



## Participant Handbook

a helpful guide to living and working in the United States



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## Who is Cultural Vistas?

Congratulations on being accepted for a training program in the United States! You are about to embark on a cultural and professional adventure of a lifetime. On behalf of our entire organization, welcome to the United States of America! We hope that you will see and experience many of the great things America has to offer.

Thank you for choosing Cultural Vistas as your legal J-1 visa sponsor for your training program. The U.S. Department of State designated Cultural Vistas as a sponsor of the Exchange Visitor Program. Cultural Vistas, not your U.S. host employer, will act as your visa sponsor throughout the duration of your training program.

As your J-1 visa sponsor, Cultural Vistas has many roles and responsibilities. Cultural Vistas is required to ensure that all parties involved in the cultural exchange program comply with the U.S. Department of State J-1 visa regulations. These parties include exchange visitors, U.S. host employers, immigration attorneys and overseas global partners. If at any time one of the associated parties fails to comply with the government regulations, Cultural Vistas may revoke sponsorship of you and your training program.

Cultural Vistas understands that it can be difficult to move to a new country. To help you prepare for your journey, we have prepared a participant handbook that includes practical information useful for your experience in the United States.

Cultural Vistas will also provide you with ongoing support and guidance throughout the duration of your training program and time in the United States. We are available to help with questions or concerns that may or may not be addressed in this handbook. Cultural Vistas also has a 24-hour emergency support phone number that you can call at any time. [The toll free emergency number is 1-877-206-6406.](tel:1-877-206-6406)

This handbook does not contain the official regulations governing your exchange program. Be sure to read and understand all U.S. government and Cultural Vistas regulations before traveling to the United States. It is your responsibility to be fully aware of your program limits and your legal status in America.

## Before you arrive

### Important documents

Cultural Vistas will issue many important documents that you must keep with you throughout the duration of your training program in the United States. You will be required to present these documents at different times, including your visa appointment at the U.S. Consulate and when entering the United States. Make a copy of each document and keep it separate from the originals. Be sure to keep both the originals and copies in a secure location.

Certificate of Eligibility (DS2019) is the legal document that entitles and authorizes you to participate in on-the-job training in the United States, and to receive wages from the U.S. employer listed on the DS2019.

Training/Internship Placement Plan (DS7002)\* is the document that outlines the training activities you will participate in during your exchange program in the United States. The DS7002 contains your signature, your supervisor's signature and the signature of an Cultural Vistas staff member.

*\*Not required for Summer Work/Travel programs*

I-94 Arrival Card will be automatically generated by a United States Customs and Border Protection agent when you arrive. Once this is done, you can obtain a paper version of your I-94 Card at [www.cbp.gov/I94](http://www.cbp.gov/I94).

Participant Handbook should be kept with you so you can reference it during your training program. The handbook contains helpful information and many resources that may be useful during your training program.

## Applying for your visa

Before you will be permitted to enter the United States for your training program, you must obtain a J-1 visa. Apply for the visa at a U.S. embassy or consulate, using the DS 2019 form that Cultural Vistas sent to you. Read all documents carefully, so that you know exactly what you are agreeing to when you enter the United States on a J-1 visa.

Visa procedures vary slightly from one consulate or embassy to another. Before you apply for your visa, check with the consulate or embassy office where you plan to apply to determine exactly what documents you need to bring.

The following are standard items required for the application:

1. A current, valid passport
2. DS2019 (Certificate of Eligibility)
3. DS7002 form (Training/Internship Placement Plan)
4. I-901 (SEVIS fee receipt)
5. Evidence of financial support for the period of time indicated on the DS2019 form
6. Proof that you have a permanent residence outside of the United States
7. One or more passport-size photographs
8. DS156 (Non-immigrant visa application)

Additional application materials may be requested by the visa officer to prove your eligibility for the J-1 visa. Such materials may include: evidence of English proficiency, further proof of strong ties to your home country, or verification of your ability to support yourself while in the United States. An application fee or short interview may also be required. Once approved, the consular officer will put the visa stamp in your passport. Depending upon the location, you will either receive your visa stamp the day of your visa interview or your stamped passport will be sent to you via post within days. If you encounter any problems obtaining your visa, please contact Cultural Vistas.

## Information on the United States

Before leaving for the United States, it is a good idea to do some research on the country. There is a great deal of information available for those who are unfamiliar with some, if not all, aspects of American life and culture.

There are a number of online resources that can help you learn more about what is going on in America, including:

- The official website for the President of the United States ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)).
- The U.S. State Department's foreign policy, life, and culture site ([www.america.gov](http://www.america.gov)).

Newspapers can give you a good idea of what is happening not only nationally, but locally. You can do a quick search on the Internet to find newspapers close to where you will be living, so you can view information on local events, weather, and news. Major newspapers such as USA Today ([www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com)), The New York Times ([www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)) and the Washington Post ([www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)) can be valuable resources.

## Your Pre-Departure Checklist

Before you leave, you may want to have enough American currency exchanged for any basic expenses when you land. For specific information on currency exchange, see further down this page; we suggest you bring USD \$150-200 in cash with you. You can also wait to arrive in the United States and use an automatic teller machine (ATM) or exchange money at the airport.

To help you better plan for your trip, use this checklist of important documents, helpful reminders, and practical travel tips as a guideline:

Items to bring:

- Your valid passport along with a photocopy of the photo page
- Copies of transcripts, important medical records, and prescriptions
- A copy of your birth certificate
- An international driver's license
- A carry-on bag with personal articles to use in case your luggage is temporarily lost in transit. Also pack valuable items and your documents in this bag

## Things to do before leaving

- Book your travel to the United States and notify your employer of your arrival date.
- Have a complete medical check-up at your doctor's office
- Learn how to get from your point of entry into the United States to your employer's office or first night's lodging
- Confirm accommodation arrangements for your first few nights in the United States with your employer
- Label your luggage with your name and the address of your employer or residence in the United States (if it has already been determined)
- Re-confirm your flight reservations 72 hours before departure
- Carry contact information for Cultural Vistas and your employer (phone numbers and addresses)
- Give your family a contact number in case of emergency

## U.S. Arrival

### Customs Regulations

Once you land and step off the plane, the first thing you will need to do is pass through the immigration and customs area. You will need to show:

- Your passport
- Your visa (which is stamped inside your passport)
- The DS2019 form

You can get information about regulations from any U.S. Consulate.

### Currency Exchange

If you do not bring U.S. currency with you, find an exchange desk to change over your money to American currency once you pass through customs. Currency in the United States is based on the dollar (symbol: \$), with one dollar containing one hundred cents (\$1.00 = 100 cents). There are also half dollar (\$.50) and silver dollar (\$1.00) coins, though they are not widely circulated. Cents are also denoted as part of a dollar: 50 cents is often written as \$.50 but may also appear as 50¢.

U.S. money, commonly referred to as “bills,” is issued in the following denominations: \$1, \$2, \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50, and \$100. The \$2 bill is rarely printed, though you may see one from time to time. When exchanging money, keep in mind that it might be helpful to obtain some bills of lesser value right away instead of just larger ones. Sometimes when paying for simple items like a candy bar or a bottle of water, a store may have a policy of not accepting \$50 bills; or the store might not have a large amount of change. You will also most likely need smaller bills for tipping, should you be taking a taxi or shuttle from the airport. See page 8 for more information on tipping.

When you see prices written, the dollar value of the item will be found on the left hand side of the decimal mark, with cents written to the right. An item marked “\$23.45” is therefore “twenty-three dollars and forty-five cents.” Commonly, when asked to pay for something, a cashier will omit the “dollars” and “cents” from the total, and would simply say “twenty-three forty-five” as the total. U.S. stores do not often bargain.

## Getting Settled

You may find your first few days in the United States overwhelming. Not only do you have to adjust to a new culture, but you need to learn where to buy groceries, get a phone, or how to get around. Remember that for the duration of your stay in the United States, Cultural Vistas will be your legal sponsor. If you are having trouble or have any questions about beginning your life in America, we encourage you to contact us.

### Finding Housing

If you and your employer have not found a place for you to live prior to your arrival, finding a place to live will be your first priority.

Most landlords renting apartments or houses require their incoming tenants to sign a lease, which is the official document of agreement between the two parties. The entire lease should be read carefully before entering an agreement, especially the paragraphs on:

- Security deposit: The money a tenant must present up front as a form of collateral for the apartment or house—usually one or two month’s rent.
- Maintenance: There are strict rules about how tenants and landlords must deal with these issues, but they vary from state to state, or even city to city.

If you have questions about a lease, call your city’s Office of Landlord-Tenant Affairs. Before signing a lease, walk through the apartment or house with the landlord and make a written list of current faults or problems. This will help eliminate the question of responsibility for pre-existing damage.

A good way to start your apartment search is by taking a tour around the area with someone who is familiar with it. He or she can point you in the right direction and make important recommendations about housing in your area.

From there, try:

- The Classified section of major daily newspapers or community publications.
- Online postings; one of the most commonly used sites is Craig’s List ([www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org)). Here, you can typically find a wide assortment of housing options posted. You can choose what type of housing you are looking for, and then see them listed by neighborhood.

Cultural Vistas cannot recommend a certain living situation for its participants.

## Communicating

### Language

Now that you are in the United States, how do you communicate with Americans? First and foremost, good English language skills are helpful. If you discover that you need some additional English language instruction once you are in the United States, there will probably be several choices offered in your community, including:

- Your host employer
- Local churches
- Libraries
- Community colleges: You can take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for credit (credit courses count towards a degree) or without receiving credit (these courses do not count toward a degree and you do not need to be enrolled in the college to take them).
- Public schools: Some public school systems offer ESL classes. Call your local high school or look for information on these courses at the library. Usually, classes at public schools cost less than either college or private classes.
- Private language schools: Private schools offer a greater number of courses at more flexible times during the week.
- Home study: You can also learn from books, tapes, videos, and on-line classes.

### Sending and Receiving Mail

Packages and letters can be mailed at any U.S. Post Office, while stamped letters can be deposited in a mailbox (usually painted blue and bearing the words "U.S. Mail"). If you are not sure how much postage you will need, take it to the post office. If you want to locate a U.S. Post Office near you, you can consult a local telephone book, or log on to the Postal Service website ([www.usps.com](http://www.usps.com)).

The proper way to address an envelope in the U.S. is as follows:

Name  
Title or Position (if applicable)  
Company or Organization (if applicable)  
Street Address or P.O. Box (Suite or Apartment number, if applicable)  
City, 2-letter State Abbreviation Zip Code

Contact a local post about postal rates for domestic and international mail and packages. Understand that the U.S. Postal Service occasionally raises its postal rates.

You can buy stamps from the post office or from vending machines located in public buildings. Try to avoid using the machines as they are more expensive.

If you need a package to deliver quickly, both domestically and overseas, there are private companies that specialize in rapid delivery. Two of the largest and most reliable include FedEx ([www.fedex.com](http://www.fedex.com)) and UPS ([www.ups.com](http://www.ups.com)).

### Telephone Service

Each city and state has various phone service providers. Check with your host employer for a recommendation. U.S. telephone numbers consist of ten digits. The first three are the area code. The area code is always used only when making a long distance call and is preceded by a 1. In many areas (Washington, DC for example) it is necessary to use the area code even when dialing a local phone number.

All of Canada and parts of Mexico are also linked to the direct dial system of the United States. Calls to these areas are made in the same manner as a call to a point in the United States.

To call overseas, dial 011, then the national code of the country you are trying to reach, the area/city code (less the 0, if it begins with one) and then the number. A few places in the United States do not have direct dial capability for international calls. Such calls can be made through the international operator (dial 00).

For directory assistance within your area code, dial 411. There is often a charge of \$.25 or more for this call.

For directory assistance outside your area code dial 1, the area code of the area in question, then 555-1212. Numbers with the area code 888, 866, 877, 886 or 800 are toll-free, meaning you will not be charged for the call. 900 numbers are not toll-free and vary in charges from \$.50 to over \$10. Know the charge before calling; many 900-number services are moneymaking ventures and should be viewed with caution.

In addition to land line telephone usage, most Americans, as with other countries, carry cell phones. There are a number of large cell phone companies in the United States. Typically, a cell phone company will ask you to sign a contract for a certain length of time (normally one or two years) and you will be awarded a certain amount of minutes per month in exchange for a monthly fee. Usually, long-distance and local minutes have no distinction with these plans, and you will only be charged extra fees per month if you go over your allotted amount of minutes. International calls usually cost extra. Cell phones are convenient and are good to have in case of emergencies, but be careful if you choose to

enroll in a plan. Be sure to read your user agreement carefully and have all your questions answered by a representative so you do not get caught paying more than you anticipated. Options for contract-free pre-paid phones and plans abound and have become popular alternatives plans that require one or two-year contracts.

### **Internet and e-mail**

Internet cafes can be found in most metropolitan areas and will typically charge you based on the amount of time you are there. You can also have internet service installed where you live. Depending on your living situation and service availability, chances are there is more than one provider, and you can compare and contrast rates and services between them. Some providers offer services that will install local telephone service, internet, and cable television for one combined sum, paid monthly. If you are interested, do not hesitate to ask your local internet provider to see if they offer this option.

If you have a laptop, you can generally find local coffee houses or libraries that provide free wireless internet access.

### **Getting Around**

You will most likely use two types of transportation to get to and from your job: a car or public transportation. You will immediately notice the difference between transportation in the United States and the rest of the world, particularly with the use of the car.

American rail and bus systems are not as extensive as those in many other countries. New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. all have good public transportation systems, but other large cities, such as Los Angeles, do not. Add in the fact that the United States is such a large country, and you begin to see why Americans rely on cars so much.

### **Driving**

If you plan to drive in the United States, you must be at least 18 years of age and hold a driver's license from your own country or an International Driving Permit (IDP). If you do not have either, you will have to take driving lessons and pass a driving and written test in the state of residency. A vision test may also be required. To obtain a license, go to the nearest Department of Motor Vehicles (MVA).

It is also important for you to know that a driver's license is the most common form of identification used in the United States; you may have to show it when you write a check or use a credit card.

A U.S. license is also used for identification purposes, as most show your date of birth and your photograph. Driver's licenses are issued by individual state governments but are valid throughout the country. Please note that IDPs must be applied for in your home country. Those whose licenses are written in a non-Roman alphabet language (example: Japanese) should apply for an IDP or have their license translated to English before departure to the United States.

Even with your IDP, you may need to get a state issued driver's license. Each state has different rules, but in most states, if you intend to stay in the country for some time, you may have to take a test for a U.S. license.

Driving without a valid license is a serious offense and can result in fines of hundreds of dollars and could also result in vehicle impoundment, etc.

Driving regulations are fairly standard from one state to another, though they vary somewhat because they are determined by the individual states and municipalities. Be aware of the speed limit signs. Other differences in the law, such as whether or not a right turn on a red light is permitted, are not as clear. Information on current driving regulations can be obtained from the state's DMV.

If you are pulled over by an officer:

- Look for police car lights and listen for sirens
- Pull your car to the side of the road safely and as soon as possible
- Roll down your window and stay seated in your car
- Follow the officer's instructions

In certain countries it is the custom to pay the police officer immediately following a violation for which you are stopped. Do not reach for your wallet; that may be interpreted as a threat to the officer.

If you receive a ticket:

- Contact us with any questions
- Follow instructions on ticket
- One payment must be paid in full by a check or money order within a specified period of time. Payment and/or court procedures are usually printed on the ticket.

All states require car owners to purchase and maintain car insurance. If you are in an accident, your car insurance will cover most of the cost of injuries and repairs, which can be very high.

Types of car insurance:

- *Liability* – This pays for injuries or damages to someone else if your car hits another person or the property of another person. It does not cover injury to yourself or your property.
- *Collision* – This pays for damages to your car from an accident.
- *Comprehensive* – This pays for damage to your car through theft, fire, storm damage, or other no-fault types of damage such as hitting an animal.

## Public Transportation

### Rail Systems

New York, Washington, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco have the largest metropolitan rail systems in the United States. Such systems provide inexpensive and very convenient transportation. Maps, rates, and time tables for rail services are readily available throughout most urban centers, and you can typically find them on the Internet as well.

Also, when using rail systems:

- Note the location of emergency equipment; usually near the doors or end of the car
- Do not stand on the edge of the platform
- Do not display money, jewelry, or other valuable items
- Keep your wallet in a side pocket; keep your purse closed
- If someone is bothering you, change cars, or inform the train operator or security guard; avoid confronting the person directly

### Bus Information

Most cities have bus systems. For information, call 411, or search your city's mass transit system on the Internet.

## Managing your money

Living in the United States, even temporarily, will require you to pay attention to certain financial obligations, as well as steps to ensure that you manage your money wisely.

### Social Security Card

U.S. law requires all who receive payment for work to obtain a Social Security Number. To get a one, you must contact the Social Security Administration. The Social Security Number is one of the most important forms of identification; through this number the government calculates one's taxes, Department of Motor Vehicles issues driver's licenses, banks set up accounts, etc. Even if you are participating in an unpaid training program in

the United States, Cultural Vistas still advises you to obtain a Social Security Number. Once you have a number it is valid for life. If you decide to return to the United States for a second training program, or on another program, you will already have a SSN.

Find out where to apply for your Social Security Number at [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov).

### Paying Taxes

Everyone in the United States, regardless of their immigration status, is responsible each year for submitting a complete and accurate income-tax statement to the Internal Revenue Service, an agency of the U.S. Treasury Department. Americans call the process "filing a tax return." As an Cultural Vistas participant in the United States, you must also file an appropriate return each year. April 15th is the day most Americans must pay their federal taxes. Do not miss this deadline; you will be penalized if you are late.

In many countries, the government assesses and collects the tax from individuals. In the United States, however, it is each individual's personal responsibility to meet his or her tax obligations. You are responsible for helping your employer estimate how much of your income should be withheld (or deducted) from your wages for taxes. Your employer pays those amounts directly to the U.S. Treasury on your behalf. In your annual tax return, you must reconcile your account with the government to verify that you have paid the correct amount over the course of a year. If you paid too much, you may claim a refund. Tax forms are available on-line at the IRS website ([www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov)).

### Banking

Shortly after you have arrived in the United States, you will want to open a bank account at a local bank or branch. This enables one to cash a paycheck, usually without any fee. When you do, bring a photo ID (such as a passport or your driver's license), your employer's name and address, your Social Security card (if you have one) and the funds you wish to deposit.

You may wish to compare the services and costs of several banks. One bank may be more conveniently located than the others, another may have more automated teller machines (ATMs) around town, and a third may allow you to do your banking from home via computer. A great way to compare offerings and check locations is to find your prospective bank's website, as their site typically maintains information about their accounts, as well as branch locators.

Banks are generally open from Monday through Saturday. Some branches will have weekend hours, depending on their location. If you utilize internet banking, you can manage your accounts all day, any day.



### Additional Financial Services

A safety deposit box, which is available at most banks, is a good place to store valuable possessions such as the airline ticket for your flight home, expensive jewelry, foreign currency, and the photocopies of the important documents you brought with you.

A check card allows you to withdraw or deposit money in your bank account using an ATM and to make purchases at stores that accept the card (including most grocery stores, gas stations, etc). Check cards are different from credit cards, as they can only be used if you have adequate funds in your account to cover the cost of your purchase.

Banks and other financial institutions, department stores, and even gasoline companies all issue credit cards that can be used to buy goods. Sometimes, these companies also offer reward “points” for every dollar you spend for their business, allowing for you to accumulate “reward points” that you might be able to exchange for a good or service.

Visa, MasterCard, American Express, and Discover are the major credit card companies in the United States.

### Budgeting

To help you manage your money better, here is a chart that gives you an idea of what some common items cost:

Item	Low	High
apartment (per month)	300	700
movie ticket	6	11
fast food meal	4	8
large pizza	9	16
man's shirt	18	50
woman's blouse	20	45
athletic shoes	40	100
jeans	30	70
dvd	10	25
hardcover book	15	25
newspaper	1	4

Please keep in mind that this chart is just a guideline. The prices of everything will depend highly on where you are living. For example, you may pay \$2,000 per month in rent for an apartment in New York City, but only pay \$800 for the same apartment in a smaller city such as Baltimore, Maryland. The same goes for articles of clothing – prices will differ based on the store where you are shopping.

### Tipping

It is customary to give a tip to wait staff, taxi drivers, food delivery drivers, and hairdressers. Tipping is supposed to recognize good service, though since most of these workers rely on tips for income, it is probably more accurate to say that only bad service will warrant not giving a tip. The common rate for tipping in the United States is 15 – 20 percent for waiters and waitresses and 10 – 15 percent for taxi drivers, food delivery drivers, and hairdressers.

### Health Care

The United States currently does not have an extensive national system of public health care and relies on a private practice scheme with costs covered by an individual and/or individual's medical insurance policy. All participants coming to the United States under Cultural Vistas sponsorship are covered by health and accident insurance.

A routine visit to a doctor's office may cost from \$25 to \$75, not including prescription medicines. Full hospital care is extremely expensive; overnight stays in major hospitals can cost over \$500 per night. State- and locally-run public health clinics, however, may offer their services at little or no cost.

Note that dental costs are not normally covered by group insurance plans. Additionally, the cost of medications not prescribed by a doctor is not covered by insurance. However, many medications come in generic varieties. Make sure to ask your doctor or pharmacist about this. Familiarize yourself with your insurance policy so you know what services are and are not available to you. If you have questions, contact Cultural Vistas or the insurance carrier.

### Staying Safe

Take time to acquaint yourself with your new environment. Familiarize yourself with your neighborhood by walking around during the day and ask colleagues or neighbors about areas you should avoid at night. Take note where street lamps are so you do not have to walk in the dark, and avoid walking alone at night. Locate the police station that serves your neighborhood and find the nearest fire-alarm box and learn how to report a fire.

In case of an emergency that requires medical attention, locate the hospital emergency room nearest your home and know what to do in case of an accident. For any emergency in the United States, you can dial 9-1-1.

Additionally, the primary duty of the police is to serve and protect you, and you should not hesitate to seek their assistance at any time. One of the most common crimes is theft of property left unattended or in an unlocked apartment or car. More serious crimes – such as drug dealing, assault and rape – also occur. Protect yourself by exercising good sense and caution. Keep your apartment locked whenever you are away and never leave a backpack or purse unattended in public. Use caution with strangers who are overly friendly and offer you gifts, or who ask you to accompany them somewhere.

You will find that sexual harassment is a particularly American concept and a fairly hot topic in the workplace. Sexual harassment consists of unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other physical or verbal behavior of a sexual nature. If you feel you are being sexually harassed in any way, it is important to tell someone. Speak to a friend, your work place human resources office, or an Cultural Vistas staff member who can advise you.

Finally, be protective about your money and personal information. Be careful of lending or giving money to anyone, especially strangers. If you are uncomfortable turning down a request for money, simply say, “I’m sorry, but I cannot help you,” and politely close the door, hang up the phone, or simply keep walking. Never give your credit card, bank account or Social Security Number to anyone unless you are involved in a transaction to purchase a product, service, or benefit. You may be giving valuable personal information to someone who will use it illegally. If you receive a phone call, and you are not interested in or do not understand the caller’s product, just interrupt him or her with a firm, “No, thank you,” or “Please take me off your list,” and hang up the phone. You may also wish to register on the U.S. “Do Not Call Registry.” Visit [www.donotcall.gov](http://www.donotcall.gov) to remove your phone number from calling lists.

## U.S. Culture

America’s population reflects remarkable ethnic diversity. More than twenty percent of the population in two major cities, Los Angeles and New York, was born in another country. In some other major cities, such as San Francisco and Chicago, more than one in every ten residents are foreign-born. Newspapers commonly use such terms as “Asian-American,” “Italian-American,” and “Arab-American” to highlight the existence of various ethnic heritages within the United States.

America’s population includes faiths and religions of all natures, people who have many years of formal education and people who have nearly none, rich people as well as the very poor. There are Republicans, Democrats, Greens, Socialists, Communists, Libertarians, and independents, as well as people who hold other political views as well.

At the heart of the United States is a belief in equality and freedom. At the same time, Americans will readily generalize about various subgroups within their own country. In a country so large, these traits are inevitable.

Hopefully the people you will be working with are as excited as you are about spending time with somebody from another country and culture. Take advantage of this opportunity for cultural exchange. You may find that your co-workers are eager to share their culture with you; invitations to lunch, after-work socializing, dinner at someone’s home, and even a baseball game are not uncommon. Spend time with Americans as that is the best way to experience the lifestyle, share their attitudes, and learn about the culture.

We are confident that your experience in the United States will be very rewarding. You will undoubtedly gain crucial knowledge and practical experience in your field of work, but we also hope that you come away from your experience with a broader outlook and a truer, deeper sense of international cultural understanding.

## Social Customs

### Individualism and Privacy

One of the most important things to understand about Americans is their devotion to individualism. Most of them have been trained from an early age to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own destinies.

The importance Americans assign to privacy is closely associated with the value they place on individualism. Americans assume that people need some time to themselves (or some time alone) to think about things or recover their energy.

## Equality

Americans' strong belief in the ideal stated in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," is also unique. With this in mind, Americans believe they are not defined by family background, but by their own individual talent and hard work. Although they sometimes violate this and other ideals in their daily lives, Americans have faith that in some fundamental way, all people are of equal value, and no one is born superior to anyone else. The expression, "One man, one vote," conveys the idea that anyone's opinion is as valid and worthy of attention as anyone else's opinion. This is not to say that Americans make no distinctions among themselves as a result of sex, age, wealth, social position, etc., but these distinctions are acknowledged in more subtle ways. Americans acknowledge status differences among themselves through their tone of voice, manner of speaking, choice of words, and seating arrangements

## Informality

Americans are generally informal in their behavior, dress, and relationships with other people. Idiomatic speech (or slang) is commonly used on most occasions, while formal speech is reserved for public events and fairly formal situations. People from all walks of life can be seen in public wearing jeans, sandals, and other informal attire. People generally slouch down in chairs or lean on walls or furniture when they talk, rather than standing up straight. However, personal space is almost always observed. Most Americans:

- Do not stand too close to each other (less than 3 feet/one meter)
- Do not talk or make eye contact with strangers on elevators
- Do not necessarily kiss cheeks to say hello or goodbye. Some friends or family may say hello or farewell with a kiss on the cheek or a hug.

## Religion

There is one great difference between religion in the United States and in many other countries – the government supports no one religion. In fact, the U.S. Constitution explicitly forbids a formal relationship between church and state. In urban centers, there can be churches of literally dozens of denominations. The fact that the government does not endorse a single state religion goes hand-in-hand with America's deep respect for privacy and individualism in that each person is free to worship as he or she wishes without fear of persecution by the government, or anyone else for that matter. Therefore, while religion is a very visible presence in the United States, it continues to be an intensely private, personal issue for a great deal of Americans.

## Business Customs

Work is generally taken very seriously in the United States. Americans take fewer and shorter holidays than Europeans, and it is common to compromise weekend and family life if a job needs to be done. As always, there are a few generalizations that can be made about how American businesses function, but they should be treated with caution: what is relevant in the eastern U.S. may be quite different from what is relevant in the western portion of the country.

A good colleague is punctual and considerate of other people's time. If you arrive five minutes late for a meeting, you should apologize. If you are going to be 15 minutes late, you should call ahead and explain your situation.

You should watch and observe your co-workers to get a sense of what the norm is at your workplace, as business customs vary across the United States. Americans have a strongly defined work ethic that may surprise some people.

Typically Americans admire well-organized people who approach a task conscientiously and persistently, and see it through to a successful conclusion. Americans are as renowned for their casual approach as they are for their strong work ethic:

- First names are the norm
- *Casual Fridays*—Some major companies have decided that if employees are allowed to wear casual clothes (khaki pants, jeans, no tie) on Friday, it increases productivity
- If people do not speak openly about what is on their minds, they will often convey their reactions in non-verbal ways (facial expressions, body positions, and gestures)
- Words, tone of voice or facial expressions will usually reveal when people are feeling angry, unhappy, confused, happy, or content
- Most offices and businesses in the United States are open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and employees are always expected to get to work on time
- Each individual office determines what constitutes proper business attire but, as a general rule, most large companies (such as major corporations or law firms) require a more formal dress code than smaller organizations. You should ask your host employer what they feel it is appropriate for you to wear.
- You will find that smoking is forbidden in the office, as it is in most public places.

## Eating and Drinking

### Eating

Because the U.S. is a culture based upon contributions from many different backgrounds, its cuisine is therefore very diverse.

In America it's common to eat breakfast in the morning, lunch in the afternoon, and dinner in the evening. The times will vary depending on your individual situation. Companies usually grant an hour for lunch during the work day.

### Drinking

Much like its food, the United States features a great deal of drink options. The legal age to consume alcohol in America is 21, and restaurants and bars will check identification regularly – so if you plan on having a drink, be sure to keep your passport or driver's license with you for ID. Do not drink during work hours, do not drink alcohol and drive, and do not buy alcohol for anyone under 21.

Given the high volume of driving in America, drunk driving has long been an important social concern, and most states are strict in the enforcement of these laws. Driving under the influence of alcohol carries more severe penalties now than in the past. Most drunk driving offenses result in arrest, a fine, and suspension of driving privileges pending a hearing, while severe or repeat offenses may result in imprisonment and/or permanent loss of driving privileges. Although the law varies from state to state, if you have a blood-alcohol level of .08 percent or greater, you can be convicted of driving while intoxicated (D.W.I.). If you are suspected of D.W.I., and are stopped by the police, you may be asked to take a breathalyzer test – an on-the-spot test that measures your blood alcohol level. Refusal to take the test is not admission of guilt, but will result in immediate confiscation of your driver's license by the police. If this occurs, the driver must apply for an appeal to set up a court hearing.

We strongly encourage you to not drive after drinking, even after only a few drinks – this is an issue that is taken quite seriously by law enforcement officials in the United States.

## Sports and Recreation

One of the most well known and visible aspects of every day life in the United States is sports. Large numbers of Americans watch and participate in sporting activities, which are a deeply ingrained part of American life. The most popular major sports in the United States are baseball, American football, basketball, ice hockey, and soccer (football). Local professional teams are a fun way for you to get involved. You may also wish to join a local league.

## Useful Practical Information

### Emergencies

Be sure to keep the number for emergency services in your area posted near your telephone. In most places, the police, fire, and rescue services can be reached by dialing 911. The operator will then ask which service you need. We hope you will not have the need for an emergency service number, but it is important to be prepared.

Dial 911 for emergencies only. General inquiries should be made on non-emergency numbers. In some areas 911 is not used, and the emergency number(s) should be listed on the inside cover of the local telephone book. You will also find direct telephone numbers for such facilities as the local police station, hospital, and crisis center on the inside cover of the phone book.

### Electric Current

The standard U.S. current is 110 volts. Electronics running on 220-240 volts will not work in the United States. Most appliance or hardware stores will carry current conversion kits that will work on appliances. Additionally, power outlets in the United States differ from those in most of the rest of the world making adapters necessary for electronic devices brought into the United States.

## Standard Conversions

Measurements	
<b>Temperature</b>	
° F to ° C	Subtract 32, divide by 1.8
ex 80°F (80-32=48, 48÷1.8=26.66) 27°C	
° C to ° F	Double, subtract 10%, add 32
ex 27°C (27x2=54, 54-5.4=48.6, 48.6+32=80.6) 81°F	
<b>Length</b>	
1 inch (1")	2.54 centimeters
1 foot (1')	.305 Meters
1 yard	.914 meters
1 mile	1.609 kilometers
<b>Distance</b>	
1 square ince	6.452 square centimeters
1 square yard	.836 square meters
1 acre	4,047 square meters
<b>Volume</b>	
1 pint	.473 liters
1 quart	.946 liters
1 gallon	3.785 liters
<b>Weight</b>	
1 ounce (1 oz)	28.35 grams
1 pound (1lb)	453.592 grams
1 ton	.907 metric ton
<b>Time</b>	
U.S. Eastern Standard Time	GMT -5
U.S. Central Standard Time	GMT -6
U.S. Mountain Standard Time	GMT -7
U.S. Pacific Standard Time	GMT -8

## Clothing and shoe sizes

### Womens clothing

American	6	8	10	12	14	16
British	28	30	32	34	36	38
European	34	36	38	40	42	44
Japanese	5	7	9	11	13	15

### Women's shoes

American	6	6.5	7	7.5	8	8.5
British	4	4.5	5	5.5	6	6.5
European	36-37	37	37-38	38	38-39	39
Japanese	23	23.5	24	24.5	25	25.5

### Men's suits/sweaters

American	36	38	40	42	44	46
British	36	38	40	42	44	46
European	46	48	50	52	54	56
Japanese	S	M	M	L	L	LL

### Men's shoes

American	7	8	9	10	11	12
British	6.5	7.5	8.5	9.5	10.5	11.5
European	40	41	42	43	44	45
Japanese	26	26	27.5	27.5	28	28

## Public Holidays

The following are national public holidays in the United States that most banks and government agencies observe. Ask your employer for a schedule of observed holidays at your company or organization.

- New Year's Day (January 1)
- Martin Luther King Jr. Day (First Monday after January 15)
- Presidents Day (Third Monday in February)
- Memorial Day (Last Monday in May)
- Independence Day (July 4)
- Labor Day (First Monday in September)
- Columbus Day (Second Monday in October)
- Veterans Day (November 11)
- Thanksgiving Day (Fourth Thursday in November)
- Christmas Day (December 25)

## Seeing the United States

The United States is a traveler's paradise. Whatever you seek to explore, America's great geographic diversity has something for everyone. There are literally thousands of options in dozens of regions throughout the country and we are not able to provide you with a complete listing of desirable or popular American places of interest. They are everywhere, and we encourage you to seek out these opportunities for yourself. Half the fun of seeing the United States is pure exploration!

The first fact that most international visitors must come to grips with is the sheer size of the United States. The country is 3,100 miles (5000 km) from coast to coast, (further than Madrid to Moscow) and 1,200 miles (1920 km) from the Mexican to Canadian borders. These figures do not include Alaska, the nation's largest state, or Hawaii, the Pacific island state. Thus, pure distance will play a large role in how you plan to see the U.S.

For those of you planning to do extensive travel in the United States after your program, we highly recommend a detailed guidebook. Available at virtually any bookstore, these books give information on every aspect of travel down to the minute details, and are considered indispensable even by experienced travelers. You have plenty of books to choose from.

All fifty states, and the U.S. capital, Washington DC, have a Travel and Tourism Division or Department which sends free information about the state to visitors. The marketing materials, which usually include a large state guidebook, map, and calendar of events, are especially useful if you are unfamiliar with the state you wish to travel in. Call 800-directory assistance, toll-free, for the number of the Travel & Tourism office of the state in question. You can also visit any state government website to visit specific tourism information.

### Ways to Get From Here to There

#### By Air

When booking airfare, shop around for the best deal. Using a travel agent; looking at prospective fares on any airline website; or checking out Expedia, Travelocity or one of the many other online travel sites, you may find good deals on flights. Flying at an odd time of day or night or being flexible in your departure or return dates can result in considerable savings. Traveling by air can be expensive, so be sure to exhaust all your options on different airlines, not to mention different methods of transportation, before making a decision to book your tickets.

Fortunately, discount travel opportunities exist for international visitors that are not available to U.S. residents. These usually take the form of unlimited travel for a set period of days, and can mean big savings for anyone wishing to see the country in a hurry. Inquire about these tickets before leaving your home country, as purchase before entering the United States is often required. There are U.S. tourist offices in several major cities overseas which can provide information about such possibilities and other features of travel in the United States.

#### By Train

Trains were once the fastest, most reliable, and most financially reasonable way to see the United States. However, with the invention of the automobile and the commercial airplane, trains were eventually surpassed as the preferred method of domestic American travel. As you might notice, the rail network in the U.S. is not as heavily utilized as it is in other countries.

The American rail service is operated by AMTRAK, the National Railroad Passenger Corporation. As with the airlines, AMTRAK offers travel packages that benefit the international visitor. The USA Rail Pass allows unlimited travel on its network for a period of either 15 or 30 days. If you are going to be doing a lot of train travel, it is worth it. But note that the USA Rail Pass is available only from major U.S. cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York, or from an international travel agent in your home country. There are also regional AMTRAK passes available for travelers concentrating on one part of the country. For more information about AMTRAK services, call them toll-free at 1-800-872-7245, or call an international travel agent before you come to the United States. You can also check out fares and schedules online at [www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com).

#### By Bus

Taking a bus across America creates a lasting image. Bus travel is inexpensive (you can sleep in the bus and save yourself overnight hotel bills), reasonably comfortable (buses are air-conditioned, heated, and usually have an on-board bathroom) and offer an intimate view of the country. Inter-city bus services are dominated by Greyhound and Trailways, but there are numerous smaller regional companies that provide direct service to less-populated areas. Like AMTRAK, Greyhound and Trailways offer unlimited travel plans and occasional special fares. The rates and duration of these packages may vary, so call either the bus companies or a travel agent.

## By Car

The most common way to see the country is by car. The United States has a large interstate highway system linking together major cities through even the most remote areas.

Those with an adventurous spirit will be happy to know that the weekend car excursion is a simple and inexpensive way to explore your area or region. The United States is large enough that a new excursion each weekend can provide a different and exciting experience. Pick up a local newspaper's Weekend or Travel section, or talk with acquaintances at work about interesting places. You will be surprised at the response; most people are eager to recommend the well-known spots as well as their own personal favorites.

In some parts of the United States, tolls can be found on certain highways or bridges. These fees are collected at booths on the road and are used to pay for the building or the upkeep of the structure or road which the driver is about to use. The charge per vehicle should be clearly displayed and can range from \$.25 to over \$10.00.

## Adventure Travel

If you are hooked on adventure travel, but do not have the time or resources to plan an outing on your own, an organized trip may be a great option. Companies all over the United States now operate major tours and group adventure trips for all ages and skill levels. Explore your options with different companies; some are only packaged leisure holidays; others are intense, high-energy trips. They can be expensive, so make sure to compare companies to ensure you get the best deal.

For more information on adventure travel tours, visit or call a reputable outdoors store such as R.E.I. (1-800-622-2236), or check a bookstore or library with an extensive travel section. There you will find comprehensive directories such as the Big Book of Adventure Travel, and adventure magazines such as Outside, which consistently carries many adventure travel articles, group travel lists, and advertisements.

## National Parks

Many of you will likely spend time in America's beautiful national parks. They are this country's treasures and a visit to at least one should be a priority for all visitors. Access to the different national parks and monuments varies, as some are located in the heart of major cities, and others are a day's drive from the nearest city. You may contact the National Park Service (202.208.4747 or [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)), which is part of the U.S. Department of the Interior, for information on a specific location such as Yellowstone, the country's oldest national park.

## Climate and Weather

Before you travel, be sure to check the weather forecast for your destination – especially if you are traveling a great distance, simply because climate can vary considerably from region to region. In general, the summers are often very hot and winters can be quite cold in all but the southernmost states. Once again, plan ahead; do some research about the region you will be living in so that you know what to expect.

## Travel Accommodations

International visitors who intend to travel in the United States may consult their travel agent, the Internet or visit their local bookstore for information on accommodations. Most have a section on travel which is complete with comprehensive accommodation guides to suit all interests and budgets. It is worth investigating your options beforehand and planning ahead if you will be traveling to popular spots during busy vacation seasons.

## Hotels and Motels

Thousands of hotels and motels are located throughout the United States, and they range in price and quality from economical to deluxe. Many are listed and classified in the numerous travel and hospitality guidebooks available at local libraries and bookstores, and most also have websites. Use these resources to obtain more detailed information.

Visitors should realize that inexpensive hotels (especially in urban areas) may not be situated in the safest neighborhoods; it may be wise to pay a few extra dollars for a more expensive hotel in a central location. If you are wary about a particular establishment, ask to see the room before paying. If the staff is rude or seems unwilling to help, you probably do not want to stay there.

Almost no hotels include meals in the total cost for the room; however, many hotels do have restaurants attached to them. Most hotel rates in the United States are also charged by room, rather than by person, so the more people who occupy a room, the lower the cost per person. Note that some hotels impose a limit on the number of people who are allowed to stay in a room. It is a good idea to make a reservation as far in advance as possible, and guests intending to check in late (after 6:00 p.m.) are advised to give the hotel a credit card number as a safeguard that the room will not be assigned to another guest.

Motels are less luxurious than hotels and aim to provide the traveler with overnight comfort, though several offer extras such as swimming pools or saunas. For this reason they can be considerably more economical than hotels and often are more convenient because of their proximity to major highways. Large hotel and motel chains often have

a central toll-free number that can be found in the Yellow Pages or through the Internet. Visitors can use this number to find out about room rates and make reservations in any of their branches in the United States, Canada, or Mexico.

### **YMCAs and Youth Hostels**

The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) offer basic, inexpensive accommodation and recreational facilities to short-term guests. They are ideal for a young traveler on a tight budget. Despite their names, YMCAs and YWCAs (or "Y" for short) are not concerned with their guests' religious affiliation, and both frequently let out rooms to people regardless of their age or sex. Due to their popularity among Americans and international visitors, they are frequently booked, and you should call ahead to see if there is room available.

The YMCA of Greater New York runs a reservation service for eighty cities in North America. You can reach them at 212-760-5856 or see [www.ymca.net](http://www.ymca.net).

Another accommodation option is youth hostels. There are almost 300 hostels run by American Youth Hostels (AYH), the U.S. affiliate of the International Youth Hostel Federation (IYHF). Do not let the name deceive you; youth hostels are not just for young people, though it is a considerable financial advantage to be a member of the IYHF. Youth hostels, whose dormitory-style rooms are segregated by sex, run the gamut from large, organized accommodation centers to buildings resembling cabins. They are most commonly found in the Northeast, the Great Lakes region, and on the West Coast. The maximum length of stay at a hostel is usually three nights, and the inconvenient hours of some hostels can be a drawback. Most are closed from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and some have an evening curfew. Call AYH in Washington, D.C. at 202-783-4943 for more information, or see [visit.hiayh.org](http://visit.hiayh.org)

### **Bed and Breakfasts**

The Bed-and-Breakfast (B&B), long popular in Europe, is catching on in the United States. B&Bs are a good, economical alternative to staying in a hotel or motel, and offer more comfort than a Y or a hostel. B&Bs are rooms in people's homes that are rented on a regular basis to travelers and include breakfast (and sometimes an evening meal) as part of the deal. B&Bs can be the most friendly way of passing a night or two in a strange location. Good sources of information on B&B possibilities in the United States are *Bed-and-Breakfast USA*, by Betty R. Rundback and Nancy Ackerman, and

*The Bed-and-Breakfast Guide for the U.S. and Canada* by Phyllis Featherstone and Barbara Ostler, both of which are available in bookstores. There are also many websites that could be good resources, including [www.bedandbreakfast.com](http://www.bedandbreakfast.com).

### **Camping**

The glory of America is reflected in the great outdoors, and these natural treasures are preserved mostly in our national and state parks. Outdoor camping is a simple and inexpensive way to enjoy some of the country's natural beauty while escaping from the commotion and pressures of everyday life or conventional tourist schedules.

The difficulty with camping is locating camping equipment. Purchasing new camping gear, such as a tent, sleeping bag, backpack, mats, cooking instruments, and other necessities, is very expensive. If you can borrow or share equipment with someone, there are forests, mountains, deserts, lakes, canyons, rivers, and long shorelines to explore. This is not to say that one can just pick up and backpack down the coast of California or up into New York's Adirondack Mountains. Most areas in the country have specified camping rules and regulations, so it is best to have a general destination in mind and investigate the camping options there before committing yourself to a long trip. Rand McNally & Company publishes a comprehensive guide to all public and private campgrounds in the United States, and it is available in most bookstores. Information about the 104 areas maintained by the National Park Service is contained in the *National Park Camping Guide*.



## After your training program

When it comes time to leave the United States and return home, you might feel as if you have finally figured out the nuances of American life! However, even during your first days in the U.S., we encourage you to think about what you want to take away from your experience. Consider why you chose to come to the United States to work, and what you want to accomplish during your time here. Organizing your thoughts will help you to clarify your career expectations. Most of all, it will allow you to best play your experience in America forward as a boost to your personal and professional life back home.

### Making the Most of Your Experience

#### Networking

All over the world, people find jobs through personal and professional contacts. Building a network now could pay dividends in the future. To help facilitate this process while here, we suggest you get to know your colleagues and fellow Cultural Vistas participants both in and outside of work. Do not be afraid to participate in extracurricular activities like sports or a social club. You would be surprised at how many Americans find jobs or make great contacts this way. Other ways include organizing events for an international club, joining programs that get you involved in the local community, or dropping in to a local career center. Overall, networking is about meeting people that compliment each other's professional interests and keeping in contact with them once you have parted ways – you never know what opportunities may come of it!

#### Immerse Yourself

Although the skills and experience you acquire working in the United States will be invaluable to your career, this alone will not guarantee you will be an attractive candidate for a future opportunity. Employers often look for a well-rounded candidate with experience in many areas. Therefore, while in America, gain an in-depth knowledge of U.S. politics, economics and everyday life. Also, do your best to achieve a strong command of written and spoken English, participate in as many professional conferences as possible, volunteer to work on projects in the community, and enrich your experience by traveling to different parts of the United States.

A well-rounded cultural experience will only make you that much more of a better job candidate once you return home.

### Go Home Prepared

Before you return home, make sure you are familiar with the recruitment schedule in your home country. Many countries do their hiring at the end of the local academic year. Contact the local American chamber of commerce for listings of American companies who may be interested in U.S.-trained candidates. Learn the proper format for writing resumes and cover letters and start networking immediately. Review the proper dress and protocol for interviews. When you graduate (if you have not already), contact the alumni association at your university and get involved. Reestablish contacts with former classmates and teachers and let your friends and relatives know you are looking for a job. And please remember to keep in touch with us, we love hearing from our former participants!

#### Re-entry Shock

Few people anticipate that upon their return home, they will experience culture shock as they did when they first came to the United States. Reverse culture shock is most pronounced in those who expect everything at home to be the same as it was when they left. Keep in mind that standards of living, the political climate, and even family relationships may have changed while you were away. You may feel uncomfortable with what were once familiar circumstances and may be disappointed in your family and friends if they show less interest in your adventures than you had hoped. Be aware of the obstacles you will face when you go back to your home country. The more you anticipate the difficulties of re-entry, the better you can minimize their impact and severity. You can also use the same skills that helped you adapt to the United States to readapt to life in your home country. While you are here, take photographs, keep a journal, and update your address book to maintain memories and contacts when you return home.

## Pre-departure Checklist

Before you leave the United States, we suggest you:

- Notify your landlord of your departure in writing at least 30 days before you intend to leave.
- Determine how you will pay your last month's rent. Can you use your security deposit? If not, determine how the landlord will return your security deposit.
- Notify telephone, electric, gas, and water companies about when they should discontinue service. Make arrangements to have any deposits refunded to you.
- Close your bank accounts.
- If you bought a car, sell it.
- Leave your forwarding address with your host employer and all companies with which you have credit cards, subscriptions, etc.
- Leave your forwarding address with the post office and Cultural Vistas.
- Pay all outstanding bills, including credit cards, loans, library fines, etc.
- Donate usable items that you are not taking with you to a local thrift store, faith-based charity or homeless shelter. You can also hold a yard sale to sell them.
- Submit your final evaluation.