

U.S. CULTURE SERIES:

Introduction to American Life

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education
USA

NAFSA
Association of
International Educators

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About NAFSA: Association of International Educators

NAFSA is an association of individuals worldwide advancing international education and exchange. NAFSA serves its members, their institutions and organizations, and others engaged in international education and exchange and global workforce development. NAFSA sets and upholds standards of good practice; provides training, professional development, and networking opportunities; and advocates for international education.

About United States Department of State Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau Educational Information and Resources Branch

The Educational Information and Resources Branch (ECA/A/S/A) of the Department of State's Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau promotes the international exchange of students and scholars through a network of overseas educational informational centers located in nearly every country of the world. More than five million prospective students contact these centers each year. The Branch estimates that a majority of the international students now studying in the U.S. contacted a Department of State-affiliated center for information on U.S. study. These students contribute an estimated \$12 billion annually to the U.S. economy. The Educational Information and Resources Branch also works with partner organizations to support international students and scholars on U.S. campuses; fund professional development and training for international student advisers, admissions personnel, and others at U.S. institutions; and supports activities that build mutual understanding through the exchange of people and ideas. Programs assist international activities of the U.S. academic community, including student and faculty exchanges, study abroad, coordination with foreign governments, evaluation of foreign institution's credentials, and recruitment of foreign students. ECA/A/S/A funds research on international education, including *Open Doors*, the annual census of the international academic community in the United States that tracks statistics about international students and scholars in the U.S. and U.S. students who study abroad.

U.S. Culture Series

This booklet is the second in a series of detailed booklets designed to be used in preparing students for successful cultural adjustment. The U.S. Culture Series booklets will address different aspects of U.S. culture and can be used in several ways: by overseas advisers at advising centers, including predeparture orientation programs and American culture discussions; by international student advisers on campus during orientation programs for new students; by international student advisers in cultural training sessions; by ESL teachers in classes preparing students to enter a U.S. college/university; and by international educators in the training of others to work with international students (such as resident assistants).

The first two booklets in this series are funded by the United States Department of State, Educational Information and Resources Branch. They are developed and written by NAFSA members.



U.S. Culture Series: Introduction to American Life

Congratulations and good luck as you embark on a great life experience. By choosing to study in the United States, you will join a community of students and scholars from around the world who study and live in the United States.

This international community consists of more than half a million students,ⁱ making the United States host to the largest number of international students anywhere. Students who come to the United States enhance our colleges and universities through their scholarly contributions. They contribute to cutting edge research and advances in technology. They increase our global connectedness and provide opportunities for U.S. students to learn more about how others live and think. All across the United States—in classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and college communities—international students make significant contributions to the quality of American academic life. Because contributions are valued as vital components of academic excellence, international education has become a proud U.S. tradition in colleges and universities throughout our country.

For most international students, preparation for study in the United States has involved hard work and sacrifice. This pamphlet has been prepared for you as part of that preparation. It is a general guide, designed to provide you with some basic information as you begin your orientation to American life. Some readers may have visited or studied in the United States previously. Even for those for whom it will be the first U.S. experience, the place may seem familiar. You can find McDonald's restaurants, and it's easy to get a Coke almost anywhere. But the menu at McDonald's is a little different from that in your hometown and the Coke has a slightly different taste. Familiar things are recognizable but not exactly what you expect. As these two examples illustrate, many things you experience will be recognizable, while others will be completely new. Furthermore, American life as depicted on television or in movies is not an accurate picture of what you will find. Even when you think you know what to expect, there will be surprises. What will you encounter?

You will certainly encounter diversity. In the United States, there is no single type of national behavior, no one life style, no one culture. We are, after all, a nation of immigrants and our country is physically very large. Individual differences, ethnic customs, regional traditions, the size and type of higher education institution—all these variables will affect your own experience of American life.

A general guide cannot prepare you for all that you will encounter, but it can give you a basis for planning and for thinking about and reacting to your experiences as a student upon your arrival in the United States. We hope that this discussion of some of the issues you may encounter will aid in your understanding of student life.

Time: An American Perspective

“What time is it?” You may wonder why Americans are always looking to see what time it is. They look at their watches, and check the clocks on their phones and computers. “What time is it?” “Am I late?” “When’s the project due?” “How long do we have?” “How much time is left?” These questions are repeated over and over. Americans seem obsessed with being on time, with their schedules, deadlines and project-due dates.

Although time is simply an idea—an intellectual concept—people talk about time as if it is a commodity. People view time as something that can be saved, spent, used wisely, or wasted. Americans not only speak of time as something tangible but, more importantly, they believe it is scarce. It is considered a valuable but limited resource. “Time is money!” One hears people wishing aloud that they could just add a few hours to the day or another day to each week. Then they could get everything done. “There’s never enough time,” they complain!

“Time and tide wait for no man.” This often heard proverb illustrates many Americans’ attitude toward time. Because their time is scarce, every valuable minute needs to be organized or allocated to a certain activity. In this environment where time is considered a limited commodity, the emphasis tends to be on accomplishing tasks and getting things done. That is considered a good use of your resource—time.

Furthermore, being *on time* in an American environment is considered a sign of respect. It shows that one values the other person’s time. Whether it is arriving a few minutes before a meeting or turning in an assignment exactly when due, being *on schedule* indicates that one is serious, committed to the activity, and respectful of the other people involved. Conversely, being late is considered rude and impolite.

Time and tasks rule the days and the nights. The United States is an achievement-oriented society where *what* one accomplishes has an over-riding significance. “What is due and when is it due?” “What’s my deadline?” “What time must I be there?” “Be on time! Don’t be late!”

The idea of being on time—not being late—is a fundamental concept shaping how people organize their activities. Being on time is defined in a precise and seemingly rigid way. If a class or a meeting is scheduled to begin at 10:00 a.m., one is expected to arrive a few minutes before the hour. It is preferable to be slightly early but definitely not a minute late. Only in social situations, for example, when dinner is to begin at 7:00 p.m., is it acceptable, and indeed recommended, to arrive five to ten minutes after the appointed time. On the other hand, if you are invited to a party that is scheduled from 8:00 p.m. to 11 p.m. or from 4:00 p.m. to 7 p.m., it is fine to arrive any time between the stated hours and leave any time up until the end of the time.

For people whose concept of time is that it is abundant and on-going, this demand for strict adherence to a timetable can be frustrating. One asks, “What’s the difference in a few minutes?” “Why are these people so upset?”

Changing Times

To shift from one view of time to another, from abundance to scarcity or vice versa, is far from simple. As long as one stays in an environment where others share the same idea of time (scarce or plentiful), no one even notices how the view of time affects life. However, shifting from one concept to the other is extremely difficult. You can’t just change your watch and make the shift.

People who have lived in many places and have experienced a variety of attitudes toward time report that the concept of time is one of the biggest challenges faced in adaptation. It is not simply about how much haste there is to get something done. Because the idea of time shapes how we organize our lives, the adjustment can be extremely difficult.

Our view of time tells us how to answer the question of what is more important: getting the task completed, finishing the project, or paying attention to people? For example, if time is plentiful, you are free to assume that what doesn’t get done today will fit in tomorrow—the unexpected visitor can be received, a conversation can run on for a few extra minutes, arriving after the appointed hour for a meeting is acceptable, what isn’t done right now will be finished later.

From the other perspective, adhering to the schedule, getting projects done in the time allotted is critically important. Because time is limited, one must use it carefully. Changes in schedule or unplanned events can be problems; they are seen to *use up* time that is supposed to be *spent* in another way. Whatever is scheduled to be done today must be completed today, for we are told “time is fleeting.” The American automaker, Henry Ford, is quoted as saying: “Time waste differs from material waste in that there is no salvage.” Watch the clock. Keep to the schedule. Tasks must be completed before we are free to spend time with our friends.

Do One Thing at a Time

The American approach to accomplishing tasks is generally to do one thing at a time, completing one activity before starting another. Although Americans frequently talk of multi-tasking, the overall preference is for a sequential approach to activities.

Talking on the phone while driving a car and eating a snack certainly is multi-tasking. However, in business settings, the sequential approach is the norm. People follow an agenda in meetings, discussing the points in the order listed. Other topics cannot be discussed until planned agenda items have been covered.

Interruptions are limited and are not well-received. “Stay focused” people say. “We don’t have much time, stay with the agenda!”

Be on Time

Being on time is not just a matter of organizing one’s schedule. When there is a schedule set for a meeting, an appointment, a class, or a deadline, it is important to meet that time precisely. Again, being on time is considered a sign of respect. If you are late, it is interpreted that you do not value the person’s time and, therefore, the person.

Some international students have had the experience of arriving 20 or 30 minutes late for an appointment and finding they are unable to see the individual they needed to see. The individual will either be with the next appointment on the schedule or may have left the office for an appointment elsewhere.

In an educational environment, being on time applies not only to classes but also to meeting deadlines. It isn’t just professors who focus on time. American students are also concerned about meeting time commitments. American students may complain if other students aren’t on time with work that is part of a group project. Honoring time commitments indicates that one is serious about the work and respectful of the others involved.

When an American friend tells you he or she can’t talk because of being in the middle of a project due in two hours and promises to call you back later, remember it isn’t that the person doesn’t want to visit with you. That is not the case—your friend is just watching that clock. Meet the deadline and then have fun and visit with your friends. The rule, learned in childhood, is work first, play later!

Communication

One of the first things you may notice in talking with Americans is that they do not like interruptions. One person speaks, then another replies. It is as if they are tossing a ball back and forth. For most people, communication means conveying thoughts and ideas in one’s own language. While there are thousands of languages in the world and we may learn many during the course of our lives, for each of us the one that truly belongs to us is our native or mother tongue. Our first language is the one that is most comfortable and familiar.

Our first experience with language is as a set of sounds, organized in a specific way. People in a given group share an understanding of the meaning of those sounds. Because spoken language is part of our life from infancy, we usually think about it as simply a means to communicate with each other but it also conveys our culture.

The words of a language can indicate what the culture considers important. For example, Eskimos have more words for snow than do people in Africa. The French have many words for food and wine while an American’s vocabulary includes a variety of words that relate to business and technology. People develop an ability to communicate what is important in their environment.

The culture is conveyed not only in the selection of words but also how they are presented. Given the American view that time is limited and tasks must be accomplished, the language favors direct, clear communication. Sentences are often simple and factual. Extensive descriptions and allusions to history or books may make some Americans impatient. Children are told “get to the point,” “just say what you mean.” In a business environment, this idea is often phrased as “just get to the bottom line, we don’t need all the details, just get to the bottom line!”

Often, American conversations tend to be a search for information. Americans ask a lot of questions, and they are very direct. Their replies to questions may seem abrupt. They are not cautious about their intent or meaning. For example, if the answer to a request is no, generally Americans will simply reply “No.” They may add a brief explanation as to why they are declining the request, but no *does* mean no. The answer of *no* does not mean that it is time to start negotiating. Such a direct answer is done without any sign of embarrassment. It is simply communicating a piece of information.

Such directness can be puzzling for people who have a more subtle communication style. Americans rely less on people inferring meaning from other information, such as the status of the speaker or the particular surroundings than would be normal in many other cultures. It is important to note that Americans will expect everyone to communicate in a similar way. They are likely to miss subtle clues and indirect messages because they don’t expect them and are not accustomed to them.

People will not hesitate to ask questions if they want information. In a classroom environment, instructors often view questions as a sign of interest in the material being presented. If an instructor’s requirements are not clear, it is

Status and Hierarchy

the responsibility of the student to ask questions to clarify the matter. Children are taught that there are no stupid questions; moreover, they learn that it is important to ask questions when they don't understand. Asking for further information is perceived as a positive action showing that the person asking the question wants to learn.

But communication isn't entirely about words; it also includes physical elements, sometimes called body language. Where one looks while talking, gestures made during a conversation, facial expressions, and posture are all part of the process. An element of the direct American style is the practice of looking directly at someone when conversing. American children are taught to look at the person speaking, to make eye contact. A parent tells a child, "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" It is considered a sign of respect and an indication that one is listening carefully. Looking away, at the floor, at one's hands is considered a sign of disrespect for the person talking. It can even be interpreted as a lack of interest in what is being said.

What Can I Talk About?

One might expect that, in an environment where directness is valued in communication, all topics are appropriate for conversation. That is not really true. Some topics that are generally discussed with acquaintances or those one does not know well:

- The weather
- One's commuting experience and cars
- Classes and jobs
- Sports
- Music, movies
- Fashion, shopping, and clothes

Topics not to discuss unless you know the people well:

- Money, how much one earns
- Family
- Religion

Another area that can be confusing is humor. Americans often use humor to make their points or to diffuse uncomfortable situations. Humor frequently relies on shared experiences and understandings that a newcomer may lack. That may lead to misunderstandings. This difficulty exists for Americans, too. They may not understand humor that is clear to you. For example, the subtle British style of humor is often puzzling to Americans. If you think of humor as another form of language, you can relax and realize that, over time, you too will speak this language and share the amusing moments.

As in most countries, status and hierarchy differences do exist in the United States. However, differences based on social status may be more difficult to perceive than in many places and do not always have obvious effects on student life. The United States is a highly individualistic culture and, as such, respect based on individual accomplishment tends to define status more than age, tradition, or family background.

This idea rests in part on one of our founding American values: "that all [people] are created equal." That value is stated in the Declaration of Independence, the document that set the principles for the establishment of the United States of America in 1776. The equality of individuals is one of our national ideals. Although throughout U.S. history we have not always achieved this ideal, it continues to be an underlying principle that guides interaction among individuals and informs how businesses, organizations, and officials treat people. It also creates an expectation among people for equal treatment, regardless of rank or status.

In the United States, it is extremely important to extend the same courtesies and respect to all individuals, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, national origin, or sexual orientation. Academic communities are particularly diverse and provide opportunities to meet and interact with a wide variety of people. As a member of the academic community, you will be expected to treat everyone with respect and can expect to be treated courteously by others.

The style of interaction in the United States tends to be informal, and communication can be more casual than in many other countries, reinforcing feelings of equality. People of the same age usually refer to each other in a familiar manner. For example, students usually address each other by their first names. Formal titles, like Doctor, Professor, Mr., Mrs., or Ms., with the person's surname (family name) are reserved for speaking with persons in authority, teachers, older people, and in office or business interactions. This informal style can be perplexing. When one is uncertain about how to address another person, it is best to observe others and follow their example. If this is not possible, it is always appropriate to ask.

Social settings also guide how individuals interact. Though many relationships are informal, differences can still occur. Giving gifts does not happen as commonly as in some other places and tends to be limited to family and close friends. Invitations to an individual's home may be purely social, such as when the invitation is from a friend or fellow student, or status-related if invited by a professor or employer. Small gifts are welcome under such circumstances. One might consider bringing flowers, a bottle of wine, or even a small artifact from one's country.

University life has its own cultural norms related to status and hierarchy. Frequently, the style of interaction can become quite informal between professor and student. It is not uncommon for a professor to prefer being addressed by his or her first name and to join students for meals or other socializing. However,

even when there is a familiar and collaborative relationship, it is important to remember that faculty members are authority figures with higher status than students. Similarly, college administrators and staff members may communicate and relate informally, while still retaining authority. For more detailed information about classroom behavior and relationships between students and faculty, please see the pamphlet *U.S. Culture Series: U.S. Classroom Culture*.

Some students will have the opportunity to work off-campus in internships or other employment. Employment settings vary widely in terms of how relations among employees, supervisors, and customers occur. Large organizations, particularly in the business sector, may be more formal than academia. You may find that following the example of a fellow employee or colleague would be helpful in determining the appropriate style of interaction.

Rule of Law: Protections and Restrictions

The United States operates under a system of laws that provides both rights and responsibilities for individuals, including international students. This system is designed to protect and provide equal rights for everyone. Laws exist at the national and state level to cover criminal offenses, like robbery or assault, and civil matters, like contracts and driving privileges. Underlying our system of laws and equal protection is the principle that everyone is held accountable. Not knowing that a law exists or that a certain action is illegal is not a defense; you will still be held responsible for abiding by all regulations.

Immigration regulations are federal laws that affect international students while present in the United States. As a visitor, the conditions of your presence in the United States are seen as a benefit rather than a right, so it is a particularly critical area of the law for students to comply with. Failure to do so can result in your losing student status and not being allowed to remain in the United States. International student advisers at the school you are attending can assist you in understanding the regulations affecting you.

Other U.S. laws exist to cover a broad range of criminal matters. As part of the U.S. system of laws, people have certain rights in these instances. If charged with a crime, an individual is considered to be innocent until proven guilty. Being proven guilty can occur at a trial or can occur when an individual admits to being guilty and accepts a punishment from a U.S. court. Punishments can include a fine, a prison sentence, or deportation from the United States, depending on the severity of the crime. An individual who has been charged has the right to be represented by an attorney. If an individual cannot afford to hire an attorney, the government will arrange to provide one. For an international student, being convicted of a criminal offense can also mean being required to leave the United States. Therefore, having the assistance of an attorney, if charged with a crime, is extremely important.

Of course, most students will not violate any laws while in the United States. However, there are some acts that do occur in student populations that can result in serious problems for individuals. The laws about these acts may be different than in other countries. The age of twenty-one is the legal age for drinking alcoholic beverages. If you are younger, purchasing alcohol is against the law. Possessing illegal drugs is a criminal offense at any age. For information on which drugs are illegal, go to www.usdoj.gov/dea and click on the links below “Drug Policy.” Driving an automobile or motorcycle under the influence of alcohol or drugs is also illegal and has serious penalties. Physical assault of another individual, including disagreements with a spouse or partner that result in physical contact like pushing or hitting, can also result in legal charges. Excessive physical punishment of children is also against the law. The definition of “excessive” in this context may be different in the United States than in other countries.

Legal contracts are civil agreements that frequently occur in the United States. Such agreements might include signing a lease for an apartment or purchasing an automobile. It is important to remember when signing such agreements that they are binding, and that each person is obliged to comply with all the terms included. Not following all the terms of the agreement usually results in financial penalties.

Colleges and universities also have their own rules and regulations for students. These rules are usually contained in a student handbook or on the school's Web site. They protect students and provide for equal treatment. The regulations also govern many aspects of student conduct in class and on campus. Knowing and following these regulations will be helpful to you as you adjust to student life in the United States.

Regional Differences in the United States

Diversity in the United States applies to places as well as people. With fifty states and a landmass of 9,629,091 square kilometers, the geography of the United States is quite varied. Within the continental United States, the East Coast, the South, the Midwest, the West, and the West Coast are all considered distinctly different regions. The states of Hawaii and Alaska are also distinct and unique environments.

Geography can affect various aspects of life. The most basic of these is the weather. As part of your preparation, you will want to know what to expect at the place where you are studying. For instance, in the northern parts of the United States, winters will be extremely cold and may have a lot of snow. Summers in the south are known for intense heat and humidity.

But weather is not the only thing affected by regional differences. Speech patterns, notions about time, how people communicate and interact, how friendly or hospitable people seem—all these are influenced by locale. These regional differences are part of what makes life interesting in the United States.

Although it is important not to generalize too much about particular parts of the country, it is helpful to understand some of the differences. People in the East may be seen as being in a hurry and very businesslike compared with other places. The South is known for a slower pace and its tradition of hospitality. Midwesterners can be described as being practical and pragmatic and a bit more traditional. Westerners are also seen as a bit more traditional, as well as very independent and individualistic. The West Coast is viewed as relaxed and informal. These are broad descriptions and will not apply to every person from a particular region; part of your experience as a student will be to observe, learn about, and enjoy whatever may be unique to your setting.

The microgeography of where you attend school may have an even more significant effect on your experiences. The size of the city or town in which the college or university is located strongly influences what life is like. Large cities anywhere in the world are busy and crowded and can be impersonal. The pace in a small town may be slower and may seem to be more friendly and personal. Even the size of the college or university will play a role in determining the culture at the location. Some schools have thousands of students; others have a few hundred.

Just as the United States is proud of the diversity of its people, each place considers itself to be unique. As part of your preparation, you may wish to study the history, traditions, and geography of the specific area in the United States where you have chosen to study. In doing so, you will be ready to experience what is special about your new home.

Family and Friends: Building Connections

The mobility of U.S. society is, perhaps, the most significant influence on relationships in the United States. Many students do not attend college in the same city where their families live. Similarly, people frequently do not reside in the same communities for their entire lives. Many large corporations require their employees to move often if they want to advance in the company. It is not unusual for families to be separated by hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. This mobility influences how people interact and form friendships. Americans tend to be very friendly on a casual basis and open to meeting many new individuals, but these interactions do not always result in close, lasting relationships.

Adding to the impression that Americans do not have deep friendships is the segmentation of their lives. Consequently, people have niches where friendships develop. It is typical for Americans to develop friendly relations with others in the classroom, at the gym, where they live, and where they work. An individual may have a friend to study with, another to play tennis with, and still another as a movie companion. These relationships often do not carry over into other aspects of their lives; these niche friendships usually do not become deep personal friendships.

A common habit of casually friendly Americans is the tendency to say things like “Let’s get together sometime” or “Let’s do lunch” and then not follow through with a specific invitation. This casual, informal style is sometimes seen as superficial by others and can be frustrating for a new international student. As a newcomer, an international student may need to initiate a meeting. If someone says, even in passing, “Let’s get together,” it is perfectly appropriate to make a call and suggest a meeting time.

Certainly the potential for close friendships exists. College and university campuses have many student organizations and clubs and offer many activities in which students can participate and have the opportunity to meet people with similar interests. Residence halls and apartments where students live are also good places to form friendships. In academic settings, graduate students may form close relationships with other students in their academic departments. Similar opportunities exist for undergraduates by joining study groups and through smaller size classes.

Dating and romantic relationships are special cases and occur in a variety of styles and levels of commitment. Sometimes people go out together as friends, as a couple, or with a group, and romantic involvement is not necessarily part of that activity. Americans also date many people before or instead of engaging in more committed relationships. It is not uncommon or inappropriate for an American to date more than one person at a time or to date many people over time before making a commitment to one individual. Individual customs and protocols vary widely, but it is still somewhat more typical for the male to invite the female and to pay the expenses of at least the first few dates.

Committed relationships tend to gradually become more serious. Not all such relationships, even very serious ones, result in marriage or long-term partnership. There is, however, a strong expectation that romantic friendships involve mutual attraction; it is never appropriate to pursue another person who expresses no interest in developing or continuing a friendship.

Romantic relationships among people of the same sex occur openly in most parts of the United States. However, because these relationships can be subject to prejudice and negative reactions from others, many colleges and universities have organizations to support and assist such students as needed.

As in other countries, certain kinds of conduct are considered inappropriate in the United States. For example, making personal comments or touching someone in a personal manner can be considered sexual harassment and is not acceptable. It is important for international students to understand what is appropriate behavior, especially in relating to the opposite sex. To learn what is considered appropriate, one might ask American friends, one’s resident assistant in the dormitory, or international students who have been in the United States for some time.

Closing

The decision to study in the United States is an important one, requiring commitment and purpose. The educational opportunities and life-enhancing experiences will be tremendous, but it is not easy for a student to leave family and friends to undertake such a challenge.

By reading this booklet, you have taken what may be the first step. We hope that you will use the information provided here to think about and discuss with others what to expect when you arrive, and what you will experience throughout your study. We urge you to read all you can about the United States and about your school in advance of your departure.

Upon your arrival, there will be many resources available at your institution to assist in your adjustment. Many schools offer orientation programs that are invaluable sources of information as well as opportunities to meet other new students. Colleges and universities that admit international students have offices providing international student services or a designated school official who can provide special assistance to you. Those individuals are knowledgeable about immigration regulations, cultural adjustment, and school resources and procedures.

Most schools offer a broad range of services available to all students. These include counselors, academic advisers, student health services, libraries, computer labs, and academic mentors dedicated to providing the support you need to be successful and fulfilled throughout your study.

William J. Fulbright, U.S. Senator and leader in founding the Fulbright Exchange Program, in expressing his hopes about the benefits of international educational exchange, stated that:

“...by producing generations of leaders, who, through the experience of educational understanding of other peoples’ cultures,...can find in themselves, through intercultural education, the ways and means of living together in peace.”ⁱⁱ

As an international student, you will join an academic community of students undertaking international study in that tradition. We wish you well in your endeavors.

FOOTNOTES:

ⁱ *Open Doors Report 2004*. New York, Institute of International Education

ⁱⁱ Fulbright, J. W. 1989. *The Price of Empire*, New York, Pantheon Books

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