



St Giles
INTERNATIONAL

**A GUIDE TO
CANADIAN
CULTURE AND
CUSTOMS**



This document has been prepared for you to read before you leave for Canada, and to refer to during your time there. It gives you information about Canadian customs and describes some points that may be different from your own culture. Part of the fun of coming to live or study in another country is observing and learning about the culture and customs of its people. We don't want to spoil the surprise for you but we do understand that it can be useful to know how other people will expect you to behave, and will behave towards you while you're away from home. This can avoid awkward misunderstandings for both you and the people you meet and make friends with! We hope that your stay in Canada will be thoroughly enjoyable and we very much look forward to welcoming you to St Giles International.

Getting in Line –

Always get in line and wait your turn when buying tickets, waiting in a bank, post office or for a bus or train. It is considered rude to 'cut in line', and although people may not say anything to you, they will make very unhappy noises!



If there is any confusion about whether there is one line or more for several different cashiers, you should still wait your turn and stay behind everyone who arrived before you. Canadians do not try to get to the front first; they are very fair. You will often hear people saying 'Who's next?' The general rule is that you are next if you were the first person to have gotten in line!

Smoking –

Smoking outdoors in public places is illegal in Canada, with no exceptions. There are even certain areas outdoors, such as near building entrances, where smoking is prohibited. Most homestay hosts will ask you to smoke outside the house.

Drugs –

Buying and selling illicit drugs is illegal in Canada. If you are found carrying drugs either in school or in public, you may be arrested and deported from Canada.

Women –

Women in Canada are seen as equal to men, and should be treated fairly. It is normal for men and women to do an equal share of the household tasks and childcare. This may not be the case in certain more traditional Canadian families and every couple has their own arrangement.

Safety for women: It is not a good idea for women to walk around on their own at night. Make sure that you use registered taxis and try to stay with a group as much as possible.



Personal Hygiene:

Restrooms -

It is customary to flush the toilet after use and to dispose of toilet paper in the toilet. Ladies' sanitary napkins should, however, be placed in the trashcan.

Tissues -

It is Canadian custom to blow your nose with a tissue. Some people keep a tissue or a handkerchief up their sleeve or in their pocket.

Spitting -

In Canada, it is extremely rude to spit in public.



Water -

The water in the taps is clean enough to drink and brush your teeth with. Some people prefer to drink bottled water and some people filter their water in a pitcher before they drink it.

Meal times -

Most Canadians eat three times a day. Breakfast can be a small meal of cereal, toast, yogurt or some fruit. On the weekends, Canadians may eat a more substantial cooked breakfast of eggs, bacon or omelets, according to preference.

People in Canada usually eat a light lunch – soup, sandwiches or a salad are the most common foods chosen for a weekday lunch. This is normally eaten between 12 and 2pm.

In Canada, the evening meal is usually eaten between 5:30pm and 7:30pm. This is usually called 'supper' or 'dinner.' It is normally a large meal, consisting of meat or fish and vegetables, a dish made with eggs, pasta or pizza.

Eating in restaurants -

Canadians are very polite to waiters in restaurants. If you want a waiter to come to your table, you should raise your hand, but not snap your fingers. To attract their attention when they are close by, you should say 'excuse me.'

Canadian table manners and customs:

If you put your knife and fork on your plate, a waiter will think that you have finished eating. If you want to take a break but have not yet finished, place your knife and fork by the side of your plate. A

good waiter will not clear your plate from the table until you have finished eating.

In Canada, it is considered very bad manners to put your elbows on the table and to speak with your mouth full. It is also not polite to make a lot of noise when you eat; chewing noisily and slurping are bad manners in Canada.

Tip/Gratuity

It is customary to leave a tip of 15% of the bill at the end of the meal unless the bill says *Gratuity Included*.

Eating in public –

In Canada, it is not acceptable behavior to eat, and drink in the street and on public transport. You should not eat in shops, banks, offices or in post offices. It is illegal to consume alcohol in public parks and beaches.

Alcohol –

It is illegal for young people under the age of 19 to consume alcohol. If you look younger than 30 you may be asked to provide photo ID in the form of a passport or driver's license. You need to show photo ID to get into a nightclub, regardless of your age.



It is acceptable in Canadian culture for men and women to drink as a form of social behavior.

Club/Bar closing time –

Downtown clubs close at 3:00a.m., other clubs close at 1:00 am. Bars and pubs close earlier, depending on the location.

10 or 15 minutes before this time, the barman will say, 'Last call!' meaning that is your last opportunity to order another drink.



Store Opening times* –

Stores open between 9-11am

Stores close between 5-9pm

*Exact times may vary according to location

Major stores are usually open late, until 9 pm, on Thursdays and Fridays.

Stores in Canada are open all day; they do not close for lunch. There are some convenience stores, drugstores, and supermarkets which close at midnight or are open 24 hours a day.

Sunday opening:

Most large stores are open on Sundays, but may close earlier. Supermarkets are open on Sundays for the same hours as on weekdays.



Bank and Post Office Opening times* –

Monday – Friday 9am-5pm

Saturday – 9-3 (some banks do not open on Saturday)

Sunday – closed

* Exact times may vary according to location.

It is easy for students to open bank accounts in Canada. All you need is two pieces of ID such as your St Giles student card, your passport and a credit card. Sometimes there are cheaper bank fees if you can show them that you are a student.

As an alternative to banks, there are also Credit Unions in Canada. You may wish to check around for the best services and fees for you.

Electricity –

Standard voltage in Canada is 110 volts. Our plugs have two flat prongs same as in the USA. Please bring adaptors with you if you wish to use electronic equipment from your own country.

Clothing –

Students tend to dress casually during the daytime at school. You may wish to bring special clothes for going out in the evening and some bars and clubs will not allow you to enter if you're wearing jeans or sportswear. Vancouver has a moderate climate, it is not very hot and humid in the summer and it is not very cold in the winter. There are four distinct seasons. The winters in Vancouver are the mildest in Canada. It rarely snows except in the mountains but it does rain in the winter, so bring an umbrella and appropriate outerwear. In spring, the weather is variable, with both sunshine and spring showers. Summers are gorgeous, sunny and with pleasant temperatures from 24 to 28 degrees Celsius. Fall still has sunny days, but the evenings get cooler and the days shorten as winter comes. The best way to dress in Vancouver is to wear layers.

If you are staying in a homestay, you should ensure that you are decently dressed at all times. It may cause offense if you are not dressed before you go to breakfast, for example, but it is a good idea to follow the example of the hosts with regards to what is acceptable.

On the road –

In Canada we drive on the right side of the road. If you are accustomed to driving on the left, remember to look in the other direction when you're crossing the road.

Speed limits -

In residential areas – 50 km, near parks and schools, 30 km (unless indicated otherwise)

On freeways and highways – 80 - 100 km (unless indicated otherwise)



Crosswalks -

Crosswalks are designated places for pedestrians to cross the street. You should not cross the street where there is no crosswalk. There is usually a sign at the crosswalk indicating when you should cross.

Public transportation -

Buying passes/transfers

If you are catching a bus, you should always buy your transfer ticket from the driver at the time of boarding. Only exact fare is accepted so have plenty of change with you. On the Skytrain stations, you have to get a ticket before entering the boarding area. You can buy monthly passes and books of transit tickets which are cheaper than individual fares, from grocery and convenience stores. Note that Vancouver is divided into transit zones and the fare varies depending on the number of zones during rush hour.

Sitting down:

If you get on a bus or a train, it is acceptable to sit down next to someone (you don't need to ask!) If you arrive at a spare double seat, you should sit next to the window and leave a spare seat for other people to use. It is considered impolite to sit in the aisle and expect fellow passengers to climb over you in order to sit down. If someone is seated next to you and you want to get off the bus, just say 'excuse me.'

There are **priority seats** on most buses. These are reserved for seniors, the disabled, pregnant women or people traveling with very young children in their arms. It is ok to sit on these seats, but you should get up and offer your place if anyone of the aforementioned people get on.

Standing up:

You are allowed to stand up on public transport.

Using the telephone -

In Vancouver and Canada the phone numbers are ten digits, including the city area code. Phone calls from a payphone are \$0.50 for a local call, and some phones in places like Vancouver airport take credit cards. The cheapest way to phone long distance is either by using Skype on a computer or using a phone card. We sell phone cards at the school for the convenience of our students. Phone cards can be used from anywhere, pay telephones, cell phones, etc.

Not all Canadian cell phones (we don't call them mobile phones, but cell phones) use the GSM system. FIDO and Rogers are telephone service companies that use GSM, but other companies like TELUS (TELUS is the largest company with probably the best cell coverage) do not.

Cell phone etiquette

In Canadian culture, it is considered rude to have your cell phone ring in a restaurant, theatre or during a business meeting. We ask that students turn off their cell phones during classes.

Making Long Distance Calls

When you make a long distance telephone call from Canada, you must add 011 + country code + city code + telephone number. When you are calling to Canada from another country, you should add 001 + the city code + telephone number. The city code for Vancouver is usually 304, but cell phones may have a different code.

Social behavior –

Personal space:

You should not stand too close to people when you talk to them. Canadian people find this uncomfortable.



Meeting and Greeting:

Most people shake hands when they meet for the first time or in a formal situation. When people are good friends, they will sometimes hug each other to say hello, goodbye or thank you.

Eye contact:

In public, and particularly on public transport, people avoid making eye contact with strangers. Most people either read or look towards the ground slightly rather than at peoples' faces. People in Canada find it uncomfortable if they feel as though someone is watching them.

'Excuse Me'

There are many occasions to use "excuse me" or "sorry" to be polite. Here are a few examples:

- We say 'excuse me' or 'sorry' if we bump into someone, or if someone bumps into us
- We say 'sorry?' when we haven't heard someone.
- 'Excuse me' precedes any intrusive question e.g. 'Excuse me, do you know if this train stops at West Pender Street?'

