



# U.S. Living

*This document includes suggestions for day-to-day life in the U.S. as well as some important rules to keep you safe. The cultural components may vary in different communities, but Cultural Vistas' rules about safety and emergency situations should always be followed closely.*

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## Meeting and Greeting

- » Outside the workplace:
  - o Greetings are casual.
  - o A handshake, a smile, and a 'hello' are all that is needed.
  - o Smile!
  - o Use first names, and be sure to introduce everyone to each other.
  - o Don't be surprised if people ask "How are you?" frequently. It's just another way to say hello.
- » At the workplace:
  - o When uncertain, use "Mr." and "Ms." when meeting someone.
  - o A firm handshake makes a good impression.
  - o Maintaining eye contact is important.



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## Gift Giving Etiquette

- » In general, Americans give gifts for birthdays, anniversaries and major holidays, such as Christmas.
- » A gift can be as simple as a card and personal note to something more elaborate for a person with whom you are close.
- » Gift giving is not an elaborate event, except at Christmas.
- » When invited to someone's home for dinner, it is polite to bring a small box of good chocolates, a bottle of wine, a potted plant or flowers.
- » Gifts are normally opened when received.

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## Dining Etiquette

- » Americans socialize in their homes and 'backyards', in restaurants and in other public places.
- » It's not at all unusual for social events to be as casual as a backyard barbecue or a picnic in the park.
- » Arrive on time if invited for dinner; no more than 10 minutes later than invited to a small gathering.
- » If it is a large party, it is acceptable to arrive up to 30 minutes later than invited.
- » Table manners are more relaxed in the U.S. than in many other countries.

- » Generally, the fork is held in the right hand and is used for eating. The knife is used to cut or spread something.
- » If you have not finished eating, cross your knife and fork on your plate with the fork over the knife. Indicate you have finished eating by laying your knife and fork parallel across the right side of your plate.
- » If you are more comfortable eating in the Continental manner, go ahead. It will not offend anyone.
- » Feel free to refuse specific foods or drinks without offering an explanation.
- » Many foods are eaten by hand.
- » Food is often served family-style, which means that it is in large serving dishes and passed around the table for everyone to serve themselves.
- » Do not begin eating until the hostess starts or says to begin.
- » Remain standing until invited to sit down.
- » Do not rest your elbows on the table.
- » Put your napkin in your lap as soon as you sit down.

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## Transportation

- » Types of public transportation may include bus, train, subway, or taxi cab. You can check with your host employer to see what is available in your area.

- » When using public transportation:
  - o Note the location of emergency equipment.
  - o Do not stand on the edge of train platform.
  - o Do not display valuables (especially money) and keep your smart phone or laptop secure.
  - o Keep your wallet in your pocket, not backpack; keep your purse closed.
  - o Be aware of your surroundings.
  - o If someone is bothering you, inform the train or bus operator, or a security guard.

- » Keep your contact information up to date!
  - o Always contact CV if your phone number, address, or e-mail changes.
  - o As a J-1 Exchange Visitor, you are required to send these updates to your sponsor.
  - o The U.S. government must have your current contact information, and your sponsor maintains those records for you.

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## Communication

- » Upon arrival:
  - o Contact your family.
  - o Use Skype (or other free internet service) .
  - o If the number begins with 0, remove the 0.
  - o Contact Cultural Vistas.
- » It may be possible to change smart phone SIM card to use your phone on U.S. networks (check with your carrier before leaving your home country).
- » If internet access is not available at your U.S. residence, certain local restaurants may offer free Wi-Fi. Public libraries usually will have internet access available.
- » You are required to check email every day.

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## Religion

- » The First Amendment of the United States' Bill of Rights, which provides rights to American citizens, guarantees freedom of religion.
- » This foundation allows all Americans to pursue their own individual religious practices without interference from the government.
- » It also means that the American government is not associated with, and does not promote or persecute, any religion.
- » This is commonly referred to as the "Separation of Church and State."

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## Meals

- » Food in the United States is quite varied, according to regional tastes and ethnic influences. While each region is known for its specialties, it is usually possible to find almost any type of food in bigger cities.
- » People in the U.S. usually eat three meals a day: breakfast before work in the morning, lunch around noon, and an evening meal (called supper or dinner) usually between five-thirty and 7 o'clock in the evening.
- » Most people are fairly casual during mealtimes, and many eat out as a way to socialize with friends.
- » If invited to a meal by a friend or employer, it is polite (but not always necessary) to bring a small gift, such as flowers or a bottle of wine. A small souvenir from your home country would certainly be an appreciated alternative.
- » While friends having a meal out often split the bill, it would not be impolite to graciously accept if your host offers to pay.



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## Money Management

- » Pay attention to your finances.
- » It is not necessary to open U.S. bank account.
- » We recommend using a credit or debit card.
- » Contact your bank before you leave.
- » Ask about additional fees.
- » Be protective of money and personal information.
- » Be careful about lending or giving money to anyone, especially strangers.
- » Do not carry large amounts of cash.
- » Depending on location, life could be more or less expensive than in your home country.
- » To compare the cost of living in U.S. cities, visit [www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/comparison.jsp](http://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/comparison.jsp)



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## Tipping

- » Certain services require a tip.
- » Always tip these service workers:
  - o Restaurant servers (15 - 20%)
  - o Taxi drivers (15%)
  - o Food delivery drivers (15% or \$3.00 minimum)
  - o Hair stylists (15%)
- » Tipping is not expected at fast food establishments (McDonald's, etc.) and places that provide minimum service.
- » More about tipping:
  - o Service workers in the U.S. make less than minimum wage; customer tips make up the remainder of their wages.
  - o Tipping at the types of businesses listed above is not optional; not tipping is very rude!
  - o For extremely poor service, tip 10%.
  - o At establishments such as cafes, where they may have "tip jars," tipping is optional.

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## Safety

- » Become familiar with your neighborhood:
  - o Use the internet (for example - Google) to look at a map of the area.
  - o Explore the neighborhood during the day.
  - o Ask colleagues and neighbors about areas to avoid.
- » Avoid walking alone at night.
- » Protect yourself through common sense and caution:
  - o Keep your apartment locked.



- o Never leave your bag or purse unattended.
- o Use caution with strangers who are overly friendly, who offer you gifts, or who ask you to accompany them somewhere.
- o Do not get into a stranger's car.
- o Do not give your phone number to a stranger.
- o Always let a friend know where you're going and what time you'll be back if you go somewhere alone.
- » Protect yourself through common sense and caution:
  - o Do not give your credit card number or bank information to anyone other than a person or organization from whom you are making a purchase.
  - o Do not give your Social Security Number (SSN) to anyone other than your host organization or to a bank (if you are opening a U.S. account).
  - o If someone else asks for your SSN, ask Cultural Vistas for advice.
- » Emergencies include:
  - o Arrest or detainment
  - o Serious illness or injury
  - o Victim of a serious or violent crime
- » The following are not emergencies; please contact Cultural Vistas during normal office hours:
  - o Lost or stolen DS-2019, I-94, passport, or other documents
  - o Questions about medical insurance, social security, or taxes
  - o Non-violent crime (theft, etc.)
  - o Problems with money or contracts
  - o General information related to housing, travel, etc.
- » If you are arrested:
  - o Call Cultural Vistas immediately; failure to call Cultural Vistas at the soonest possible opportunity may result in the loss of your J-1 Visa sponsorship.
  - o You do not need to answer any questions from police until after your lawyer arrives; remain calm, ask to call Cultural Vistas, and ask for an attorney.

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## Emergency

- » Dial 9-1-1 on any phone or cellular phone when you have an emergency. This will connect you to the local emergency response service, which will decide whether to connect you to:
  - o The police (if you are reporting a crime)
  - o The hospital (if you have a medical emergency)
  - o The fire department (if you are reporting a fire)
- » If you have an emergency (victim of crime, car accident, health emergency, fire, etc.) take these steps:
  1. Get to a safe place as quickly as possible.
  2. Call 9-1-1.
  3. Call Cultural Vistas.
    - o During office hours: (9AM to 5PM, Monday-Friday): 410-997-2200.
    - o Outside of office hours (24/7): 877-206-6404.
    - o This number should only be used in case of an emergency.

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## Medical / Prescriptions

- » If you are on any prescription medications, it would be wise to bring your valid written prescription, translated into English. If at all possible, bring the amount of medication you will need for your entire stay.
- » If a doctor prescribes medication, many drugs are produced in two versions: generic (less expensive) and brand-name.



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## Insurance

- » While you will be covered by medical insurance that provides partial compensation for medication, it could save you some hassle to take care of medical needs before you leave your home country. In addition, some medications may not be available in the U.S.
- » In the U.S., it is rare to go to hospitals except in serious emergencies; a private doctor's office is cheaper and faster.

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## Laws

- » Alcohol:
  - o You must be 21 to drink or purchase alcohol.
  - o You should not enter a liquor store if under 21.
  - o It is illegal to give alcohol to anyone under 21.
  - o It is illegal to have open alcohol containers on the street.
  - o It is illegal to drive after drinking alcohol.
- » Driving:
  - o If you have a valid driver's license in your home country, you should be able to rent a car in the U.S.
  - o If your license is not written in English, it is recommended that you obtain an English translation from a translation service; it is also recommended that you obtain an International Driver's Permit (IDP) if possible.
  - o Different states have different driving laws.
  - o All U.S. states require that cars drive on the right side of the road.
- » International travel:
  - o Any time you travel outside of the U.S. you must e-mail your primary contact at Cultural Vistas with exact travel dates, destination, and emergency contact information.
  - o For travel anywhere outside the U.S., you should make sure you have received a multiple entry visa (this will be indicated by "M" under Entries on the J-1 Visa stamp in your passport).
  - o When traveling outside the U.S., you will need to carry your passport with the J-1 Visa, DS-2019 form, and I-94 Card or electronic record of admission in your carry-on bag, and present them to a Customs and Border Protection officer.

- o If you wish to travel to Canada or Mexico during your J-1 program, you must determine whether you need a visa and make the proper arrangements.
- o If you wish to travel outside North America during your J-1 Visa program, you must determine whether you need a visa and make the proper arrangements. This will involve mailing your DS-2019 and your travel itinerary to Cultural Vistas' office, along with a \$30 fee for travel validation. You may also be asked to complete a travel validation form.
- o If you travel internationally during your J-1 program without following these instructions, you may be unable to properly re-enter the U.S. on your J-1 Visa.

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## Packing

- » Pack the following items in your carry-on luggage:
  - o Passport with J-1 Visa, DS-2019, I-901, DS-7002, and contact information for Cultural Vistas
  - o Credit cards and emergency money in cash
  - o Any medications (in their original packaging)
  - o Toothbrush
  - o A change of clothes for one day
  - o Laptop/charger
  - o Phone/charger
  - o Electrical adapter (if necessary)
- » Pack the following items in your checked bag:
  - o 5 sets of "work clothes": nice shirts and pants (not jeans and t-shirts)
  - o 2-3 sets of casual clothes to wear on weekends
  - o 2 pairs of shoes for work and 1 comfortable pair for walking around in your free time
  - o Enough underwear and socks for 1.5 or 2 weeks
  - o Coats, gloves, scarves, hats, etc. if weather dictates
  - o Toiletries: towel, small soap and shampoo bottles, toothpaste, bath towel
  - o Small gifts showing your home country's culture (optional)
  - o Photos or small mementos (optional)