



Tools For Better Travel

How to drive across the U.S. for foreigners

In real estate the most important thing is location, location, location, and as far as real estate is concerned the United States has it all. Situated between the world's two major oceans, the United States holds the most diverse ecosystems in the world, and based on population and land area, it is one of the largest in the world. At 3.79 million square miles (9.83 million km²) it's nearly impossible to see and experience everything the country has to offer, but for many it's worth the try. This article is not intended to guide people on where to go, but provide information necessary to help people from other countries navigate the roads and explore the U.S.

RENTAL VEHICLES

There are numerous rental agencies, with many sizes and styles of vehicles. Do some research on models that suit your needs, and spend a few minutes checking out the "feel" of the car, because you may be in it a long time? Just make sure the company accepts your countries drivers' license, or get an international license. Also try renting a vehicle you can sleep in, because it can save money in the long run.

CAR RENTAL TIPS

- Most rental car agencies will let you pick up in one state, and drop off in another without charge, but check in advance.
- Make sure you it has cruise control, and the horn, blinkers, air, radio, lights etc. work before you leave. There's nothing worse than having a broken air conditioner and radio ruin what could be an enjoyable drive through the Mojave Desert.
- Take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the vehicle, and check the car thoroughly on the inside and outside, especially the tires, before leaving and report any problems or damage before you go.
- For British, Irish, Australian, Japanese and other right sided drivers, remember the steering wheel will be on the opposite side of the car you'd expect it to be, because driving is on the right side of the road in the United States.
- Most American rental cars are "automatics", so you do not have to shift gears.
- Purchase insurance when driving a rental car - nearly all US states require it. It is available at most rental car dealers and can be of great assistance in the event of an emergency. Before you leave check to see if your car insurance covers your car rentals as well.
- Most rentals offer GPS systems at an added cost. Also your phone GPS may not work in the United States, so check beforehand.
- Some rental cars will have a "hidden" GPS that allows the rental company to "track" you, so make sure you check to see where you are allowed to drive.
- The legal minimum age to obtain a driver's license in the United States varies from state to state but the average age is about sixteen. However, for those under 25 or over 70, check with the car rental agency before you leave to ensure that they will rent you a car.
- Carry your passport with you, in addition to your driver's license and whatever credit card you used to book the car.

HIGHWAY/FREEWAY TIPS

The United States is famous for its road systems, and being able to drive for thousands of miles without having to pay for the use of the road. When traveling across the US, one typically uses freeways and highways, and the difference basically lies in how you get on and off. Freeways are closed off, and one has to take a long ramped entrance and exit to enter into a freeway. Highways tend to be more open and can be entered and exited through both long ramps, or simply by turning off a street and onto the highway. However both typically have more than one lane, contain no stop lights, and are free to travel on in the United States. Here are a few pointers.

- Americans are known for being "aggressive drivers" so the number one rule is drive defensively. It's a good thing to have manners and be polite, but sometimes being too polite is not a good thing, because it can slow down traffic and even cause accidents. Remember the US freeway system in larger cities is wider, longer, faster, and more complicated than other countries. When you are on a 6 lane freeway with thousands of other cars, you need to be able to change lanes smoothly even while driving at 70mph.
- If Freeways scare you, try avoiding large cities, or park your car on the outside, and take the local public transport into and out of the city.

- All interstates are free of charge with some exceptions in various states, mostly over certain bridges or turn-pikes, so check your route before you go.
- You can tell what direction you are going by the interstate's number: Odd numbers usually head north-south (101, 5, 55), even usually run east-west (10 20 80).
- East of the Mississippi River the typical speed limit is 65 mph, and on the west side, it is basically 70 miles per hour. However speed limits change depending on population size. So the more rural the area, the higher the speed limit.
- Remember in the United States most drivers go above the speed limit by 10 – 20 mph. So even if the sign says 65, the average speed will be more like 75 or 80. Although the US uses a police force known as the highway patrol, many officers will not ticket people unless they are going faster than the flow of traffic.
- The speed limit in the US is rated in miles per hour, but most cars have both miles and kilometers on the speedometer. The conversion rate from kilometers to miles is to take the total miles, and divide them in half. Then add one half of remaining half to convert Kilometers to Miles. For example 100 km = 62 miles. Just take 100 Km and divide it in half (100/2 = 50). Now, take one half of the half of (so 50/2 is 25, and 25/2 is 12.5). Now add the two together 50+12 = 62. So 100 miles = approximately 62 kilos.
- Highway signs are often color coded to indicate what they mean:
 - ✓ Signs with a green field and white letters indicate route information, and they indicate places, distances, and places (including exits.)
 - ✓ Signs with a blue field and white letters are hospitality signs, and they indicate rest areas, food, hotels, hospitals, gasoline, etc.
 - ✓ Brown signs with white letters are heritage signs. These indicate historical attractions, entertainment (amusement parks), campgrounds, and natural attractions like national parks or protected natural areas.
 - ✓ Red or orange signs equal - caution, danger, or stop. When you see red or orange signs of lights they are not just a suggestion, but a warning to slow down, stop and pay attention. For example - an upside down triangle means you must yield to crossing traffic, and a blinking red light means the same thing as a stop sign, so stop and pay attention before you proceed.
 - ✓ Yellow signs or lights mean "caution." A blinking yellow light means "to slow down and proceed with caution". Yellow signs are commonly found in areas where wildlife or small children are present. So pay attention in rural areas because it's common for large animals to wander into the road, and hitting one is bad news for both of you, and hitting a child is bad news for everyone.

GENERAL RULES AND DRIVING TIPS

- Stop in BOTH directions for any school bus with flashing lights.
- At a 4-way stop, drivers must proceed in the order in which they have arrived. If there is a tie, the vehicle on your right has right of way.
- A lower speed limit (often 20 mph) is strictly enforced near **schools**, even after school hours.
- Watch for special lanes on the freeway which have a diamond shape painted on the pavement. These are designated "car pool lanes or high occupancy vehicle lanes" and are for cars with more than one person.
- If you are stopped by a police officer, park ranger, state trooper, or highway patrolman: Pull over to the right side of the road as soon as it is safe to do so, and DO NOT GET OUT, but stay inside and turn on the light so they can see you more clearly. The officer will park behind, and walk up to you. He or she will first ask for your identification: (1) your driver's license, (2) your registration papers for the vehicle, and (3) proof that you have insurance to cover any potential liability from an accident. Do not argue with them or ask why you are being pulled over, because it usually makes matters worse. Let them talk to you first, listen politely, and then explain yourself. If you are polite (or pathetic) enough, they might just give you a warning.
- You must stop for pedestrians in a crosswalk.
- Making right turns on red signals after stopping is allowed in most states.
- In urban areas, be careful not to block intersections (with or without traffic lights) when traffic backs up. This is called "blocking the box" and if there is a police officer around, you will get a ticket because it can cause gridlock.
- Two "major US driving sins", If someone is tail gaiting you, just let them pass, and try not to cut people off (merging in front of someone too close or too quickly).
- Most gasoline stations require you to pay before filling up, and you may have to go inside to do so.
- Plan your journey and know your next turn. Although roads are generally well marked, heavy traffic conditions on multiple-lane roads can make advanced movements essential.
- If you get **lost**, park in a shopping area, rest stop, or seek a restaurant and ask for help (this can save hours of frustration and gasoline).
- In the event of a flat tire or other **road emergency**, try to ease yourself to the right side of the road where most

US roads have a narrow shoulder to park on. Turn on your emergency blinkers, to notify other drivers. If you have room most vehicles carry extra tires in the trunk, or use a mobile phone or find a call box (located periodically along some major highways). Most auto insurance covers the cost of a tow-truck.

- Pay attention to signs that say "four wheel drive only", because a typical sedan or minivan WILL NOT be able to withstand rocky trails, craggy surfaces, and icy conditions up a mountain pass. If you want to explore rugged terrain rent a vehicle with 4-wheel drive.
- If you see someone turning their headlights on and off when they pass, it usually means, that your high-beams are on, or that there is trouble ahead (like a highway patrol), so make sure your headlights are on low, and slow down, you might just save yourself an expensive speeding ticket.
- Parking along a road must be on the right side of the road - going with the traffic, not against.
- Wear a seatbelt. This is the golden rule of driving in the U.S. All states require seatbelts for drivers, and most states require them for passengers, even children (most states even require a special seat for children under 50 pounds.)
- Babies and small children generally are not allowed to sit in the front seat in America; the passenger's side airbag can suffocate a child or baby if it deploys in an accident.
- It should be obvious, but never drink alcoholic beverages and drive (Blood-alcohol levels to be legally inebriated average around .08). Do not even have (or keep) any open bottles of alcohol, even beer, in the car.
- If you do hit somebody or something, stop or you will be charged with hit and run (a serious offence in most states). If it is a person, get out of the car, and find a way to call an ambulance or police immediately, and help if you can. If it is simply a damaged car, exchange information with the other party and inform the rental dealership and police as soon as possible. They will want to know of it as it happens and if you have any questions they most likely shall oblige. If the other person leaves, make sure you get the license plate number and vehicle description (if not you may be held responsible).

DIFFERENCE IN DRIVING TERMINOLOGIES

- Interstate highway, expressway or freeway = motorway
- Interchange or exit = junction
- Pass = overtake
- Lane = carriageway
- Marked crosswalk = zebra crossing (note that US drivers typically do not stop for crossing pedestrians unless on a red or flashing red signal; however, it is wise to be cautious for any pedestrian that may cross in front of your vehicle but be careful about making sudden stops because the vehicle behind you may not expect it)
- Rest stop = services (note that many US "rest stops" are more frequent but only have WCs, picnic tables, and vending machines, and may even be deserted at times)
- Traffic circle = roundabout
- 9-1-1 = 999 (emergency number for police, fire, and medical assistance, including calls from mobile phones)

SLEEPING ACCOMODATIONS (Organized by lowest to highest cost)

- **Rest stops**, most rest stops in the US are basically safe to stop and sleep for awhile (but use common sense). They are not designed for camping or extended stays but are plentiful (<http://restareas.appspot.com/>)
- **Couch surfing**: Online websites (<http://www.couchsurfing.org/>) are set up where people let you sleep on their couches. It's a cheap, great way to meet people, but may potentially be dangerous.
- **Off the beaten path**: This may work well for a quick place to sleep, but just be careful where you stop to sleep.
- **Caves or natural shelters**: I had friends who lived in hollowed out redwood tree, and in a cave on a remote beach in Hawaii without incident.
Missions/Homeless shelter: Maybe not the best place to sleep, but if your luck or weather turns it may be the driest and safest place
- **Local Churches**: Some churches have accommodations, so don't be afraid to ask.
- **Abandoned Buildings**: Not recommended but just remember if you found them so can others, so be careful.
- **Camp grounds**: Minimum cost, and great if you have a comfortable car or tent great, if not pray for good weather. (<http://www.reserveamerica.com/>)
- **Hostels**: Hostels typically cost 20-50 dollars depending on location. They are great places to get a hot shower, meals, meet new people, and are fairly safe. (<http://www.hostels.com/>)
- **Vacation Rentals**: These typically are converted residential homes or apartments, and the owner fixes them up for longer rental terms (usually they have a 3 day minimum). They are hit and miss on quality and services, so check them out before hand. (<http://www.vacationrentals.com/>)
- **Bed and Breakfasts**: B&B's are inside people's homes, and the owner rents out rooms and opens up their

kitchen/living room areas for common usage, and true B&B's serve a decent breakfast.

(<http://www.bedandbreakfast.com/>)

- **Motels:** Motels are basically smaller hotels with less service and you can rent rooms for longer or shorter periods. Hotels: These are great inexpensive places to stay and usually have pools, saunas, room service etc. (<http://www.motels.com/>)
- **Hotels:** Hotels come in all shapes and sizes, and basically refer to anyplace that rents rooms, but provides full service and are staffed 24 hours. (<http://www.hotels.com/>)
- **Resorts:** A resort is basically a large area with numerous accommodations all in one facility. They generally cost more than other hotels, but provide numerous services. (<http://www.luxuryresorts.com/>)

FREE TO LOW COST SHOWERS ALONG THE WAY

- **Rest stops** rarely have shower facilities, unless they are larger.
- **Local colleges** often have large shower facilities in their gymnasium areas.
- **Swimming pools/lakes/beach** areas always have places to shower off (although sometimes outside).
- **Churches or community centers:** Larger community centers or churches have shower facility, so don't be afraid to ask.
- **Health clubs and local Y's:** All health clubs and Y's have day rates which includes showers.
- **Portable showers:** You can buy or make portable showers, which are basically a bag with a hose attached, that you can hook up on something higher than yourself (kind of like water bottles used by mountain bikers). Also a nearby garden hose can be used in a pinch.

EATING (Organized from lowest to highest cost)

- **Community feeding projects:** All you need to do is ask the closest homeless person and they can tell you (although they may choose not to).
- **Local food banks:** Many churches and catholic charities have food banks where food can be purchased inexpensively (or for free).
- **Dollar stores:** Many dollar stores have food isles and its surprising what you may find, although it is usually processed foods, but what can you say for only a buck.
- **Day old bakeries/food outlets:** Day old bakeries generally have baked items that are near their expiration dates. Food outlets usually have canned, boxed, and other types of packaged foods that may be damaged or older, but usually still edible.
- **Picnicking with cheap coolers:** Styrofoam coolers are only a few dollars and can save hundreds over time. So Pick one up with a bag of ice and some fruit, vegetables, bread, sandwich makings, cereal, etc and stop to eat along the way.
- **All you can eat Buffets:** All you can eat salad/soup bars serve as a great healthy and inexpensive way to eat at least one large meal a day.
- **Fast-food:** You can still find dollar menu items in many fast food places, and it can a great alternative for a cheap bite to eat.
- **Local hangouts:** One of the joys of traveling is trying the local cuisine, and no better and cheaper place than where locals eat. You can find these by asking around, or looking for the eateries with the longest lines.
- **Fine Dining:** This of course is a great way to treat yourself, however it can also kill your budget so dine wisely.

FREE TO LOW COST ACTIVITES ALONG THE WAY

- **Museums:** Many museums have lower cost entrance fees at certain days or times and some countries like the UK have removed entrance fees altogether
- **National Parks:** National parks have increased entrance fees, but many do not charge if you walk or bike in.
- **Skip tourist attractions:** Many tourist attractions are overhyped and overcharged. Do your research before hand. You can still enjoy wandering around many, and there are areas to visit without paying fees.
- **Explore off the beaten path:** Many times the greatest sites are nearby tourist attractions, but most don't take the time to explore. My favorite times are always wondering around back streets and through buildings that have no official designation, but have their own treasures to uncover.
- **Art Galleries:** Love to see Picasso, but don't want to cough up the \$25 entrance fee? Don't worry there are many undiscovered Picassos' in retail art studios all around the world.

- **Sites with benefits:** Many times there are also great sites that have entrance fees, but that have things included in the cover charge. For example the Guinness Factory in Dublin gives a pint of Guinness at the end of the trip, and it has lots of cool things to see and do along the way.
- **Public Parks and Buildings:** Many of the great places to visit have been turned into public parks or buildings with little or no cost for entrance.
- **Local schools and universities:** Educational facilities often have low cost events like concerts, plays, science fairs, art shows, and athletic events with times and dates posted all around the campus.
- **Public Libraries:** Public libraries offer more than free access to books and other information, many also provide access to free DVD's, movies, music, books on tape, and often are housed in great historical buildings.
- **Pick up sporting games:** Like to play or try a new sport, many activities occur at parks and courts all around the world. Most people don't mind if you join in, just remember our motto, don't be afraid to ask.
- **Historic Towns:** There are many fantastic historical places to see in America especially along migration trails.
- **Hostels:** There are many great hostels, found on-line, which offer inexpensive activities and are a great place to meet people.
- **Highways:** The US road system is the best in the world, and the interstate system is generally free and a great way to go. American road systems are numbered, and interstate highways that run east and west are even numbered (i.e. 10, 40, 80), and odd numbered highways run north and south (i.e. 101, 5, 55).
- **Smaller cities:** These are great places to stay, people are typically friendlier, and they are easier to navigate, although most have limited public transport.
- **Cities with better public transportation:** Areas like the San Francisco/Bay Area, Chicago, Seattle, Portland, Boston, Denver and NY are great places to visit and have great public transportation.
- **Pick up a guide book or your local activities list:** You would be surprised at all the great things to do around a city or countryside that can provide hours of low, or no cost activities, just by reading about it.
- **Meet local people:** Many times we travel and overlook the people that know the area the best, and that is your everyday citizen of the area. Although typically it helps to approach them during their leisure time, so go to your local coffee shop, pub, and park. So remember, don't be afraid to ask, you might just find a lifelong friend or even a tour guide for FREE!

CHOOSING A DESTINATION AND TRAVEL TIMES

- **Americans love convenience:** The US is very citizen oriented and unlike most countries there are numerous and free public access areas like water-fountains, restrooms (stocked with toilet paper & soap), rubbish bins, handicap access ramps, parking areas, sidewalks, public parks, and other amenities.
- **Do not limit yourself to highly touristic areas:** Many times they are costly, overcrowded, overhyped and disappointing. So do your research, ask around when you arrive, and make sure you save time for unexpected stops and adventures along the way.
- **Choose wisely:** Due to the size and distances between population centers, you could spend all your time driving, and not enjoying your destination. Remember you can save time, by dropping off and picking up different cars along the way, and catching commuter airlines between far apart destinations.
- **Watch out for time constraints and crowds:** Climbing the statue of liberty is a great experience, but sometimes there is so many people pushing behind you, that you only have a few seconds to enjoy the view from the top.
- **Check out down town areas:** Most cities have restored old/down town areas and they are full of activities and things to do.
- **Get off the highway:** For some reason Americans build roads everywhere, and the best times can be had by veering off course and checking out the back roads.
- **Freeways versus highways.** Typically highways turn into freeways in larger cities, and traffic can slow to a crawl (literally you could crawl faster). It might take 6 hours to drive 400 miles on the highway, and then 3 hours to go 40 miles on the freeway.
- **Beware traffic patterns:** American traffic tends to be heavy early morning from 5 to 9, and early evening 3 to 7. So try to stay away from large cities at this time.
- **Great Signage:** One thing the US road system has down pat is signage, so don't worry about not knowing where you're going. On all interstate highways they will count down like clockwork the distances, locations, turn off locations for just about everything, cities, gas, rest stops, hospitals, schools etc.
- **Average speeds:** You can basically travel safely at around 70 mph on most highways. In Mid-America it's typically less crowded and sometimes you can average 80+ on longer stretches. In larger cities you typically can average about 50-60 mph depending on traffic.

- **Road conditions:** By and large US roads are more numerous, wider, and better maintained than other countries.
- **Public parks and recreations facilities:** These are numerous in most states and access is almost always free of charge, so check them out.