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Welcome to America, Please Be On Time: What Guide Books Tell Foreign Visitors to the U.S.

By Max Fisher

Such tips as "don't hand out cash to dinner guests" reveal what foreign tourists find surprising about coming to America.



A potential visitor reads the *Lonely Planet* USA guide. (Flickrcc/xJason.Rogersx).

The United States is the second greatest tourist draw in the world, with [60-million-plus visitors](#) in 2010 alone (France, number one, attracted almost 80 million). Flipping through a few of the many English-language tourist guides provides a fascinating, if non-scientific and narrow, window into how people from the outside world perceive America, Americans, and the surprises and pitfalls of spending time here.

Of the many pieces of advice proffered, four of the most common are: eat with your fingers (sometimes), arrive on time (always), don't drink and drive (they take it seriously here!), and be careful about talking politics (unless you've got some time to spare). But they say more than that.

One of the first things you notice in picking up *Lonely Planet USA* or *Rough Guides: The USA* or reading WikiTravel's [United States of America](#) page, as I did (traditional guides such as *Fodor's* or *Frommer's* are more circumspect and not nearly as interesting), is the surprising frankness in discussing the warts of American history and society. The destruction of native communities and slavery both get long sections, the latter usually including some comments on still-present racial sensitivities.

"Gifts of cash, prepared ready-to-serve foods, or very personal items (e.g. toiletries) are not appropriate."

Politics get heavy treatment in the books, as do the subtleties of discussing them, maybe more so than in any other guidebook I've read (what can I say, it's an addiction). *Lonely Planet* urges caution when discussing immigration. "This is the issue that makes Americans edgy, especially when it gets politicized," they write, subtly suggesting that some Americans might approach the issue differently than others. "Age has a lot to do with Americans' multicultural tolerance."

Rough Guide doesn't shy away from the fact that many non-Americans are less-than-crazy about U.S. politics and foreign policy, and encouragingly notes that many Americans are just as "infuriated" about it as visitors might be. Still, it warns that the political culture saturates everything, and that "The combination of shoot-from-the-hip mentality with laissez-faire capitalism and religious fervor can make the U.S. maddening at times, even to its own residents." They go on:

Vigour and passion are animating forces in politics and culture here. While this tendency has deep roots in the country's religious heritage (modern evangelism was perfected here), it affects everything from the firm opinions people hold over even trivial matters, to the public stand they make over God, government, guns, and other incendiary topics.

Lonely Planet even offers a helpful tip for navigating the polarized politics, in which political truth can be hard to come by, particularly "during election cycles." They recommend [fact.check.org](#): "It's a great resource for parsing truth from political bombast." Sometimes, the books seem to assume that foreign visitors might have a tough time navigating the redder parts of America. "Texas is the country's capital for oil-drilling, BBQ-eating and right-wing politicking, with huge expanses of land and equally domineering attitudes," says *Rough Guide*. *Lonely Planet* says that solo women travelers in "rural" areas can sometimes attract raised eyebrows.

But maybe the topic that gets the most attention in these books is food, which they praise for its quality and variety (and portion size) in a tone of near-disbelief. As in any culture, the niceties of dining -- especially at someone's home -- can get complicated. Here, from Wikitravel, is some sage advice on a ritual that even I did not realize was so complicated until I read this passage:

When invited to a meal in a private home it is considered polite for a guest to ask if they can bring anything for the meal, such a dessert, a side dish, or for an outdoor barbecue, something

useful like ice or plastic cups or plates. The host will usually refuse except among very close friends, but it is nonetheless considered good manners to bring along a small gift for the host. A bottle of wine, box of candies or fresh cut flowers are most common. Gifts of cash, prepared ready-to-serve foods, or very personal items (e.g. toiletries) are not appropriate.

Wikitravel has you covered for going out to restaurants: don't plop down at a stranger's table, don't slurp, and don't pick up your cell phone. There is one piece of good news: it is not considered rude to leave some food on your plate. If you've ever made the mistake of over-ordering in a culture where eating less than everything can be a profound insult, you know how much of a relief this American standard can be:

It is usually inappropriate to join a table already occupied by other diners, even if it has unused seats; Americans prefer this degree of privacy when they eat. Exceptions are cafeteria-style eateries with long tables, and at crowded informal eateries and cafes you may have success asking a stranger if you can share the table they're sitting at. Striking up a conversation in this situation may or may not be welcome, however.

Table manners, while varying greatly, are typically European influenced. Slurping or making other noises while eating are considered rude, as is loud conversation (including phone calls). [...] Offense isn't taken if you don't finish your meal, and most restaurants will package the remainder to take with you, or provide a box for you to do this yourself (sometimes euphemistically called a "doggy bag", implying that the leftovers are for your pet). If you want to do this, ask the server to get the remainder "to go"; this term will be almost universally understood, and will not cause any embarrassment. Some restaurants offer an "all-you-can-eat" buffet or other service; taking home portions from such a meal is either not allowed, or carries an additional fee.

You might say that global food cultures tend to fall into one of two categories: utensil cultures and finger cultures. The U.S., somewhat unusually, has both: the appropriate delivery method can vary between cuisines, and even between dishes, and it's far from obvious which is which. Baked chicken is a fork food, but fried chicken a finger food, depending on how it's fried. If you get fried pieces of potato, it's a finger food, unless the potato retains some circular shape, in which case use your fork. And so on. Confused yet?

The books emphasize that the U.S. is safe, with one big exception they all note: "inner cities," which are described with a terror that can feel a little outdated. "When driving, under no circumstances you should stop in any unlit or seemingly deserted urban area," *Rough Guide* warns, going on to describe dangerous scams - a strange man waving you down for "auto trouble," another car hitting yours out of nowhere so that you'll get out - in a way that makes them sound commonplace.

Gay and lesbian travelers are urged to stick to the big cities. "In the rural heartland, however, life can look more like the Fifties - homosexuals are still oppressed and commonly reviled. Gay travelers need to watch their step to avoid hassles and possible aggression," according to *Lonely Planet*.

Despite the divides, there is one thing that Americans agree on, according to the guides: punctuality is a big deal. *Lonely Planet*, in the same paragraph, notes that "Americans are notoriously informal in

their dining manners" but that "it's polite to be prompt ... arrive within 15 minutes of the designated time." They repeat, later, "Do be on time. Many folks in the U.S. consider it rude to be kept waiting." *Rough Guide* hammers home, in asides in many sections, that things happen on time here, and lateness doesn't get forgiven easily.

Another common tip has to do with personal space: Americans like it *a lot*. "Don't be overly physical if you meet someone," says *Lonely Planet*. *Rough Guide* suggests keeping arms-length distance except in the most crowded urban circumstances. Books gently deter cheek-kissing - especially outside of coastal cities - and, when it comes to the intricacies of when to hug or not hug, suggest simply following the Americans' lead.

For travel, there are long sections on visas and how to navigate airport security, along with warnings that Amtrak service can be, as the *Rough Guide* puts it, "skeletal." WikiTravel features a yellow-highlighted section warning against overstaying your visa - the country takes it quite seriously. There are three paragraphs reiterating the importance of carrying travel documents on your person when near the border.

In many ways, the tour books say as much about the world as they do about the U.S., by highlighting the ways in which American practices and standards deviate. Anyone who's traveled widely, particularly in the developing world, will understand why these books are so emphatic about, for example, punctuality, personal space, and the unreliability of our trains.

Still, these are guides for people who want to spend their time and money seeing America, and this excitement shines through even the sourest sections.

"Many of the stereotypes do hold true - this is a place where you'll find real life cowboys, gangsters, and other Hollywood standbys," *Rough Guide* says. "The palpable sense of newness here creates an odd sort of **optimism**, where anything seems possible and fortune can strike at any moment."

Update, June 3: A number of commenters ask about tipping. As I note in the comments, the books tend to include long sections on the nuances of American tipping. They also strongly encourage visitors to adhere to the unusually high tipping rates, explaining both that service jobs tend to pay very poorly and that the tipping system is partially responsible for the exceptional quality and consistency of service here. A commenter on Reddit [posts this excerpt](#), from a guide book for the U.S. that the commenter says was translated from Japanese, explaining tipping in unusually blunt terms.

Americans have a social institution called a "gratuity". Basically, the price on the menu at any place which serves food is not the real price. The real price is 20% higher. You have to calculate 20%, write it under the subtotal, and sum to arrive at the real price. Taxis work the same way. It is considered very rude not to pay the "gratuity."

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