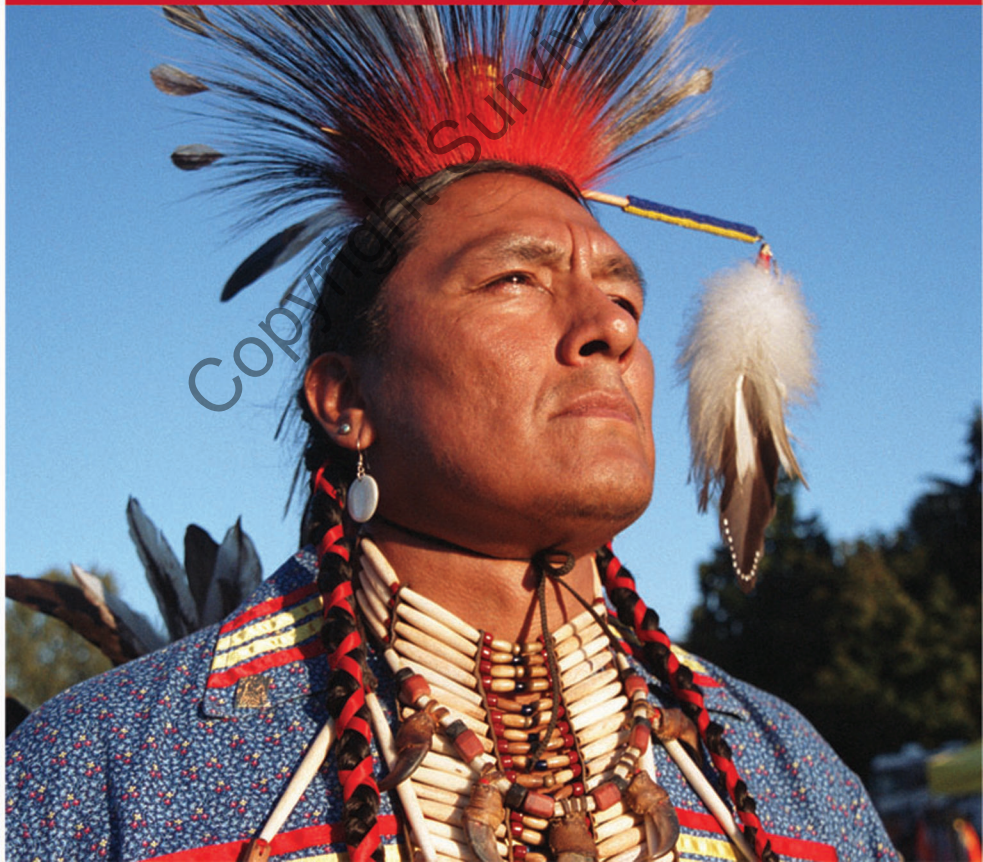


Culture Wise **AMERICA**

The Essential Guide to Culture,
Customs & Business Etiquette

David Hampshire & Anthony Poulton-Smith





Culture Wise **AMERICA**

The Essential Guide to Culture, Customs
& Business Etiquette

David Hampshire & Anthony Poulton-Smith



Survival Books • London • England

First published 2009

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or recorded by any means, without prior written permission from the publisher.


Copyright © Survival Books 2009

Cover photo © Sergei Bachlakov ( www.shutterstock.com)

Cartoons & maps © Jim Watson

Survival Books Limited

26 York Street, London W1U 6PZ, United Kingdom

 +44 (0)20-7788 7644,  +44 (0)870-762 3212

 info@survivalbooks.net

 www.survivalbooks.net

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.

A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-905303-58-8

Printed and bound in India by Ajanta Offset

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank their many friends, family members and colleagues – unfortunately too many to mention – who provided information for this book. We would particularly like to thank Robbi Forrester Atilgan for her research and editing, without whom this book would never have seen the light of day, Peter Read for additional editing, Rachel Wright for final checks, Lilac Johnson for proof-reading, Di Tolland for DTP and photo selection, and Jim Watson for the cover design, maps and cartoons.

Finally, a special thank you to all the photographers (listed on page 270) – the unsung heroes – whose beautiful images add colour and bring America to life.

THE AUTHORS

David Hampshire: David was born in England and after serving in the Royal Air Force, was employed for many years in the computer industry. His work has taken him around the world and he has lived and worked in many countries, including Australia, France, Germany, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Panama, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland and the USA. David has been a full-time author since 1990 and is the author, co-author or editor of over 20 titles, including *Buying a Home in Florida* and *Living and Working in America*. David lives with his partner in England and Panama, and is a frequent visitor to the USA.

Anthony Poulton-Smith: After a few years grammar school, Anthony shunned further education in the pursuit of ‘real’ knowledge – not to mention a little spending money! After almost 20 years in light engineering, he began writing full-time in 1991 and since then has had over 450 articles and eight books published (mostly on the origin of place names), together with innumerable crosswords and puzzles. In his ‘spare’ time he has educated his two children at home, dabbles in professional landscape gardening to maintain his fitness, and gives talks in person and on radio around the subject of place-name origins.

When in the UK, Anthony’s home is in Tamworth in Staffordshire, where locals are known as ‘Tammies’, while in his home across the pond in Detroit (Michigan) he becomes a ‘Wolverine’ (despite the fact that there hasn’t been a single sighting of this animal in the state for over 120 years!).

What readers & reviewers have said about Survival Books:

‘If you need to find out how France works then this book is indispensable. Native French people probably have a less thorough understanding of how their country functions.’

Living France

‘It’s everything you always wanted to ask but didn’t for fear of the contemptuous put down. The best English-language guide. Its pages are stuffed with practical information on everyday subjects and are designed to compliment the traditional guidebook.’

Swiss News

‘Rarely has a ‘survival guide’ contained such useful advice – This book dispels doubts for first-time travellers, yet is also useful for seasoned globetrotters. – In a word, if you’re planning to move to the US or go there for a long-term stay, then buy this book both for general reading and as a ready-reference.’

American Citizens Abroad

‘Let’s say it at once. David Hampshire’s Living and Working in France is the best handbook ever produced for visitors and foreign residents in this country; indeed, my discussion with locals showed that it has much to teach even those born and bred in l’Hexagone – It is Hampshire’s meticulous detail which lifts his work way beyond the range of other books with similar titles. Often you think of a supplementary question and search for the answer in vain. With Hampshire this is rarely the case. – He writes with great clarity (and gives French equivalents of all key terms), a touch of humour and a ready eye for the odd (and often illuminating) fact. – This book is absolutely indispensable.’

The Riviera Reporter

‘A must for all future expats. I invested in several books but this is the only one you need. Every issue and concern is covered, every daft question you have but are frightened to ask is answered honestly without pulling any punches. Highly recommended.’

Reader

‘In answer to the desert island question about the one how-to book on France, this book would be it.’

The Recorder

‘The ultimate reference book. Every subject imaginable is exhaustively explained in simple terms. An excellent introduction to fully enjoy all that this fine country has to offer and save time and money in the process.’

American Club of Zurich

‘The amount of information covered is not short of incredible. I thought I knew enough about my birth country. This book has proved me wrong. Don’t go to France without it. Big mistake if you do. Absolutely priceless!’

Reader

‘When you buy a model plane for your child, a video recorder, or some new computer gizmo, you get with it a leaflet or booklet pleading ‘Read Me First’, or bearing large friendly letters or bold type saying ‘IMPORTANT - follow the instructions carefully’. This book should be similarly supplied to all those entering France with anything more durable than a 5-day return ticket. – It is worth reading even if you are just visiting briefly, or if you have lived here for years and feel totally knowledgeable and secure. But if you need to find out how France works then it is indispensable. Native French people probably have a less thorough understanding of how their country functions. – Where it is most essential, the book is most up to the minute.

Living France

A comprehensive guide to all things French, written in a highly readable and amusing style, for anyone planning to live, work or retire in France.

The Times

Covers every conceivable question that might be asked concerning everyday life – I know of no other book that could take the place of this one.

France in Print

A concise, thorough account of the Do’s and DON’T’s for a foreigner in Switzerland – Crammed with useful information and lightened with humorous quips which make the facts more readable.

American Citizens Abroad

‘I found this a wonderful book crammed with facts and figures, with a straightforward approach to the problems and pitfalls you are likely to encounter. The whole laced with humour and a thorough understanding of what’s involved. Gets my vote!’

Reader

‘A vital tool in the war against real estate sharks; don’t even think of buying without reading this book first!’

Everything Spain

‘We would like to congratulate you on this work: it is really super! We hand it out to our expatriates and they read it with great interest and pleasure.’

ICI (Switzerland) AG



CANADA

MEXICO

Lake Superior

Lake Huron

Lake Ontario

Lake Erie

Lake Michigan

Lake St. Clair

Lake St. George

Lake Ontario

Lake Erie

Lake Michigan

Lake St. Clair

Lake St. George

Lake Ontario

Lake Erie

Lake Michigan

Lake St. Clair

Lake St. George

Lake Ontario

Lake Erie

Lake Michigan

Lake St. Clair

Lake St. George

Lake Ontario

Lake Erie

Lake Michigan

Lake St. Clair

Lake St. George

Lake Ontario

ROCKY MOUNTAINS

APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS

COASTAL PLAINS

SIERRA NEVADA

Seattle

Portland

San Francisco

San Jose

Los Angeles

San Diego

Los Vegas

Grand Canyon

Phoenix

Albuquerque

Denver

Salt Lake City

Great Salt Lake

El Paso

San Antonio

Houston

Little Rock

Omaha

Kansas City

St. Louis

Indianapolis

Chicago

Columbus

Detroit

Milwaukee

Minneapolis

St. Paul

Little Rock

Dallas

Houston

Atlantic Ocean

Ocean

Jacksonville

Orlando

Fort Lauderdale

Miami

Washington, DC

Baltimore

Philadelphia

New York

Boston

Atlantic Ocean

Ocean

Jacksonville

Orlando

Fort Lauderdale

Miami

Washington, DC

Baltimore

Philadelphia

New York

Boston

Atlantic Ocean

Ocean

Jacksonville

Orlando

Fort Lauderdale

Miami

Washington, DC

Baltimore



Copyright Survival Books

CONTENTS

1. A CHANGE OF CULTURE	13
America is different	13
Culture shock	15
Families in America	22
A multicultural society	23
A new life	23
2. WHO ARE THE AMERICANS?	27
A potted history	28
The people	35
Sense of humour	38
Children	40
The class system	41
Attitudes to foreigners	42
Icons	43
3. GETTING STARTED	65
Immigration	65
Bureaucracy	67
Accommodation	68
Buying or hiring a car	71
Emergency services	73
Health services	74
Insurance	78
Education	79
Council services	83
Utilities	84
Staying informed	87
Banking	90
Taxes	92
Cost of living	93
4. BREAKING THE ICE	97
Community life	97
Sexual attitudes	98
Meeting people	101
Invitations	105

Respecting privacy	107
Taboos	108
Expat community	110
Confrontation	111
Dealing with officials	112

5. THE LANGUAGE BARRIER **115**

Learning American English	115
The English language	117
Other languages	119
Slang & swearing	123
Body & sign language	124
Forms of address	126
Greetings	128
Telephone, letters & email	129

6. THE AMERICANS AT WORK **133**

Work ethic	133
Permits & paperwork	134
Finding a job	135
Contracts	140
Starting or buying a business	140
Black economy	144
Working women	144
Business etiquette	145
Employing people	148
Trade unions	149
Working week	149

7. ON THE MOVE **155**

Driving	155
Public transport	162
Hitchhiking	168
Cycling	168
Accommodation	169

8. THE AMERICANS AT PLAY **171**

Dress code	171
Eating	173
Drinking	179
Cafes, restaurants & diners	181

Nightlife	183
Family occasions	184
Clubs	190
Popular culture	190

9. RETAIL THERAPY **199**

Customer service	199
Opening hours	200
Black market	201
Queuing	201
Sales & discounts	201
Types of shop	203
Markets	204
Paying	205
Food & wine	206
Clothes	208
Collectables	210
Mail-order shopping	211
Returning goods	212

10. ODDS & ENDS **215**

Geography	215
Climate	216
Crime	219
Flag & anthem	220
Government	222
International relations	225
Religion	227
Military service	227
Pets	228
Time difference	228
Tipping	229
Toilets	230

APPENDICES **233**

Appendix A: Embassies & Consulates	233
Appendix B: Further Reading	235
Appendix C: Useful Websites	239
Appendix D: American Idioms	247
Appendix E: Map of States	254

INDEX **257**



Statue of Liberty, NY

INTRODUCTION

If you're planning a trip to America or just want to learn more about the country, you'll find the information contained in *Culture Wise America* invaluable. Whether you're travelling on business or pleasure, visiting for a few days or planning to stay for a lifetime, Culture Wise guides enable you to quickly find your feet by removing the anxiety factor when dealing with a foreign culture.

Adjusting to a different environment and culture in any foreign country can be a traumatic and stressful experience, and the US is no exception. You need to adapt to new customs and traditions, and discover the American way of doing things; whether it's sharing a few Buds and dogs with your buddies at a ball game; enjoying a neighbourhood BBQ of hog, mutton or ribs, followed by Key lime or pumpkin pie; or a family brunch of bagels, lox, cream cheese and capers – everything in America seems to come with food.

America is a land where many things are done differently: where people drive enormous autos on vast super highways with a dozen lanes, and traffic may join or exit from the left- or the right-hand lane; where people drink iced tea, root beer and bourbon, and eat chillins, cornbread, hominy grits and black-eyed peas; where you need a few lifetimes to understand ball games such as baseball and gridiron (but can still enjoy them); and where patriotism is a way of life and it's a felony to insult Old Glory (the US flag).

Culture Wise America is essential reading for anyone planning to visit the US, including tourists (particularly travellers planning to stay a number of weeks or months), business people, migrants, retirees, holiday homeowners and transferees. It's designed to help newcomers avoid cultural and social gaffes; make friends and influence people; improve communications (both verbal and non-verbal); and enhance your understanding of America and the American people. It explains what to expect, how to behave in most situations, and how to get along with the locals and feel at home – rather than feeling like a fish out of water. It isn't, however, simply a monologue of dry facts and figures, but a practical and entertaining look at life in America – as it really is – and not necessarily as the tourist brochures would have you believe.

A period spent in America is a wonderful way to enrich your life, broaden your horizons, and hopefully expand your circle of friends. We trust this book will help you avoid the pitfalls of visiting or living in America and smooth your way to a happy and rewarding stay.

Good luck!

David Hampshire & Anthony Poulton-Smith

February 2009



American flag & Constitution

1.

A CHANGE OF CULTURE

With almost daily advances in technology, ever-cheaper flights and knowledge about almost anywhere in the world at our fingertips, travelling, living, working and retiring abroad have never been more accessible, and current migration patterns suggest that it has never been more popular. However, although globalisation means the world has ‘shrunk’, every country is still a world of its own with a unique culture. Some people find it impossible to adapt to a new life in a different culture – for reasons which are many and varied. According to statistics, partner dissatisfaction is the most common cause; as non-working spouses frequently find themselves without a role in the new country and sometimes with little to do other than think about what they would be doing if they were at home. Family concerns – which may include the children’s education and worries about loved ones at home – can also deeply affect those living abroad.

There are no foreign lands. It is the traveller only who is foreign.’

Robert Louis Stevenson
(Scottish writer)

Many factors contribute to how well you adapt to a new culture – for example, your personality, education, language skills, mental health, maturity, socio-economic situation, travel experience, and family and social support systems. How you handle the stress of change and bring balance and meaning to your life is the principal indicator of how well you’ll adjust to a different country, culture and business environment.

AMERICA IS DIFFERENT

Many people underestimate the cultural isolation that can be experienced in

a foreign country. Even in a country where you speak the language fluently, you’ll find that many aspects of the culture are surprisingly foreign (despite the cosy familiarity engendered by cinema, television and books).

Everyone thinks that they know America. Its presence is all-pervasive, in newspapers and magazines, on television and the cinema screen; it even influences much of the clothing we wear, the cars we drive and the food we eat. US politics have more effect on other nations than do those of any other country on earth. However, thinking you know a country and actually living there are two completely different

things, and there are many facets of US life which are quite different from those at home. Of course, if 'home' is in China, Africa or parts of the Middle East, then life in the US may feel very alien indeed.

One of the most unsettling aspects of America is its sheer scale. It's a nation which crosses four time zones (six if you count Alaska and Hawaii), where it can take over three days' non-stop driving to travel from the east coast to the west. In spite of its crowded metropolises, much of the country is wilderness and sparsely populated, and the people who live in its rural heartland are very different from the city slickers of New York or Los Angeles.

The United States of America, as its name suggests, is a federation of smaller states. Its people speak the same language – more or less – although those from New England and the Deep South may occasionally struggle to understand each other (not to mention all those who don't speak English at all). Each state also has its own rules and laws. You can settle in one area, then move to another, and almost feel as though you've moved to a completely different country. You may have to learn a new set of driving rules, and maybe even take another driver's test. And, if you're working in, say, teaching or hairdressing, you may need to obtain a new license before you can work in the new state.

The British and Europeans have a close, although not always comfortable, relationship with America. They discovered the New World only to be shown the door when America asserted its independence in 1776, yet since then they have fought alongside each other in wartime, traded widely in peacetime, and the US has opened its doors to immigrants from across the European continent.

Some Americans look to Europe as the fount of all culture; at the same time, there are older US citizens who consider



Europeans to be aloof and snobbish or, worse, left wing bureaucrats, while many Europeans regard Americans as right wing, loud, brash and uncouth.

Americans tend to live by the clock and measure success by achievement, and this attitude is very different from societies where time spent in contemplation is just as valuable as time spent closing a deal. People from Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures may find US life uncomfortably materialistic and fast. Immigrants from societies where family is the central core of life may struggle to understand how an American family, while professing to be close, lives in separate cities, watches television in separate rooms and eats at different times of the day.

Before you try to get to grips with American culture, however, you first need to adapt to a totally new environment and new challenges, which may include a new job, a new home and a new physical environment – which can be overwhelming.

America has many extremes of climate and weather, and you mustn't underestimate the effects that these can have on you. Extreme conditions of heat and cold can lead to a lack of energy, poor sleep and dehydration. In the summer in the southern states, temperatures regularly rise to a physically draining 120°F (50°C), while winters bring freezing conditions and heavy snowfalls to the Midwest and northern states. Dangerous weather phenomena such as tornadoes, hurricanes and hailstones the size of golf balls are an accepted part of life in some parts of the US, where weather patterns are far less predictable than they are, for example, in Europe.

Those who move to a new job or attempt to start a business in America may encounter a (very) steep learning curve – indeed, even finding a job can be a struggle, as you'll be up against a population which lives to work rather than working to live. The chances are that you've left a job in your home country where you held a senior position, were extremely competent and knew all your colleagues. In America, you may be virtually a trainee (especially if your English isn't fluent) and not know any of your colleagues. The sensation that you're starting from scratch can be demoralising.

Even if you move to a part of the US with a large expatriate community – such as Los Angeles or New York – items that you're used to and took for granted in your home country may not be available, e.g. certain kinds of food, opportunities to engage in your favourite hobby or sport, and books and magazines in your language. The lack of 'home comforts' can wear you down. You'll also have to contend with the lack of a local support network; at home you had a circle of friends, acquaintances, colleagues and possibly relatives you could rely on for help

and support. In America, there may be no such network, which can leave you feeling lost.

The degree of isolation you feel usually depends on how long you plan to spend in America and what you'll be doing there. If you're simply on a short holiday, you may not even be aware of many of the cultural differences; although if you are, it will enhance your enjoyment and may save you a few embarrassing or confusing moments. However, if you're planning a business trip, or intend to spend an extended period in the US, perhaps working, studying or even living there permanently, **it's essential to understand the culture, customs and etiquette at the earliest opportunity.**

'If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion and avoid the people, you might better stay at home.'

James A Michener (American writer)

CULTURE SHOCK

Culture shock is the term used to describe the psychological and physical state felt by people when travelling, living, working or studying abroad, or even moving to a new environment in their home country (where the culture may vary considerably by region and social class). Culture shock can also be regarded as the period of adjustment to a new country or environment, where, in addition to adapting to new social rules, rules of behaviour and values, you may also need to adjust to a different climate, food and dress. It manifests itself in a lack of direction and the feeling of not

knowing what to do or how to do things, and not knowing what's appropriate or inappropriate. You literally feel like a 'fish out of water'.

Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar rules of behaviour and symbols of social intercourse. These rules and symbols are the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people; when and how to tip; how to give orders to staff or employees; how to buy goods and services; how to use a cash machine or the telephone; when to accept and refuse invitations; and when to take statements seriously and when not to. These cues, which may be verbal, gestures, or facial or hand expressions, are acquired in the course of our life, and are as much a part of our culture and customs as the language we speak or our beliefs. Our peace of mind and efficiency depends on hundreds of these cues, most of which are unconsciously learned.

The symptoms are essentially psychological – although you can experience real pain from culture shock – and are caused by the sense of alienation you feel when you're bombarded on a daily basis with cultural differences in an environment where there are few, if any, familiar references. However, there are also physical symptoms that may manifest themselves in the form of an increased incidence of minor illnesses (e.g. colds and headaches), or more serious psychosomatic illnesses brought on by depression. You shouldn't underestimate the consequences of culture shock, although the effects can be lessened if you accept the condition rather than deny it.

Stages of Culture Shock

Severe culture shock – often experienced when moving to a new country with a different language – usually follows a number of stages (the names of which may vary) and forms, but is typically as follows:

1. The first stage is known as the 'honeymoon' stage, and usually lasts from a few days to a few weeks after arrival (although it can last longer, particularly if you're insulated from the usual pressures of life). This stage is essentially a positive (even euphoric) one, when a newcomer finds everything is an exciting and interesting novelty. The feeling is similar to being on holiday; therefore, when you're on holiday or a short trip abroad, you generally experience only the positive effects of culture shock (although this depends very much on where you're from and the country you're visiting – see 'Paris Syndrome' box).



Paris Syndrome

A dozen or so Japanese tourists a year have to be repatriated from the French capital, after falling prey to what's become known as the 'Paris Syndrome'. This is what some polite Japanese tourists suffer when they discover that Parisians can be rude or that the city doesn't meet their expectations. The experience can apparently be so stressful for some people that they suffer a psychiatric breakdown and need to be hospitalised or repatriated under medical supervision.

2. The second (rejection or distress) stage is usually completely opposite to the first; and is essentially negative, and a period of crisis as the initial excitement and holiday feeling wears off, and you start to cope with the real conditions of daily life—except, of course, life is nothing like anything you have previously experienced. This can happen after only a few weeks, and is characterised by a general feeling of disorientation, confusion and loneliness. Physical exhaustion brought on by jet lag, extremes of hot or cold, and the strain of having hundreds of settling-in tasks to accomplish is an important symptom of this stage.

You may also experience regression, where you spend much of your time speaking your own language, watching television and videos, and reading newspapers from your home country, eating food from home and socialising with expatriates who speak your own language. You may also spend

a lot of time complaining about the host country and its culture.

Your home environment suddenly assumes a tremendous importance and is irrationally glorified. All difficulties and problems are forgotten, and only the good things back home are remembered.

3. The third stage is often known as the 'flight stage' (because of the overwhelming desire to escape), and is usually the one that lasts the longest and is the most difficult to cope with. During this period you may feel depressed and angry, as well as resentful towards the new country and its people. It may include difficulties such as not being understood, and feelings of discontent, impatience, anger, sadness and incompetence. This is inevitable when you're trying to adapt to a new culture that's very different from your home country.

Depression is exacerbated because at this stage you can see nothing positive or good about the new country and focus exclusively on the negative aspects, refusing to acknowledge any positive points. You may become hostile and develop an aggressive attitude towards the country.

Other people will sense this and, in many cases, either respond in a confrontational manner or try to avoid you. There may be problems with the language, your house, job or children's school, transportation ... even simple tasks like shopping may be fraught with problems, and the fact that the local people are largely indifferent to all these problems only makes matter worse.

They try to help but they just don't understand your concerns, and you conclude that they must be insensitive and unsympathetic to you and your problems. The transition between your old culture and customs and those of your new country is a difficult process and takes time to complete, during which there can be strong feelings of dissatisfaction.

The period of readjustment can last as long as six months, although there are expatriates who adjust earlier and (although rare) those who never get over the 'flight' stage and are forced to return home.

What are the most annoying aspects of living in America? The following comments (in no particular order) are taken from expatriate web logs.

1. Healthcare – and the need for very expensive insurance.
2. The way that rules and regulations change from state to state.
3. Disregard for other nations.
4. Tacky television and the endless ads.
5. Tipping – even when the service is bad.
6. Tasteless beer.
7. Fast 'junk' food with no flavour and vast portions.
8. Total reliance on cars.
9. Poor work-life balance.
10. Overweening patriotism.

4. The fourth (recovery or autonomy) stage is where you begin to integrate and adjust to the new culture, and

accept the customs of the country as simply another way of living. **The environment doesn't change – what changes is your attitude towards it.** You become more competent with the language, and you also feel more comfortable with the customs of the host country and can move around without feeling anxiety. However, you still have problems with some of the social cues, and you won't understand everything people say (particularly colloquialisms and idioms).

Nevertheless, you have largely adjusted to the new culture, and start to feel more at home and familiar with the country and your place in it, and begin to realise that it has its good and bad points.

The same web logs reveal that however much expats may complain about America, they also have some valid reasons for loving the place:

1. Friendliness and welcoming attitude.
2. The 'can-do' attitude and belief that 'anything is possible.'
3. Wide variety of entertainment.
4. Lower cost of living.
5. Customer service with a smile.
6. Diversity and equality.
7. Wide open spaces and great national parks.
8. The 24-hour culture.
9. Freedom of choice.
10. People's pride in their country.

5. The fifth stage is termed 'reverse culture shock' and occurs when you return to your home

country. Depending on how long you've been away, you may find that many things have changed (you'll also have changed) and that you feel like a foreigner in your own country. If you've been away for a long time and have become comfortable with the habits and customs of a new lifestyle, you may find that you no longer feel at ease in your homeland. Reverse culture shock can be difficult to deal with, and some people find it impossible to re-adapt to their home country after living abroad for a number of years.

The above stages are present at different times, and everyone has their own way of reacting to them, with the result that some stages are longer and more difficult than others, while others are shorter and easier to cope with.

Reducing the Effects

Experts agree that almost everyone suffers from culture shock, and there's no escaping the phenomenon; however, its negative effects can be reduced considerably, and there are certain things you can do before leaving home:

- **Positive attitude.** The key to reducing the negative effects of culture shock is a positive attitude towards America (whether you're visiting or planning to live there) – if you don't look forward to a holiday or relocation, you should question why you're doing it! There's no greater guarantee of unhappiness in a foreign environment than taking your prejudices with you. It's important



when trying to adapt to a new culture to be sensitive to the locals' feelings, and to try to put yourself in their shoes wherever possible, which will help you understand why they react as they do. Bear in mind that Americans have a strong, in-bred cultural code, just as you do, and react in certain ways because they're culturally 'trained' to do so. If you find yourself frustrated by an aspect of the local culture or behaviour, the chances are that they will be equally puzzled by yours!

- **Research** – Discover as much as possible about America before you go, so that your arrival and settling-in period doesn't spring as many surprises as it might otherwise. Reading up on the US and its culture before you leave home will help you familiarise yourself with the local customs, and make the country and its people seem less strange on arrival. You'll be aware of many of the differences in America and be better prepared to deal with them. This will help you avoid being upset by real or imaginary cultural slights and also reduce the chance of your offending the locals by cultural misunderstandings. Being prepared for a certain amount of disorientation

and confusion (or worse) makes it easier to cope with it. There are literally hundreds of publications about the US as well as dozens of websites for expatriates (see **Appendices B** and **C**). Many sites provide access to expatriates already living in America, who can answer questions and provide useful advice. There are also ‘notice boards’ and ‘forums’ on many websites, where you can post messages or questions.

- **Visit America first.** If you’re planning to live or work in America for a number of years or even permanently, it’s important to visit the country to see whether you think you would enjoy living there and be able to cope with the culture before making the leap. Before you go, try to find someone in your local area who has visited the US – or, even better, lived and worked there – and talk to them about it. Some companies organise briefings for families before departure. Rent a property before buying a home and don’t burn your bridges until you’re sure that you have made the correct decision.

- **Learn the language.** As well as a positive attitude, overcoming the language barrier will probably be the most decisive factor in combating culture shock and enjoying your time in America. The ability to speak English isn’t just a practical and useful tool (the one that will allow you to buy what you need, find your way around, etc.), but the key to understanding a country and its culture. If you can speak the language, even at a low level, your scope for making friends is immediately widened beyond the usual limited expatriate circle. Obviously not everyone is a linguist, and learning a language can take time and requires motivation. However, with sufficient perseverance virtually anyone can learn enough of another language to participate in the local culture.

Certainly the effort will pay off, and expatriates who manage to overcome the language barrier find their experience in America much richer and more rewarding than those who don’t. America is unusual

Honolulu, Hawaii



in the allowances it makes towards people who don't speak English. Many government and state organisations make information available in a wide range of languages, and in parts of the US, Spanish is as widely spoken as English. However, on a social and work level, you'll find it difficult to get close to people if you don't speak English. If you make an effort at communicating with the local people in their own language, you'll also find them far more receptive to you and your needs.

While it may seem odd to forewarn English speakers of a language barrier when thinking about living and working in the US, there are many differences between Standard English and American English, in terms of pronunciation, grammar and terminology – see **Appendix D** for a few examples – and it's important to be aware of these differences. Even within the US, there are a surprising number of differences between the northern and southern states (and, to a lesser degree, east and west). You cannot be expected to recognise and learn every regional nuance in grammar and dialect – even the Americans don't – but you should be aware that they exist.

'Americans who travel abroad for the first time are often shocked to discover that, despite all the progress that has been made in the last 30 years, many foreign people still speak in foreign languages.'

Dave Barry (American writer & humorist)

- **Be proactive** – Make an effort to get involved in your new culture,

and go out of your way to make friends. Join in the activities of local people, which could be a religious holiday, local festival or social activity. Americans will make an effort to invite you to events, although this doesn't mean they regard you as friends – true friendship takes time. In some areas of the US, people are more welcoming to outsiders; in others, they may take time to get to know and trust you. Americans like people who 'join in' and there are often local clubs where you can engage in sport or keep fit, draw and paint, learn to cook regional dishes, make handicrafts, etc. Volunteering is an important activity – around a quarter of people give up some of their time to a good cause – and there are many groups where you can volunteer. Not only will this fill some of your spare time, giving you less time to miss home, but you'll also meet people and make new friends.

If you feel you cannot join a local club, perhaps because the language barrier is too great, then you can always participate in activities for expatriates, of which there are many in the most popular destinations. Look upon a period spent abroad as an opportunity to redefine your life objectives and acquire new perspectives. Culture shock can help you develop a better understanding of yourself and stimulate your creativity.

- **Talk to other expatriates** – Although they may deny it, they've all been through exactly what you're experiencing, and faced the same feelings of disorientation.

Even if they cannot provide you with advice, it helps to know that you aren't alone and that it gets better over time. However, don't make the mistake of mixing only with expatriates, as this will alienate you from the local culture and make it much harder to integrate. Don't rely on social contact with your compatriots to carry you through, because it won't.

- **Keep in touch with home** – Staying in touch with your family and friends at home and around the world by telephone, email and mail will help reduce and overcome the effects of culture shock.
- **Be happy** – Don't rely others to make you happy, otherwise you won't find true and lasting happiness. There are things in life which you can change, and if you need them to change you must do it yourself. Every day we are surrounded by things over which we have little or no control, and to wail about them only makes us unhappier. So be your own best friend and nurture your own capacity for happiness.

Culture shock is an unavoidable part of travelling, living and working abroad, but if you're aware of it and take steps to lessen its effects before you go and while you're abroad, the period of adjustment will be shortened and its negative and depressing consequences reduced.



FAMILIES IN AMERICA

Family life may be completely different in the US, and relationships can become strained under the stress of adapting to culture shock. Your family may find itself in a completely new and possibly alien environment, your new home may scarcely resemble your previous one (it may be much more luxurious or significantly smaller), and the climate may be dramatically different from that of your home country. If possible, you should prepare yourself for as many aspects of the new situation as you can, and explain to your children the differences that they're likely to encounter, while at the same time dispelling their fears.

Culture shock can affect non-working spouses and children more than working spouses. The husband (though it could equally be the wife in equality-conscious America) has his work to occupy him, and his activities may not differ much from what he had been accustomed to at home. On the other hand, the wife may have to operate in a totally new environment that differs considerably from what she's used to. She will find herself alone more often, a solitude intensified by the fact that

there are no close relatives or friends on hand. However, if you're aware that this may arise beforehand, you can act on it and reduce its effects. Working spouses should pay special attention to the needs and feelings of their non-working partners and children, as the success of a family relocation often depends on the ability of the wife and children to adapt to the new culture.

Good communication between family members is vital, and you should make time to discuss your experiences and feelings, both as a couple and as a family. Questions should always be raised and, if possible answered, particularly when asked by children. However difficult the situation may appear at the beginning, it will help to bear in mind that it's by no means unique; and that most expatriate families experience exactly the same problems, and manage to triumph over them and enjoy their stay abroad.

Children can find their lives radically altered by a move to America.

American children appear to have more freedom and possessions than those in other countries, but they also face more pressure – from their peers, their parents, their teachers and society as a whole. Teenagers from a more family-orientated country may struggle to find acceptance in a large US high school, especially if their language skills are shaky, and they will need plenty of support at home.

A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

The good news for newcomers is that America is a multicultural society, where people from many nationalities

live, work and play together in harmony. This has not only greatly enriched the American way of life and added to its diverse range of foods, religions, businesses and ideas, but makes it much easier for immigrants to integrate into society. Virtually all ethnic groups in America maintain active clubs and societies where newcomers are warmly welcomed.

Coined in Canada in the '70s, multiculturalism is an ideology of racial, cultural and ethnic diversity, and its policies advocate that immigrants can integrate into society while retaining and valuing the most important elements of their own culture (including speaking their own language and teaching it to their children where applicable). In America, migrants are encouraged to maintain ties with their homeland and its culture – rather than abandon them – while simultaneously being urged to embrace US values, including introducing foreign cultural ideas. Consequently, America has one of the most ethnically diverse societies in the world, and a low level of inter-ethnic conflict and high levels of cooperation. Intermarriage between different ethnic groups is high, and extends to indigenous and non-indigenous people.

A NEW LIFE

Although you may find some of the information in this chapter a bit daunting, don't be discouraged by the foregoing negative aspects of travelling and living in America; these have only been highlighted in order to help you prepare and adjust to a new life. The vast majority of people who travel and live abroad naturally occasionally

experience feelings of discomfort and disorientation, **but most never suffer the most debilitating effects of culture shock.**

As with settling in and making friends anywhere, even in your home country, the most important thing is to be considerate, kind, open and genuine – qualities that are valued the world over. Selfishness, rudeness and arrogance will get you nowhere in America or in any other country. Treat the US and its people with respect, and they will do likewise.

The majority of people living in a foreign land would agree that, all things considered, they love living there – and are in no hurry to return home. A period spent abroad is a wonderful way to

enrich your life, broaden your horizons, make new friends and maybe even please your bank manager. The authors and publisher trust that this book will help you to avoid some of the pitfalls of life abroad and smooth your way to a happy and rewarding future in your new home.

'Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.'

Mark Twain (American writer)





Antelope Canyon, Arizona