What are the biggest myths about living in America?

David Hawley, Series Chief Marshal at MotoAmerica

Things that surprised me when I first moved to the USA, good and bad (as they occur to me) were:

- Everybody I met is so nice. People are generally friendly and polite. From the TV shows I saw, I expected everyone to either be scowling at each other in a threatening manner, if not actually shooting.

- The areas I first encountered were and still are covered in trees. There is much more green space in housing areas and a lot of this is covered by trees.

- It’s not really the land of opportunity at all. If you come in as I did with a good job already, you can do quite well, but moving from being working class to middle class is actually more difficult than in the UK where I come from.

- The US is a great place if you have enough money but can be a terrible place if you are short of money. There is far less of a safety net for people who have problems, and there is certainly a less sympathetic attitude.

- It’s much easier to get things done in the US than in the UK. People have a much more forward-looking attitude in businesses.

- Much of the growth in the US is actually driven by foreigners. So many of the IT departments in the US are staffed by foreigners like me, and in particular, Indians, that if you removed them all, I’m sure the US IT sector would collapse. This was the biggest surprise to me when I first started working here. I did consulting work in IT for Life Sciences companies and every one of the IT departments was at least 50% Indian.

- People don’t carry guns on the street and there aren’t shootings every day, in most places. In some places, there are shootings every day, but they tend to be concentrated. Petty crime is less common in the US in most areas. I know few places in the UK where you would leave your gardening stuff in an unlocked shed or a bicycle in the drive. It’s common here.

- In many areas, I didn’t notice any racism at all. It did take me some time to spot it in some places, to be frank, and some of my black friends had to point it out to me, but I’ve been in far more racist places in Europe.

- There are more different kinds of churches than you could possibly imagine, particularly in the South, not just the main denominations that you see in most of the UK and Europe. Dozens of them.

- So many people dress in exactly the same way. My American wife pointed out the converse of this in the UK, that people look quite different from one another. I was at a hardware store recently, there was a delay at the checkout. I noticed that of the eleven men waiting in line I was the only one without a plaid shirt, goatee beard and baseball cap.

- Everyone has to fill in a tax return. This nearly caught me out. Filling in a tax return is such a usual part of life for Americans that nobody thought to tell
me about it. I’d never done one in my life and it is a lot of work. In the UK my employer did all of that.

- Healthcare - I think most people are aware that the cost is a lot higher than the UK, but I couldn’t believe how bureaucratic it is, form after form after form. Insurance coverage is an absolute minefield, the plans are mind-bendingly complex and of course, insurance companies, being profit-making, will twist and create obstacles and do anything they can, to avoid paying out. The trouble with health insurance is that if they don’t pay, you can die. If there’s anything that I do miss about the UK it’s the NHS.

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