

First Impressions

Size

It is difficult to really experience or "feel" the size of the United States. To get the full impact you should realize, for example, that it takes 48 hours (two entire days and two long nights) to travel by train from Chicago to Los Angeles, rolling along hour after hour across wheat fields, mountains, and deserts.

Another way to think about it is to compare distances in the United States with others more familiar to you. For example, New York to Washington, D.C. is about the same as London to Paris or Nairobi to Mombasa or Tokyo to Kyoto; New York to Los Angeles is farther than Lisbon to Cairo or Moscow to Montreal or New Delhi to Rome.

Climate

Naturally, with such distances, the climate in the continental United States is also one of great extremes. From New England and New York through Chicago and much of the Midwest and Northwest, temperatures vary from subzero in winter to the high 90s (Fahrenheit) or over in summer.

These sections have occasional frosts and periods of moderate cold. Generally, summers are likely to range from 70° F to 100° F (21° C to 38° C), and many areas can be quite humid. However, air conditioning is so widespread that you can expect most office buildings and homes to be kept at relatively comfortable temperatures.

Americans in Motion

Americans are restless. Most travel whenever they get the chance. They crowd onto trains, buses, and planes. In increasing numbers, they hike with packs on their backs or ride bicycles, heading for the mountains, seashore, or national parks.

Blunt Speech

Don't think that Americans are being rude if we tend to speak in monosyllables or answer with a mere "O.K.," "Sure," or "Nope" or greet you with "Hi." Our brevity is not a personal insult, though to those accustomed to formal phrases, we seem blunt. American informality has become more desirable than formal expressions of greeting or farewell.

A Do-It-Yourself Society

The United States is a do-it-yourself country. We generally carry our own bags, take our laundry to the Laundromat, stand in line at the grocery store, or shine our own shoes, whoever we may be lawyer, professor, bank president, or corporate executive. Anyone who can afford the high cost of service in this country and wants to pay for it, may. But there is absolutely no social stigma in doing one's own daily chores, no matter how menial. In fact, Americans take pride in do-it-yourself accomplishments and may devote a great deal of their leisure time to projects around the home. Huge warehouse stores that cater to do-it-yourself tasks have been built throughout the country.

Many Americans who could afford household help or a driver or a gardener do not employ them. They prefer family privacy, independence, and freedom from responsibility, all of which are at least partially lost when one has help in one's home.

Houses interest Americans greatly. They spend much of their time thinking and reading and talking about the design of houses, their decorations, how to improve them. Many weekend hours are passed in do-it-yourself projects around the house. People also love to look at each other's houses. Since they would thoroughly enjoy visiting and examining a house in another country, they assume that you will probably have the same desire. Don't be surprised, therefore, if you are shown the entire house from top to bottom, including bathrooms and closets! Don't make the mistake of refusing: the whole house may have been cleaned especially for you!

Because people in the United States have come from so many nationalities, there is a far wider range of what is acceptable than in some countries where the inhabitants have grown up with a common heritage. As a result, no one needs to feel awkward or uncomfortable in following his or her own customs. Although Americans are noticeably informal, if you prefer somewhat greater formality, feel free to act in your own way. This will be acceptable to those around you.