

Guide to Hosting International Visitors

As a Citizen Diplomat

By opening your home to visitors from foreign countries, you have essentially become an acting ambassador from the United States to your guests. This opportunity represents both a responsibility and a pleasurable and rewarding experience.

International visitors come to the United States from all over the world in order to study and observe communities throughout the country. They may be government leaders, students, specialists, or representatives of law, education, medicine, business, media, or the arts. Most of the International Visitors for whom IVCLA prepares itineraries are sponsored by the United States Information Agency or other government agencies.

Escort-Interpreters often accompany those visitors whose command of English is not adequate for the purposes of the trip. Their experience and insight may shed needed light on the situation. If the escort is not needed for the home visit, he/she may prefer to be excused.

IVCLA will provide a visitor profile which includes the nationality, occupation, age and language of your visitor. If you call the IVCLA office, we can also provide you *Background Notes* from the Department of State about the visitor's country.

You will probably arrange to meet your visitors and bring them to your home. If you are unable to do this, transportation arrangements will be made by IVCLA with the visitor's escort if possible.

General Approach

In your home, you and your family ARE the U.S.A. as far as your guests are concerned. In a relaxed atmosphere they can explore with you the validity of their ideas about this country and its people.

Keep your hospitality simple, spontaneous, not lavish. Modest home hospitality impresses the visitor as much as more elaborate efforts. However, bear in mind that informality carried too far is confusing to the visitor. Familiarity may be misinterpreted, and too great a show of friendliness may overwhelm some whose shyness is protected by great formality in their home countries. In general, on an initial visit, guests should not be addressed by their first names.

You need have no hesitation about taking your guests on a "tour" of your house or apartment. Such openness is characteristic of our hospitality and your visitors are usually interested in every aspect of how we live. Much that we take for granted in our homes may prove new and fascinating, curious and puzzling to them.

The questions visitors ask may indirectly teach you and your family much about their countries, tastes, attitudes and interests. Your responses will reveal much of the same about you and your country.

Hosts frequently ask, "What should we do about the children!" The answer is a resounding, "Bring 'em on!" Your children may also be American versions of those they left at home...and immediate rapport develops with the whole family because of something all of you have in common. By making it possible for your children to meet and talk with people from other lands, you

give them experiences that are enriching, educational and enduring.

It is appropriate to invite friends to share the evening with your international guests. But a wise host will think twice before deciding to stage a large party in which much of the value of personal exchange with the guests is lost. The evening should not run too late. You can suggest to your guests that "We know you are busy. We'll be glad to take you back to your hotel whenever you'd like."

Food and Drink

Be prepared to meet your guests' food requirements, including those of their religious or cultural traditions. However don't attempt to prepare their national dishes unless you lived in their countries or are thoroughly familiar with the preparation. IVCLA will notify you of the visitor's dietary restrictions, based on the information we are given.

SMALL PORTIONS are desirable for visitors to whom our foods are quite strange.

SECOND HELPINGS should be offered more than once. In many countries it is polite to decline a second helping the first or even second or third time it is offered.

CONVERSATION while eating is not as customary elsewhere as in the U.S. A quiet guest is not necessarily an unhappy one.

ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES are not acceptable to all guests. Soft drinks and fruit juices should also be available.

PORK is not acceptable to Muslims and most Jews.

BEEF is not for Hindus and some Buddhists, many of whom are vegetarians.

LAMB, FISH, and CHICKEN are generally acceptable to people of the Eastern hemisphere.

RICE is a greatly appreciated staple in the diet of Eastern and tropical guests.

LOCAL AREA special foods are often interesting to guests.

SALADS may be unfamiliar for some Asians. Europeans enjoy them.

LIGHT DESSERTS such as fruit, cheese or ice cream are preferred by most guests.

FAMILY CUSTOMS should remain unaltered at the table to give your guests a true picture of how you live. For example if you usually say grace with meals, continue to do so. If necessary explain the customs to your guests.

Considerations in Conversation

You have a significant role as an interpreter of the United States to those who may have a distorted picture of this country. In your discussions, tact and understanding are essential. But be honest and tell your guests that your attitudes and expressions of opinion are your own and may not agree with those of the next Americans they meet.

Guests who don't speak English may say "yes" to be polite when they don't really understand you. On important questions, make sure, gently and slowly, that you are understood.

LISTEN and give your visitors time to think in their language, translate into English, and then comfortably tell you their thoughts.

RECOGNIZE that while democracy is cherished by us, it might not be the form of government most suitable for your visitors' homelands.

REALIZE that while material aspects of the U.S. are well-known, our cultural and social values are at least as significant.

RESPECT the traditions and behavior patterns of people in other countries. Their differing opinions and reactions provide an opportunity for mutual tolerance and understanding.

A knowledge of the current affairs and achievements of your visitors' native lands acquired through reading or travel can help open the door to effortless conversation. Encourage your guests to talk about themselves, their countries, their families, their ideas. They have much to tell. We have much to learn. Be a good listener!

Around Town

Local spots we take for granted may be of interest to foreign visitors. For instance:

- supermarkets
- shopping centers
- civic or PTA meetings
- housing developments
- parks, recreation areas
- school sports events

While you are showing your guests about, allow some intervals for observing, absorbing and resting. A steady flow of English may tire them. Don't try to take in more than they can usefully absorb. Reserve time to answer questions that remain about what you have seen.

If you have continued contact with the visitors after they return home, or interesting stories about their visit, IVCLA would love to hear about it. We will share this information with the national sponsoring agency. It is important during this time of government budget cuts to illustrate the value of the International Visitors Program. We do not want to lose this valuable program that increases international cooperation and helps to solve the global problems of the 21st century.

Success Stories

U.S. Embassy in Caracas evaluation from Mr. Jose Maria Salvador

"Mr. Salvador praised the 'stupendous' home hospitality he received in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Houston, San Francisco, and Boston, and was quite taken by the 'tremendous' variety of people involved - black/white, rich/lower/middle class. In fact, Mr. Salvador was fascinated by the diversity of the United States in general - its people, geography, and cultural life. The Embassy concluded that he was just overwhelmed by this assault on his senses...It was truly memorable; he made a point of emphasizing the 'extraordinary friendliness and good disposition' of everyone he encountered, and how important that was to his perception of the United States. At this point in his debriefing, he finally ran out of adjectives and fell silently - and exhaustively - into his memories."

U.S. Embassy in Beijing from Mr. Xia Xudong and Mr. Zhao Haiyang

"The visitors found the program gave them excellent opportunities to observe various aspects of American society. Impressed by the diversity of cultural life in the United States, Mr. Zhao said, 'It's hard to believe it is all one country.' The meetings with the Korean-Black Coalition in Los Angeles and with members of the Native Hawaiian's independence movement in Honolulu, for example, gave them valuable insights into ethnic issues in the U.S. The chance to learn more about pressing social problems such as unemployment, teenage pregnancy, crime - and the efforts underway to overcome these problems - will be useful as they work to articulate for colleagues in China some of the fundamental differences between the U.S. and Chinese social systems, including varying definitions of human rights."