



## **California Immersion Program 2011: Student Handbook**

**Dear Student & Family,**

**On the following pages, you will find cultural, practical, and safety information regarding your upcoming stay in California. Please read it carefully, and contact us with any questions before your departure. Remember that you are about to embark on a wonderful adventure, and we are here to help!**

**Sincerely,  
Edu-Culture International (ECI)**

### **ENGLISH LANGUAGE IMMERSION IN CALIFORNIA**

**The English spoken by Americans is generally fast, and Americans tend to run their words together. Tips for understanding & communicating:**

- ❖ Ask your host family what they would like to be called (Mrs. and Mr. are common formal addresses, but it is likely your host parents will ask you to refer to them by their first names.)**
- ❖ Make sure your family knows how to pronounce your name!**
- ❖ Ask questions when you don't understand a word, instead of assuming. You are here to learn and your family knows that!**
- ❖ Speak as much as possible in English – don't be afraid to make mistakes, mistakes are often a source of humor, and always a source of learning.**
- ❖ Slang is common, again, ask if you have trouble understanding.**
- ❖ If you are having trouble communicating, ask your Chaperone, or Local Leader for help!**

### **HOST FAMILY IMMERSION IN CALIFORNIA**

**Living with a host family is a crucial part of your experience. ECI host families volunteer to have you in their home, and will treat you as a family guest. Families volunteer to host because they want to learn about you and your culture. Remember to always be polite to your host family, and if you have any trouble, or are concerned about any aspect of your host family stay, talk to your chaperone, Local Leader or the ECI office.**

## **COMMON HOST FAMILY QUESTIONS ANSWERED**

### **1. Are U.S. host families paid?**

- a. No, ECI host families in California volunteer to host you. Unlike families in Ireland or England that you may have experienced, ECI's host families in the States host because they want to experience a cultural exchange experience with you. They want to learn about you, your family, and your culture! Families provide a private bed for you, meals, and welcome you into their daily lives. Most importantly, they provide a safe, welcoming spot for you to live during your program.

### **2. Does my host family want to spend time with me?**

- a. Absolutely!! Again, ECI's host families invite you into their home in order to learn about you. Treating you as a family member, they will invite you to be part of their daily lives – taking you on excursions, shopping, errands, and introducing you to their friends and extended family.

### **3. Will I be expected to help around the house?**

- a. When Americans visit each other even overnight, it is considered polite to at least offer to help with small chores, like dinner dishes, taking out the garbage, and tidying up. American teens typically help around the house, and as a family guest, it is appropriate for you to ask what you can help with. ECI host families will often give you a small chore to help with, and it will help you feel like a member of the family!

### **4. Will I be sharing a room?**

- a. Possibly. Host families always provide you with a private bed, whether it's in a guest room or shared with a child from the host family. Occasionally, you might share a room with another European student, whose native language is different than your own.

### **5. Will there be teenagers the same age in my host family?**

- a. Not necessarily. Your host family may have teenagers around the same age as you, may have younger children, or no children at all. The important thing to remember is that your host family will welcome you and treat you like a part of the family. If there is a teenager in the family, it's possible that you will become lasting friends, and it's also possible that you won't. Remember to engage with the family as a whole!!

### **6. How does it work with meals and my host family?**

- a. Your host family provides breakfast, lunch and dinner. Your host family is generally happy to accommodate any special eating requests from you – but please let ECI know in advance. Always say thank you!
  - i. **Breakfast** – is usually light: toast, cereal or eggs. Be sure to tell your family when you like the food!
  - ii. **Lunch** – generally sandwiches or salads.

- iii. **Dinner** – In California, often families sit down together for dinner, but not necessarily as much as Europeans. Some nights, your family will likely provide dinner but people will eat at different times. This is usual, so don't be surprised if your family doesn't sit down together each night!

**7. What am I responsible to pay for when I am with my host family?**

- a. Your host family provides meals and lodging for you. Any extra activities, like movies or excursions, are extra and while your host family will occasionally offer to pay for you (which is fine), you should always offer and be prepared to pay for yourself.

**8. Am I expected to be with my host family during the evenings?**

- a. Your family really wants to get to know you and spend time with you! Evenings are the perfect opportunity for you to get to know each other. American families, like all families, are generally busy during the day, and evening is a time for relaxing and spending time together. Each family, and each evening, may be different!
- b. Life and culture for teenagers in the US is different from Europe. Here teenagers are not allowed to go to bars until age 21, so there is no real "nightlife" for teenagers until they go to college. For this reason, during your trip you will not really be able to go out at night; instead, you could have a barbecue with your family and their friends, or go to their local pool, watch a sports game, or simply watch TV.
- c. Public transportation in the U.S. is not nearly as reliable as in Europe, so teenagers often have to rely on their parents to take them to friends' houses. Your host family may offer to take you to the house of a friend of your host brother or sister. You should not ask to be taken anywhere. Families could easily feel like they are being used as a taxi service. All of this will be very different from what you are used to, but remember that you are in the US for a short time only, and part of the cultural experience is adapting to these differences.
- d. Try not to spend a lot of time alone in your room – this could be considered rude. If you need some time alone, tell your family. They will understand, but if you disappear to your room they may think you don't want to be with them or you are upset about something.
- e. We encourage you to jump in and become part of your host family. Avoid spending long hours on the phone or the Internet talking to your friends and family back home (unless it's an emergency, of course). While you are here, you want to spend all the time you can with your American family and friends!

**9. I love to listen to my own music. Is it acceptable to bring my IPOD?**

- a. Your host family will want you to feel comfortable and happy. It is of course acceptable to bring your IPOD, any many times you will find American teens and adults have their own. However, it is considered

impolite to listen to an IPOD or be on a cell phone during conversations. Try not to play music all the time when you are with your host family.

**10. Can I call home from my host family's house?**

- a. While we certainly want you to stay in touch with your family at home when you're in Europe, it can also be costly to call internationally. We recommend utilizing Skype and calling cards. See following pages for more exact tips, and also we highly recommend setting up a plan in advance to let your family know that you have arrived safely – consider the time difference!

**11. I am allowed to smoke in Europe. Is it okay to smoke while in the U.S.?**

- a. Absolutely not. Smoking is a huge cultural difference between Europe and the U.S. It is illegal for teenagers to smoke in the U.S. and you could be given a costly ticket if you break this law.
- b. In addition to smoking being illegal for teens, California more than any other part of the U.S. is highly intolerant of smoking at all. Many people consider it highly rude and take offense to smoke around them, or even outside of their homes. ECI's programs are strictly non-smoking – you will not be allowed to smoke at any point during your trip, even outside. Many parts of California have strict anti-smoking laws where you are not allowed to smoke within 20 feet of any public place.
- c. Additionally, California is highly wildfire conscious, and this has led to an additional intolerance of smoking. Note that thousands of acres of California forest has been burnt in the last few years alone, some fires being started due to carelessness with cigarettes.
- d. Smoking during your trip is a break with the rules of the trip, and has serious consequences. If you think this is going to be any problem for you, please talk to the ECI office before departure.

**12. Are there any other cultural differences I should be aware of?**

- a. While America & Europe share many cultural similarities, there are also important differences. Learning about and accepting these differences is a crucial part of your immersion experience. Much of the fun of being in another country is learning about these differences and ACCEPTING them. If things seem a little strange and are not what you are used to, or if something makes you feel a little uncomfortable, please remember that you are only in the US for a short time. Be positive and try to make the best of every situation.

**Some small cultural differences worth remembering:**

- ❖ During mealtimes:
  - Always put your napkin on your lap.
  - Bread goes on a plate – NEVER just on the table.
  - Never start eating before everyone at the table has their meal in front of them.

- ❖ Tipping:
  - In a restaurant: 15 – 20%
  - Taxis: 10%
  
- ❖ During the day, Americans always leave all their room doors open. They would think it strange if your room door was closed during the day. If doors are closed in your host family's home, make sure you knock before entering.
  
- ❖ **Helping yourself:**
  - It is typical for Americans, especially teens at home, to help themselves to snacks and drinks. Don't be surprised when you see them opening the refrigerator on their own – it is perfectly fine and polite in the U.S. If you have questions about this, talk to your family or Local Leader.

### 13. Is it usual to stay in contact with my host family after the trip?

- a. This is very often what happens, particularly if you get along really well with your host family. It is **really important** that you contact your family upon your return, even if it is only a quick email to say thank you for spending time with them. Some students are invited to return and stay with their host families in the future if they have built a really strong relationship. This is a private arrangement between students and families (ECI is no longer involved after your trip ends). Please don't ask your family if you can come back to visit -- this puts them in a difficult position. **Please wait to be invited.**

## Other Practical information

### Spending Money

We can only give guidelines about how much money to bring, but from our experience it is a good idea to bring at least \$150 for each week. This amount will cover personal spending needs such as snacks, stamps, postcards, local telephone calls, and small presents/souvenirs, as well as any expenses when you go out with your host family. Remember: While your family may offer to pay for you, you need to be prepared to pay for all activities you do with them.

### Luggage

For transatlantic flights, airlines allow each traveler one - two pieces of hold (checked) baggage and one carry-on bag. Please consult the guidelines of the airline in question for the weight allowance (usually it is 23 kilograms).

## **Clothing**

Most importantly, bring clothes that are comfortable. Also bring clothes that don't need special care. Of course the clothes you decide to pack are entirely up to you, but make sure you include the following:

- Swimsuit
- Sandals
- Light jacket, sweater, or sweatshirt
- Two pairs of comfortable shoes, one good for walking
- Jeans - several (or something similar)
- Shorts - several (or whatever you prefer to wear in hot weather)
- T-shirts (or something similar)
- Something a little more formal
- Also bring: A battery-operated alarm clock and extra batteries

## **Weather**

The weather in California is typically hot and dry. In some parts of the Bay Area, temperatures can be as high as 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius). In the city of San Francisco, however, it can often be a lot cooler, in the range of 65-70 degrees (18-21 degrees Celsius). You will need a light jacket and pants even on some summer days in San Francisco.

## **Medicine**

Be sure to bring copies - in generic form - of any prescription medicines you take. If you wear glasses, bring a copy of that prescription also.

## **Valuables, Documents, Money**

We advise you to bring an ATM card (Bankomat) if possible. Check if your card will work in the US. If it has the Cirrus or Maestro symbol, you can use it in the US. If in doubt, ask your bank. If you want to bring travelers cheques, make sure they are in US dollars. Traveler's cheques are not recommended; they are a lot less convenient. You will need to find a bank that is open and have your passport with you, and banks normally charge a commission for cashing the cheque.

You are responsible for your passport and plane ticket as well as your own money/ traveler's cheques/ATM or credit cards. The safest way to carry your money is in a money belt.

**If you do bring traveler's checks, keep a record of them separate from the cheques themselves, and keep track of what you have cashed. Regular banks have the best rates for cashing traveler's checks. Banks are generally open Monday-Friday 9 am to 5 pm.**

Don't carry large amounts of money with you each day. Ask your host family about the day's activities so you can decide how much to take with you on any given day. Also, do not carry your passport with you. Leave both items in a safe place at home with your host family.

### **Post offices**

The cost of sending a letters or postcards to Europe is 98 cents, and they will take about a week to arrive. Most post offices are open Monday to Friday from 9 am to 5 pm and some are also open Saturday 9 am to 1 pm.

### **Camera**

Make sure you have this in your carry-on luggage (but don't forget it on the plane!).

### **Electricity**

The current in the US is 110V AC, so you will need to bring an adapter if you're bringing electrical appliances.

### **Mobile Phones and Calling Europe**

Your phone will work in the US if it is a "tri-band" phone. Remember that if you decide to bring it to the US you need to set up the facility for making international calls before you arrive. Calls will be very expensive – both within the US and to Europe.

**We highly recommend utilizing Skype.** We let our host families know this too, so often you will find that they already have Skype loaded on their computers – though it is a simple and free download otherwise. Remember, calling computer to computer is free, while calling cells or landlines from Skype has a cost, though usually less than calling cards. You can find more information or download it onto your computer at [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com).

When you are at home with your host family, they will likely be happy to let you use their phone to make local calls (to your chaperone, for example). However, if you want to call Europe, you will need to buy a phone card (ECI will provide phone cards when you arrive for a minimal fee if you do not have one). The phone card will give you a toll-free access number to call (usually beginning with 1-800 or 1-888). You will need to enter your password and then the service will connect your call to Europe. Using a phone card will not cost your host family anything. You can also use the phone card from any pay phone, which will not charge you money but it may use extra card minutes. Alternatively, you can call "Collect" to Europe, though this option is much more expensive.

### **Present for your host family**

Whether or not you bring your host family a present is your decision, but this would definitely be a much-appreciated gesture. It should, however, just be a souvenir from your home, such as chocolates, t-shirts, a book with photographs of Europe, etc. If you have a host sister or brother, bringing copies of your favorite music is also a good idea! It would be especially thoughtful to bring a little something for each family member. Remember: The important thing is not the cost of the gift, but rather the thought behind it!

### **ECI contact staff**

Before you set off to the US, you will receive the contact details of ECI's Immersion Director in the U.S., who will be on call for you throughout your stay. If you experience any problems of any kind – no matter how small – you can get in touch with her and she will do everything possible to solve your problem.

During your stay with your host family, your ECI contact will get in touch with you and possibly visit you and your family, just to make sure everything is fine for you and you are having the best possible time. At least once during your stay, an ECI staff member will arrange to meet up with you at a cafe to see how you are doing, and in order to give you the opportunity to talk about any issues that may be concerning you that you don't necessarily want to talk about in front of your family.

We want you to have the best possible experience during your time in the US. Your ECI contact can be called any time if you are having problems of any kind – with the family, with cultural differences, or in practical matters. Let us know at once if problems arise – small problems can get bigger if not addressed, and we can't help you if we don't know!

### **Arrival and customs**

When you arrive at the airport in the US you will go through customs. If you are not flying directly to San Francisco, you will need to collect your luggage and re-check it for the connecting flight. There are also two small forms you will need to fill out before you land. Everything will be explained to you on the plane, but don't hesitate to ask questions (more than once) if you don't understand something.

Once you've cleared customs, an ECI representative will meet you at the gate. Sometimes your host family will also be there, otherwise the ECI representative will take you to their house, either via private car or BART (the Bay Area's metro system). When you arrive at the airport, you will receive an emergency card with contact information for your host family, and your ECI contact. If you experience any problems of any kind – no matter how small – you can get in touch with either your ECI contact and she will do everything possible to solve your problem.

### **Mealtimes**

Breakfast is usually a light meal - eggs, cereal, or toast. Lunch is eaten around noon and is usually sandwiches, soup, or salad. Dinner is the big meal of the day and is eaten between 6 pm and 8 pm.

### **Alcohol**

Alcohol laws are very strict in the US. You are not allowed to have alcohol under the age of 21. This means you will not be able to enter bars nor buy alcohol. This law is STRICTLY enforced. You can be put in jail for breaking this law.

### **Smoking**

The US – and ESPECIALLY California -- is practically a society of non-smokers and some people are very intolerant of smoking. It is against the law to smoke in any public place, including restaurants and bars. Parks and sidewalks are also designated public places! It is illegal to smoke within 20 feet of any public place.

Under no circumstances should you smoke during your program. ECI rules strictly forbid you to smoke – even when you are at home with your host family.

### **Host Family Economic Situation**

Not all Americans have large houses and swimming pools. Host families are different. Some have swimming pools and others live in quite small homes. THE MOST IMPORTANT thing is that all the families are kind, welcoming, and looking forward to your visit.

Please note that in the current global economic crisis, families in the U.S. have all seen their situations impacted. Some have lost homes, jobs, and all are deeply concerned. It is wise to be aware of this, and recognize that your host family has volunteered to have you live with them! Make sure to thank them and go out of your way to share your culture with them.

### **Family Structure**

Many US families have just one parent. Divorce is very common, so some families have stepchildren and parents. Of course there are also many "traditional" families - two parents and several children.

### **Pets**

Domestic animals are incredibly common in California families. Dogs, cats, even rabbits or lizards (in aquariums) are often to be found in homes. Please ensure that you alert ECI to any allergies to pets, or even if you are afraid or uncomfortable around animals so that we can make appropriate arrangements for you!

### **If you feel unwell**

At the first sign of illness, tell your host family as well as your ECI Chaperone or Local Leader. Make sure you bring all necessary medical insurance documentation with you. In case of a medical emergency you can call **911** (police, ambulance, fire).

### **Time Zones**

Central Europe is 9 hours ahead of California.

**Again, remember that your host family, your chaperones, your local leader and the ECI office in Berkeley are all here to help you make the most out of your language & cultural immersion stay. Please feel free to ask questions, and learn as much English as possible!**

**HAVE AN ENJOYABLE TRIP!**