

Background

Cultural awareness when you travel

Most travellers have a story about travel to another country and the problems of cultural differences. Perhaps they arrived late for a meal or they ate too early. Maybe they did something at the dinner table that is *rude or they chose the wrong topics of conversation. These stories are often funny but rarely serious. When two people with experience of travel meet, they usually expect cultural differences – after all, that’s what makes travel interesting. But the visitor with a good cultural understanding will communicate more effectively and be welcome back. Here is a summary of the key areas to consider.

¹ _____
When you first meet, it’s important to talk about ‘safe’ subjects. In all parts of the world, your journey and the weather are likely to be good opening topics. Also, asking about the country you are in and places to visit are good ways to develop a conversation. However, opinions are different when someone introduces the topic of family or free-time interests. Not everyone likes to talk about personal things in the workplace. The *golden rule here is to begin with the safe topics and build the relationship before you move on to subjects like the economy or politics.

² _____
The gestures we make in our own countries do not always ‘translate’. When you shake your head from side to side in India, it can mean ‘Yes’, not ‘No’. But hands can cause bigger problems than heads. For example, putting your hands on your hips in parts of Southeast Asia might suggest you feel angry or *hostile towards them – definitely don’t use it with a police officer or government official!

Glossary

- **acceptable* = something that people think can be permitted
- **custom* = normal way of doing things in a country
- **golden rule* = most important rule
- **hostile* = aggressive
- **rude* = not polite
- **spouse* = person you are married to

Finally, there are your feet. Don’t show the bottom of your shoes in many countries and you might need to take them off when entering someone’s house – or you might need to keep them on!

³ _____
Polite travellers are welcome all over the world and people will invite you into their house. In many cultures, this offer of hospitality is very serious. If you refuse an offer of food, help, or even a gift sometimes, it can be very rude. At a meal, it could be polite to finish everything or polite to leave a little. In general, guests who try anything put in front of them (even the strangest-looking food) will be welcome back in all cultures.

⁴ _____
If you are abroad with a close friend or *spouse, find out what is *acceptable when you are in public. Holding hands is probably safe, but kissing in public might not be. Alternatively, you might be surprised by how much people in some cultures show their affection.

⁵ _____
The rules of punctuality really are very different, even within continents such as Europe. It’s hard to generalize about regions. For example, people often say South American countries are relaxed about being on time, but in Chile it is important to be punctual. There is a simple guideline to follow: If you arrive early or on time, your host might be surprised, but not think it’s rude. If you or someone else arrives late, then perhaps that’s your *custom or their custom (or maybe they just couldn’t find a taxi!) In other words, accept and learn from cultural differences.

