

Cultural Differences

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Cultural differences can get you in trouble! If you are traveling abroad, you may do something to surprise or shock the local people. Even worse, you may unknowingly cause anger or offence. If this happens to you, you may find yourself in the middle of a cultural misunderstanding.

Social rules and standards of behavior can vary widely around the world. What may seem normal behavior in one country may be completely unacceptable somewhere else. For the innocent traveler abroad, an inappropriate gesture can create problems.

How you point at someone or something can have the opposite meaning to that which you intended. By beckoning someone, you may, in fact, have driven him or her away! So remember that hand gestures can mean different things to different people. The thumbs up sign in many parts of the world signals everything is fine. However, be careful! In some countries, it is considered offensive.

Gestures, headshakes, head nods, waving and pointing may help you communicate, or unfortunately may have the opposite effect and cause confusion instead. For the first time visitor, a little research and reading before traveling to a foreign country can prevent such problems.

Manners, etiquette, eating habits, coughing, spitting and other such personal behavior can also arouse strong reactions. Slurping noodles in a fancy restaurant in London will reward you with strong glares of disapproval. Coughing and sneezing without covering your mouth will also make you very unpopular with the locals. Spitting may be considered a healthy habit in China, but is illegal in many countries. The best advice: do what the locals do. This allows you to blend in rather than stand out.

Physical contact with others on trains and buses is a normal part of life in Asia. But in Western countries, people feel uncomfortable and become irritated when people get too close to them or touch them in public. They feel their private space has been invaded. So choose carefully where you sit! Be aware too about your clothing, as standards of modesty differ widely and too much bare skin can attract the wrong kind of attention. And if you smoke, check before lighting up in a public place, as smoking is now banned in some countries.

Although cultural clashes between individuals may seem minor, when magnified many times, they can affect relationships between nations. By understanding cultural differences, politicians can ease international tensions and work toward a better and more peaceful world. And for the individual it can make your travel experience so much more enjoyable!