



http://www.asrculturelab.net/tabooos

Avoiding Cultural Taboos

Thanks to the speed and convenience of modern travel, destinations that used to take a long time to travel to can now be reached quickly and easily. Even though jet flights make **far-off locales** seem close, they may still be different from your home country in various important ways. Therefore, it is important to **adapt** your behavior so that you don't insult or offend the local people. Here are some tips that will make communication easier, and your trip more enjoyable.



1 Speech and gestures

Never raise your voice in order to make yourself understood. If you do not know the word for something in the local language, or cannot make yourself understood verbally, try drawing a picture or pointing to an object. Remember, though, that pointing directly at a person can be highly offensive in some cultures. If you have to point something out, do so by gesturing towards the object with the palm of your hand flat, facing upward, and your fingers outstretched. Before you travel, try learning some basic words or phrases of the local language. Most useful are those that express **gratitude** and politeness, such as words for *please*, *thank you*, and *may I*, as well as basic greetings.

2 Religious customs

Consider the main religion of the country you plan to visit and read about any taboos related to clothing, especially if you plan to visit places that are considered **sacred**. As a precaution, bring **conservative** clothes, such as shirts or T-shirts that cover your shoulders, and long trousers.

3 Sensitive topics

Avoid topics of conversation that you think may be sensitive. If a topic is sensitive in your own culture, it will more than likely be the same in other cultures. Feel free to show interest in the history and customs of the place you are visiting, but don't ask too many questions about why things are done a certain way; you may offend the local people.

4 Displaying affection

Keep in mind that, in many cultures, displaying **affection** in public is considered taboo. Kissing on the street or in public places is unacceptable behavior and should be avoided. If you are unsure of how to behave, watch the local people and copy them—if they don't behave in a certain way, you probably shouldn't either.

5 Choosing gifts

35 If you are traveling on business, or plan to stay with a host family, and you wish to take a gift, do some research. The idea of the perfect gift varies greatly from country to country, and one of the easiest ways to offend somebody is to give the wrong gift. In China, it is taboo to give clocks and fans. The Chinese word for "fan" has a similar sound to the word for "separation," while the sound for "clock" is similar to that of "death." In Japan, gifts should never be given in sets of four, as the sound of the word "four" in Japanese is similar to the sound of the word meaning "death."

6 Opening gifts

The opening of gifts is also treated very differently around the world. In many Western countries, do not be surprised if your hosts immediately tear the wrapping paper from a gift in great excitement. They will then tell you how wonderful the gift is, even if they do not like it! In most Asian countries, it is considered impolite to open gifts in front of the gift-giver for fear of offending the person.

Wherever you go in the world, always be **tolerant** of the local customs. Avoid being **critical**; try instead to show respect for the values of the country you are in, even if you do not necessarily agree with them.

A For each question or statement, choose the best answer.

- The author of the reading passage has most likely _____.
a. traveled a lot b. taught at a university c. written several books
- According to the reading, which articles of clothing should you plan to travel with?
a. a T-shirt and shorts b. a jacket and hat c. pants and a long-sleeved shirt
- If a topic isn't appropriate to talk about in your country, it probably _____ okay to talk about in another country.
a. might be b. should be c. isn't
- According to the reading, _____ is not appropriate behavior in many countries.
a. kissing in public b. expressing gratitude c. giving presents
- According to the reading, the best gift to give someone from China is _____.
a. a fan b. a clock c. neither a nor b

B The statements below are about the reading. Complete each one using the correct word or phrase.

- It's useful to learn the words for *please*, *thank you*, *may I*, as well as _____.
- When you're unsure about how to behave, watch the _____.
- The Chinese word for *clock* and the Japanese word for *four* both have the same sound as the word meaning _____.
- In Asian countries it is considered impolite to open gifts _____ the giver of the gift.
- While in another country, if a local person can't understand something you are saying, try _____ or pointing to the object.

Reading Comprehension:
Check Your Understanding