travel to another country and return to Germany? How do you identify yourself as a legal resident and not a regular tourist visiting Germany? Here is the answer:

Active duty U.S. military members assigned to Germany present their military ID card and travel orders when initially entering Germany. When on leisure travel outside of Germany, they will need to carry their CAC, leave form and tourist passport. U.S. government civilian employees, DoD-sponsored contractors and all eligible family members require a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) certificate in their passport while residing in Germany. It must be presented to Customs and Border Agents when entering and departing Germany. The SOFA certificate is typically in the form of a stamp placed inside a no-fee passport when issued by the State Department. However, it can also be in the form of a laminated card when issued by a military passport acceptance facility in Germany.

What are the SOFA status benefits and responsibilities? SOFA is defined as a treaty that sets out the terms under which the members of the force and the civilian component of a foreign NATO-member state are allowed to operate in another NATO state. The SOFA certificate identifies the bearer as a person who is entitled to unrestricted entry and exit from Germany and to benefits, privileges and protection under the NATO SOFA and the German Supplementary Agreement. These benefits include the exemption from having to register your presence with the German authorities and paying German income tax. You can also purchase certain goods tax-free to include vehicles.

The SOFA treaty gives you many benefits, but it also means that you have certain responsibilities. Individuals are responsible for learning and obeying German laws, carrying an official ID card issued by the sending state and registering vehicles with USAREUR. In addition, civilians and dependents are required to have a SOFA certificate in their passport to prove their entitlement to live, work and travel within Germany.

Who is entitled to a SOFA certificate? In order to be eligible you must belong to one of the following categories: U.S. DoD civilians or DoD-sponsored contractors and their family members as well as military dependents accompanying the force. Certain foreign nationals from NATO-sending states employed by the U.S. armed forces are also eligible.

What documents do I need to receive a SOFA certificate? Command-sponsored family members and stateside-hire civilians should receive a SOFA stamp in their no-fee passport before arriving in Germany. The documentation needed for U.S. Forces members to obtain SOFA certificates for their foreign national or non-command-sponsored dependents include their PCS or TDY orders assigning them to Germany, an AMS Surf showing the member's DEROS and their dependents' passports and ID cards. For local hire civilians, contractors and their family members, an AE Form 600-77A is required from their servicing personnel office or sponsoring agency. In addition, the dependents' passports and valid ID cards are also required. All family members must be enrolled in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS). If dependents do not possess a valid ID card (i.e. children under the age of 10), the sponsor will need to provide a verified DD Form 1172-2 as confirmation that the dependents are enrolled in DEERS.

Why do I need a SOFA certificate? Although not all customs agents check for a valid SOFA certificate that should not be a risk you are willing to take. If caught without it, violators could face fines or even deportation. At a minimum, your continued travel to or from your destination in Germany will be delayed. Officials have become less lenient when checking for SOFA certificates since noticing a large influx of travelers without valid SOFA identification. Citizens or nationals traveling on passports from a country that requires a visa for Germany must obtain a SOFA certificate from the Regional Director, IMCOM-Europe G-1, prior to arrival in Germany. You may refer to the Foreign Clearance Guide (FCG) for a list of these countries at <https://www.fcg.pentagon.mil/fcg.cfm>; please note that this website can only be accessed from an authorized domain. Failure to obtain SOFA identification prior to arrival in Germany may result in denial to enter Germany and immediate deportation. U.S. citizens and foreign nationals from countries not requiring a visa for Germany, may be able to enter without a SOFA certificate if unable to obtain one prior to departure. However, they should carry a copy of the sponsor's travel orders to Germany and must visit their servicing passport office to request the identification certificate within 90 days of arrival.

What do I need to visit a foreign country as a tourist? Active duty military members must obtain a tourist passport to enter a foreign country as a tourist. When returning to Germany, they will need to show their military ID card and valid leave form; leave forms need to identify the unit assigned or attached to in Germany. U.S. citizen family members, civilians and contractors must also obtain a tourist passport to visit foreign countries. Command-sponsored civilians and their family members as well as military family members will need to carry both the no-fee and tourist passport when on leisure travel and present the tourist passport when entering a foreign country and the no-fee passport with SOFA stamp when returning to Germany. The use of a no-fee passport for leisure travel is not authorized and at your own risk. All non-command-sponsored family members, local hire civilians and contractors will receive a SOFA card for their tourist passport since they are not eligible for a no-fee passport. Finally, always check the FCG for passport and visa requirements before making any travel plans!

When does my SOFA status end? SOFA status for military or civilian members ends when their assignment in Germany ends. Unaccompanied dependents whose sponsor has PCSd are authorized full SOFA privileges for 90 days after the sponsor's departure. This is called the 90-day grace period. SOFA status for military members and their dependents retiring or separating in Germany ends on their date of retirement or separation. The same applies to civilians and their dependents who retire, resign or are terminated. These individuals must contact the local host nation officials regarding residency or a 90-day tourist extension prior to losing SOFA status if they do not depart Germany on or before their last day of SOFA status.

What do I need to do when my SOFA status ends? Sponsors and/or dependents must visit their servicing military passport acceptance facility to have their and/or their dependents' SOFA certificates invalidated as part of their out-processing actions. We recommend out-processing the passport facility NET 30 days prior to departure or after any last-minute leisure trips outside of Germany. The passport facility will invalidate SOFA certificates and return them to individuals so they can show them to Customs and Border Agents when departing Germany. Do not turn in or throw away your SOFA certificates prior to departure!

Always Practice the Rule of Three! Eligible individuals should always carry a valid and unexpired DoD ID card, passport(s) and SOFA certificate when traveling!

Courtesy of the Ramstein Passport Office (5 August 2024)