An international student’s guide to living in America.

By Amr Al Amr
The wide selection of universities in the United States makes the country an appealing destination for international students. In the beginning of my academic career, I, too, found that America held possibilities for extending my education that were simply unavailable to me in Saudi Arabia. In Southern California, not only are the schools some of the best around, they also attract diverse student populations – so the experience is not purely academic. To a certain degree, there is a cultural immersion taking place. And there is always someone willing to speak with you – even if your English is a bit broken.

For students in the process of learning English as a second language (ESL), the best advice I can offer is to find a school where you can go outside and mingle. This is the very best way to learn. No matter what your background – if you are Asian, Arab, or European – sticking together will never help your English improve. Americans are friendly people, and it’s easy to strike up a conversation; and hearing fluent English is an important step in learning the language.

The program I enrolled in focused on speaking and writing, with secondary goals of reading and listening. My thinking was, “Okay, I used to work in the United States and possess good English skills. But my writing is terrible – not at all professional. How can I improve?” The program’s essays, assignments and research papers helped improve my writing tremendously. I was also able to easily score high on the TOEFL exam and get into a school without anxiety about having to perform professional writing tasks.

The next courses I took encouraged my public speaking skills, allowing me to represent myself well and stand up with confidence in front of people. The instructors were friendly and understood my concerns as an international student. They respected my background, religion and country and treated me more like a friend, with kindness and expert instruction. The course load was pretty difficult, but manageable. I’d spend five or six hours a day studying at school and two to three at home. There’s listening, speaking, going out and talking with people. My favorite assignments included real-world scenarios where we got to interact with the public. There were academic and real-world assignments.

My mission to perfect the English language began as an exhaustive online search of universities in California – a place I’d always wanted to see. I found a school that offered me a good balance between study and home life. After hearing excellent feedback from other students, I confirmed that the university offered an educational experience that was well worth the cost of tuition. Plus, it was located in a family-friendly area – something that was important for me and my wife, who was also a student. But my needs were individual to my situation, and each student needs to decide what is right for his/hers. Following are some helpful tips – a Top 10 guide – to living in America as an international student. Each represents an important aspect of the experience:

1. **CHOOSE THE RIGHT SCHOOL**
   The main difference between looking for schools in other countries versus America is the huge selection. Look for a well-known school that offers small class sizes of around 12 to 15 students.

2. **CONSIDER LOCATION**
   Since I live with my family, safety was my priority, and weather was important, too. Orange County, CA, offers this, in addition to cultural diversity – all important points when deciding location.

3. **LOOK FOR CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE**
   I enjoy most the freedom and lifestyle of America. We try to enjoy the cultures and traditions here. For example, last year we celebrated the Thanksgiving holiday with an American family in Newport Beach, CA, and we enjoyed it so much. Look for a school that allows you to be part of society and not feel isolated from the culture in which you live.

4. **DON’T FORGET THE FOOD!**
   We enjoy American food, and we eat it back home. Globalization makes the world like a small village. But you may miss the flavors of home, so be sure to scope out markets and restaurants in the area that offer a taste of the familiar.
5. MAKE SURE YOU CAN GET AROUND
It was not always easy for me. First of all, working, learning a new language, applying for schools, and getting school acceptance are hectic stages to go through. Managing the schedule and getting to and from different places can be stressful. Make sure you’re surrounded by a support system, not to mention a transportation system like bus or train service.

6. ACCEPT AMERICAN HOSPITALITY
Americans are very nice, friendly, and easygoing people. The experience of living in America has helped me a lot to understand the Americans’ culture. Doing this can help you develop friendships at work, school and in your neighborhood.

7. KEEP COMMUNICATING
Respecting other people and appreciating everyone’s differences can best be facilitated by open-minded and ongoing communication.

8. EXPLORE YOUR SURROUNDINGS
Don’t be afraid to take a walk in the morning or travel and see new things on your breaks or holidays.

9. STAY IN TOUCH WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY
Chat with friends and family on the Internet every once a while. Try to go back home whenever you have a chance. The first three months in a new country can be really hard, but after that you will adapt quickly to your new home.

10. MAINTAIN YOUR OWN CULTURE
Everyone experiences culture in different ways. For example, we had “Ramadan” the holy month for Muslims, two months ago, and we were fasting on a daily basis from sunrise to sunset. In addition, we meet with other Saudis once every month and have our own food. It’s a great way to feel connected to those around you.

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