



A GUIDE TO UNITED STATES CULTURE AND CUSTOMS



This document has been prepared for you to read before you leave for the U.S., and to refer to during your time there. It gives you information about American customs and describes some points that may be different from your own culture. Part of the fun of coming to live or study in another country is observing and learning about the culture and customs of its people. We don't want to spoil the surprise for you but we do understand that it can be useful to know how other people will expect you to behave, and will behave towards you while you're away from home. This can avoid awkward misunderstandings for both you and the people you meet and make friends with! We hope that your stay in the U.S. will be thoroughly enjoyable and we very much look forward to welcoming you at St Giles International.



Getting in Line –

Always get in line and wait your turn when buying tickets, waiting in a bank, post office or for a bus or train. It is considered rude to cut in line, and although people may not say anything to you, they will make very unhappy noises!

If there is any confusion about whether there is one line or more for several different cashiers, you should still wait your turn and stay behind everyone who arrived before you. Americans do not try to get to the front first; they are very fair. You will often hear people saying ‘Who’s next?’ The general rule is that you are next if you were the first person to have gotten in line!



Smoking –

Smoking indoors in public places is illegal in California, with no exceptions. There are even certain areas outdoors, such as near building entrances, where smoking is prohibited. There are, however, a limited number of homestay hosts who allow smoking inside the house.

Drugs –

Buying and selling illicit drugs is illegal in the U.S. If you are found carrying drugs either in school or in public, you may be arrested.



Women –

Women in the U.S. are seen as equal to men, and should be treated fairly. It is normal for men and women to do an equal share of the household tasks and childcare. This may not be the case in certain more traditional American families and every couple has their own arrangement.

Safety for women: It is not a good idea for women to walk around on their own at night. Make sure that you use registered taxis and try to stay with a group as much as possible.

Personal Hygiene –



Restrooms

It is customary to flush the toilet after use and to dispose of toilet paper in the toilet. Ladies' sanitary napkins should, however, be placed in the trashcan.

Tissues -

It is American custom to blow your nose with a tissue. Some people keep a tissue or a handkerchief up their sleeve or in their pocket.

Spitting -

In the U.S., it is extremely rude to spit in public.



Water –

The water in the taps is clean enough to drink and brush your teeth with. Some people prefer to drink bottled water and some people filter their water in a pitcher before they drink it.



Meal times –

Most Americans eat three times a day. Breakfast can be a small meal of cereal, toast or some fruit, or a more substantial cooked breakfast of eggs, bacon or omelettes, according to preference.

People in the U.S. usually eat a light lunch – soup, sandwiches or a salad are the most common foods chosen for a weekday lunch. This is normally eaten between 12 and 2pm.

In the U.S., the evening meal is usually eaten between 5:30pm and 7:30pm. This is usually called 'supper' or 'dinner.' It is normally a large meal, consisting of meat or fish and vegetables, a dish made with eggs, pasta or pizza.



Eating in restaurants -

Americans are very polite to waiters in restaurants. If you want a waiter to come to your table, you should raise your hand, but not snap your fingers. To attract their attention when they are close by, you should say 'excuse me.'

American table manners and customs:

If you put your knife and fork on your plate, a waiter will think that you have finished eating. If you want to take a break but have not yet finished, place your knife and fork by the side of your plate. A good waiter will not clear your plate from the table when you have finished eating.

In the U.S., it is considered very bad manners to put your elbows on the table and to speak with your mouth full. It is also not polite to make a lot of noise when you eat; chewing noisily and slurping are bad manners in the U.S.

Tip/Gratuity

It is customary to leave a tip of 15% of the bill at the end of the meal UNLESS the bill says *Gratuity Included*.

Eating in public –

In the U.S., it is acceptable behavior to eat, drink and chew gum in the street and on public transport. You should not eat in shops, banks, offices or in post offices.



Alcohol –

It is illegal for young people under the age of 21 to consume alcohol. If you look younger than 30 you may be asked to provide photo ID in the form of a passport or driver's license.

It is acceptable in American culture for men and women to drink as a form of social behavior.



Club/Bar closing time –

All clubs and bars close at 2:00a.m.

10 or 15 minutes before this time, the barman will say, ‘Last call!’ meaning that is your last opportunity to order another drink.



Store Opening times* –

Store open between 9-11am

Store close between 5-9pm

*Exact times may vary according to location

Store in America are open all day; they DO NOT close for lunch.

There are some convenience stores, drugstores, and supermarkets which close at midnight or are open 24 hours a day.

Sunday opening:

Most large store are open on Sundays, but may close earlier. Supermarkets are open on Sundays for the same hours as on weekdays.



Bank and Post Office Opening times* –

Monday – Friday 9am-5pm

Saturday – 9-1 (some banks do not open on Saturday)

Sunday – closed

* Exact times may vary according to location.

The Bank of America will allow students to open a free checking account for a minimum of 4 months.

Electricity –

Standard voltage in the U.S. is 120 volts. Our plugs have two pins. Please bring adaptors with you if you wish to use electronic equipment from your own country.

Clothing –

Students tend to dress casually during the daytime at school.

You may wish to bring special clothes for going out in the evening and some bars and clubs will not allow you to enter if you're wearing jeans or sportswear. The climate

in San Francisco is very changeable so it is a good idea to bring warm, waterproof clothing for all seasons of the year. Even in mid-summer, it is not unusual to have cold, overcast weather.

If you are staying in a homestay, you should ensure that you are decently dressed at all times. It may cause offense if you are not dressed before you go to breakfast, for example, but it is a good idea to follow the example of the hosts with regards to what is acceptable.



On the road –

In America we drive on the right of the road. If you are accustomed to driving on the left, remember to look in the other direction when you're crossing the road.

Speed limits –

In residential areas – 25-45mph (unless indicated otherwise)

On freeways and highways – 55-70mph (unless indicated otherwise)



Crosswalks

Crosswalks are designated places for pedestrians to cross the street. You should not cross the street where there is no crosswalk. There is usually a sign at the crosswalk indicating when you should cross.



Public transportation

Buying passes/transfers

If you are catching a bus, you should always buy your transfer ticket from the driver at the time of boarding. On the underground train stations, you have to get a ticket before entering the boarding area.

Sitting down:

If you get on a bus or a train, it is acceptable to sit down next to someone (you don't need to ask!) If you arrive at a spare double seat, you should sit next to the window and leave a spare seat for other people to use. It is considered impolite to sit in the

aisle and expect fellow passengers to climb over you in order to sit down. If someone is seated next to you and you want to get off the bus, just say ‘excuse me.’

There are **priority seats** on most buses. These are reserved for seniors, the disabled, pregnant women or people traveling with very young children in their arms. It is ok to sit on these seats, but you should get up and offer your place if anyone of the aforementioned people get on.

Standing up:

You are allowed to stand up on public transport.



Social behavior

Personal space:

You should not stand too close to people when you talk to them. Americans people find this uncomfortable.



Meeting and Greeting:

Most people shake hands when they meet for the first time or in a formal situation. When people are good friends, they will sometimes hug each other to say hello, goodbye or thank you.

Eye contact:

In public, and particularly on public transport, people avoid making eye contact with strangers. Most people either read or look towards the ground slightly rather than at peoples’ faces. People in America find it uncomfortable if they feel as though someone is watching them.

‘Excuse Me’

There are many occasions to use “excuse me” or “sorry” to be polite. Here are a few examples:

- We say ‘excuse me’ or ‘sorry’ if we bump into someone, or if someone bumps into us
- We say ‘sorry?’ when we haven’t heard someone.
- ‘Excuse me’ precedes any intrusive question e.g. ‘Excuse me, do you know if this train stops at Powell Street?’ ‘Excuse me, do you have the time?’ ‘Excuse me, is this seat free?’
- We sometimes say ‘excuse me, please’ when we want to attract someone’s attention or we want them to move.

'Ps and Qs'

Children in the U.S. are often told to 'mind their Ps and Qs'

P is for **Please** and Q is for **Thank you**.

Whenever you ask someone to do anything, you should say please, and whenever someone does something for you (even if it is part of their job) you should say 'Thank you.' Here are a few examples:

- When you get out of a taxi, you should always say **thank you** to the driver.
 - You should say **thank you** to a waiter when they give you your food.
 - You should say **thank you** to a shopkeeper when they give you your change.
 - When you are offered something you don't want you should never say no, you should always say **no thank you** or just **thank you**.
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- You should say **please** when you ask the taxi driver to take you somewhere, 'I'd like to go to Pier 39 please.'
 - You should say **please** to the waiter when you order your food, 'I'd like the salmon pasta please.'
 - When you are offered something you want, the answer should never just be **yes** it should always be **yes please**.