Traveling to the United States

The Empire State Building stands tall over the New York skyline. © *Francisco Diez*

A record 62 million international travelers visited the United States in 2011. From students and tourists to academics and professionals, travelers from all over the world flock to the United States each year to learn, work and catch a glimpse of the landmarks they have seen in art, photography and Hollywood films.

But there is more to visiting the United States than famous destinations. From a diverse populace and breathtaking natural wonders to a smorgasbord of culinary delights, traveling in the United States offers a host of rewards you may not have seen in the movies.

Getting Your Visa

Depending on your country of origin, you may have to apply for a visa before you can enter the United States. U.S. embassies can help with questions about visa requirements. Whether you are traveling for tourism, business, study, a professional exchange or other reasons, knowing in advance about how to apply for the type of visa you need can simplify the process.

According to Shusmita Khan of Bangladesh, a recent participant in a State Department–funded professional exchange program, the application process was "very structured." First, she filled out an online application; then, she submitted payment and scheduled an interview at the embassy.

At the interview, "the visa officers were nice but professional,"

she says. "I also noticed that there were interpreters for people with limited knowledge in English."

Thomas Barlue, from Liberia, remembers being asked "just a few" questions about his occupation and his purpose for traveling to the United States. Chris Reyes, from the Philippines, agrees. He did not experience the "long lines and long wait" he had been expecting.

Getting Around

When Peruvian exchange participant Angela Marín Rivera touched down in the United States, the first thing she noticed was the American readiness to lend a hand. "People helped me during all the process until I met the person who was waiting for me," she says.

Marín, who is blind, asked for wheelchair service to help her navigate the airport. She was impressed by the U.S. emphasis on accessibility. "I had no problems," she says. "I learned how to walk safely around the cities I visited, and also I learned how to take a bus, walk inside places and go shopping."

"Everything is so planned and organized," says Khan. "Things are labeled properly so anyone who can read English [is] able to understand where to go and what to do."

Barlue agrees. Everywhere he went, "there was some kind of instruction posted to help newcomers get around and get the help they needed," he says.

"I felt welcome and secure," says Marie Soudnie Rivette, an exchange participant from Haiti.

Meeting Americans

Americans are very approachable, says Natia Jikia, a graduate exchange student from Georgia. "I can relate to them equally as much as I can relate to my fellow Georgians," she says.

Indeed, says Reyes, the American people are "very expressive of their emotions, very candid, and very open to cultural diversity."

One of San Francisco's famous cable cars makes its way up Hyde Street with the Pacific Ocean and Alcatraz Island at its back. © *AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez*

Ra'ed Almickawi, an Israeli participant who worked in Anchorage, Alaska, felt welcome right away. "I was so touched by the people of Alaska, [by] their warmth and great hospitality," he says. "It made me feel at home already on the first day."

Bela Khan, an undergraduate exchange student from Pakistan, agrees. Americans are "warm and welcoming," and have "a high threshold of tolerance and respect for diversity," she says.

Seeing the Sights

That respect for diversity, Bela Khan says, is reflected in America's varied cities and towns. Her favorite was San Francisco. "It is a city with much soul," she says. She particularly liked Alcatraz Island, home to the notorious maximum-security prison that closed in 1963, and the shopping district surrounding the city's historic Fisherman's Wharf.

Reyes, whose favorite part of the city was the colorful Castro District — longtime home to a thriving gay and transgender community — agrees. "I fell in love" with the city, he says.

The sun rises over the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. © *Ade Russell*

Jikia preferred New York for its "distinct culture, pace and diversity." In her view, "it embodies the true American spirit." Barlue especially enjoyed seeing Times Square, the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and the striking architecture of the city's historic churches.

Rivette, on the other hand, recommends Washington. "It was really impressive to walk by the White House and Capitol," she says. "I smelled and touched the sense of power and honor. Visiting the Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln memorials was inspiring."

Baigalmaa Bayandroj, a participant from Mongolia, eschewed the monuments to take in an Orioles baseball game in Baltimore and a college football match in Annapolis, Maryland. Watching traditional American sports in person was "wonderful," she says.

Almickawi most enjoyed the natural beauty of Anchorage. "I was so fortunate to experience the great summer," he says. He took full advantage of the long daylight hours afforded by Alaska's high latitude to hike, mountain climb and harvest vegetables. "I really enjoyed the nature," he says.

Likewise, Jikia took pleasure in the United States' natural wonders. She describes her visit to the Grand Canyon as "truly phenomenal." The canyon "made a huge impression on me. It was everything I expected and much more."

Bela Khan advises travelers to the United States to "take time to visit the local areas" rather than just the main attractions. Each place is different, she says, and tourists should "make it a point to travel across the country."

Tasting American Diversity

Culinary differences abound as well, says Bela Khan. From "Mexican, Spanish, Italian" to "Chinese and Thai," she says, "you get to try everything under the sun here!"

Jikia agrees, calling the variety of ethnic food "adventurous and amazing." In Reyes' estimation, "America is a wonderful place to visit to understand diversity, experience openness and to taste food that can range from the most exquisite to the most unique."

In spite of the gastronomic variety, traditional American dishes such as hamburgers, pizza, corn on the cob and cookies still top the list of favorites.

Bela Khan's personal favorite? Chicken pot pie, a dish made by baking chicken and potatoes in a pastry shell. Almickawi's tastes, on the other hand, stayed true to his natural inclinations. "Being in Alaska," he says, "I was so privileged to eat fresh salmon."

Making Memories

Even more than America's natural wonders, Almickawi will remember "the amazing people and the dear friends" he made along the way.

"I have amazing American friends that are an integral part of my life," agrees Jikia. Indeed, when she reflects on what she will remember most about her time in the United States, "It is the relationships I have built and friends I made" that are most important.

Reyes will remember the "thriving spirit to help" he felt during his travels, which renewed his sense of "how we are all interconnected."

The sky glows over the Lincoln Memorial at dusk in Washington, D.C. © *Francisco Diez*

"I learned how the American people are working hard through volunteerism to help solve community and society issues" such as homelessness, he says. "Regardless of the diversity of culture and traditions" in the United States, "there is really a strong sense of national pride."

Marín's favorite memory of her stay in Lincoln, Nebraska, is more down-to-earth. "There's no snow where I live," she says. "I enjoyed touching and feeling it. … It was a great experience for me."

Preparing for Your Trip

Because the United States is "a very diverse society," Barlue recommends researching the communities you will be visiting. "People's thinking and ways of doing things are quite different from my experiences with other countries I have traveled to."

Marín says most Americans "have an open mind and heart" to people from other countries. To get the most out of your travels, recommends Almickawi, try to "meet the people and share your culture."

The others agree. "Be open, be attentive to opportunities and do not be afraid to express your point," suggests Rivette. "Think big, but be proud of your own culture and personality."

Finally, "ask for help if necessary," advises Marín. Jikia agrees. "Be open, ask questions, be positive and smile," she says. "Here, everything is possible!"

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