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Expand Your World
(From Your Own Backyard)

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Expand Your World (From Your Own Backyard)

Travel feels great because it exposes you to new people and experiences. But you don't need to wait until your next trip to experience a new-to-you culture. Here's how to connect wherever you live.

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THERE'S NO GETTING AROUND IT: We live in polarized times. Bridging divides—whether cultural, political, or religious—is more important than ever. It's nice when you can get away, to be swept up in a foreign place. But you don't always have to travel to immerse yourself in another way of life. There's an easy, inexpensive opportunity right in front of us.

When we engage across difference in our own hometowns, we cultivate stronger communities and a stronger democracy, says Rachel Peric, executive director of Welcoming America, a nonprofit that works with local governments and other organizations to create a more inclusive climate for all Americans, including new residents from other countries. "Connecting with other cultures is about creating a sense of belonging for everyone," Peric says. "Especially at a time when our communities don't look the same as they did 20 years ago."

And no action is too small. "Citizen diplomacy has a much deeper impact than anything governments could produce because it's experiential," says Patricia Harrison, PhD, director of International Professional Exchange Programs at World Learning, a nonprofit that runs cultural exchanges and other educational programs.

Finding a profound—or at least an interesting—local cross-cultural experience takes curiosity and a willingness to get lost, feel awkward, and occasionally be overwhelmed by how little you know. In other words, it helps you grow. Engaging with other cultures expands our creativity and makes us more empathetic. If you're game, here are 10 places to start.

1

Think global, eat local

At the 7th Street Community Garden in Louisville, Kentucky, immigrants and refugees plant crops beside longtime residents, sharing knowledge. If you're part of a community garden, talk to organizers about reserving plots for newcomers. The International Rescue Committee's New Roots Program can connect refugees to gardens.

2

Learn about another religion

Local interfaith organizations, like Interfaith Partners of South Carolina, promote cooperation among religious groups, running a variety of programs, including visitor days at mosques, temples, synagogues, and churches. IPSC board member Holli Emore also recommends visiting a house of worship on your own: "Just reach out to people and introduce yourself."

3

Cook together

Cooking classes led by immigrants and refugees are emerging all over the U.S., in cities large and small, from the League of Kitchens in New York City and Los Angeles to the Welcome Neighbor STL Supper Club in St. Louis. You can taste Afghan meat dumplings (mantu), Argentine empanadas, and more as you get to know folks from those countries through something we all share: an appetite.

4

Dine with a future leader

Since 1940, the U.S. Department of State has selected emerging world leaders (500 have gone on to become heads of government) to meet American professionals through the International Visitor Leadership Program. A meal with an American family is an essential component, and hosts often get hooked. Over the past 10 years, Connie Miller of Seattle has hosted more than 150 people, among them female entrepreneurs from all over Africa, Japanese bankers, and a doctor from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Sign up to host through World Learning or the Global Ties U.S. Network.

▶ worldlearning.org/get-involved/volunteer/



5

Seek new music

Look for concerts in intimate, interactive spaces—libraries, yoga studios, churches, and festivals—suggests Sabrina Lynn Motley, director of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. If there's a language barrier, she adds, "listen to a rhythm or a melody that draws you. You may not know the words, but you can often understand the emotion."

6

Get an old-school pen pal

When she was 13, Joy Catania of Erie, Pennsylvania, answered an ad for a pen pal. For years, she and Shantaram Dhamale of Kadus, India, exchanged letters, sharing everyday experiences and historical events of their time. "One of the most poignant letters I [wrote] was about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.," she remembers. Catania, 65, and Dhamale, 67, stay in touch via email and text now, but she recommends the tactile experience of a letter. Find your own pen pal through PenPal World or Global Penfriends.

8

Head to the library

It's a portal to other worlds. Check out a reading by an international author. Borrow a foreign film. See an exhibition. Join a language-practice group. Or just people watch. "You will see all different cultures," says Marcellus Turner, executive director and chief librarian at the Seattle Public Library. "It's one of the last democratic institutions where people can have access for free."

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9

Host an international traveler

Sign up for Servas, an international hospitality social network founded in 1949 that pairs travelers worldwide—a majority are from Asia, Europe, and North America—with local volunteer hosts. (Its founder envisioned it building cross-cultural understanding and peace.) A typical stay is two nights, but you can also opt to be a day host and meet a traveler for a few hours. For other homestay opportunities, try the international center at your local university.

7

Help a newcomer

Mentoring an immigrant family can involve helping them move, taking them to the post office, enrolling kids in school, and practicing English. "When I came to this country and didn't speak the language, my mentor was instrumental," remembers Fatima Said, now executive director of Project FINE (Focus on Integrating Newcomers through Education), a nonprofit in Winona, Minnesota. Welcoming America's network of partners and nonprofits is a great place to start looking for a mentoring organization where you live.

10

Build your own bridge

Many cross-cultural opportunities don't exist yet. So look around. "All of us are sitting at different tables, whether it's as a parent in the PTA or somebody in a condo association," says Peric. "There's always a space to be thoughtful about who's showing up. Ask: 'Am I doing things that make sure different voices are heard?'"



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