

The United States of America



Basic information

The United States of America extend over more than one third of the North American continent. With over 9.8 million km² and a population of about 328 million, the US is the fourth largest country in the world by area and the third largest one by population. It consists of 50 states and some territories in the Pacific and the Caribbean (Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, etc.). Alaska, located at the northwest corner of North America, and the Hawaiian Islands, situated approximately 3,200 km south-west of California, became the 49th and 50th states of the USA only after World War II. The capital is Washington, D.C., which is actually not located in the state of Washington but borders the states of Maryland and Virginia and is situated on the northern edge of the Potomac River. D.C. stands for the District of Columbia. The US borders Mexico in the south, the Atlantic Ocean in the east, Canada in the north and the Pacific Ocean in the west. The lowest point in the US (-86 m) is in Death Valley, California and the highest point (6,168 m) is Mount McKinley in Alaska.



National symbols include the American flag, the national anthem and the Great Seal of the United States. The American flag is referred to as "the Stars and Stripes" or "the Old Glory". It consists of 50 white stars (states of the Union) on a blue background and 13 red and white stripes (original colonies). The red colour signifies courage, the white purity or goodness and the blue justice. "The Star-Spangled Banner" is the US national anthem. Francis Scott Key wrote the lyrics in 1814 to the music composed by John Stafford Smith earlier in 1780. It was originally a war song connected with the battle of Baltimore in 1812 but adopted as the national anthem by Congress in 1831. The Great Seal of the United States appears on all official documents. It was designed by Charles Thompson and approved by Congress in 1782. There is a bald eagle on one side of the seal (the national animal) and an unfinished pyramid on the other side. The US is a federal republic based on the Constitution. A salad bowl or tossed salad is a concept of American society. It is a metaphor for the way a multicultural society can integrate different cultures while maintaining their separate identities, contrasting with another concept, the melting pot, which emphasises the combination of the parts into a single whole. American values include patriotism, hard work (Protestant work ethic), self-belief, independence, equal chances, self-reliance and freedom. Interestingly, the US has no official language. People living in the country have been speaking languages other than English since before the founding of the republic. In fact, common languages spoken throughout the 13 colonies included Dutch, French and German, not to mention the many languages spoken by Native Americans. Spanish is the second most widely spoken language in the US.



Geography & Climate



The USA is a country of many contrasts, covering a very large territory. You can visit anything from crowded metropolises to vast prairies and breathtaking national parks. The country can be divided into five main areas. The Appalachian Highlands are geologically the oldest. The highest mountain in the Appalachian Highlands is Mt. Mitchell (2,037m). The Appalachian Plateau is divided by the river valleys in the west of the Appalachian Highlands. Further to the west, there is the Mississippi Basin called the Interior Plains. It comprises the Mississippi Lowlands, Central Plains and Great Plains. About one half of the continental USA is occupied by the Cordilleras in the west. They are divided into several ranges: the Rocky Mountains (over 4,000m high), the Great Basin full of ranges and valleys (e.g. Death Valley), the Colorado Plateau with the Grand Canyon, the Cascade Range and Sierra Nevada with the highest peak of the continental USA Mt. Whitney (4,418m) and lastly, the Coast Range surrounding the Great Valley in California.

The USA has many rivers. The biggest river system is that of Mississippi and Missouri. The Mississippi River is the third longest river in the world (6,212 km). The most important river in the east is the Hudson River, connected with the Great Lakes. Colorado, Columbia and Rio Grande on the Mexican border are the most important rivers in the west of the country. The longest river in Alaska is the Yukon River. The Great Lakes on the US - Canada border make up the biggest reservoir of fresh water in the world. They are Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, Lake Huron, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario - together they cover nearly 250,000 sq km. The Niagara River - part of the St. Lawrence River - connects Lake Erie and Lake Ontario forming the world-famous Niagara Falls which are 51 m high, 900 m wide on the Canadian side and 320 m wide on the US side.

The climate of the USA is varied - from the Arctic climate in the north to the subtropical climate in the south. However, the temperate climate prevails. As the country is divided by mountain ranges, the climate differs accordingly and is influenced by the oceans too. Hence, there is a great difference between the climate on the Atlantic coast (east) and the Pacific coast (west) where the summer and winter are not very different. The most pleasant climate is, of course, on the Hawaiian Islands. The occurrence of tornadoes, floods, hurricanes and wildfires is not that uncommon.

Economy

The US economy is the biggest in the world. The country is responsible for 30% of the world's industrial production and about 20% of the world's agricultural production. The US foreign trade is about 13,6 % of the whole world trade. The USA is developing practically in all fields using the advances of science and technology. It is a member of the G7 countries and newly of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), a free trade agreement between Canada, Mexico, and the United States. The US Dollar is the currency of the United States.

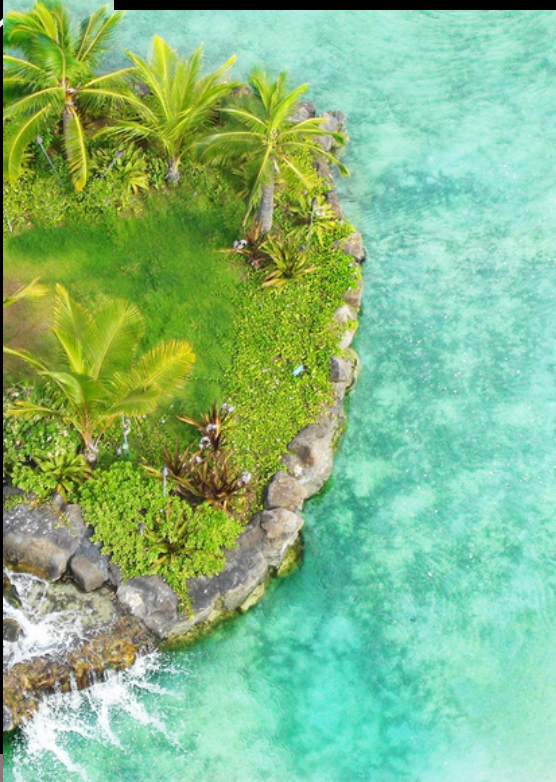
The country is enormously rich in raw materials. It ranks first in the world's production of mica (49 %), molybdenum (45 %), natural petrol (41 %), kaolin (33 %), natural phosphates (28 %), salt (20 %) and gypsum (16 %). It occupies second place in natural gas (24 %), sulphur (19 %), coal (18.5 %) and oil (14 %). Except for a few raw materials, it is practically self-sufficient, though it imports some of them from abroad, mainly because of their lower price on the market.

The USA is the leading country in agriculture. The arable land covers 20.7 % of this vast country. The high effectiveness of the American agricultural system is shown in the fact that only 2.4 % of the population work on about 2 million farms, which is sufficient not only to feed the whole country but a great deal of agricultural production is exported. E.g. the production of soya and maize (called corn in the US) makes up about half of the whole world production. The US also exports wheat, cotton and many other agricultural products.

The USA is also the leading industrial country for its chemicals, the production of lorries and cars, machinery and electronics (Silicon Valley).

The USA exports primarily machinery, cars, planes, metal-made products, chemicals, agricultural products, raw materials, paper, textiles etc. It imports industrial products (42 % of cars), raw materials, oil (30 %), consumer goods (16 %), food and tropical crops. Its main trading partners are Canada and Japan.

Hawaii & Alaska



Separated from the US mainland by Canada, Alaska is the largest and least populated US state. It was bought from Russia in 1867. Alaska has an arctic climate and is partly covered by glaciers. The wildlife of Alaska is both diverse and abundant. The Alaskan Peninsula provides an important habitat for fish, mammals, reptiles, and birds. At the top of the food chain are the bears (brown bear, grizzly bears, black bears, Kodiak bears and polar bears. There are also moose and caribou, bison, wolves and wolverines, foxes, otters and beavers. Fish species include salmon, graylings, char, rainbow and lake trout, northern pike, halibut, pollock, and burbot. The bird population consists of hundreds of species, including bald eagles, owls, falcons, ravens, ducks, geese, swans and the passerines. Sea lions, seals, sea otters and migratory whales are often found close to shore and in offshore waters.

Hawaii is the only US state situated only on islands. All the islands (137) were formed by volcanic eruptions and the spectacular scenery and tropical climate make them a popular tourist destination. The surprise Japanese attack on the US naval base in Pearl Harbor, west of the Hawaiian capital Honolulu, brought the US into World War II, in which it joined the Allies. Tourist activities include visiting the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, whale watching in Maui, diving, snorkelling, helicopter tours, hiking, surfing and playing golf. The Hawaiian hoary bat and the Hawaiian monk seal are two endemic mammals of Hawaii.

Places of interest



The West

High mountains run from the north to the south (the Rocky Mountains) and the area has a lot of unspoiled countrysides popular for hiking and camping. It was first settled by Spanish missionaries but now has a varied mix of immigrants from all around the world, resulting in the tolerant, open-minded attitudes of local people. California is known for its film industry (Hollywood) and hi-tech and computer industry (Silicon Valley).

The Southwest

This is a hot dry region, with deserts and lovely scenery (the Grand Canyon, Monument Valley...). It was home to various Native American tribes and even now there are Indian reservations. The US won some parts of this region from Mexico in the Mexican-American war (1846-8) and Spanish culture is still strong there. Texas is the second largest state (after Alaska) and an important centre of oil production.

The South

This region was devastated by the Civil War (1861-5), a conflict between the South (which supported slavery because its main industry, agriculture, was dependant on this type of labor) and the North (which was against slavery because it profited more from industries which were not as dependant on slave labour). The North won and slavery was abolished, but for many years blacks were segregated and discriminated against. The region has a mild climate suitable for agriculture and is a popular destination for retired people.



The Midwest

The flat fertile land of this region makes it perfect for farming – it is nicknamed “the nation’s breadbasket” with huge fields of corn, wheat and other grains. There are fewer large cities (Chicago) and not a very dense population. People from this area tend to be thought of by those in larger cities as “hicks” (= people who are not very cosmopolitan and spend more time with farm animals than at cultural events).

Mid-Atlantic

This region was settled by people from various European countries and became the centre of industry. Some of the most populous US cities are situated here, as well as the US capital. New York City is still very cosmopolitan and it is the most populous city in the US (over 8 million people). It has remained the centre of finance (Wall Street) as well as culture (Metropolitan Museum of Art, Carnegie Hall...).

New England

The first European settlers (mainly English Protestants seeking religious freedom) settled in this region in the 17th century and it became the country’s cultural and economic centre for a long time. Even today, it is home to some of the most prestigious universities (Harvard, Yale...).

Other places to visit: Mount Rushmore, New Orleans, Jamestown, Kennedy Space Center, Sequoia National Park, Graceland, the Lincoln Memorial, San Francisco, the Everglades National Park, Las Vegas and Yosemite National Park.