

**Columns**

## A trip 'back home' provides reminders of what makes America special

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By Dan Franch

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Time flies when you're having fun. Just the same, all good things must come to an end. That perfectly sums up my experience in the U.S. last year, when I returned for a visit from early August to late December.

It was the longest stretch of time I'd spent in the country since moving away in 2000. And I loved it!

I'm often critical of the U.S., but during my travels through Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, D.C., and Arizona — meeting friends, family, and new people — I chose to focus on what makes America remarkable.

### **Openness**

America is open, and I'm not just referring to its borders — regardless of where you stand on that hot-button issue. There's a feeling of openness and space when you're here. Perhaps this is what people mean when they talk about freedom. No wonder, considering the country's vast size. This expanse fosters a sense of freedom in how people live and do things. America isn't burdened by

history, traditions, and social expectations, so people are free to be themselves. Foreign visitors often tell me that the moment they set foot in America, they feel welcomed and considered part of the culture. That's rarely the case in Europe, where language, culture, traditions and family history run deep and may draw dividing lines.



## Nature

America's natural beauty is spectacular. It has it all — deserts, rain forests, prairies, mountains, swamplands and everything else that defines nature. During this visit, my wife and I explored the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina, the Shenandoah Forest in Virginia and Michigan's Pictured Rocks National Forest. Alongside spectacular landscapes, we encountered elk, bears, deer, squirrels, chipmunks and more. While many visitors focus on America's big cities (which are fantastic in their own right), the country's natural diversity is awe-inspiring. It also makes the U.S. a global hotbed for natural resources.

## The Arts



Dan Franch enjoys the view at the Shenandoah Forest in Virginia during his trip back to the States during the last half of 2024. Courtesy Dan Franch

If there's one thing I truly miss about living in America — especially Chicago — it's the vibrant live music, dance and theater scenes. Chicago boasts world-class blues and jazz clubs and regularly hosts top-tier touring acts from all musical

genres. Its theater and dance scenes buzz with both local and international talent. While Europe may rival and even exceed the U.S. in the quantity and variety of art museums and exhibitions, America, nevertheless, holds its own. Whenever I'm back, I make sure to immerse myself in some form of artistic experience.

### **Friendliness**

American friendliness is legendary, as is its customer service. It's all smiles, all the time. A European colleague recently asked if I'd grown tired of what she called Americans' "fake smiles." I see her point, but I'll take warm greetings and friendly interactions over the grimaces, sneers and silence that often greet me in Europe. And good luck striking up a conversation with a stranger in Europe. Small talk hardly exists there. While the chit-chat is just that with someone in the U.S., it can be entertaining and a pleasant way to pass the time.

### **Dynamism**

This is where America truly shines and thrives. Americans have a forward-thinking, future-focused mindset, always intent on what can be done rather than what can't. Despite a population of over 300 million, the country can adapt, innovate and pivot faster than most others. It's remarkable, really. Americans embrace new ideas, technologies and trends at breakneck speed, often leading global movements. Failure isn't seen as the end — it's just a step toward trying again. In Europe, failure often carries a stigma, but in America, it's part of the process toward success.



### **Energetic optimism**

Americans are brimming with positive energy — it's palpable. People are constantly on the go, chasing goals with relentless enthusiasm. Their optimism is captivating, even if some might call it naive. Americans are "go-getters" with a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" and "the sky's the limit" approach to life. Sure, some of it might be superficial, but it fuels resilience and hope. Americans are dreamers, not fatalists, always striving to turn ambitions into reality. This

pursuit drives innovation, collaboration and an enduring belief in second chances. It's a refreshing alternative to Europe's pessimistic-tinged gloom-and-doom outlook on life and the future.

### **In sum**

America has often been called a great social experiment. That description feels apt. It's a place where people come to develop themselves, seek success or escape repression — sometimes all three. It's also been said that America “buys brains,” attracting the best and brightest from around the world. I see that too. Smart people gravitate here because they know they can pursue their dreams, possibly falter, and still try again.

In its October edition, *The Economist* concluded a special report on America's economy with the statement: “But if you want to bet against America, *The Economist* will take the other side of the wager.”

I'd take that bet too. When you combine America's openness, natural beauty and cultural richness with the friendliness, optimism, and dynamism of its people, it would be difficult to find another place like it.



I haven't yet.

• *Dan Franch, franchdan@gmail.com, a former Peace Corps volunteer, grew up in Addison and left for good in 1998. He has traveled to more than 50 countries, starting with a backpacking adventure around the world for a year in 1991. He currently lives and works in Estonia.*

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