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A GUIDE TO POPULAR DESTINATIONS WORLDWIDE

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➤ **EXCLUSIVE**

- > OVERVIEW
- > STUDENT SPEAK
- > ALUM VOICE
- > SPOTLIGHT

➤ **DESTINATIONS**

- > US, UK, CANADA, IRELAND, AUSTRALIA,
NEW ZEALAND, GERMANY, SWEDEN, SPAIN,
SWITZERLAND, DENMARK, NETHERLANDS,
JAPAN, SINGAPORE, DOHA AND MORE



Inside the United States

From cultural nuances to food and travel – here’s a handy primer for students who wish to study in the US by **Kavita Mehta**, CEO and Co-founder, The Red Pen

The United States is the ultimate destination for higher education, with more than 50% of Indians studying outside India headed to one of the country’s 4000+ universities and colleges. If you are considering a US university education, there will be new experiences to enjoy, friendships to forge, as well as cultural faux pas to avoid. Here are a few tips to help make the most of studying in the US.

CULTURAL NUANCES

University campuses are like melting pots, attracting students from different backgrounds and aspirations from across the US and the rest of the world. While the ethos and personality of every university may be different, campuses and their surrounding communities strive to embrace diversity, respect cultures and socio-economic differences. Take this opportunity to interact with a wide cross-section of people – be it students, faculty, staff or coaches.

Generally speaking, Americans are polite and friendly. The American way of greeting everyone with a “How are you doing?” or “What’s up?” is a way of acknowledging people. So non-Americans may feel that they have many new friends as they walk across campus when, in reality, they are the recipient of a culturally expected gesture. Simply smile back and ask, “How do you do?” Also, it’s always best to err on the side of caution and include a “please” or “thank you” in any request.

Be discerning about what you hear and how you interpret it. In every culture, there are

nuances and signals that become apparent over time. When unsure of a comment or phrase, make a note to ask a trusted friend later. Americans can also be quite direct and upfront with their opinions. While this can be jarring at first, just be aware that it is a cultural style and not necessarily personally directed.

Many Indian students are initially surprised by the informal interactions between faculty and students. On some campuses, students address professors by first name, stop by office hours for extra help or enjoy a meal with teaching assistants in the university cafeteria. This can be mistaken for release from accountability for academic performance. On the contrary, American university professors have high standards for students and expect them to communicate appropriately and take personal responsibility for their studies.

The concept of ‘physical space’ or personal boundaries is often confusing to Indian students. As they relate to physical space, Americans will keep a comfortable distance on public transit, pass on the left (not the right), and stand politely in line, waiting their turn. When it comes to conversation, stay away from religion and politics and definitely do not ask anyone how much they weigh, the value of their house or their annual salaries. Finally, personal hygiene is paramount, make sure to wear clothing appropriate for the season, launder clothing regularly and use deodorant on a daily basis.

INDEPENDENCE AND SELF SUFFICIENCY

Living alone as a student in the US (or for that



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matter, any country), being away from home and a reliable support system, can be a time of tremendous adjustment. In India, there are layers of support—parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, second cousins and so forth—to ensure children don't go astray and stay on track. In the US, students are expected to be independent and manage tasks such as meeting their academic advisor, scheduling courses, paying fees, getting flu shots or turning in an assignment. At the same time, universities emphasise teamwork, where students need to collaborate on projects and assignments with classmates, helping build communication, negotiation and consensus building skills in the process. It is important for students to learn to plan their time and resources so they don't miss opportunities, take unnecessary risks or spend money recklessly.

Be mindful and respectful of commitments. If you commit to meeting a classmate for a study session at 8pm, do not show up at 8:30pm, do not “forget” and avoid cancelling at the last

minute. When it comes to deadlines for class assignments and submissions, it is your job to remember the dates and have your materials ready on time. And make sure to build in buffer time for unexpected hiccups such as snowstorms or computer glitches.

Since Americans pride themselves on being hands-on and resourceful, and because hiring labor can be expensive, they attempt tasks that in India we would simply outsource. This includes things like doing laundry, painting a room, assembling a desk, hanging pictures on the wall or fixing up a broken down car. While you might turn up your nose at such “menial” jobs, step back a moment and consider the value of developing skills that require you to use your hands as well as the satisfaction that comes from doing things for yourself.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EVERYTHING

Take the time to meet people from outside your ethnic group or major course of study. One first year student at the University of

spotlight

Southern California initially questioned his decision to live in the freshman dormitory versus the more luxurious international student apartments. But once he settled in, he realised that by choosing the dormitory, he had the opportunity to interact with a wider cross-section of people and learn how to manage life (and differences) on a busy dorm floor with shared bathrooms and common study areas. It also enabled him to immerse himself in the traditional US undergraduate experience, which is something that you can only really do once in life. He also learned about American football, which is often an experience that goes beyond the game itself; depending on your campus, there can be extensive rituals related to game-day parties, dress codes and spirit building activities.

Many Indian students are wary about heading to small towns for college, fearing that they will be isolated or lack resources. On the contrary, small towns offer a terrific opportunity to imbibe campus life without the distractions or expense of big city living. Further, small towns in America have most of the same high quality amenities such as grocery stores, movie theatres, restaurants and malls as bigger metros; so don't fret about not having access to essentials.

Once you decide on a university, research opportunities to become involved. There are hundreds of clubs, groups and teams to join. Embrace this golden chance to learn new things, build leadership skills, indulge a passion or engage in meaningful dialogue. Ensure that you include time for adequate sleep and exercise; life is a holistic experience, make sure to nurture all aspects of yourself.

MONEY MATTERS

The US economy operates primarily on plastic, with credit and debit cards used to purchase almost everything. Cash is rarely used, especially on campuses, where most transactions are completed using a student ID card that is linked to an account with the university. While in India parents usually open and manage bank accounts, in the US, students will need to setup their own accounts, which typically have minimum balances, cheque-writing privileges and an ATM card.

FOOD

American culinary options are delightfully influenced by the diversity of ethnicities and cultures of the country. You might find Peruvian, Greek, Ethiopian, Southern Barbeque and Korean food trucks or restaurants on the same block. Embrace this opportunity to try a range of delicacies and perhaps find a new favourite. Remember to be very specific when ordering vegetarian food; Americans consider eggs to be vegetarian and fish is not considered "meat". And ice is always served in drinks so if you don't want it, make sure to tell your server.

"Big, big, big" is an American mantra and that couldn't be truer than when it comes to food. Americans expect large portions of everything from French fries (not "chips") and dessert to soda (not "cold drinks") and nachos. Pay attention and moderate your intake, lest you find yourself putting on the famous "freshman 15" pounds during your first year of college.

Finally, meal times are much earlier than in India; breakfast is eaten between 6am and 9am, lunch between 11am and 1pm and dinner between 5pm and 7:30pm.

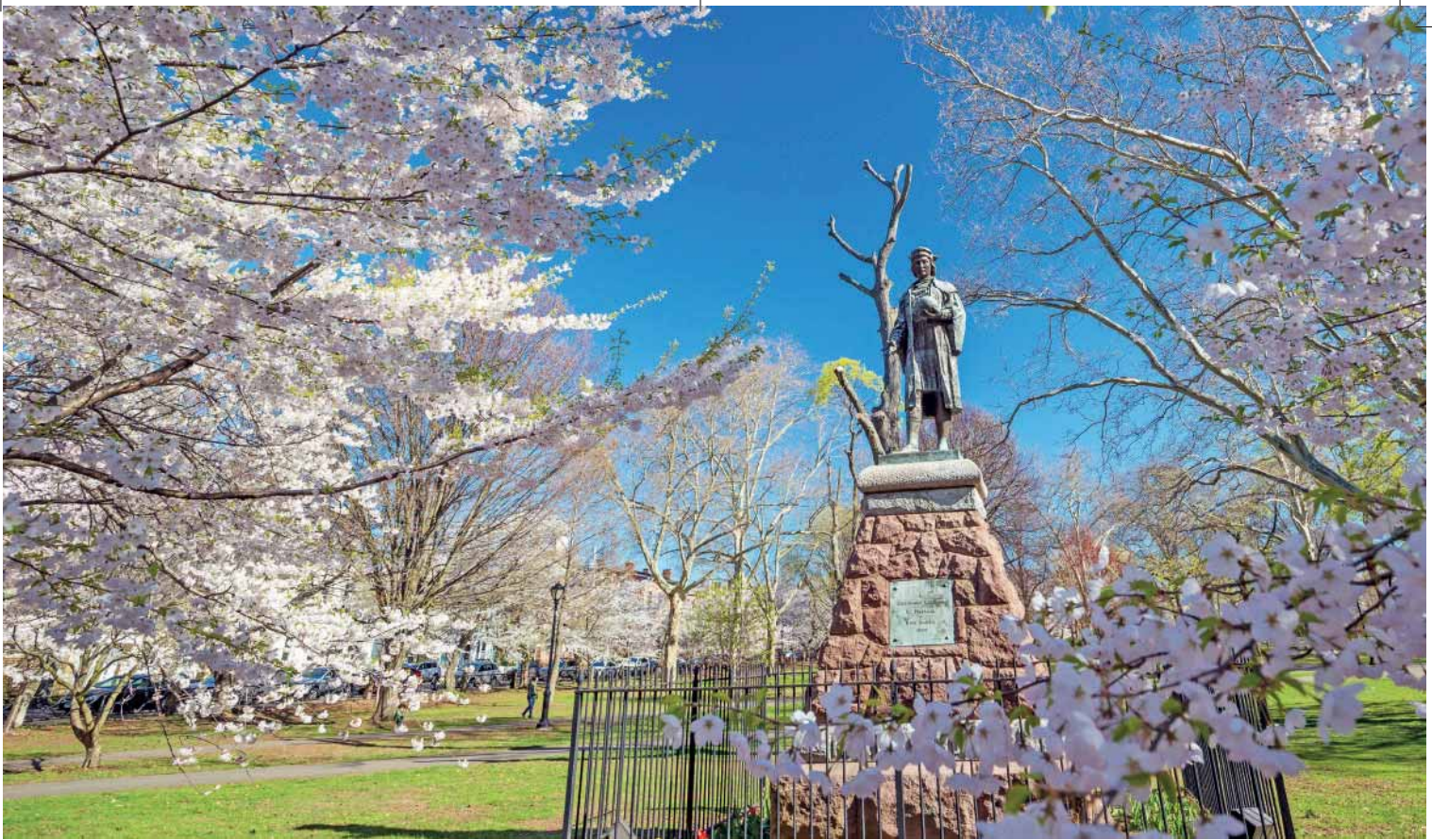
TRAVEL

When a student has friends and relatives abroad, it can be easy to think they will be supervised in the same way they have been at home. Students' schedules are jam packed with academic and social events, especially on weekends. So while jetting off every weekend to a new city or destination may sound appealing, know that this is rarely a reality.



AT A GLANCE

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Since driving is synonymous with American culture, secure a driver's license before departing from India. Having a license will come in handy when using a car sharing service such as Zipcar or when borrowing a friend's ride. If you don't want to drive, know that taxis are not ubiquitous and can be rather expensive. Other ride platforms such as Uber and Lyft, however, are widely available, especially in college towns. Learn to use public transit - it's usually faster and cheaper than private transport. And, as a bonus, it's often free for students.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Email is the preferred form of digital communication in the US. Americans check email regularly, using it as the primary way to plan or events or share information. WhatsApp, while headquartered in the US, is not widely used or even known; text messaging is more prevalent. Americans typically avoid calling others before 8am or after 9pm. So, if you do need to speak with someone, text first to check if it is okay to call. And, get used to voicemail; as annoying as it is to leave a message, voicemail is still a tool widely used in the US.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Banks, technology giants, retailers and other companies are eager to target and hook new customers, especially college graduates (or soon-to-be graduates). Scoop up the marketing freebies – food, t-shirts, cups and other merchandise – regularly given away on campus.

During orientation, many banks will approach first year students with unbelievable credit card offers. While a credit card is definitely a must, be careful to read the fine print – cards targeting the student population often come with low spending limits, high interest rates and many other restrictions. Be a smart consumer and shop around for the best deal.

Finally, when making a purchase, especially a pricey one, don't jump at the first offer or product you see; do some research and you'll discover that there is often a cheaper or more valuable option.

CONCLUSION

Studying in the United States can be an incredible experience for the student who plans ahead, has an open mind and is willing to ask for help. Embrace the opportunity to immerse yourself in a new culture for a few years to gain another perspective on life.