

Five Things I Noticed About America After Living Abroad

Last week, I set foot on American soil for the first time in nearly two-and-a-half years. I have lived abroad for most of the past decade, but I'd never been away from my homeland for so long. I'm an American citizen and I love my country dearly. However, thanks to my marriage to a non-American, I now live in Brazil. (Before that we lived in South Africa and England).

Since I've been abroad so long, I'm looking at my homeland through the eyes of a foreigner. Here are five things that jumped out at me right away.

1. Americans are Nice

I realize this varies greatly by region, but in general I'm amazed at how friendly Americans are. People smile. They look you in the eye. They offer assistance spontaneously. I've had to ask strangers for help on several occasions, and they all did their best for me and seemed to sincerely wish me well. Many of the people I've met in foreign countries are nice too, but the consistency of the friendliness of Americans is striking – and heartwarming.

2. American Roads are a Thing of Beauty

Again, this is something that varies by region. But American roads are far better than nearly any others I've seen in the world. Roads in Europe are well maintained, but America has so much more space. I've swerved around countless potholes in South Africa and sat for hours in Brazil's crazy traffic jams. Compared to that, driving in America feels like gliding around in a theme park.

3. American Coffee Cups are Huge

Coffee cup sizes in America are much bigger than any other country I've ever visited. When I landed at the airport, I ordered a medium-size cup of coffee. My jaw dropped when the guy brought me a gigantic slosh bucket full of coffee. Then I remembered, "Oh, yes. That's an American-size 'medium.'" I love coffee, so I'm not complaining. But, next time, I'll be ordering a small.

4. American Sales Tax is Annoying

When ordering the aforementioned cup of coffee, I arrived at the counter holding exact change that I'd counted out. Then something annoying happened: the price on the cash register was 64 cents higher than the price displayed on the sign. I'd forgotten about sales tax. I've never visited a foreign country where your total tax bill is not already announced to you before you make your purchase. Why can't American stores just include sales tax in the price tag on the shelf? Americans seem to have collectively accepted this state of affairs, and that's a shame. It doesn't have to be this way.

5. (Some) Americans are Overweight

I hesitate to even bring this up, because foreigners – particularly Europeans – like to sneer about America's high obesity rate. I live in Brazil where at least half the population looks like they should be supermodels. So, it's hard not to notice that many Americans are overweight. The obesity rate is a complex problem and I don't have anything new to contribute to the debate. I will note, though, that the Brazilian obsession with beauty can also be quite unhealthy at times. So perhaps it's a question of picking your poison.

These are the five first things I noticed about American after an extended stay abroad. It's wonderful to be back. This country is far from perfect, but as the classic American heroine Dorothy said, "There's no place like home."