

America the *Strange*

One weird part of life is that just when you thought you understood something, you realize that you know even less than when you started. There are a lot of things about America that seem to follow this rule. Today I'll try to explain away some of the weirdness of America the Strange.

"Gambling is illegal, but there are casinos everywhere!"

The legality of gambling differs from state to state. Nevada, home of Las Vegas, is a world-famous example of a state with legalized gambling. However, in say, Minnesota, where gambling is illegal, there are over 20 casinos! They're not part of a clandestine black market, and the authorities aren't just looking the other way. So what in the world is going on here!?

The correct answer is that the casinos are operated on special areas reserved for Native Americans. Long ago the US government stole the Native Americans' land, and in return they later ceded back special "reservations" where the tribes can operate their own government with some degree of independence. A number of tribes have improved their economies by opening casinos on their reservations.

"Why is everything so different from state to state?"

America wasn't originally a single country. When the US was founded, it was more of a loose association by which the 13 original European colonies would work together under the "Articles of Confederation." However, the Articles were too weak to allow the country to be run properly, so the US Constitution was created, instituting a stronger federal government. Since then, the US has always kept a careful eye on the balance of power between the states and the federal government.

And that's why things are so different from state to state.

"But the states all seem to agree on some things...?"

It's true—for instance, the drinking age is 21 for the entire US. Actually, each state *could* set a different drinking age. But of course when the federal government wants the states to agree on something, it plays the trump card—money. If the government says "we'll give you additional federal funding if you make the drinking age 21," the states all fall in line. Money is a powerful thing.

Additionally, the driving age can be slightly different by state, but in most it's 16. As for voting and general-purpose "adulthood," that's set by the federal government at 18 years of age.

Finally, this is a question a Japanese friend in America asked me:

"Do drivers just not care about red lights in America!?"

This also depends on the state, but depending on the circumstances you *can* turn on a red in America. Those of you who live in Japan may not get a chance to put this knowledge to use, but it may come in handy if you're ever on a trivia game show!