

# American Cultural Information

## Social Courtesy

### Handshake:

- The most common form of greeting in the U.S. is a hand shake. Men shake other men's hands, men shake women's hands and women shake other women's hands.
- If you get to know someone well enough, a hand shake can sometimes turn into a hug or brief pat on the back or shoulder. Women-to-women turn their greetings into warm embraces much more often and sooner than men-to-men, or men-to-women. While in many countries men kiss the cheek(s) of women when they meet, in the U.S. that action is reserved for very close friends.
- If you are unsure how to greet someone, a handshake is probably your best option.

### Hugging, kissing or touching:

- Hugging is typically done among close family members and friends.
- Kissing people in greeting is usually done only in the context of relatives, lovers, and friends.
- Avoid touching people during conversation unless you know them well. It usually makes them uncomfortable.

### Staring:

- It is typical policy while walking in public not to stare at others.
- A quick glance to familiarize oneself with the environment is fine, however, to continuously stare at someone because they are different is totally unacceptable and considered rude.

### Miscellaneous Social Courtesies:

- Many people will smile and/or say hello as they pass. This is considered a friendly gesture.
- Laughing at total strangers can be very offensive.
- It is common when walking in a group to yield to others by making space for them to pass without having to brush up against them.
- When shopping, it is not acceptable to get very close to another shopper in an attempt to make him move away from a product you also want to see. It is best practice to wait in line to pay for your item without breaking ahead of someone, and to know what you want to buy before going to the cashier.
- Americans walk to the right on a sidewalk. It is polite to move over to the right if you are with a group of people while only one person is walking toward you.
- Out of respect for age and/or disability, Americans generally hold open doors, give up seats and/or help those struggling to manage. Common courtesy assumes that people in the vicinity will do what they can to make the situation easier to handle.
- Never make racial, sexist, or homophobic comments about anyone.
- Winking at a woman is inappropriate because of the flirtatious nature of the gesture. In other circumstances a wink will signal amusement or that the speaker is kidding. Because of the potential for misinterpretation, winking should be avoided.

## Hygiene/Personal Hygiene

- Americans are very concerned with personal hygiene and cleanliness. It is not unusual for them to bathe one or even two times a day.
- Americans typically wear deodorant, especially in hot humid summer weather. Americans sometimes find body odor to be offensive.
- Spitting is unacceptable in any public setting except for baseball players on a field.
- If you have a cold and cannot avoid spitting up phlegm, use a tissue and then throw it away.
- Picking your nose is considered childish by Americans. Do not do it in view of others.

- It is good hygiene to wash one's hands after using the toilet or if you are about to handle food.
- Flatulence in the presence of others is not a good idea. If you need to, excuse yourself and do so in a private manner.

## **Dining**

- Chewing with your mouth wide open is impolite. Kindly chew and swallow before speaking.
- It is good hygiene to wash one's hands after using the toilet or if you are about to handle food.
- Burping loudly is not a compliment to the chef in the U.S. It is frowned upon and reflect poor manners.
- In America, the drinking age for alcohol is set at 21 and is enforced with ID checks by the alcohol seller. Furthermore, it is illegal to provide a minor with alcohol.
- Tipping: Restaurant and bar menus indicate prices without sales taxes (which varies by city/county) and tips (15 to 20%), so everything you will order on the menu will end up costing about 21% to 26% more. The sales tax will always be included on the 'check' (bill); the tip is rarely included unless you are dining with a group of 6 or more people -- in this case, many establishments automatically add a tip or 'service charge' or 'gratuity' of between 15% and 20%.
- If you aren't eating, it is polite to have your hands either rested in your lap or casually laid out on the table, so you are comfortable while you chat.

## **Additional Customs/Habits/ Things not to forget**

- In general, most Americans, even in a business setting, will prefer to be called by their first name. However, it is a good rule of thumb to address them by their title (Mr., Mrs., Ms., Dr., or Professor, in general) and last name (e.g., Mr. Anderson) until you are specifically told otherwise.
- Americans may also address you by your first name immediately after being introduced to you; this is not considered rude at all and reflects the more casual style of Americans.
- Generally speaking, it is polite to call an adult woman Ms. at first, unless you are prompted otherwise. An American woman will let you know what she wants to be called.
- Being on time is important.
- Americans can be very direct and honest, even though it may seem rude to people from another culture.
- Americans value independent thinking.
- Americans like to joke, smile, and talk.

## **Privacy/Personal Space**

- Americans like privacy and personal space.
- While difficult to gauge, the best estimates for comfortable personal physical space for an American is typically an arm's length apart. Anything closer is viewed as uncomfortable.
- Americans usually have larger personal space boundaries than people from other cultures. If you notice someone backing up a little while talking to you, don't step toward them as they most likely feel uncomfortable with the lack of distance between you.
- Closer contact is reserved for closer acquaintances-the barrier may break down as they get to know you.
- Physical interactions amongst strangers aren't common in America.

## **Scams**

- Money Changing "Errors"- Look up the monetary conversion before you go. Do your math before you travel to get a sense of where the conversion rate is at.
- ATM Scams- Always use ATMs in reputable banks and if the ATM sucks in your card, refusing to give it back, then go into the bank immediately.
- Amazing Deal- If it sounds too good, it probably is. Often times, street hustlers will try to sell you stolen goods at a discounted rate in order to dispose of the stolen property. Other times, they will offer to sell you an extremely valuable and prized item at a discounted rate and then rob you and take your money/valuables. To avoid this, we suggest shopping with known retailers and in large public venues like malls or shopping centers.

- Beggar- Someone tells you a story of despair and asks for your money to help put things right. All too often these are con artist tricks and they succeed because they sound like they're real. The best general policy is to be skeptical of anyone who asks you for money.
- Pick-pocket- The most common travel scam is the bump and grab, where a thief or a gang of thieves distract you with a shove/bump and then proceed to lift your valuables from your pocket and/or purse. This method is most popular on public transportation. To avoid this, never put a wallet or anything of value in either your front or back jean pocket. Furthermore, individuals should always opt for cross-body purses with zippers (no flimsy one button purses).
- Stolen Phone for Pictures- As a tourist in a new country, it is only natural that you'll want to take pictures to capture your memories. Sometimes predators seek out tourists, wait for the opportunity to offer to take their picture, and then run away with their cellphones. To avoid this, have a friend or another person that you know take the picture.

### **Social Media Safety**

- Learn about and use the privacy and security settings on social networks. They are there to help you control who sees what you post and manage your online experience in a positive way.
- Never disclose your location. If you plan to share images online, make sure that you turn off the GPS on your device to keep your exact location private. Tagging or posting your specific location is an exciting feature, but not everyone needs to know where you are at all times. It makes you vulnerable, especially if your profile is public.
- Never meet up with anyone from the internet.
- Never post confidential information like schedules, personal identification information, etc. It is always better to omit information about yourself rather than include it on your social media. Just because there is an option to include your current city doesn't mean you have to. Be cautious about how much personal information you provide on social networking sites. The more information you post, the easier it may be for a hacker or someone else to use that information to steal your identity, access your data, or commit other crimes such as stalking.
- Assume that anything you post, regardless of privacy settings, is accessible to anyone. If you don't want something to be seen, don't post it on the internet. Assume that once you put information on the site, it stays there forever. Even if you delete the account, you don't know if someone has already printed/copied your text or photos off of it.
- Be selective when accepting your "friends." Social networks can be used for a variety of purposes. Some of the fun is creating a large pool of friends from many aspects of your life. That doesn't mean all friends are created equal. Use tools to manage the information you share with friends in different groups or even have multiple online pages. It's important not to make you or your information vulnerable to people who you have never met before in real life. Don't just add someone as a friend because they wanted to add you.
- Always log out of social media. This is especially true when you're using a public computer at a library or hotel. The reality is that we all have some private information on our social media — even if it's only our name and a photo — and you don't want to give someone easy access to your identity.
- "Catfishing" - this term applies to someone that intentionally creates a fake social media account with the intent to deceive others either for romantic purposes or other revenge tactics.

### **American Cultural Norms**

- Time-oriented- In contrast to many other cultures around the world, the American culture puts great emphasis on the ability to control outside events, in large part through his mastery of technology. Americans believe in setting strict deadlines and timetables, even for casual social events. Productivity, self-reliance and "getting things done" are prized personal and professional qualities. It is important to be on time for appointments. Even being 5 minutes late without calling beforehand may doom an interview or important business meeting, while social occasions are slightly more flexible - 10-15 minutes late for a date is acceptable. Learn to estimate the time it will take to complete certain tasks.
- Individualistic- Some Americans can be stubbornly individualistic, to the point of appearing self-centered to members of other, more communally-centered cultures.

- Hobby-loving- In the large cities and towns there are many opportunities to get involved in social and cultural activities, with a multitude of hobbyist clubs and associations catering to almost every interest: travelling, cooking, writing, dining out, sailing and watersports, etc. If you love to read books or watch films, for example, there are a number of clubs in large cities catering to these interests. If you like nature, you can join hiking clubs or environmental organizations.
- Sports-loving- Americans love their sports, especially baseball, football, basketball, soccer, golf, hockey and tennis. "Team spirit" is celebrated. Being a "good sport," having a good sense of humor, taking insults and slurs lightly, are all signs you are being a "good sport."
- Off-Color Humor- Some Americans like to poke fun, but most of the time it is meant to be in good humor. In fact, more Americans than ever are sensitive to cultural diversity.