

# Cultural Etiquette Overview

The purpose of this is to help give a quick summary of good etiquette in different cultures. If you are spending more time with a specific group, then it's recommended to look into more detailed resources.

## General:

- Ask if you should take your shoes off before entering a home
- Accept gifts
- Use the right hand for greeting, giving a gift, receiving a gift, etc. The left hand is generally considered to be a secondary hand used for cleaning and other dirty tasks
- Don't discuss politics or anything about their home country that could bring back negative memories.
- Punctuality isn't critical in many other cultures.
- Be respectful and courteous, especially towards elders.
- Don't refer to the US as "America" to those from Mexico or South America.
- Avoid situations in which you will be left alone with a member of the opposite gender
- Saying a greeting in their native language is appreciated
- Don't take photos of someone without their permission

## Islam:

- In general, avoid public displays of affection, criticism of others, and losing your patience. Do not take someone's photo without first asking permission. All of these are viewed as rude and disrespectful.
- It is important to know that men and women usually don't greet each other in public if they are not from the same family. Men also avoid eye contact with women they are not related to.
- When eating, do not touch anything with your left hand. The left hand is used to clean bodily excrements and viewed as unclean. The right hand is the clean hand used for eating, shaking hands etc. Enter and leave the house with the right foot.
- Dress modestly for home visitation.

### **Afghanistan:**

- Men and women are expected to be separated from each other.
- Do not push an Afghan to tell you about their family. Some people have been separated from relatives or had family members killed. Others may be hesitant to talk about the family they have left in Afghanistan out of fear that it could endanger them.

### **Argentina:**

- Hats are expected to be removed when entering buildings, houses, elevators and (among some men) when in the presence of women.
- Try to tolerate a higher volume of noise. Argentines are generally more open to loud music and conversation in a social situation.

### **Bangladesh:**

- It is considered impolite to cross one's legs or to smoke in the presence of elders.
- Do not give byproducts of pork to a Muslim or beef/leather byproducts to a Hindu.
- Drawing parallels between Bangladesh and other countries on the Indian subcontinent such as India or Pakistan may offend your Bangladeshi counterpart. Bangladeshis often get these comparisons, yet take great pride in being culturally and politically distinct from both India and Pakistan.

### **Brazil:**

- Since Brazilians are generally easy going, the etiquette for visiting their home is quite casual and relaxed.
- It is considered to be impolite to arrive on the designated time. If invited to a Brazilian household, come no earlier than 15-30 minutes after the designated time.

### **Chile:**

- It is polite to greet the head of the family first.
- It is expected that you will arrive on time if the person you are visiting is of a higher status or the visit is related to business.

## China:

- Give and receive everything with two hands.
- It is expected that one bows their head slightly and speaks softly when conversing with someone elderly. The advice or opinion of the elderly should never be contested. Talking back to or refuting them is considered very rude.
- Are often punctual and will generally arrive at the designated time, particularly when meeting someone for the first time.
- Do not draw on similarities between China and Japan, as these East Asian countries have distinctly different societies and cultures. Many Chinese find blanket, uninformed comparisons to be insulting or ignorant.

## Columbia:

- It is a polite gesture to bring cakes, traditional breads and desserts to the host when visiting for the first time.
- Do not ask about “violence in Colombia” unless you have a specific question. Colombians are generally open to discussing the subject, but they can find it tiring or even annoying when foreigners seek a broad explanation.

## Congolese:

- An inquiry must be made about one's health and family to indicate the required level of respect.
- Older people are shown respect through physical gestures, and agreement with them is considered more important than frankness.
- Congolese people give much importance to good dressing.
- Hands are shaken with men and women on encounter and departure.

## Cuba:

- Touching people is normal. It's more a demonstration of affection or used for emphasis when speaking.
- It's commonly understood that “Cubans loathe open conflict and will typically minimize interpersonal conflicts by [expressing them through innuendo](#) rather than direct accusation.”
- When you hear people speaking loudly, complaining, or possibly arguing, this is usually more an expressive discussion than it is a fight or severe disagreement (in public).

### **El Salvador:**

- While shaking hands, use the appropriate greeting for the time of day: "buenos dias"(good morning), "buenas tardes" (good afternoon), or "buenas noches" (good evening).
- In many ways El Salvador is a formal culture where only close friends and family use first names (Use Senor or Senora).

### **Guatemala:**

- Guatemalans take titles seriously. Whenever possible, they should be used when addressing the individual in person or via correspondence.
- Men will greet friends with a handshake different from the standard business handshake. Grips tend to be firm. When meeting someone for the first time, it's customary to say, "*mucho gusto*"

### **Honduras:**

- Hondurans are generally like most people when it comes to personal space. Good friends might pat each other's backs but most people confine touching to just the handshake.

### **Iraq:**

- Avoid sitting in any position that allows one's shoe to face another person. This is considered insulting. Similarly, it is inappropriate to cross your legs when facing someone.

### **Mali:**

- It is very rude to interrupt elders when they are speaking and one should never ever contradict them, even if they are completely wrong
- Greetings are also an important part of Malian culture, and it is considered impolite not to greet another person.

### **Mexico:**

- It is polite to say "*Salud*" when someone sneezes. This literally translates as "health" but means the equivalent of "bless you".
- Never criticize the Virgin of Guadalupe or say anything about her that could be perceived as a slight

### **Myanmar (Burmese):**

- Be sensitive to the reality that many Burmese living in other countries may have experienced trauma of some kind.
- If you have taken your shoes off, do not leave them lying upside down. This is believed to cause bad luck.
- It is impolite to sit on a chair with one's legs crossed, especially for women.

### **Nepal:**

- There is a strong emphasis on cleanliness in Nepal, influenced by social and religious customs. Certain actions, objects and body parts are considered particularly pure or impure. For example, the head is understood to be the purest part of the body, whilst the feet are the dirtiest. 'Jutho' (impurity) refers to food or objects that are ritually polluted or excluded and are therefore inedible.
- One should always sit in a way that avoids the soles of their feet pointing at another person.
- Hindus do not eat beef out of veneration for the cow. The whole of Nepal has generally followed suit. While it is usually okay to eat it in front of a Nepali, do not offer beef to them.
- Nepalis tend not to give gifts often or make a big fuss about them. It is polite to bring fruit or sweets as a small gift when visiting someone's home; however, anticipate that gesture is unlikely to be received with profuse gratitude.

### **North Sudan:**

- It is rude to show, point or expose the soles of your feet to another person whilst sitting.
- When something does not happen according to plan due to one's error, one can say "*Malesh*" (Sorry). This offers regret whilst saving one's reputation at the same time.
- Guests usually arrive at mid-morning or early evening to avoid interrupting a family meal.
- Alcohol and pork are prohibited in Islam and rarely consumed in Sudan. Do not offer alcohol or pork to your Sudanese counterpart if you know that they are Muslim.
- Do not assume that the Sudanese and South Sudanese are culturally similar. They are from different countries and have different languages, religions, ethnicities and lifestyles.

## **Peru:**

- It is also polite to show concern for the health of the hosts' family and their relatives.
- In a social setting, genuine attempts to speak Spanish will be appreciated, regardless of the level of proficiency.
- Try not to stereotype contemporary Peruvian culture based on ancient Inca culture.
- Do not be offended if you are called '*gringo*'. This term is generally used not as an insult but as a way to refer to any foreign people or objects.

## **Somalia:**

- Wear clothes that cover your shoulders and knees to respect the modesty of your Somali counterpart. Women especially are expected to be modest in their behavior and dress when in public.
- It is rude to show, point or expose the soles of your feet to another person whilst sitting.
- It is very disrespectful to tell an elder what to do or openly disagree with them.
- Alcohol and pork are prohibited in Islam and rarely consumed in Somalia. Do not offer alcohol or pork by-products (e.g. gelatine) to your Somali counterpart if you know that they are Muslim.
- Meat should be prepared to halal standards.
- Do not eat in public during Ramadan.
- Try to refer to the Somali nation, nationality or culture specifically when possible, rather than "African". It is appreciated when foreigners recognise that Somalia is culturally distinct from the rest of Africa.

## **South Sudan:**

- Do not refer to South Sudan as "Southern Sudan". 'South Sudan' refers to the same region, but recognises that it is now an independent nation.
- Address people using their formal title or reference to a familial relationship, especially if they are older than you
- Show respect to those who are of a higher social status than you by looking down and avoiding direct eye contact.

## **Syria:**

- It is common to smoke cigarettes in public places in Syria, including indoors.
- Displaying the soles of one's feet to another person is improper.
- Observant Muslims will not eat food that contains traces of pork or alcohol. However, it is common for many secular Muslims to consume things that are typically prohibited by the Islamic script. For example, it is normal for some Syrian Muslims to drink alcohol.
- Avoid asking questions about a Syrian man's female family members. It is appropriate and appreciated to ask someone about their family's general health, but specific questions into the private lives of females can be mistaken for overt interest or even disrespect by conservative Syrians.

## **Uganda:**

- When traveling in Uganda there will probably be more than one occasion when you're called a 'Mzungu' by locals. It's not an insult. The literal translation is 'person who wonders without purpose' but most Ugandans these days use it to describe any white foreigner.
- The term 'extended family' is not used in Uganda. A typical family is made of parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins, nieces and nephews. The word 'cousin' in Luganda is the same as 'brother' or 'sister'. Relationships and kinship in Uganda come with responsibility and duties to be performed by family members, especially in times of crisis or need.
- Women don't sit with their legs open. Even when you are wearing trousers, it's expected that you keep your legs together when you sit.

## **Ukraine:**

- Avoid presenting instructions or advice as orders. Ukrainians can be resistant to blunt direction. Instead, explain why something needs to be performed before asking a person to do it.
- Do not associate Ukraine with Russia or draw similarities between the two countries. Ukrainians are likely to take offense at any suggestion that they are a part of the Russian people or culture.

## **Venezuela:**

- People do not usually remove their shoes when they enter someone's house, especially if a woman is wearing high heels.
- Do not diminish the seriousness of the situation in Venezuela. Venezuelans generally speak about the political situation in their country

quite openly and may raise the topic themselves. However, the situation is very complex. If the topic is discussed, it is best to simply listen to their point of view and express sympathy for their people's circumstances. Venezuelans are likely to appreciate that their voice is being heard.





## **Sources:**

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**Islam:**

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