



Welcome to the United States of America! We hope you enjoy your visit to this country and can experience some of its many wonders—no matter how long you stay. This short guide will introduce you to the people of the United States and their way of life. Because people in most countries refer to citizens of the United States as Americans, we also use that term here.

As you read this CultureGrams report, please remember the United States is not only a large country but also a land of diversity. It is hard to describe the many different customs found here; we can only share some of the more general and common characteristics of the people and the country.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. The United States covers the central portion of North America and includes Alaska and Hawaii. Covering 3,794,100 square miles (9,826,675 square kilometers), it is the third largest country in the world. Because of its size and location, it has many different climates and a variety of geographical features. Large mountains, vast deserts, wide canyons, rolling hills, frozen tundra, extensive coasts, tropical islands, prairies, forests, wetlands, and other features can be found. In the west, east of the beaches and mountains of California, the Rocky Mountains give way to a vast central plain, which merges with the

rolling hills and low mountains of the east. Hawaii’s rugged, volcanic topography is lush and green year-round. Alaska has towering mountains, broad valleys, and glaciers. Natural resources include bauxite, coal, copper, gold, iron, lead, mercury, natural gas, nickel, petroleum, phosphate, silver, uranium, and timber.

Climates throughout the country are as varied as the terrain. Humidity is often high in the east and southeast, while the west is dry. Most of the nation experiences all four seasons, with cold and snowy winters and warm summers. The southwest and southeast experience fewer variations in climate and rarely receive snow. Natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and severe winter storms impact various regions.

History. Knowledge of North America’s history before Europeans arrived is incomplete, but large empires and advanced civilizations existed. From the 17th century on, Native Americans were displaced by European settlers, who came for riches, territory, and religious freedom. Disease brought by the settlers also decimated the Native American population. Thirteen British colonies were established on the east coast of North America. The American Revolution (1775–83) led to independence from Britain, which resulted in a loose confederation of states. The Constitution of 1787

strengthened the federal government, establishing the basic form of government that exists today. Explorers and pioneers headed west and settled large areas of land. The United States acquired territory from Native Americans, France, Mexico, Russia, and Spain throughout the 19th century, expanding its borders from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

In 1861, civil war broke out between Union states in the north and Confederate states in the south over issues of slavery, states' rights, and economic differences. Under President Abraham Lincoln, Union forces defeated the Confederates in 1865. Slavery was abolished and the unity of the country was restored; however, it took many years for the nation to heal from the conflict. Legal discrimination based on race continued until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s prompted legislation that ended such discrimination.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, immigration boomed, the U.S. economy grew substantially, and government policy focused on finding world markets. Initially wary of involvement in European affairs, the United States provided troops only during the final year of World War I. By 1942, the United States was a major combatant in World War II and emerged as the strongest economic and military power in the world. In the latter half of the 20th century, a state of political and military hostility referred to as the Cold War developed between the United States and the U.S.S.R. This led the United States to become a principal donor of financial and technological aid to developing countries in an effort to spread American values (which were not always welcome) and to stop the spread of Soviet-sponsored communism.

With the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, American influence declined, although this trend seemed to reverse in the 1980s and 1990s. U.S. leadership was pivotal in the 1991 Gulf War, as well as in Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, and is still vital to ongoing peace talks and trade negotiations around the world. President Bill Clinton was especially active in Middle East peace negotiations.

In the 2000 presidential elections, George W. Bush was declared the winner over Al Gore after numerous vote recounts and court decisions; he won reelection in 2004. After the terrorist attacks of September 2001, Bush declared a war on terror, which eventually led to military action against Afghanistan (2001) and a controversial war in Iraq (2003), which over time lost public support. The crash of the U.S. housing market and the subsequent failure of several U.S. financial institutions set off a larger global economic crisis in 2008.

Presidential elections that year gave victory to Democratic candidate Barack Obama, who was reelected in

2012. In 2010, Congress passed controversial health-care reform laws that require every citizen to have health insurance or pay a penalty. President Obama also declared the end of combat operations in Iraq, and all remaining troops were withdrawn by December 2011. However, U.S. troops were again sent to Iraq in 2014 to aid in the fight against Islamic State militants; by early 2015, the number of U.S. troops, all non-combatant, reached some 4,000. The combat mission in Afghanistan formally came to a close at the end of 2014, though about 10,000 U.S. troops remained in the country to train and assist.

The killing of a young, unarmed black man by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 sparked weeks of protests and focused attention on issues of income inequity, the treatment of minorities in the justice system, and the militarization of police. That year also saw the Obama administration announce it was seeking full diplomatic relations with Cuba. At the beginning of 2015, the government released the latest planned data reforms in response to the 2013 leaking of secret National Security Agency documents both domestically and abroad.

The United States is an active member of the United Nations and a key donor of international aid.

THE PEOPLE

Population. The population of the United States (more than 318 million) is the third largest in the world, after China and India, and is growing at 0.8 percent per year. A large portion of the population (78 percent) is white. Hispanics, also known as Latinos (17 percent), are the fastest-growing minority group. They recently became the country's largest ethnic minority, surpassing the black population (13 percent). Other groups include Asians and Pacific Islanders (6 percent) and Native Americans (1 percent). About 2 percent of Americans claim two or more races. These census figures add up to more than 100 percent because people may identify with multiple racial or ethnic groups.

Although members of any ethnic group can be found anywhere in the country, populations vary by region. For example, Hispanics reside mostly in the west and southwest, while African Americans live mostly in the east and southeast. In Hawaii, roughly half of the people are Asians or Pacific Islanders. Minority populations tend to be concentrated in urban areas, where more than 80 percent of all Americans live. About 20 percent of the population is younger than 15 years of age.

Most Americans enjoy access to the education, health care, and economic prosperity needed to make choices in their lives. The United States' mosaic of peoples

benefits and challenges the nation. Racial tensions, particularly in larger urban areas and some southern states, have erupted into violence throughout the country's history. As a result of the civil rights movement, however, many people recognized the inequalities favoring whites over other ethnic groups. Since the mid-1900s, much progress has been made in extending equality to all. However, Americans generally agree there is still a lot to do.

You may come from a nation that is not as racially mixed as the United States. Your visit may allow you to observe the positive impact a multiracial society has on the United States, as well as the difficulties a country faces in overcoming ethnic tensions. It might also be an opportunity to become acquainted with people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Language. American English is different from other forms of English spoken around the world. If you learned English as a second language, you may have studied a British variety in a classroom setting. One of the first things that you will notice is that the American usage of English does not always conform to strict rules.

Even among well-educated Americans, spoken English is very flexible. Be aware that idioms are often used in American English. For example, an American might greet you with *How ya doin?* as a way of saying hello. Other common colloquialisms include *Shape up* (Behave yourself), *Suit yourself* (Do as you please), and *Knock it off* (Stop what you are doing). If you do not understand a phrase, ask for an explanation.

Except for some differences in pronunciation, people throughout the country speak a uniform language; only a few minor dialectical variations exist. This is due largely to American mobility, the nation's mass media (especially television), and its educational system. In the northeast and south, the *r* may be dropped from the end of a word; in the south, English is spoken at a slower pace and with different vowel pronunciations. In general, Americans draw out their sounds rather than speak in concise, clipped syllables. Some ethnic groups also have their own variety of English, especially in urban areas. Spanish is common in many communities and is the primary language in the home for roughly 13 percent of all Americans. Native Americans speak a variety of Amerindian languages. Many first- and second-generation immigrants continue to speak their native tongues.

Religion. Although the United States has never had an official state church, about 84 percent of the population professes some religious belief. Most Americans (roughly 79 percent) are Christians. Early European settlers were primarily Christian, and the Constitution

and Bill of Rights are based, in part, on Christian values and principles. However, the Constitution dictates that church and state remain separate.

There are scores of different Christian churches throughout the country. Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans are the largest Protestant groups; more than half of all Americans belong to these or other Protestant organizations. About 24 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Other Christian denominations account for another 3 percent of the total. There are also substantial numbers of Jews (1.7 percent), Buddhists (0.7 percent), Muslims (0.6 percent), and members of other religions. Roughly 39 percent of all Americans attend religious services weekly. About 12 percent of all Americans have no religious affiliation but may still have spiritual convictions.

Religion generally is a personal matter for Americans. They do not have to tell employers about their religious preferences. They are not obligated to accept anyone's beliefs, but they can express their beliefs in public if they wish. People with an active interest in religion often discuss their beliefs in the hope that others will accept their faith.

While you are in the United States, you are welcome to practice your religion, and you may find others who share your beliefs. Most Americans are understanding if your religion requires you to abstain from certain foods and beverages and will not expect you to violate those principles. They will also understand the need for time to worship. If you have special religious needs, explain them to your hosts, and they will probably try to help you.

General Attitudes. Americans are frank and outspoken. They voice their opinions and share their views on a variety of subjects. They also ask questions and challenge other people's opinions. Unless it is very personal, public criticism is not considered improper. While most Americans are proud of their country, they may openly criticize the government or even the president. Freedom of speech is carefully protected by the people and the Constitution. Americans value humor and like to laugh at themselves and the country's weaknesses. Indeed, a good sense of humor is appreciated.

Americans also appreciate innovation, hard work, and independence. In fact, independence is a basic value in the United States. Young people work to achieve financial independence from their parents. Extended families generally do not live together. The nation's foreign policy is based on a belief that people should have freedom and independence. Political debates in the country often focus on the rights of the individual.

Although members of many cultures believe the

group, community, or society is more important than the individual, American culture is different. Even when working as a team (in sports, business, and so forth), Americans usually think in terms of several distinct individuals blending their efforts rather than a group working as one unit. Traditional duties generally are less important than individual preferences. If your culture stresses the group more than the individual, American individualism may be difficult to accept—not only because of the way Americans behave, but because you may be expected to behave the same way.

Do not be afraid to disagree with someone, even in front of others. It is often a sign of strength, ambition, and intelligence to ask questions or challenge opinions. You may notice that Americans are sometimes disrespectful of leaders, parents, or superiors. Often this is because individuals do not feel restricted by social status. Although social classes exist, most Americans believe in social mobility that allows a person to move from one economic class to another.

This opportunity for mobility is commonly called *The American Dream*, which means work and personal ambition can lead people to accomplish more than their backgrounds might suggest they can. However, *The American Dream* includes the risk of failure. The United States does not have some of the government programs other countries have that provide basic necessities or that act as a safety net to every citizen. Therefore, some people do not have jobs, homes, pensions, or access to medical care. The wealthy can become poor, the poor can remain poor, and some elderly people are not taken care of. The government is not overly involved in society because Americans generally feel the government should not intervene in their personal lives.

Personal Appearance. Although fashion trends affect general clothing patterns, Americans generally feel free to wear whatever they please. Some use clothing to make a social or personal statement. Americans emphasize cleanliness but may purposely wear tattered clothing or casual attire in public. *Dressing down* (dressing casually) is a trend in the workplace; still, suits with neckties for men and pantsuits, dresses, or skirts for women are standard attire in many offices. Formal clothing is worn for certain occasions. Short pants and recreational clothing are often worn in public. Appearance, in general, is important to individual Americans. Except in formal situations, you should be comfortable in casual clothing and can follow the general example of the people around you. If you prefer to wear more traditional clothing from your homeland, most Americans will not object.

Greetings. Both men and women usually smile and shake hands when greeting. The American handshake is usually firm. Good friends and relatives may embrace when they meet, especially after a long absence. In casual situations, people may wave rather than shake hands. Friends also wave to each other from a distance. Americans may greet strangers on the street by saying *Good morning* or *Hello*, although they may pass without any greeting. Among the youth, verbal greetings or hand-slapping gestures are common.

Except in formal situations, people generally address one another by given name, even when first meeting. Using a title (*Mr.*, *Ms.*, or *Dr.*, for example) before a family name shows respect. When greeting someone for the first time, Americans commonly say *Nice to meet you*, *My pleasure*, or *How do you do?* A simple *Hello* or *Hi* is also common.

Friends often greet each other with *How are you?* and respond with *Fine*, *thanks*. Americans do not really expect any other answer to the question *How are you?* because it is a way of saying hello. Many of your new friends may be eager to have you teach them some greetings used in your country.

Gestures and Communication. When conversing, Americans generally stand about two feet (0.6 meters) away from one another; this distance is called *personal space* and is important to most Americans. However, people may spontaneously touch one another on the arm or shoulder to show surprise, sympathy, or caring during conversation. Direct eye contact is not necessary for the duration of a conversation, but avoiding it may indicate the speaker is not sincere or the listener is not interested.

Holding hands in public is a sign of romantic affection; friends of the same sex generally do not hold hands. To point at an object or an individual, a person extends the index finger. One beckons by waving all fingers (or the index finger alone) with the palm facing up. To express approval, Americans use either the “thumbs up” or “okay” sign. “Thumbs up” is done by making a fist with one or both hands and extending the thumb(s) upward. The “okay” signal is made by rounding the thumb and index finger until their tips touch to form a circle; the other three fingers point up. Americans often hand items to one another with one hand and may even toss something to a friend.

When sitting, Americans assume a casual posture. People may prop their feet on chairs, place the ankle of one leg on the knee of the other, cross legs at the knee, or sit with legs spread apart. Poor posture is not uncommon.

Some of the above gestures may not be common in your culture and may even be considered offensive.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

If an American friend accidentally offends you, you should explain why the gesture is considered improper in your country. There are also finger and hand gestures that are offensive or vulgar in the United States (such as extending the middle finger).

Visiting. Americans enjoy socializing. They gather in small and large groups for nearly any occasion, and they enjoy talking, watching television or a movie, eating, and relaxing together. Although Americans are informal people, they have structured lives. Time schedules generally are important. Therefore, it is best to make appointments to see officials and to telephone before visiting friends. If invited to someone's home, you should arrive promptly, especially if invited for a meal. The meal generally is served first, and guests socialize with their hosts afterward. Refusing second helpings is not considered impolite. Unless your host tells you to dress formally, assume your visit (and clothing) will be informal. Dinner guests are expected to stay a while after the meal to visit with the hosts. If refreshments are served during a casual visit, it is polite but not necessary to accept them.

Guests are not expected to bring gifts, but a small token such as wine, flowers, or a handicraft will be appreciated. If you stay for a few days, a small gift or a letter of thanks is appropriate. During a longer visit, you may be asked to help a little in the home by keeping your room clean, making your bed, or washing the dishes. If you stay for several weeks, you will generally be considered part of the family, who will expect you to help in the home as any other family member.

Eating. Because Americans come from many different cultural backgrounds, eating styles and habits also differ. However, most Americans eat with a fork in the hand with which they write. They use a knife for cutting and spreading; otherwise, they lay it on the plate. When a knife is used for cutting, the fork is switched to the other hand. People eat some foods, such as french fries, fried chicken, sandwiches, hamburgers, pizza, and tacos, with the hands. They generally place napkins in the lap.

Resting elbows on the table usually is considered impolite, but some people are not concerned with it. If you prefer to eat a different way, do not feel obligated to use the American style. In informal situations, you are generally welcome to do what is most comfortable.

Eating Out. Americans eat many meals away from home, partly because they enjoy it and partly because a busy lifestyle makes cooking at home increasingly difficult. Therefore, eating while walking in public is not considered rude. It is common to eat in the car while driving, and you will notice the popularity of *drive-through fast-food* restaurants. Such places provide an

inexpensive meal in less than five minutes.

The United States also has many restaurants where fast food is not served. These offer traditional American meals as well as foods from around the world. At a restaurant where you are served by a waiter or waitress, you should leave a tip (service charge) of at least 15 percent. A few restaurants include this charge in the bill, especially for large groups, but most do not. Restaurant employees rely on tips as an important part of their regular income because they do not receive high salaries. At fast-food establishments, do not leave a tip but clear your table when you leave.

Unless specifically invited to eat out at a host's expense, Americans pay for their own meals when dining with friends. This is called *splitting the check* or *getting separate checks*. If you are invited out but your host does not offer to pay for your meal, you should be prepared to pay for it or decline the invitation.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The American family is the basic unit of society, but it has experienced significant change in the last few decades. A generation ago, the average family consisted of a mother, a father, and two or more children. This nuclear family often maintained important ties to members of the extended family.

Today, the number of married couples without children, single-parent households, same-sex couples, and unmarried couples with or without children is on the rise. More than one-third of all children are born out of wedlock. Children may live with or be cared for by grandparents, especially if the parent is young and unmarried. Americans vary widely in their attitudes toward these non-traditional households: roughly one-third accepts them as normal, another third considers them socially harmful, and another third tolerates them.

A generation ago, men were the traditional breadwinners. Today, more than half of all women are formally employed. In homes where both the husband and wife work, men are now expected to share household chores, although women still perform most domestic duties. Men often play an important role in raising children as well. In families where both parents work or in single-parent families, relatives may take care of children during the day. However, many families must rely on daycare facilities, and the need for such facilities is growing.

In recent years, the number of multigenerational households has grown to include 16 percent of the population. Elderly individuals who cannot care for themselves live in retirement communities or other institutions; many live with their adult children. Otherwise, the elderly live in their own homes. They comprise a

rapidly expanding segment of the population.

The American family is very mobile. It is common to move from one region of the country to another for education, employment, or a change in living conditions.

Dating and Marriage. Dating is a social pastime. Young people may begin dating in couples as early as age 13, although group activities are more common at that age. More serious dating in couples begins as early as age 15. A person does not feel obligated to date only one person at a time, unless the couple agrees to do so. Otherwise, Americans date on a casual basis as many people and as many (or as few) times as they wish until they develop a serious relationship with one person. That relationship may or may not lead to marriage. Dating is as common among single adults as among the youth. At all ages, going to movies, dancing, dining at restaurants, and participating in sports are popular dating activities.

Casual sexual relationships are common in the United States. Many couples choose to live together before or instead of marrying. Still, many consider marriage to be the preferred living arrangement.

Wedding ceremonies vary according to one's religious background, but all couples must obtain a marriage license from the local government before getting married by a civil or religious authority. Weddings can be lavish or simple, depending on each family's region, economic status, religious affiliation, and personal preference. Divorce is common, as is marrying for a second or third time.

Diet. It is difficult to name a national dish. The abundance of fast-food restaurants in the United States would seem to indicate that the national foods are hamburgers, french fries, pizza, tacos, and chicken. While these foods are popular, they reflect a busy lifestyle as much as preference. Americans eat beef, pork, chicken, and turkey in fairly large quantities, although eating habits are changing with health concerns. Potatoes, rice, and pasta are common with the evening meal. Fresh fruits and vegetables are available all year. Americans consume large amounts of candy, ice cream, and other sweets. Ethnic foods are readily available in many areas. Most Americans will try any food, and the culture easily adapts to new tastes. The majority of popular American foods are adopted from the national cuisines of immigrants.

Recreation. Baseball, basketball, and American football are the most popular spectator and participant sports. Soccer, which may be the national pastime in your country, is growing in popularity. Public schools provide team sports for the youth. Professional sports are an important part of American culture, and professional athletes are paid very high salaries.

Americans enjoy cycling, racquetball, tennis, swimming, golf, bowling, jogging, hockey, and aerobic exercise. In their leisure time, Americans enjoy consuming media; they watch television and enjoy movies at home on disc or streamed to a computer or television. They watch newly released films in movie theaters. Dining out is another popular activity. Americans spend time online interacting with friends via social media, playing games, and surfing the web. Picnicking, attending concerts, reading, traveling, and spending time with friends are also common pastimes.

The Arts. Galleries and museums nationwide exhibit many styles and mediums. Government and private organizations provide financial support to artists and art education programs. Larger cities usually have a professional orchestra, and most have at least one theater. New York City is the center of fine arts production in the United States. Broadway musicals are quite popular, and the best shows tour the nation. The U.S. entertainment industry, including movies and music, is known worldwide. Computer animation and technology contribute to many movies' visual appeal.

Pop music is the most common form of music heard in the United States. However, jazz, blues, country, bluegrass, and rock and roll (of which there are several styles) all originated in the United States and have large followings. Realistic fiction is the most popular literary form in the United States.

Holidays. Each state has its own public holidays, and each city may have annual celebrations. National public holidays include New Year's Day (1 Jan.), Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (third Monday in January), Presidents' Day (third Monday in February), Memorial Day (last Monday in May, honoring the war dead), Independence Day (4 July), Labor Day (first Monday in September), Columbus Day (second Monday in October), Veterans Day (11 Nov.), Thanksgiving (fourth Thursday in November), and Christmas (25 Dec.). Christmas Eve (24 Dec.), although not a national holiday, is also celebrated.

Many days are observed but are not legal holidays. These include Groundhog Day (2 Feb.), Valentine's Day (14 Feb.), St. Patrick's Day (17 Mar.), April Fool's Day (1 April, when people play pranks on one another), Easter (March or April), Mother's Day (second Sunday in May), Father's Day (third Sunday in June), Flag Day (14 June, commemorating the 1777 adoption of the U.S. flag), and Halloween (31 Oct.). The most popular holiday season extends from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day.

Shopping and Business Hours. Except for retail stores, businesses are generally open from 8 or 9 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m. Retail and grocery stores often remain open

until 9 or 10 p.m., and many are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Large supermarkets usually carry anything from food and school supplies to electronics, sporting equipment, and prescription medications.

In suburban areas, people shop for various items at large shopping complexes called *malls*. A *mall* has dozens of businesses offering clothing, computer equipment, jewelry, fast food, and other items. Department stores, which are sometimes attached to *malls*, carry clothing, cosmetics, household goods (like cookware and bedding), hardware items, gardening equipment, gifts, and hundreds of other products. If you need to shop for a specific item, you should either ask an American friend what type of store carries that item or look it up online.

When shopping, be aware that many states add a sales tax onto retail sales. This tax is not included in the price of the item you are purchasing. Therefore, if you buy something for \$20, you will pay more than that for the item. Sales tax rates are different in each state but average about 7.5 percent.

Money. The U.S. dollar system uses paper money and coins. The paper money is all the same color and size. Denominations include \$1, \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50, \$100, and others of higher value.

Coins do not have numbers on them to signify their value. The *quarter* is the largest coin in common use and is worth 25 cents (there are 100 cents in a dollar). The next largest coin in size is the *nickel*, but it is worth only five cents. The next largest is the *penny*, or one-cent coin, which is copper in color. The smallest coin is the *dime*, worth 10 cents. Americans tend to use debit and credit cards more often than cash, though there are some circumstances that call for cash only.

If traveling throughout the country, be aware that bus stations, train stations, some airports, and even banks in some parts of the country do not have currency exchange facilities. Major hotels will exchange currency for their guests, but rural hotels rarely have such services. Because carrying large amounts of cash is not wise, you may want to use a credit card or traveler's checks when traveling extensively.

SOCIETY

Government. The United States is a democratic federal republic. Individual states hold sovereignty over their territory and have rights that are not reserved by the federal government. Each state has its own legislature and a directly elected governor. Free elections have always determined the country's leadership, and citizens may vote at age 18. The U.S. president is elected by an *electoral college*, which represents the vote of the people in each state. Presidential elections

are held every four years, on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November; the next election will take place in 2016.

The bicameral legislature, called Congress, has two houses: the 435-seat House of Representatives, whose members serve two-year terms, and the 100-seat Senate (two senators from each state), whose members serve six-year terms. Nonvoting delegates in the House represent U.S. territories and the District of Columbia. Congress is dominated by the Republican and Democratic parties. Smaller parties are active throughout the country, but most act as pressure groups rather than viable election contenders. About 19 percent of the legislators are women. The government also has a separate judicial branch, consisting of state and federal courts and the Supreme Court.

Economy. The United States has the largest, most diverse and technologically advanced economy in the world. The real gross domestic product per capita is one of the highest in the world. This indicates that the average American has greater buying power than people in most other countries. Thanks in part to government relief and stimulus programs, the economy has improved after suffering a serious recession that began in 2008. While American society as a whole is prosperous, there is a widening gap between the wealthy and the poor, and even between those who earn a comfortable income and those who struggle to meet basic needs.

The country's economic strength is based on industrial and service sectors, overseas investments, the dollar as a major world currency, a demand-driven consumer society, and exports. The service sector employs more people than manufacturing, but the United States remains a world leader in industry and high technology. It exports capital goods, cars, consumer goods, food, and machinery. It also exports *pop culture* (e.g., movies, music, television programming, fashion trends, sports), which can fuel demand for American goods. The United States is a key world financial center; its economic fortunes affect global markets and international economic growth. The currency is the U.S. dollar (US\$).

Transportation and Communications. The United States has an extensive network of paved highways; the private car is the primary form of transportation. If you plan to drive while you are in the United States, you should have an international driver's license and be familiar with the road signs, which do not always conform to the international standard. Vehicles travel on the right-hand side of the road in the United States. If you wish to purchase a car, become familiar with insurance laws in the state where you are living. In the United States, all drivers must have insurance in case

they have an accident.

In large cities, public transportation (buses, railways, and subways) is usually available. Many people travel long distances by air. Passenger train travel is limited to short commuter distances and relatively few cross-country routes; trains more frequently transport goods.

The communications network is extensive. Most households have at least one telephone, radio, and television. There are thousands of radio and television stations throughout the country; most are privately owned. Freedom of the press is guaranteed. Newspapers are available everywhere, and about three-quarters of all Americans read either a print or online edition every day. Others prefer to watch television for news. About 84 percent of the population has internet access, and its use in homes and schools is common.

Education. Each state is responsible for its education system, but there is a growing emphasis on national standards. Education is free and compulsory for children ages five through sixteen. Most students complete their high school education at grade 12 (age 17 or 18), but they can leave school at age 16. In addition to emphasizing basic academic subjects, schools also provide recreation, team sports, musical training, and various other activities.

This broad focus of the education system may be different from your country and may make U.S. schools seem less rigorous than yours. If you attend school in the United States, you may find advantages and disadvantages to the American approach to education.

After high school, many students join the labor force or seek vocational or technical training. Others enter a university or junior college to pursue higher-education degrees. Students must pay tuition for education after high school, and some schools are very expensive. Because of this, many students choose to attend school part-time while they work full-time to support themselves. Many full-time students also work part-time. The basic literacy rate is 99 percent,

APPROXIMATE U.S. MEASURE METRIC EQUIVALENT

1 mile	1.6 km
1 yard (3 feet)	.91 m
1 foot (12 inches)	.3 m
1 inch	.254 cm
1 acre	.40 ha
1 pound (16 ounces)	.45 kg
1 ounce	28.35 gm
1 gallon (4 quarts)	3.79 l
1 quart (4 cups)	.95 l
1 cup	.24 l
0°F	-18°C
32°F	0°C
60°F	16°C
90°F	32°C

To convert degrees Fahrenheit (°F) into degrees Celsius (°C), subtract 32 and divide by 1.8.

COUNTRY AND DEVELOPMENT DATA

Capital	Washington, D.C.
Population	318,892,103 (rank=3)
Area, sq. mi.	3,794,100 (rank=3)
Area, sq. km.	9,826,675
Human Dev. Index* rank	5 of 187 countries
Adjusted for women	47 of 148 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$52,800
Adult literacy rate	99 percent
Infant mortality rate	.6 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	.76 (male); 81 (female)

although functional illiteracy is a problem for many adults in the United States.

Measurements. Unlike most countries, the United States does not use the international metric system for measuring size, weight, distance, and temperature. If you will be dealing much with measurements, you should acquire a complete conversion chart.

Most Americans will not be able to tell you the metric equivalent of an American measurement. Although metrics are taught in the schools, Americans continue to resist the elimination of their unique system.

Health. Health facilities are extensive and modern, except in some rural areas, and the United States is a world leader in medical research and training. The health issues Americans face are different from those in some other countries in that sedentary lifestyles and risky physical behavior are the two greatest causes of adult health problems. Nearly all children receive immunizations against disease. Although the government provides some aid to the poor, the United States does not have a national (public) healthcare system. Because health care is expensive, most Americans rely on private health insurance to pay medical costs. In the past, some people could not afford or were unable to purchase this insurance, but the 2010 Affordable Care Act has made health care more widely available, particularly to people with lower incomes or pre-existing conditions. However, many Americans are opposed to the law because it has driven up the cost of some insurance premiums.

If you have health problems while in the United States, remember you are expected to pay for any treatment you receive unless you are covered by some form of insurance, either from your country or through traveler's insurance. If you need special medication, see a doctor for a prescription. Medications readily available in your country may be restricted here.

Traveling. If you are traveling extensively in the United States, you should make careful plans, especially if this is your first visit. You are free to travel in most areas without restriction. Make flight and hotel reservations in advance. Youth hostels are not as common in the

United States as in other countries. Crime is not as common as you might see on television or in American movies, but it is still a serious problem in large cities, and you should be careful. Do not carry large amounts of cash; avoid walking alone at night; do not leave your possessions unattended; and lock the door to your car, hotel, or apartment.

If you do travel, you will find the United States has more than large cities. There are vast areas of wide open spaces where several miles might separate homes or towns. In small towns, life is relaxed and friendly. We invite you to experience this part of the United States as well as its famous cities.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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