International Perspectives on U.S. Americans

We asked some international students to comment on their first impressions of life in the U.S. This will give you a sense of what “outsiders” notice about life in the U.S. and how they may view you, knowing you are a U.S. American.

Uzbekistan

My fellow Uzbek friends say that Americans are ‘freedom-lovers,’ ‘free to express themselves,’ and ‘open-minded.’ So that I can add that Americans adore their country and are real patriots of their native land. They do not know limits. For example, a 46-year-old can decide to go to college to get a bachelor’s degree. They also love money and spend most of their time earning and saving. At the same time, they like recreational activities a lot, such as sports, travel, etc. Also, they are into the ‘political correctness’ thing a lot. Americans are very ‘environmentally conscious,’ meaning they care about the environment and ecology a lot and enforce environmentally friendly practices such as reuse/recycle.

Japan

Americans have high self-esteem and respect others’ individuality.

One of the things that I found interesting or odd about U.S. Americans after I came to the United States is that they seem to be busy all the time and proud to tell people how busy they are. I sometimes felt as if they were implying that they were too busy with other things to be bothered with me. They seem to be very friendly and easy-going, but you have to make an appointment for whatever you do with them, even going out for coffee with friends sometimes. Otherwise, people would leave you saying, ‘I gotta go.’ It took awhile for me to get used to it.

Kyrgyzstan

Many people from former Soviet Union countries would say, ‘People in the USA are very friendly, but they hardly be real friends’ or ‘Americans are very busy people and hardly have time for socialization with each other.’

Mongolia

I have very positive thoughts about U.S. Americans. First of all, they are very friendly. Even if they are in a bad mood, they do their best to be friendly. Second, I think U.S. Americans are very good communicators. Talking with others and sharing information all the time seems to be important for them; however, they are forgetful. They ask you a question and you give them the answer, but when you see them again, they ask you the same question again. Third, Americans are very good at timing and planning things ahead of time. I have always been so amazed at how they plan events and activities of all types including their work and vacations. Once they plan to do something they do it no matter what. Moreover, they are good at meeting deadlines and doing things on time.

Iceland

Of all the things I thought of Americans before I came, two issues have remained as still true. They are incredibly loud and take up a lot of space in public places. The sound level at an American restaurant is as high as a cliff full of birds in my country of Iceland. It is hard to pass Americans on the sidewalk because they usually take up half the space themselves just by the way they walk and swing their arms. Every time I go home to Iceland, I’m stopped by someone who tells me I’m taking up too much space on the sidewalk!
Hong Kong

I have noticed the following differences in friendship:

- Americans talk about politics and sports with their friends whereas we talk with our friends about deeper subject matters such as ideas, beliefs, and our goals in life.
- There is a deeper commitment among friends in my culture. I can expect my friends to be there for me even when we are far apart or vice versa.

Korea

Americans are individual-oriented. Each individual's opinion, perspective, and way of living are considered to be unique in the society. Americans are polite to strangers in general; however, that politeness is often superficial. In other words, they act politely for the sake of politeness (meaning that they act politely not necessarily because they respect others but because they know that they ought to be polite). Americans love food...lots of food. They love eating out. Restaurants are serving more than enough food to the customers and wasting more than what is needed to feed the starved people in extremely poor countries.

Germany

Americans are very patriotic, almost nationalistic. Americans are convinced that theirs is the best country and that other nations need to learn and absorb the American belief system. There is little if any introspection and reflection of what can be learned from others. Even though the U.S. stands for freedom of speech, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, its core values continue to reflect the white, male, Christian thinking of the Founding Fathers.

For reflection and discussion:

- Were you surprised at any of the comments?

- Many of us grew up with adults trying to teach us the golden rule (Do unto others as you would have them do unto you). While this works pretty well with people from the same cultural group, it does not necessarily work well in crossing cultures. Instead, consider the Platinum Rule in which you “do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them” (M. Bennett, 1999, p. 213). How might you go about discovering how people in your host culture would like to be treated?