



United States of America



America was stumbled upon by Columbus in 1492 and for more than 500 years people have travelled here seeking a better life in the 'land of opportunity'. The land was fought over by colonial powers for centuries and finally won its independence from Britain in 1783. Despite the near annihilation of the Native American population, one of the bloodiest civil wars the world had seen, and ingrained racism (Native Americans were not granted citizenship until 1924 and racial segregation was the norm until as late as the 1950s), the American people have succeeded in forging one of the worlds most united, democratic and tolerant nations, a fascinating melting-pot of cultures, and the undisputed military and economic heavyweight of the world.



The Star-Spangled Banner © www.freedigitalphotos.net

The country is made up of 48 neighbouring states of the continental USA, plus the huge state of Alaska, northwest of Canada, and the volcanic islands of Hawaii, 2,000 miles (3,219km) out into the Pacific. There are also the US territories, which include Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the Midway Islands and the US Virgin Islands. Tourism is focused mainly in the great cities such as New York and Washington, as well as sunshine states such as California, Florida and Hawaii where millions of tourists congregate each year to enjoy the fine beaches, natural wonders and man-made attractions such as Disneyland, Universal Studios and Hollywood. Too many miss out on the mind-blowing landscapes of the interior which can be found in the wealth of magnificent National Parks like Yosemite, Yellowstone and the Adirondacks, as well as spectacular sights like the Grand Canyon and the Rocky Mountains. With all this on their doorstep, it's easy to understand why most Americans have never bothered getting a passport.

Basics

Time: The USA is divided into six time zones. Eastern Time is GMT -5, Pacific Time is GMT -8, Central Time is GMT -6, Mountain Time is GMT -7, Alaska is GMT -9, and Hawaii is GMT -10. Other than Arizona and Hawaii, all states observe daylight saving time in summer between March and November when clocks go back one hour.

Electricity: 120 volts, 60Hz. Plugs are mainly the two, flat-pin type, though three-pin plugs are also widely used. European appliances without dual-voltage capabilities will require an adapter, which can be purchased in most major departure airports.

Money: The US Dollar (USD) is the unit of currency and is divided into 100 cents. Only major banks exchange foreign currency. ATMs are widespread and credit cards and travellers cheques are widely accepted. Travellers cheques should be taken in US Dollars to avoid hassles. Banking hours are Monday to Friday 9am to 3pm.

Currency Exchange Rates				
US\$1.00	US\$5.00	US\$10.00	US\$100.00	US\$1,000.00
A\$ 1.31	A\$ 6.55	A\$ 13.10	A\$ 131.04	A\$ 1,310.40
C\$ 1.12	C\$ 5.60	C\$ 11.21	C\$ 112.05	C\$ 1,120.50
€ 0.72	€ 3.59	€ 7.19	€ 71.87	€ 718.70
NZ\$ 1.61	NZ\$ 8.04	NZ\$ 16.08	NZ\$ 160.76	NZ\$ 1,607.60
R 8.16	R 40.78	R 81.55	R 815.54	R 8,155.40
£ 0.63	£ 3.14	£ 6.27	£ 62.72	£ 627.20
US\$ 1.00	US\$ 5.00	US\$ 10.00	US\$ 100.00	US\$ 1,000.00

Note: These rates are not updated daily and should be used as a guideline only.

Language: English is the most common language but Spanish is often spoken in south-western states.

Entry requirements for UK nationals: UK passport holders require a valid passport for travel to the USA. Under the Visa Waiver Programme (VWP), most British citizens do not require a visa for holiday, transit or business purposes providing their passports are machine-readable, the stay does not exceed 90 days, a return or onward ticket is held and they check into the US government ESTA website prior to departure.

Entry requirements for Canadians: Canadians do not require a visa, only a valid passport. Visitors should hold tickets and documents required for return or onward destination.

Entry requirements for Australians: Australian nationals do not require a visa for stays of up to 90 days under the Visa Waiver Program; a valid machine-readable passport, a return or onward ticket is required if travelling by sea or air and they must check into the US government ESTA website prior to departure.

Entry requirements for South Africans: South Africans must hold a passport valid at the date of entry; a visa is also required. Visitors must have return or onward tickets and the necessary documents for further travel.

Entry requirements for New Zealanders: New Zealand nationals require a valid passport, but do not require a visa for stays of up to 90 days under the US Visa Waiver programme. A machine-readable passport is necessary to qualify for the programme, a return or onward ticket is required and they must check into the US government ESTA website prior to departure.

Entry requirements for Irish nationals: Irish nationals require a valid passport. Irish passport holders qualify for the visa waiver programme, but a machine-readable passport (MRP) must be presented to gain visa-free entry to the country, which allows a stay of up to 90 days. Visitors must have return or onward tickets, all necessary documents for further travel and check into the US government ESTA website prior to departure.

Passport/Visa Note: Visitors entering the country under the Visa Waiver Programme (VWP) must have a machine-readable passport (MRP) that has a bar code on the photo page. From 26 October 2006 eligible travellers under the VWP must include biometrics in their machine-readable passports if they wish to enter the country without a visa, containing unique personal data such as fingerprints or iris details. All new passports issued on or after 26 October 2005 must contain a digital photo image in order to travel visa-free. Due to new security measures, all visitors to the USA will have a photograph and two fingerprints taken by an inkless scanner on arrival, including those travelling visa-free under the Visa Waiver Programme. As part of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), all travellers travelling between the United States and Canada, Mexico, Bermuda, and the Caribbean region are required to present a passport or other valid travel document to enter or re-enter the United States. If departing from the USA a valid passport will be required by immigration authorities. A new security regulation, in force from 2009, means that all visitors who do not need a visa under the US visa waiver programme will need to register online three days before travel. This will allow the US government to screen all visitors before travel. The new programme will be mandatory for all visa-free travel from 12 January 2009. For more information on visa visit: http://travel.state.gov/visa/visa_1750.html

Health: There are no specific health risks associated with travel within the USA. Medical facilities are excellent, but expensive. Only emergencies are treated without prior payment and treatment can be refused without evidence of insurance or proof of funds. Good medical insurance is essential.

Tipping: A 15% tip is expected by taxi drivers, bartenders, hairdressers and waiters, but don't tip in fast-food or self-service restaurants. In expensive restaurants or for large parties tip 20% of the bill. It is normal to tip staff in hotels. Most services are customarily tipped if the service is good.

Climate: The United States of America covers a large region, stretching from east to west across six time zones and therefore it is no surprise that the country has a varied climate, ranging from arctic regions to deserts. California, on the west coast of the US, has a pleasant, Mediterranean climate, and the Pacific Northwest Coast has more of a maritime climate, with cooler summers and mild winters, influenced by westerly winds. The central part of the US has extreme temperature variations and a continental climate - with cold winters and hot summers (with tornadoes). The eastern central US tends to be more humid, while the western central US is semiarid. The east side of the country has a continental climate caused by air masses moving from west to east, with hot summers and a prevalence of tornadoes in the Mississippi River area. Florida has the warmest winters on the eastern seaboard. It is recommended that travellers research the climate in the specific state they wish to visit when choosing when to travel.

Safety: Travel within the United States is generally trouble-free, however travellers should be aware that the US shares with the rest of the world an increased threat from terrorist incidents. Security has been heightened particularly at airports. Restrictions on hand luggage apply and travellers are advised to check on the latest situation with airlines in advance. Travellers should also be alert to the dangers of car and street crime in cities and should use common sense and take basic precautions. Hurricanes are common between June and November, putting the southern USA, including the Gulf Coast and the eastern US, at risk. There is a risk of wildfires in many dry areas in the US, particularly on the West Coast from March to November.

Customs: Laws vary from state to state, including speed limit, fines and punishment. The age at which you may legally buy and consume alcohol is 21 years.

Business: In such a large country, filled with so many diverse groups, business practices may differ according to each state, however rarely to any large degree. The East Coast is traditionally more formal than the West Coast, however in states such as California dress code and conservative appearance are as common as they would be in New York. Punctuality is important throughout the country and it is considered rude to be late for a meeting. Gift-giving is uncommon as it may be construed as bribery. Appropriate titles (Mr, Mrs, Ms) are used upon introduction and until otherwise stated. Americans favour politeness and greetings of 'Hello' and 'How are you?' are often expressed with sincerity. Business hours may vary in each state, but an 8am start and 5pm finish Monday to Friday is the most common with an hour over lunch.

Communications: The international country dialling code for the United States is +1. The outgoing code is 011, followed by the relevant country code (e.g. 01144 for the United Kingdom). The US has numerous area/city codes, which must be dialled before the local number required (e.g. New York Manhattan, 212, and Washington DC, 202). Mobile networks cover most of the country, including all urban areas, however unless you have a tri-band phone it is likely your cellular phone from home will not work in the United States. The largest GSM networks are T-mobile and Cingular. Internet cafes are prevalent in most towns and cities.

Duty Free: Travellers to the United States who are returning residents of the country do not have to pay duty on articles purchased abroad to the value of \$800 provided their stay was longer than 48 hours and their duty-free allowance was not used in the 30-day period prior. For passengers arriving from Samoa, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands, a duty-free allowance of \$1,200 is allowed. The following items are included in this: 1,000 cigarettes and 100 cigars. Travellers over 21 years are allowed 1 litre of alcoholic beverages; and perfumes, lotions and other goods for personal use. Restrictions may apply to goods from Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Burma (Myanmar), Angola, Liberia and Sudan. It is prohibited to import Cuban cigars from any country. Travellers to the United States who are non-residents do not have to pay duty on the following items: 100 cigars or 200 cigarettes and gifts to the value of \$100 provided their stay in the USA is not less than 72 hours and that the allowance has not been used in the preceding six-month period. Prohibited items for residents and non-residents include: meat or meat products, poultry, narcotics, absinthe, plants, seeds, vegetables, fruits, soil, live insects and other living plants or animal pests. Fish is prohibited unless it carries disease-free certification. Wildlife and animals or their by-products carry restrictions. Dairy products and eggs from specified countries are not allowed. Firearms and ammunition are not allowed without the necessary license and permit.

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Tourism

United States Tourist Office: www.usatourist.com

United States of America Embassies

United States Embassy, London, United Kingdom: +44 (0)20 7499 9000.

United States Embassy, Ottawa, Canada: +1 613 688 5335.

United States Embassy, Canberra, Australia: +61 (0)2 6214 5600.

United States Embassy, Pretoria, South Africa: +27 (0)12 431 4000.

United States Embassy, Dublin, Ireland: +353 (0)1 668 8777.

United States Embassy, Wellington, New Zealand: +64 (0)4 462 6000.

Foreign Embassies in United States of America

British Embassy, Washington DC: +1 202 588 6500.

Canadian Embassy, Washington DC: +1 202 682 1740.

Australian Embassy, Washington DC: +1 202 797 3000.

South African Embassy, Washington DC: +1 202 232 4400.

Irish Embassy, Washington DC: +1 202 462 3939.

New Zealand Embassy, Washington DC: +1 202 328 4800.

United States of America Emergency Numbers

Emergencies: 911

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