

## Guide to US History and Culture: An Interview with Tourism Leader Maricar Donato

Interview by Kate Berardo

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If you want to understand how the world sees the US, ask Maricar Donato. She is Director/Founder of WashingTours and Events and a multilingual tourism leader who guides hundreds of people from all over the globe through the nation's capital each year. As she unlocks mysteries of US history in her tours, Maricar faces all kinds of questions about US culture from her participants. Some questions are based on fact, others on fiction (or Hollywood), but all highlight common perceptions held about the US of A. In this article, Culturocity's Kate Berardo interviews Maricar as she reflects on what she enjoys about working as a professional Washington, DC tourist guide and the perceptions of the US she encounters in her work.

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According to Maricar Donato, 19 million people visit Washington D.C. each year. Yes, she admits, part of the attraction to the nation's capital is the number of free museums and attractions. But more deeply, what entices visitors to the nation's capital is an interest in visiting one of the world's greatest powerhouses and experiencing the culture that fuels it.

Being a guide in this environment is no small feat. It requires the ability to give engaging tours to people of all kinds of backgrounds, ages, races, and beliefs (something that has become almost second nature to Maricar after 10 years) and often to do so in multiple languages (Maricar works in five).

Perhaps more importantly, being a tourist guide means becoming an ambassador for a day or week or however long a tour lasts. Guides have the opportunity to break-down stereotypes and to build ties between nations instead of furthering divides.

Maricar takes this responsibility seriously—and finds her job rewarding as a result. In the first part of this interview, she shares the connections she builds and the satisfaction she gets in her job. In the second part, she highlights both common and unusual questions she has been asked about US culture.

**Q: What do you enjoy most about giving these tours?**

**A:** *I enjoy a lot. I enjoy...*

*...the interaction I get when meeting people who come from such diverse backgrounds.*

*... watching people's faces, their light bulb moment., their smiles, their tears, their interest in wanting to learn more about America.*

*...threading the stories from the sites that they visit, creates a memory that they can keep and share when they return home.*

*I enjoy when people take notes and ask lots of interesting questions that I can learn from and that I can pass on to my future groups. I enjoy it when they know how to listen and in the end share their nuggets of wisdom gleaned from what they've experienced, walked, touched, felt, tasted and smelled.*

*I enjoy speaking with them in the language that they are familiar with but above all the universal language of human contact and face to face interaction. They come to take a tour to know more about a place, to discover, to explore and to learn from an expert.*

*I enjoy also learning from them, from their questions, their emotions, their sensitivity, their discoveries and their ability to interact from one another in a positive or negative situation.*

*I enjoy when at the end of a 5 day tour, I call on random participants to give a voice as to what it was that made the tour a memorable experience. Many come and give a voice to their feelings saying that is not the words, or the different languages that have been spoken but moreso the nonverbal communication that was seen through their eyes, their body language, and above all their human interactions that made it a memory. We call this interconnectivity.*

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Part of the attraction in meeting Maricar is this clear passion she has about what she does and the energy she brings to her work as a result. But for a cultural specialist like me, what makes speaking with someone like Maricar Donato so interesting is that she has access to many different opinions about US culture from people all over the world.

When I talk to Maricar about how the US is perceived, Maricar notes that many of the opinions she hears are based on perceptions which are sometimes distorted, or based on limited information and generalizations. She recognizes the impact of Hollywood: many visitors sometimes seek what they've seen in the movies—50s-like diners, the blue jeans culture, huge limousines, display of patriotism, and evidence of the American Dream.

However, many of the questions she gets asked pose interesting topics for discussion. What is it, Maricar is asked as they visit the capital's many war memorials, that makes Americans seem to be at war so often? Good question.

**Q: What are some other common questions you are asked about the US?**

**A:** *Where do people live... can we see their homes?*

- *Why is the American flag displayed so often outside their homes?*
- *What is a typical work day like?*
- *Why do Americans have such little vacation time?*
- *What do they think of us (e.g. the French, Italians, Swiss, Japanese?)*
- *Is racism still inherent in US society?*
- *Why do people only speak one language?*
- *What are Americans' core beliefs?*
- *Why do Americans seem to live, eat and die in their cars?*

- *Where does the attraction to 'time is money' come from?*
- *Why are people so organized here? Standing in line, following rules, waiting for the light to turn green before walking...*
- *If the next elected President were Muslim or not Christian, would he have to swear by the Bible when he gets inaugurated?*

If you're curious about this last question, the answer is no, and he—or she—wouldn't be the first to use not to use the Bible. In January, 2007, Keith Ellison, the first Muslim elected to Congress, was sworn in using the Koran. There have also been a number of Jewish Congress members who have used the Old Testament instead of the Bible.

The last one is easier to answer because it's fact-based. What about the rest? We rarely stop to think about how our own cultures shape our daily actions and way of thinking. Doing so can be revealing. Knowing your own culture is a key step toward being able to understand, respect, and work with people from different cultures. Besides, being curious toward cultures (your own and others)—showing **culturocity**—is a hallmark of success in a global world.

So, how would you answer these questions? Do we wave our flag more than other countries? If so, why might that be? What do homes in the US say about US culture? What do you consider core US values? Do those around you agree?

Culture is complex and subjective, so don't be surprised if you encounter different thoughts and ideas as you discuss these questions. If you'd like to hear Maricar's answers, consider joining one of her tours. Aside from leading people from all over the world, Maricar regularly leads groups of Americans through the nation's capital, from young ambassadors, to retirees, to convention groups and spouse programs. Visit Washington Tours & Events at: [www.washingtours.net](http://www.washingtours.net). ✧

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*Kate Berardo, founder of Culturocity.com, is an intercultural consultant specializing in innovative intercultural learning. With training experience in ten countries with over 30 different nationalities, Kate focuses on cultural awareness, intercultural competency, relocation, and teambuilding. Media worldwide has featured her work, most recently CNN's Business Traveller and the Dubai Daily Gulf News.*

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