



AIANTA

American Indian Alaska Native
Tourism Association

15 cultural protocols to know before you visit Native homelands in the U.S.

Kicking off National Native American Heritage Month in November, 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.

1. **Which term is preferred, American Indians or Native Americans?** Both terms are generally acceptable, although many individuals have a preference. "American Indians" refers specifically to Indigenous people of the lower 48 states while "Native Americans" includes Alaska Natives as well. Native Hawaiians are not considered to be "Indian" and are their own unique people. "Indian Country" is the term most commonly used to refer to the homeland of Native Americans. To learn more about Hawaiian culture and protocols, visitors can refer to the [Ma'ema'e Toolkit](#) created in partnership with the Native Hawaiian Hospitality Association and the Hawai'i Tourism Authority.
2. **What is Indian Country?** Indian Country refers to the many self-governing 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. They can make and enforce laws, determine membership, and license and regulate activities in their jurisdictions. Native Americans are also United States citizens and have the right to vote.
3. **Where is Indian Country?** 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.

4. **What do Native peoples want to be called?** A key piece to understanding cultures different than yours is asking and learning about them. A great way to do this is to ask a member of the homelands what they want to be called.
5. **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. In addition, 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. There are 7.2 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives living in the U.S., including those of more than one race (U.S. Census Bureau 2021).
6. **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 and is used at home, school and work. American Indians, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians come from many different cultures with their own languages, passed down through oral tradition over thousands of years. Today, about 200 of these languages remain, but many have only a handful of speakers. Numerous tribes are working to revitalize their languages and increase the number of speakers among their members.
7. **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.
8. **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, activities and lodgings 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, call ahead to the tribal government office 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.
9. **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 is 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.

10. **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.
11. **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 our teachings and our heritage. These have been passed to us by our ancestors and represent thousands of years of our individual histories. Your patience and understanding of our traditions and cultures are appreciated.
12. **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).
13. **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:
 - a. Request a written guarantee or written verification of authenticity
 - b. Get a receipt that includes all the vital information about your purchase, including price, maker and maker's Tribal affiliation
 - c. 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.
 - d. These tips are provided by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board (IACB). For more tips, visit their website at www.doi.gov/iacb.
14. **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 do not allow photography or require

a paid permit.

15. **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 Indian Country. Today, it is the leading travel resource for travelers planning trips to native destinations, and for tribes and native enterprises looking to grow Indian Country 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.

A few closing thoughts as you plan your visit – Native Americans live like anyone else in the U.S. with few exceptions and do not live in traditional dwellings or wear traditional regalia outside of celebrations or ceremonies. Most are happy to share information about their culture if asked respectfully. Although local customs vary, dressing modestly, listening when elders are speaking and leaving artifacts where they lie will help ensure that you are not disrespecting the local norms.

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About AIANTA

Founded in 1998, the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA) was established by tribes for tribes to address inequities in the tourism system. Governed by an all-Native board of directors, AIANTA serves as a united voice for the \$14 billion Native hospitality sector. AIANTA's priorities are; 1) to provide technical assistance and training, research, and publications to American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities engaged in tourism and hospitality; 2) to facilitate conversations with the Native communities, federal agencies, non-profit associations, and elected officials on the economic and cultural importance of a healthy hospitality industry; 3) to highlight the importance of visiting authentic Native destinations, including cultural, heritage, historic, and artistic sites; and 4) to generate awareness, interest and demand for these destinations with domestic and international travelers, the travel trade and the media. www.aianta.org.

Media Contact

Liz Slobodian

Liz@ShipwrightCommunications.com