

# [***I Returned to the U.S.—American Work Culture Shocked Me***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BPG-0341-JBR6-9186-00000-00&context=1516831)

Newsweek.com

April 2, 2024 Tuesday 8:22 AM EST

Copyright © 2024 Newsweek Inc. All Rights Reserved



**Length:** 1058 words

**Byline:** David Wen

**Highlight:** People don't take their vacation days.

**Body**

I moved to the Netherlands—Maastricht—in September 2018 to pursue a Masters degree. Education there was infinitely cheaper than American education. But in reality, I was looking for a lifestyle change.

Friends and family couldn't understand why I wanted to move because on the outside, I was on my way to achieving "The American Dream." Coming from an immigrant family, I was fortunate enough to attend a top-ranked university—UCLA—and find corporate jobs in both Hollywood and Silicon Valley.

But something was missing. I didn't know what at the time. I applied to study abroad and then watched a YouTube video on Maastricht. It looked like a fairytale, so I decided to make the leap.

Going from the hustle and bustle of San Francisco to the small town of Maastricht was an experience of a lifetime. It's a unique, medieval town that borders both Belgium and Germany. One minute I'm in the Netherlands, the next, in Belgium, then Germany.

I loved cycling in the countryside and the slower pace of life compared to big city life in the U.S. But when I returned to the U.S. for a break, I experienced a reverse culture shock.

Returning to the U.S. for a break was like living in one big Hollywood movie—it was an experience of the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Let me talk you through a day in my life after returning.

I went grocery shopping in the morning. It was an experience and an adventure. I'm used to only one or two choices of brands to choose from in the Netherlands.

Here, there are roughly 50 brands of everything, from toilet paper, to sausages, to coffee. On the one hand, the variety is amazing. On the other, it can take me up to 15 minutes to buy toilet paper.

This is America. The selection is crazy, and while it's nice to come back and see all this variety in the supermarkets—from Safeway, to [*Costco*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/costco?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), to Trader Joe's—it can sometimes be overwhelming when you have every single possible combination of coffee, toilet paper, and it can take me up to 20 minutes to buy a bag of chips.

I look forward to lunch and the food scene in the U.S., from Asian to Mexican to everything in between—there is something for everyone, and fast food everywhere—every block, every mall, every day. No wonder so many people are overweight. I gained 20 pounds in two weeks after returning.

The lack of exercise also doesn't help. During my lunch break, I walked toward [*Stanford University*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/stanford-university?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and shockingly realized that I was the only person walking. I then came to the realization that hardly anybody walks in the U.S.

Homelessness in the U.S. is also shocking. This is the part that Hollywood never shows. While walking down the street, I realized that it's such a contrasting, shocking scene in downtown San Francisco to see techies with their company-sponsored backpacks walk alongside countless homeless people wandering and begging. Of course, there is homeless in The Netherlands, but it's not in your face. There are no tents on the streets.

On this particular day, while meeting my friends, one mentioned her son had an allergic reaction. Luckily, he was fine, but she received a bill for $20,000. Another friend then told me about the time he fainted, got transported to the ER, and was handed a $10,000 bill. It makes one think twice before deciding to go to the ER in the U.S., and healthcare in general.

Straight after, we spoke about work, which is the most American thing to talk about, and he casually told me, "I had to work this past weekend. I'm still working 60 hours a week."

I thought to myself: *If I ever decide to return back to the U.S. for good, it would be difficult for me to adapt back to American work culture—the number of hours, the stress, the lack of vacation, and the fact that people don't take their vacation days.*

But I do miss parts of American work culture—the drive, ambition, energy, and being surrounded by people who are very ambitious about their careers. It drove me to become a better and more confident person, and to be honest, I miss that because that is part of my DNA growing up in the U.S. I came to the conclusion that yes, you do make a lot more money in the U.S., but the trade-off is time.

I overheard some people talking about the most recent mass shooting at an American school in suburban Denver. It seems like this is the norm nowadays in the U.S. It's sad and horrible.

You also hear stories about the police beating up someone else again. What's sad is that many people no longer trust the police, and I know plenty of great police officers. But all it takes is a few bad apples to ruin it for the rest of them.

I do wonder what the news outlets are saying, because when I returned to the U.S. for a bit, I stopped reading the news. You get two different stories. It seems like such a divided country now, the left vs. the right, [*Democrats*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/democrats?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) vs. [*Republicans*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/republicans?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), the police vs. the world. And this is what always shocks me when I come back now—how divided the country has become.

You can literally lose a friend because of ***politics***. The media has played a role in pitting one group against another as well, and it's sad because The United States doesn't seem so united anymore. It seems quite divided every time I come back, and it's sad.

The Netherlands provides me with the following: a slower pace of living, a social safety net, less social comparison, more time and freedom, a better work-life balance, more vacation time, affordable healthcare and education, and being able to travel easily around Europe.

I hope things get better in the U.S., because I left my heart in the U.S. Most of my family and friends are there, and I still consider it home. There are many things I love about the U.S., but there are also things I hate.

But I'll forever be grateful to the country for what it has given me. There is no perfect place, and change takes time. My biggest hope is that the country unites itself once again to truly become the "United States of America."

[*David Wen*](https://www.youtube.com/@hidavidwen) *runs a YouTube channel focused on Dutch lifestyle and culture (through the lens of an American). He grew up in California pursuing the American Dream and worked for big corporations in Hollywood and Silicon Valley before leaving to experience the European Dream.*

*All views expressed are the author's own.*

*As told to Carine Harb.*

***Do you have a unique experience or personal story to share? Email the My Turn team at*** [***myturn@newsweek.com***](mailto:myturn@newsweek.com)***.***

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2371467/david-wen-usa-netherlands.jpg)

**Graphic**

David Wen USA Netherlands

David Wen

David Wen (pictured in the Netherlands) is a content creator, focusing on Dutch lifestyle and culture.

**Load-Date:** April 2, 2024

**End of Document**