

Why the USA?

Hamburgers, barbecues, sports, ethnic festivals, fireworks on the 4th of July, Thanksgiving holiday, Halloween, proms, school year-books, studying, new subjects, learning to know yourself better, and experiencing the life of an American family...

The United States of America is a country of much broader diversity than seen on television and in films. Exchange students going to this country rarely experience the extremes of American life – from the luxury to the violence – seen on TV, but they can develop a deep understanding of American lifestyles and attitudes by becoming a member of a family in the U.S.A.

A country of vast contrasts in both its geography and climate, the U.S.A is a land of immigrants. Some people call its population a “melting pot”, where people from around the world have blended. Others say that the diversity of America’s people and ways of life is more like a “tossed salad”, wit each element retaining its identity while contributing to the whole. The truth is that a hundred exchange students could easily have a hundred very different experiences during their stay in the U.S.A!

Who are Americans? They are usually open and friendly; have an explorers spirit; enjoy the challenge of solving a problem; and generally like to work and be entertained with equal enthusiasm. As an exchange student in the U.S.A. you may enjoy these aspects of the American spirit, yet wonder at Americans’ general lack of knowledge about your country. The U.S.A. is a large country that for many, life beyond America’s borders is considered far, far away. Many Americans are strongly patriotic about their country and express these values openly.

Short Facts

Area: The U.S.A. is the world’s third largest country in size, with 9,360,000 km² . Many different geographic features are found in the U.S.A.: deserts, high mountains, semi-tropical areas, and many wide-open plains. Each geographically different area has its own lifestyle, influenced in part by its environment.

Climate: In the northeast and central areas, you will find cold, snowy winters (as cold as -20°C) and hot summers (up to 40°C). In the south and southwest, mild winters and very hot summers are usual. The northwest is known for its frequent rain. Semi-tropical climates prevail in southern Florida and Hawaii. Alaska’s climate is extremely cold in the long winter but is moderately warm in the short summer period.

Luckily, you will find efficient central heating and air conditioning in most public buildings, including schools, to make your life comfortable in any climate you encounter. Could this be the first time you experience snow or see a palm tree?

Population: There are 255 million Americans, approximately 80% of whom live in urban areas. However, most YFU exchange students live in small towns, suburban areas or in rural communities. Very few live in large cities.



**Third largest
country in the World**



255 million
Americans

Religion: Religion has always been important in the U.S.A., since many early European settlers left their homelands to find freedom to practice their religion of their choice in the “new world”. Many Americans actively practice their religion, and all religions of all types can be found. The majority of Americans are Christians (Protestants and Catholics). Churches, temples, synagogues and mosques often serve both as religious and social centres. In many cases you will find activities for members of all ages and interests. This special dimension of America often provides exchange students – even those who do not regularly practice religion at home – with a unique chance to make friends and experience America in a very different setting.

Government: The Federal Government is a constitutional democracy made up of three branches:

The Executive (the President and the Cabinet); the Legislative (consisting of two chambers: The House of representatives and the Senate); and the Judicial (Including the Supreme Court and the Federal Court system). However, responsibility for the organisation of most day-to-day affairs and services is held by each of the 50 states, which organise each in their own way. They often transfer this power farther down to local government authorities. For this reason, there is no centralised, national education system; and no standard policy in such areas as automobile driving, sales taxes or drinking laws. One of the most exciting features of American politics is observing the variety of attitudes which prevail from state to state on a common issue.

History: The lands which make up today's United States were originally inhabited by hunters, farmers, and native indians. These tribes possessed a rich diversity of culture and traditions which have influenced modern American culture, especially in some areas of western United States. Modern American history dates only back to 1492, when Columbus sailed westward from Spain in search of a shorter route to India. He landed in the Caribbean Islands, therefore opening new lands for European exploration and settlement.

European colonial settlements were established in the early 1600's in various parts of what is now the United States. Battles were fought among these groups, and control of the land frequently changed during the 200 years that followed.



Constitutional
Democracy

The English held the strongest control over the colonies along the Atlantic coast, but they did not have the support of the people, who staged a successful revolt in 1776. The United States of America was created from these 13 colonies in 1789, when they united under a single constitution. Since then, immigrant expansion, treaties, and further wars added more land to the West, until the U.S.A. stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific by the mid a little searching you can also find speakers of many other languages.

American English as usually spoken by TV news broadcasters is heard in most of the country. Certain areas of the country have distinctive accents and expressions that bring pride, yet amusement to the American people. As an exchange student, you may find that you, too, can be identified as having lived in part of the U.S.A. because you use the expressions and accent of the people in your host community!

Education: U.S. high schools generally include students from 14 to 18 years of age. They offer a comprehensive choice of courses, ranging from academic, pre-university coursework to very practical courses designed to teach job and life skills. Each local school district and state system determines the number and range of courses which are required to for a diploma, however, exchange students should not expect to obtain a U.S. high school diploma.

Exchange students are encouraged to take some courses which will enhance their appreciation for their host country: US history, English composition and literature, economics and others. Mathematics and physical education are also usually required. In addition to these academic courses, this could be your chance to study art, music, photography cooking, or other subjects that interest you!

After school activities in U.S. schools are also varied, with opportunities for all types of sports, drama, special interest clubs and social events. The high school is really the centre of most teenagers' social lives.

Family: American family life is usually casual, and you are likely to find that each family member has a schedule of work or study and other activities which keeps them coming and going at different times from the home. All family members – including exchange students – are usually expected to share in family duties. It won't be long before you, too, will have places to go and things to do with your American family and friends.

Recreation: Although Americans take fewer long vacations than people in many other countries, everyday life offers a variety of leisure activities usually not far from home. A favourite leisure activity in many homes is watching television (or films on video) – you will find shows for every taste and at all hours of the day and night. Excellent athletic facilities can be found everywhere, and exploring the great outdoors is usually possible. Just about anywhere in the U.S.A., you will be sure to find wonderful parks and other sites of interest.

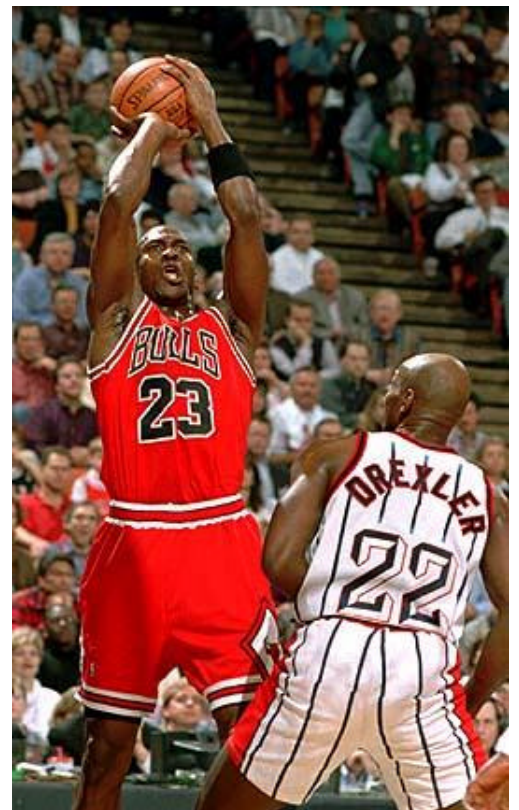
You and your new American friends are likely to attend dances at school, parties in someone's home, or go out on "dates." Your high school sports teams will have games in the evenings and on weekends which will show what Americans mean by "school spirit" and "pep"!

American families appreciate the times when all members are together. In some homes, working together on household chores is just as important as having fun together.

YFU in the USA: Youth For Understanding, Inc. is a non-profit exchange organisation which began in 1951 by bringing a group of German teenagers to the U.S.A. YFU soon expanded to include exchanges with most other European countries, and then to Latin America, Asia and the Pacific.

The YFU-US National Office is located in Washington, D.C. with a staff of approximately 40 employees. An Average of 7,000 students each year participate in programs to and from the U.S.A. YFU-USA has ten regional offices across the U.S.A. and a network of more than 2,000 volunteer Area representatives who support students and their families.

YFU Host Families: All YFU host families in the U.S.A. are carefully screened. Families represent a range of economic, religious, educational, and ethnic backgrounds. Host families are prepared for the exchange experience through printed materials, contact with YFU staff and volunteers, and orientation programs.





YFU Activities: About a month after arriving in the U.S.A., students and host families attend a post-arrival orientation. Shortly before the end of their stay, a re-entry orientation helps students think about the transition back home. Throughout the exchange, YFU sends written materials to students and families to help them maximise the learning and success of the exchange experience.

Other YFU events are organised by local YFU volunteers during the year. Most regional offices offer group trips. These trips are optional and usually require a modest additional cost.

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