



Learn The Local Etiquette Before Arriving At Your Destination

Rules of engagement

by [Beth Blair](#) | April 2015



Photo: Being 'on time' varies by culture. © Alessandroguerriero | Dreamstime.com

American actress and singer Selena Gomez caused quite a stir when she revealed an ankle inside Abu Dhabi's Grand Mosque over the 2015 New Year holiday. Linden Schaffer, founder and director, Pravassa Wellness Travel, says even if you're not a celebrity, learning cultural norms and expectations in advance is imperative to avoid making travel faux pas.

According to Dawn Bryan, author of *Elite Etiquette*, international travel etiquette and protocol, despite recent massive political and economic changes, remain pretty consistent. However, the luxury business traveler who wishes to be successful needs much more information than the average tourist.

Professional travelers should take into consideration the country, region, religions and culture when doing their homework. It's worth being versed in a number of topics including greetings and salutations, titles, forms of address, gestures (especially the offensive), handshakes, eye contact, personal space issues, gifts (giving and receiving) and even business card exchanges. Bryan says something as simple as waving or beckoning varies from culture to culture. "In most non-American cultures, pointing, chewing gum and speaking with hands in your pockets are all considered impolite,

even offensive. The American sign for 'O.K.' (thumb and forefinger curled to make an 'O') has other meanings: In Japan it means 'money,' and in Norway and Russia it is considered an insult."

As for running late, don't do it. "In most cultures, visitors are expected to be on time; for example, to the Swiss, New Zealanders and Danes, lack of timeliness is considered sloppy and indicates incompetence," says Bryan. "However, in Italy and Portugal, be prepared for the most important or highest-ranking person to arrive later."

Personal space should also be respected. "Maintain some distance when conversing with the English and Japanese as well as most Singaporeans," Bryan advises. As for gift giving, she warns to never wrap a gift for a Chinese associate in white, blue, purple or black as these colors are associated with funerals. In France, business gifts should never be offered at the first meeting, and never expect Asians to open your gift in your presence.



Tipping customs vary greatly from country to country, so be sure to know the local rules before you pay. © Eziogutzemberg | Dreamstime.com

Tipping expectations vary around the world, but first you must know your currency, says actress Channon Dade, who hosts the lifestyle and travel channel ChannonDade.com. Dade recalls a time she requested an exchange of U.S. dollars for Indonesian rupiahs. Instead, the clerk exchanged her U.S. currency for Indian rupees. It wasn't until she arrived in Bali that she realized the discrepancy, and at that point exchanging rupees for rupiahs wasn't an option. Dade now offers the advice to wait until arriving at the final destination's airport to conduct the currency exchange or Google the image of the money to make sure you have the correct currency.

Author and columnist April Masini of AskApril.com says good travel etiquette starts at the airport. "When you check your luggage at the curb, instead of inside, it's good practice and expected etiquette to tip the person checking your bags \$1–2 per bag checked. Tips always vary by airport, the same way they do by culture. Some places expect tips and others refuse," Masini says. "A big, busy airport, like JFK, is a place where tipping is more appropriate because someone going out of his way to help you is not doing other things in order to give you better service. At a slow and sleepy airport, wherever it is, services are a lot easier for employees to perform because there's so much less going on. Your tip should reflect the difference."

She adds, “It is good etiquette to tip the housekeeper at a hotel in order to show her your gratitude for the job she’s done before and during your stay. Tipping some amount is always better than tipping nothing, but a good rule of thumb is a few dollars per day for a normal room and stay. If you’ve left a particularly messy room, double that amount. For example, if you’ve left dishes, full trash cans and bottles and cans or take-out food containers all over the place, give her a few extra dollars for the work. If it’s really bad, \$10 will do. Anyone in a suite should double this amount.”

“Tipping is one of the most common etiquette challenges we face when traveling in foreign countries,” says Mike Kelly, CEO, On Call International, a travel risk management company. “While tipping is pretty much mandatory in the United States, not all countries play by the same rules. In fact, in some destinations, like Japan, a tip is actually considered an offensive display of wealth and pity — leave a 20 percent tip at dinner in a restaurant and you could actually ruin someone’s day. On the other hand, forget to tip in countries like Mexico and you’re committing more than just an innocent faux pas.”

According to Michael Tulipan, editor, TheSavvyExplorer.com, “Americans are inundated with tipping opportunities, from restaurants to taxis to our local coffee shop, and travelers need to be conscious to break the tipping habit overseas.” He notes that workers are paid living wages in other countries and do not rely on tips for the majority of their income, unlike U.S. service workers.

“Travelers to Europe can round up checks with a few coins in most establishments and should tip 5–10 percent at most in high-end restaurants,” says Tulipan. “Also, watch out for service charges in countries like England. If there is a service charge on the bill, the tip is taken care of. Do note that any tips should be left in cash, as the majority of establishments will not have an option to add tips to the credit card receipt.”

Anthony Bianco of TheTravelTart.com lives in Australia, where there is no tipping culture. He says, “In Australia, some people might tip if the meal or service was exceptional, but it’s not commonplace.”

Dianne Hall, director, GoWalkaboutTravel.com, concurs and advises clients visiting Australia and New Zealand never to feel pressured to tip. “For the most part, people get paid well here, but we are also a very expensive country. The rule of thumb in Australia has always been to round up when in a taxi ... so if the driver says it is \$9 for the trip, then you pass him \$10 and say, ‘Keep the change, mate.’”

Rounding up is commonplace elsewhere, too. “The Czech form of tipping is pretty interesting. Czechs — not tourists in the center, where a 10 percent tip has become expected — round up to the nearest reasonable round number,” says Charles Neville, marketing manager, JayWay Travel Inc. “The currency here, the Czech koruna (crown), is the only unit of currency (no cents) and there are [about] 22 to the dollar. A usual bill for two for a lunch with a drink would be 280 crowns, so the diners would say ‘300’ to the waiter to indicate how much they wish to pay, including tip.”

James Kaiser, author of *Costa Rica: The Complete Guide*, reports, “In Costa Rica, a 10 percent tip is automatically included on all bills. Adding an additional tip is entirely optional. Locals almost never add an additional tip, but many U.S. travelers don’t realize the tip is automatically included, so they add an additional 10–20 percent. This makes the Costa Rican servers very happy.”

There is one piece of restaurant etiquette that creates much unnecessary confusion between Costa Rican servers and visiting English-speaking foreigners, Kaiser explains. “In Costa Rica, it’s considered extremely rude for the server to bring the bill before the customer asks for it. In the U.S., customers expect the bill to be delivered promptly and automatically. So in Costa Rica a visitor will wait for the bill to be delivered, and they will grow increasingly frustrated as more and more time passes. The Costa Rican server, meanwhile, is wondering why on earth it is taking so long for them

to ask for the bill. When you want the bill in Costa Rica, wave to your waiter, mock scribble onto your palm and ask for '*La cuenta, por favor.*' "

Brazil follows the same 10 percent service charge, and it is recognized by the label "service," according to Jill Siegel of SouthAmericanEscapes.com. Tips are not customary in taxi cabs, but the "round up" method is common practice. Siegel does say that for private drivers or guides, \$20–50 for a full day is appropriate. "Brazilians are generally discreet when handling money. Fold the bills in your palm and hand them to the recipient in a manner you are going in for a handshake," she says, then adds, "a smile goes a long way in Brazil."

Of course, that advice reaches worldwide. "People pay more attention to your requests if you ask nicely no matter where in the world you are," Linden Schaffer says, "Learn 'hello,' 'please' and 'thank you' in whatever language is spoken where you are traveling. It shows that you took the time to learn something of the culture you are visiting, and people will be more apt to be friendly back."