

1.1 Why Choose the United States?

Moving to the United States isn't just a geographical shift, it's a symbolic leap. For many, stepping onto American soil means brushing up against a myth: one of freedom, success, and second chances. Sure, the reality often hits harder than expected, but there's no denying the structural advantages of this country, if you know where you're landing.

One of the most obvious draws? The size and diversity of its job market. With over 330 million people and an economy that stretches across every industry imaginable, the U.S. offers a playing field where almost any skillset can find its match, assuming you've got the paperwork, the cultural codes, and the mental stamina. It's where startups can bloom overnight, where innovation is currency, and where global corporations base their R&D labs, HQs, and strategic arms. For skilled professionals, it's often not just an opportunity, it's an acceleration.

But there's more. America isn't just a country, it's a cultural engine. Netflix, Hollywood, Silicon Valley, social movements, this place shapes global narratives. Living here means stepping into the eye of the storm, where trends are born, tested, and amplified. It's not just a place to settle; it's a place that exports dreams and contradictions in equal measure.

Then comes the social myth: the self-made story. The land where anyone can rise. And yes, social mobility exists, but it's no escalator. It's a steep climb, and where you start (your state, your skin color, your network, your visa) shapes the outcome. Success is possible. But failure? Always lurking. That's the deal.

Still, the system works, on paper, at least. The dollar is relatively stable. The legal infrastructure is sharp (if you can afford the right lawyer). Opening a business, a bank account, or signing a contract can be surprisingly fast, and equally opaque, especially if you're navigating it solo.

And don't forget the connectivity. The U.S. is a global hub, logistically and digitally. Whether you're freelancing, trading, creating, or consulting, the infrastructure is built to link your local life to global ambitions. Flights, fiber optics, e-commerce, cloud services, it's all there.

Yes, visas are a maze, but they exist. Investor (E-2), sponsored employee (H-1B), intra-company transfer (L-1), student (F-1), extraordinary talent (O-1)... every route has its requirements, caps, and bureaucratic traps, but with strategy, they're navigable.

And if you're thinking long-term, know this: some U.S. states are internal tax havens. No income tax in Florida, Texas, Nevada. Low corporate taxes in Wyoming and Delaware. For entrepreneurs and digital nomads, these are magnets.

In short, moving to the U.S. is often seen as an existential upgrade. Across cultures, it still signals boldness, ambition, and a certain kind of freedom. It's not a neutral country, you don't end up there by accident. You go because you're aiming high. Sometimes, you win big. Sometimes, you crash hard. But you rarely walk away unchanged.

1.2 What to Really Expect

Living in the United States isn't just about adjusting to a new time zone or figuring out how to pronounce "schedule" the American way, it's stepping into a parallel mental universe, where social codes, daily rhythms, and dominant values can throw off even the most open-minded. Whatever you think you know from Netflix or short visits breaks down fast in the face of everyday reality. Culture shock isn't a possibility. It's a guarantee, slow, sometimes sneaky, often brutal.

The invisible, ever-present core? Radical individualism. America runs on the myth of absolute autonomy: you're responsible for your wins, your failures, your life. This creates bold profiles, people who pitch themselves like brands, who craft their persona on LinkedIn, at networking events, even at dinner. Being visible, assertive, upbeat, that's the default setting. But the flip side is rough. Vulnerability is seen as weakness. Asking for help looks like failure. And anyone who doesn't fit the mold, the introverted, the quiet, the nuanced, often comes off as untrustworthy or incapable.

Pace of life varies wildly depending on the state, but in major cities, one thing dominates: the cult of hyperproductivity. In New York, San Francisco, or Chicago, working 50+ hours a week isn't unusual, it's expected. Burnout is almost a badge of honor. In the South or rural zones, life moves slower, but jobs are scarcer. So you either burn out keeping up, or zone out on the sidelines. Either way, you'll have to pick a side.

American politeness is an art form, and a trap for newcomers. That cheerful "How are you?" from a cashier or Uber driver? It's not an actual question. It's social music. The rookie mistake is answering honestly, or worse, expecting a real reply. This constant friendliness creates the illusion of warmth, but often hides a solid emotional wall. Relationships start functional, coded, superficial. Real connections take time, and a deep read of the subtext.

Then there's the raw truth: inequality is in your face. Poverty isn't hidden. It's right there on the sidewalks, tents, broken systems, hospitals you can't afford, collapsing public schools. There's no universal safety net. No job means no income, no visa, no home. The system is fragile by design, and racial and social tensions run deep beneath the glossy surface. Diversity posters can't cover up the profiling, the police violence, or the segregation that still defines many places.

Everyday life runs on two forces: consumerism and bureaucracy. Everything is monetized, everything has a form, a process, a clause. Administration is digital but ruthless, one mistake on a form, and your entire legal status can collapse. America may be “customer-friendly,” but it’s unforgiving to anyone who doesn’t master the rules.

Work culture is harsh. Few holidays, long hours, constant pressure to perform. Even national holidays aren’t always paid unless you negotiated them upfront. The competition is silent but relentless. Taking a break is seen as suspect. Wanting to disconnect? Practically an act of rebellion.

And then come the paradoxes, the ones that really stick. How can a country that worships freedom also have mass surveillance, or a legal culture where people stay silent out of fear of lawsuits? How can a nation be so friendly and so litigious at the same time? The answer is: it all coexists. America isn’t inconsistent. It’s built on paradox.

Finally, you’ll need to learn the hidden rules: always leave a tip (and get it wrong? That’s an insult), start building credit in your first month (or forget about renting, calling, or driving), insure everything, your pet, your mental health, your packages. And above all, master networking. Opportunities don’t come from résumés. They come from connections, even shallow ones. In the U.S., weak ties are gold.

So no, this isn’t “just another country.” It’s a parallel world, with its own gods, codes, illusions, and traps. Best to know that before you jump.

1.3 Cultural Snapshot: Society, Contradictions, and the Balance Between Modernity and Tradition

The United States loves to define itself as the "land of the free", a place where everything is possible, where everyone gets a shot, where freedom is etched not just into the Constitution, but into the soul of the nation. It's a founding myth, near-religious in its symbolic weight. But scratch the polished surface of national storytelling, and what you find is a society riddled with sharp contradictions, sometimes violent, often unsolvable. The entire country feels like it's built on tensions kept in fragile balance: modernity versus conservatism, radical individualism versus hyper-regulation, progressive rhetoric versus brutal regressions.

Religion, for instance, is everywhere, or nowhere, depending on where you land. In the Southern states, it still shapes social life: public prayers, TV sermons, giant roadside crosses, anti-abortion campaigns led by pastors. Refusing to engage can mean exclusion. But in progressive urban bubbles, religion is absent or openly challenged, atheism is normalized, and social debates unfold far from any church. These two worlds coexist without really understanding each other. This is a country where you can attend a gay wedding in an art gallery in San Francisco, and then get denied birth control in a Mississippi pharmacy, on "moral grounds."

Another massive gap lies between tech-driven hypermodernity and decaying infrastructure. The U.S. invented Google, Tesla, SpaceX, smart cities, but also has collapsing bridges, pothole-ridden roads, and lead-contaminated water systems. In parts of rural America, internet access is still patchy. Innovation is real, but concentrated, unevenly distributed, and incapable of masking the country's aging, neglected, often denied structural decline.

National pride is everywhere, hammered into kids at school, broadcast by the media, performed in every pre-game anthem. But it exists side by side with fierce self-criticism. In cities, universities, and activist circles, the American project is relentlessly questioned: its hypocrisy, its democratic failures, its past and present crimes. It's not rare to see a massive flag waving in a front yard, right next to a Black Lives Matter sign or an "Abolish ICE" poster. Patriotism and protest don't cancel each other out, they feed off one another. America is an ideological battlefield, 24/7.

On the surface, the U.S. looks incredibly diverse. And yes, it's a multicolored, multiethnic patchwork. But that diversity is often compartmentalized, ranked, exploited. Racial tensions aren't historical relics, they still shape neighborhoods, hiring practices, healthcare access, education. Multiculturalism is real, but it doesn't erase systemic racism or the legacy of slavery and segregation. In some cities, crossing one street is all it takes to shift from a wealthy white neighborhood to a heavily policed Black ghetto.

Gender and sexuality rights are equally charged territory. In cities like New York or Portland, being non-binary or queer can be recognized, even celebrated, in creative circles. But in states like Arkansas or South Dakota, minors are banned from trans healthcare, and schools censor books mentioning homosexuality. The U.S. doesn't move forward in a straight line: every step forward triggers a backlash. It's a country that legalizes same-sex marriage in one corner, and restricts abortion rights in another. Progress here is constantly contested.

Add to that a mosaic of regional identities. Living in California is nothing like living in Texas, New York, or Alabama. These aren't just variations, they're separate worlds, with their own laws, social codes, paces, accents, political climates. Attitudes toward guns, religion, education, food, even the human body differ wildly. An expat who ignores these nuances is in for a crash course, the hard way.

Then there are the unspoken codes around patriotism, guns, and the military. In some communities, criticizing a soldier, staying seated during the anthem, or questioning the Second Amendment can get you socially exiled faster than breaking an actual law. It's not just symbolic. It's deeply identity-based. Miss the signal, and you risk deep misunderstanding, or outright rejection.

In short, the United States isn't a homogeneous country, not even a coherent one. It's an archipelago of lived realities, often clashing, always marked. You don't adapt by checking boxes. You adapt by reading between the lines, accepting paradoxes, and choosing your battles.

1.4 Rule of Law, Individual Freedoms, and the Political Climate

On paper, the United States presents itself as the stronghold of civil liberties, a democratic model built on a near-sacred Constitution, revered like a founding relic. Every citizen, and by extension, every resident, is supposed to benefit from a full legal arsenal: freedom of speech, privacy, due process, political participation. In theory. Because in reality, these rights are constantly renegotiated, bypassed, or made conditional, depending on the state, the situation, or the person's background.

Freedom of speech is arguably among the broadest in the world. You can criticize the government, protest in public, create a dissident media outlet, write a pamphlet trashing the White House. But that formal freedom is now eroded by quieter pressures: cancel culture, self-censorship in certain circles, the extreme polarization of public debate. In some areas, speaking freely comes with real risk, economic, social, even legal. And for foreigners, that freedom is never fully granted: it's tolerated, sometimes encouraged, until it becomes inconvenient.

The country's federal structure adds a Kafkaesque layer of complexity: each state enforces its own laws, sometimes in total contradiction with federal texts. What's legal in California can get you arrested in Texas. On issues like cannabis, abortion, gun rights, or data protection, the U.S. fractures into a patchwork of legal micro-societies, often incompatible with one another. This fragmentation demands constant vigilance from any expat, because not knowing the local law, even accidentally, is never a valid excuse.

And then there's gun ownership, the ultimate symbol of "freedom" for some, a logistical and security nightmare for others. In some states, you can walk into a supermarket with a gun on your hip and no one bats an eye. Elsewhere, even a blunt object might trigger a full search. The laws vary, but the risk doesn't: the normalization of firearms makes every argument potentially deadly, every encounter with police potentially tragic. And no, you never really get used to that.

The judicial system is a slow, heavy, unequal machine. Lawsuits cost a fortune, lawyers are unreachable without legal insurance, and the penalties are often extreme. The U.S. holds the world record for incarceration, with a staggering overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic minorities. That's not a side note, it's a deep, systemic symptom rooted in history. "Liberty and justice for all" starts to sound hollow when you look at the numbers. And for foreigners, it's even worse: without citizenship, without a lawyer, without a network, you can be crushed with no recourse.

Immigration, in this context, isn't just a paperwork issue, it's a political minefield. Laws change with every presidency, and procedures tighten or loosen depending on the ideology in power. The migrant is portrayed in turns as a threat, an economic asset, a victim, or an intruder. No status is fully safe. Not even a green card is a bulletproof shield. And any mistake, even a minor one, can turn into grounds for expulsion or permanent blockage.

Surveillance, digital and otherwise, is pervasive and rarely questioned. Big Tech collects everything. Federal agencies cross-match data. Cameras are everywhere. Social media platforms serve as behavioral monitoring tools. The myth of privacy crumbles the moment you open a bank account, download a health app, or connect your phone to public Wi-Fi. Legal protections exist, but they're weak, technical, and easily sidestepped. And they're useless to anyone who doesn't know exactly how to invoke them.

Lastly, how foreigners are perceived depends wildly on where you are. In cosmopolitan cities, a foreign accent might be seen as enriching. Elsewhere, it can trigger suspicion or hostility. Surface-level curiosity, polite tolerance, casual racism, or straight-up xenophobia, everything's on the table. Sometimes, crossing a state line is all it takes to shift from "cultural ally" to "suspicious outsider."

In short, the U.S. offers enormous freedoms, but they're unstable, unevenly distributed, and conditional. The democratic dream still exists, but it's surrounded by invisible fences, legal traps, and constant ambiguity. The people who truly benefit are those who know how to play the game. For everyone else, it's a rigged chessboard.

1.5 Internal Tensions and Regional Divides

The United States is not a homogeneous country, it's a federation of fractures. Political, economic, ideological, geographical... These fault lines aren't new, but they've deepened over the decades, shaping parallel realities within the same national borders. Living in San Francisco or in a hamlet in Kansas means inhabiting two different Americas, often irreconcilable.

The urban–rural divide is perhaps the most visible. Big cities concentrate wealth, universities, modern infrastructure, cutting-edge industries, and cultural diversity. Life moves fast, hyper-connected, immersed in progressive noise. In contrast, rural America faces growing isolation: no public transport, hospitals shutting down, underfunded schools, unstable internet coverage. Ideology mirrors this split: cities vote blue, speak of inclusion and climate; the countryside leans deep red, clinging to faith, order, and identity. It's not just a difference of opinion, it's a clash of narratives.

Layered onto this is the three-part cultural split: the East Coast, the West Coast, and “Middle America.” The East (New York, Boston, Washington) is elite, globalized, rooted in intellectual and financial tradition. The West (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle) plays the card of creativity, tech, and social avant-garde. The center of the country, often dismissed as a cultural wasteland, is mostly invisible. It's where a nationalist, religious, sometimes resentful heart still beats. The divide isn't just political, it lives in urban planning, speech, clothing, food, belief systems.

The red state / blue state split has become legal. From one state to another, everything changes: access to abortion, cannabis laws, gun regulations, voting procedures, school curricula. An American citizen can cross a state line and gain, or lose, fundamental rights. It doesn't create visible chaos, but it builds a shifting legal map that's stressful for residents and almost absurd for newcomers.

Within this fragmentation, structural racism acts as a toxic glue. A direct legacy of slavery and segregation, it manifests today through school ghettos, legal dead zones, and unequal access to health, justice, and housing. It's not a leftover from the past, it's a living system, disguised by equality slogans. The numbers don't lie. The poorest neighborhoods are overwhelmingly Black or Latino. Prisons are filled with minorities. The worst public schools are in the most racialized districts. This is a new kind of segregation, quieter, but just as efficient.

Native territories face a different kind of invisibility. Confined to reservations, underfunded, and neglected by institutions, they continue to suffer from slow but constant dispossession. Land disputes, pipelines, drilling, mining, regularly reignite legitimate anger, but rarely reach mainstream media. America still doesn't know what to do with its First Peoples: how to recognize them without returning what was taken.

Economically, the inequalities are obscene. The gap between Silicon Valley and Detroit, Beverly Hills and Chicago's South Side is dizzying. The American Dream has mutated into a statistical nightmare: the richest 1% owns more than half the country, while the working poor sink into debt just to survive. This isn't just a financial fracture, it's spatial, symbolic, and sometimes explosive.

Religious clashes add fuel to the fire. In some states, education is still shaped by evangelical doctrine. Homosexuality is taboo, abortion is called murder, libraries are filtered through dominant religious beliefs. Meanwhile, in secular cities, those same beliefs seem archaic, even dangerous. This isn't a modernity-versus-tradition debate. It's an existential tug-of-war between two worldviews.

And as if that weren't enough, the territory is regularly hit by regional shocks. Hurricanes in Florida and Louisiana, wildfires in California, droughts in Texas, snowstorms in the Midwest, armed political tensions in some border states. These disasters, natural or human, are constant reminders of how fragile America's balance really is.

In short, the United States isn't a divided country. It's a fragmented, polarized, multifaceted one, where every region, every city, every community lives its own reality. For any expat, understanding this map of tensions isn't optional. It's a condition for mental, social, and sometimes even physical survival.