

15 Cultural Protocols to Know Before you Visit Native Homelands in the U.S.



AIANTA
American Indian Alaska Native
Tourism Association

The American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA), the only national organization dedicated to advancing cultural heritage tourism in Native Nations and communities across the United States, is sharing 15 cultural protocols travelers should know before visiting Native homelands in the U.S. While every tribe and region of Native America is different, follow these general guidelines for visiting Native lands.

Each tribal nation in Native America makes the decision on how best to balance community and tradition while providing visitors with enjoyable experiences. However, to avoid misunderstandings or violations of our traditions, tribes ask that visitors follow a basic code of conduct. In doing so, tribes can ensure the protection of sacred and ceremonial areas, including the preservation of historical artifacts.

Which term is preferred, American Indian, Native American or Indigenous?

All terms are generally acceptable, although many individuals have a preference. "American Indians" specifically refers to Indigenous people of the lower 48 states, while "Native Americans" encompasses Alaska Natives as well. Native Hawaiians are distinct from "Indians" and are their own unique people with ancestral ties to their homelands. To delve deeper into Hawaiian culture and protocols, visitors can consult the [Ma'ema'e Toolkit](#), a resource developed in collaboration with the Native Hawaiian Hospitality Association and the Hawai'i Tourism Authority. "Indigenous" is more internationally favored.



What do Native peoples want to be called?

A key aspect of understanding cultures different from your own is through asking questions and actively learning about them. When referring to multiple individuals with different tribal affiliations, both "American Indians" and "Native Americans" are acceptable terms. However, when referring to individuals, it is preferable to use the name of their specific tribe whenever possible or available. Here are some examples:

- He is a Navajo commissioner.
- She is a citizen of the Nisqually Indian Tribe.
- He is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

It's important to note that many of the tribal names commonly known are not the names the people refer to themselves as. For instance, "Nez Perce" is a colonizer-assigned misnomer, whereas "nimiipuu" is the preferred term, meaning "the people" in their own language.

What is Indian Country?

Indian Country refers to the many self-governing and sovereign Native American communities in the U.S., including Native American reservations and trust lands. Federally recognized tribes and the United States have a government-to-government relationship. As sovereign nations, they create and enforce their own laws, determine citizenship, and license and regulate activities in their jurisdictions. Native Americans are also United States citizens and have the right to vote. There are also state recognized and unrecognized tribes, while some Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian people have unique status.



How many tribes and Native Americans are there in the U.S.?

There are 574 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages. A federally recognized tribe is an American Indian or Alaska Native tribal entity that has a recognized government-to-government relationship with the U.S. Additionally, there are more than 60 state-recognized tribes, which allows for a degree of self-determination at the state level but not at the federal level. According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2021, there are 7.2 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives living in the U.S., including those of more than one race.

Where is Indian Country?

All of America is considered Indigenous homelands. Due to treaties and forced displacement, the establishment of reservations, etc. were created. Today, the term "Indian Country" refers to this land base, while Natives continue to maintain their connection to their homelands beyond these borders. More than 56 million acres make up Indian Country, an area that when combined would be roughly the size of Great Britain. This area is spread across 326 Indian lands, including reservations, rancherias, pueblos, and villages. The largest is the 16-million-acre Navajo Nation Reservation that stretches across three states in the Southwest, and the smallest is a 1.3-acre parcel in California where the Pit River Tribe's cemetery is located. Many smaller reservations are less than 1,000 acres in size. Some reservations represent tribes' ancestral lands while others were created by the federal government to forcibly resettle Native Americans away from their homelands. Not all federally recognized tribes have reservations.



Can I visit any reservation?

Many reservations welcome visitors and have recreational, historical, and cultural sites and events to share with the public. All the attractions, experiences, and accommodations listed on [NativeAmerica.Travel](#) are open to the public. Other tribes prefer not to have tourists or require that visitors register at a tribal office. When in doubt, visit the tribal government website to understand if and where visitors are welcome. When visiting any reservation, you are considered a guest and should respect the privacy of the residents and adhere to the tribe's laws.



Do Native Americans share a common language?

Hundreds of languages were once spoken among indigenous people of North America, but today, English is the most common language used at home, school, and work. American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians originate from diverse cultures, each with its own language passed down through oral tradition over thousands of years. Presently, about 200 of these languages still exist, but many have only a few speakers remaining. Various tribes are actively engaged in revitalizing their languages and striving to increase the number of speakers among their members.



What is there to do in Indian Country besides gambling?

About a third of federally recognized Native American tribes have gaming operations, but there is much more to experience in Indian Country. Come meet the people behind the adobe dwellings of the Southwest, the buffalo herds of the Northern Plains, the exquisitely carved totems of Alaska, and all the Indian Country in between. Native American geography and heritage are diverse and very much alive, offering visitors a multitude of authentic experiences grounded in history. While many tribes continue to face economic hardships as a result of historical injustices, Native Americans are proud people with many stories to tell.

Burial grounds and religious ceremonies are sacred and are not to be entered.

Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians are hospitable and generous in nature. However, spiritual teachings, sacred ceremonies, and burial grounds are not openly shared with the public. Native peoples are proud of their teachings and their heritage. These have been passed down by their ancestors and represent thousands of years of individual histories. Your patience and understanding of their traditions and cultures are appreciated.



What are the guidelines for photography on Native lands?

It is a respectful practice to ask for permission before taking any photos on Native lands. Unless you see a sign posted on the premises, always ask before photographing or recording an individual, an event, or activity, as there are some reservations that prohibit photography, videography, or the use of drones. Some may require a paid permit.

Always be aware of your surroundings by being attentive to signage and obey individual tribal rules and regulations.

Weapons, drugs, and misuse of alcohol will not be tolerated. Please respect the privacy of residential communities. It is always a good idea to ask about the local laws beforehand.



What are some important things to consider when planning to travel to Indigenous lands?

As with all travel planning, a good starting point is to research the communities you plan to explore and then be prepared to ask questions on site. Contacting each Tribe or Native Nation before you go is also a great idea to see if they're welcoming visitors or hosting sacred events on a particular day, not open to the public.

Do not pick up or remove artifacts or objects.

Remember, artifacts and objects found on Native lands belong to the land and its people. If you see something that is of interest, ask your guide if they're able to teach you about it. Consider investing in art from a tribal artisan as one of the many ways you can support the tribe while bringing home a memento from your visit (beadwork, basketweaves, pottery, clothing, canvas painting, and much more).



Are there resources to help me plan my trip to Native America?

AIANTA created the NativeAmerica.travel website to share the unique experiences available to travelers throughout Native Nations and communities. Today, it is the leading travel resource for travelers planning trips to native destinations, and for tribes and native enterprises looking to grow Indigenous tourism as a means of economic development. Visitors interested in learning more about Native culture can visit www.nativeamerica.travel and can learn more about AIANTA at www.aianta.org.

Buying authentic arts and crafts.

Under the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, all American Indian and Alaska Native art and craft products must be marketed truthfully regarding the Native American heritage and tribal affiliation of the artist or craftsman. To ensure you are buying authentic art, follow these buying tips:

- Request a written guarantee or written verification of authenticity
- Get a receipt that includes all the vital information about your purchase, including price, maker, and maker's Tribal affiliation
- Realize that authentic handmade pieces may be expensive. If a price seems too good to be true, be sure to ask more questions about the item and its maker.
- These tips are provided by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board (IACB). For more tips, visit their website at www.doi.gov/iacb.



About AIANTA

For more than 26 years, the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA) has served as the only national organization dedicated to advancing cultural heritage tourism in Native Nations and communities across the United States. Established by tribes for tribes to address inequities in the tourism system, AIANTA is a 501(c)(3) national nonprofit governed by an all-Native board of directors and serves as a united voice for the \$15.7 billion Native hospitality sector. AIANTA's successful legislative work led to the industry-changing Native American Tourism and Improving Visitor Experience Act (NATIVE Act) funding in 2018, as Indian Country Tourism was recognized through federal appropriations via NATIVE Act implementation. AIANTA's mission is to define, introduce, grow, and sustain Indigenous tourism that honors traditions and values. Native Nations and communities who are looking to start or expand their cultural tourism footprint can find resources at www.aianta.org and visitors interested in learning more about Indigenous culture can visit www.nativeamerica.travel.