

Much of what we say doesn't necessarily come out of our mouths. **Laura Fountain** looks at the world's unspoken language

The art of not speaking

Place your thumb and first finger together and then fan the rest of your fingers out. In most Western countries, this hand signal is intended to communicate satisfaction, but depending on your location, the person on the receiving end may be offended or even offer you cash. This western sign that everything is 'OK' is highly offensive in Russia and Mexico, while in Japan it means 'money'.

With more than 70 per cent of communication between people coming from our body language, it is important to understand the rituals and customs of non-verbal communication used by other cultures to ensure you are getting the right message across. While we may not have time to learn the language of a country, familiarising yourself with its silent language of gestures will help you to use these powerful communicators to your advantage and avoid causing offence.

As Roger E Axtell, author of *Gestures: Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*, explains: "The world is a giddy montage of vivid gestures – traffic police, street vendors, expressway drivers, teachers, children on playgrounds, athletes with their exuberant hugging, clenched fists and high fives. People all over the world use their hands, heads and bodies to communicate expressively."

However, the multitude of cultures and gestures around the world means there are inevitably going to be clashes of meanings, and people who share a language may draw different messages from the same gesture.

"An American teenager was hitchhiking in Nigeria," describes Axtell. "A carload of locals passed him. The car



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of communication between people comes from our body language, so it is important to understand non-verbal nuances

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screached to a halt. The locals jumped out and promptly roughed up the visitor. Why? Because in Nigeria, the gesture commonly used for hitchhiking (thumb extended upwards) is considered a very rude signal.

"There are behavioural differences between cultures too. I was once walking along with a colleague of mine in Saudi Arabia when he took my hand and held it. Being from the US where physical contact is less common between friends, this was alien to me.

"I later found out that in my colleague's country, this was a sign of friendship and respect, and that I could have caused great offence by pulling my hand away.

"The best advice for travellers is to be aware of what's going on around you and if you see a gesture that you don't understand, ask what it means."

Pleased to meet you

When we are unable to communicate effectively through language, we tend to gesture more, but this may only increase the opportunities for faux pas. As *Lonely Planet* Travel Information Manager Tom Hall describes: "It is possible to get by when abroad by pointing, but in some parts of the world, pointing is considered rude."

The western custom of handshaking is widely recognised throughout the developed world, with some eastern countries adopting this greeting for business situations to make westerners feel at ease.

Handshakes around the world vary though, and while in much of the West a firm handshake is interpreted as a sign of confidence and power, in other countries such



Greetings: The custom of shaking hands is a worldwide sign of respect; a kiss on each cheek is considered quite continental; the Japanese bow is fraught with hidden meaning

“In many parts of the world, there is not always the expectation that, as a visitor, you will get things right. If you forget, a simple smile and an apology will generally be met with friendly acceptance”

► as China, a lighter handshake with eyes averted is polite. The standard greeting for much of Asia is the bow. In Japan, a lot of meaning can be derived and implied through a simple bow. The person of lowest rank in a situation bows first and lowest. In formal situations, it is important to know the rank of the people you are being introduced to and bow lower the more important the person facing you is. Bowing lower and holding the position for longer is a sign of respect and gratitude.

Mind your Ps and Qs

It's not just body language that we need to be aware of when travelling – behaviour that may be acceptable in our home country has the potential to offend abroad. Russians use the word *'nyekulturny'* to refer to anything they consider socially unacceptable. Wearing your winter coat or boots in theatres, office buildings or similar public spaces is *nyekulturny* – no matter how cold it is. Once you've removed your coat in a restaurant or theatre though, remember not to sit on it – this is a definite faux pas.

“People need to be aware that behaviour we wouldn't think twice about at home is not always acceptable abroad,” Hall advises.

“In much of Asia it is offensive to show the soles of your feet, and in Africa, for example, women who enter a bar by themselves are either assumed to be prostitutes or to have sexual intent. This is quite a serious piece of information that lone women travellers should keep in mind.”

Hall advises taking time to research the customs of the country you are visiting before you travel. “Preparation pays dividends when travelling. If you're going to a country you haven't visited before, a good guidebook will tell you what pitfalls you should avoid.

“Learning a few basic phrases – especially ‘sorry’ and ‘excuse me’ – will greatly improve your enjoyment of your trip. A little effort goes a long way when it comes to learning languages and it will be greatly appreciated by the locals.”

Behavioural differences between cultures don't always have the potential to land you in hot water – some could show a friendlier side to other nations.

“In the UK and the West, there is not the same culture of sharing that you find in many parts of the world,” says Hall. “You might find yourself on a bus with strangers who offer you sweets or nuts etc. It's always good to bring along something to offer in return as you'll often have a very different background from most of your fellow passengers and could find yourself feeling awkward.”

Should you find yourself in an empty Egyptian theatre or cinema, don't be surprised if the only other theatre-goer sits next to you. This does not necessarily mean they want to talk to you: Egyptians tend to gravitate towards others. Just don't give them the ‘thumbs up’ sign, as this is offensive in Egypt and much of the Arab world.

Hall says, however, that travellers shouldn't worry too much about what offence they might cause. “In many parts of the world there is not always the expectation that, as a visitor, you will get things right. In Japan, for example, you should take your shoes off when entering a building and there are usually signs in English to remind you of this.

“If you forget, however, a simple smile and apology will generally be met with a friendly acceptance.” ■



Going up in the world

After her first year in Hong Kong, Lloyds TSB's Louise Curtis takes stock of her new overseas lifestyle

Moving from a family house surrounded by green fields to a small flat on the 43rd floor of a high-rise block overlooking the sea is about the most dramatic move someone could make. It's a change that Louise Curtis embraced when she swapped her Cheshire home in the UK for a new life in Hong Kong.

Louise had worked for Lloyds TSB in the UK for 23 years when her husband, John, was headhunted for a job in Hong Kong back in October 2005. She immediately investigated her own options and quickly landed a post running the International Personal Banking service in Lloyds TSB's Hong Kong office.

“The timing was perfect,” she laughs. “If you read it in a book, you wouldn't believe it. From start to finish we had four weeks to move.”

A new way of life

Letting out their UK house, the Curtises rented a flat in Hong Kong and threw themselves into their new jobs. John works for an insurance company, while Louise leads a team of four providing offshore banking to expats and British Chinese who like the structure and commitment of a British bank. Almost every aspect of their day-to-day existence has been transformed, Louise says, from the food they eat to the way they get around.

“We loved our cars and used them a lot,” she says. “But we sold them both when we moved because we would have had to pay so much import tax. But public transport here is so fantastic, we haven't missed driving at all.”

A free shuttle service whisks Louise to work



‘The timing was perfect. If you read it in a book you wouldn't believe it’

every morning – they live right in the centre of Hong Kong island, so the office is just 20 minutes away. She has found the working day much longer – 9am to 8pm is typical – but the Chinese are very sociable, going out together after work and never skipping a lunchbreak. “It's normal to eat out four or five nights a week,” she says. “Living space is so limited that lots of people don't have large kitchens, so there is a real culture of eating out.” It makes financial sense too – two bags of groceries can easily set you back £40.

Any trepidation she had about the language barrier quickly evaporated. “I should be learning Mandarin or Cantonese, but the girls in my team speak fantastic English. When we go out together they explain the menu to me and order for me.” The food is exciting and Louise enjoys trying different cuisines but she admits to missing bacon sandwiches.

In their free time, the couple love to travel. During their first year as expats, they have visited 10 new destinations, including the Philippines and Bangkok. They have also made three trips back to the UK to see family and friends, which has meant Louise has not suffered too badly from homesickness. “We'd like to stay out here as long as they'll have us. The quality of life is better and we are enjoying the ‘work hard, play hard’ ethos. We feel we are living an exciting and rewarding life and have to pinch ourselves to believe it's real.” ■

Louise's tips for new expats

- Don't get stressed about changes; instead, regard them as an adventure. “Of course it's never going to be the same as the UK, but that's why we wanted to do it,” says Louise.
- Be willing to adapt your working style – management techniques that work well at home don't necessarily translate to other cultures: “I find I have become much more aware of my management style and the effect it has on others.”
- Don't forget to explore what's on your doorstep as well as venturing further afield: “There are loads of places close at hand that we haven't yet been to.”