Do you know where you’re going?

50 Essential Questions

How much do you know about your host country and its culture? The following is certainly not exhaustive; many more questions will likely arise as you explore the answers some of the ones listed below. You may not encounter all of these situations during your time abroad, but when you can answer these 50 Essential Questions, you may consider yourself safely beyond the beginner stage!

1. What type of government does your host country have? Which party is in power at present, and for how long? When are the next elections?
2. Who are the prominent people in your host country? Think of fields such as politics, academics and the arts, athletics, entertainment, religion, etc.
3. Who are the country’s national heroes and heroines?
4. Can you recognize the national anthem?
5. What does the country’s flag look like? Do you know the significance of it?
6. What languages are spoken in your host country – one, or several?
7. What are the social and political implications of using one language vs another?
8. What’s the predominant religion(s)? Is it an official state religion? Are you familiar with its tenets or sacred writings?
9. How do members of the predominant religion view other religions?
10. What are some key events in the history of your host country? In the last 100 years? In the last 5 to 10 years? In the last 12 months?
11. What events are people in your host country talking about right now? This might be local, regional, national or international.
12. How do people organize daily life? What’s the normal meal schedule? Is there a typical rest period during the day, or a best time for socializing?
13. How do most people get around, especially students? What kind of public transportation is available? Do all social groups use it?
14. Who has the right of way in traffic: cars, bicycles, pedestrians, animals?
15. What are the important holidays in your host country? How are they observed?
16. What are some of the favorite sports, games and leisure activities for adults? Teenagers?
17. How big a role does music play in the culture, and what kind of music?
18. How are birthdays celebrated?
19. On what occasions would you present or accept gifts from people? What kind of gifts would be appropriate to exchange?
20. What foods are most popular, or typical, and how are they prepared and eaten? What things are taboo in this society?
21. What’s the attitude toward drinking? What are the laws and customs regarding alcohol? What's the legal drinking age, and when do young people typically start drinking?
22. What’s the usual dress for women and men in different settings? Casual or formal; are jeans or shorts or spaghetti straps or short skirts acceptable? Can you wear sweats to class?
23. What kind of health services are available, and how would you access them? What percentage of people have health insurance? Is it public or private?
24. What are common home remedies? Where can you buy medicines? Are over-the-counter medicines and related items (pain reliever, contact solution, etc.) readily available?
25. Are prices fixed or are customers expected to bargain? If so, how does the bargaining process work?
26. If you touch or handle merchandise for sale, what will the seller make of it? Will the seller find you knowledgeable, inconsiderate, incredibly disrespectful?
27. What are the dating customs of the host culture?
28. What are the most common forms of marriage ceremonies and celebrations?
29. What’s the attitude toward divorce? Toward extramarital relations? Toward plural marriages?
30. Are there special privileges accorded to people based on their age and/or sex? Who is respected or holds authority?
31. How do people greet each other? Is it different for women and men, young people and old? Do people shake hands, bow, embrace, or kiss?
32. How do people take leave of each other? What might variations from the usual way of greeting or leave-taking signify?
33. If you are invited to dinner, should you arrive right on time? Early? Late? How late?
34. Is education readily available in your host country? How much does it cost? Is it mandatory, and until what age?
35. What proportion of people earn a college degree in your host country?
36. How much does university cost, and where and how do students typically live? What are the important universities in your host country?
37. What should you know about the university atmosphere, the relationship between faculty & students, quantity and expectations for academic work? Is there an honor code?
38. What kind of television programs or movies are shown? Which are most popular?
39. What’s a typical work schedule? How does it accommodate societal or cultural needs?
40. Is military service mandatory? For whom? For how long?
41. What is the history of relations between your host country and the United States?
42. What are the main sources of news in your host country? Newspapers, radio or television, Internet, word of mouth?
43. How is the United States (and/or your home country) presented in the media? Does the representation seem balanced, accurate, exaggerated or distorted?
44. How many people have emigrated from your host country to the US, and are there many American expatriates living there currently?
45. How will your financial situation and living conditions compare with those of the majority of people living in your host country?
46. Are there major differences in living situations, such as amount of space, privacy, bathrooms and showers, laundry facilities or other appliances, computer and Internet access, etc.
47. How do people view animals, especially keeping house pets?
48. Where do children congregate and socialize? What games do they play?
49. How are children disciplined? Are they usually present at social gatherings? Ceremonial occasions?
50. What kinds of schools do children attend (public, private, parochial)? Is one kind thought to be better than another? Are children grouped by sex, class, caste or race?