

## Basic Things You Should Know Before You Go

It's strategic to have some basic facts about your host country at your fingertips. This helps you to get into conversations and shows your respect for the culture. Take some time to investigate the following topics—use the Internet, foreign newspapers, and magazines or ask a person from your host country.

- Names of political leaders
- Names of political parties
- Major religion(s)/spiritual beliefs and their effect on the host country
- Hot topics of the day (e.g., government scandals)
- Recent conflicts and the role of the U.S. in those conflicts
- Type of government
- Year of independence and circumstances
- Economic conditions
- Cultural diversity (immigration and refugee populations, etc.)
- Class structure (e.g., what will your status as a student be in this country? What percentage of students in your host country go to college?)
- U.S. role in local economy, politics, culture, etc.
- Types of gifts, if any, that will be appropriate to bring to host families, new friends, etc.

## Ideas for Interaction

The following are some suggestions from fellow travelers about means of increasing your contact with the hosts in your area and of dramatically increasing your international and intercultural learning experience. Some options may not be available where you are situated, but if there is a need for such a program you might want to make efforts toward its creation.

- What are you interested in? Soccer? Classical music? Juggling? Find a local group, club, or society comprised of locals who have similar interests.
- Start or join a study group to study the language or for a cultural exchange.
- Make a meal for some fellow students or your hosts. One author of this text made tacos in Malaysia—it was tricky finding the ingredients but well worth the effort. Another made chocolate chip cookies with a friend in Taiwan and sold them at a local market!
- School clubs. There usually is an international student organization on campus. What a great way to meet local students who are interested in you!
- Give presentations to local schools, community organizations, and businesses. Often the university or school where you belong will have opportunities, whether volunteer or paid, for foreign students to give short presentations about their home countries. Here's your chance to deepen the locals' cultural knowledge of the U.S. and to de-bunk stereotypes in the process!
- Join in political activities. However, be careful: some countries discourage or even prohibit foreign students from engaging in these activities. Check with your study abroad program administrators before joining.
- Attend religious/spiritual activities. Just because you are in a foreign country doesn't mean you have to stop being spiritual. You may or may not find a place to worship of the same denomination to which you belong, but you can be adventurous and explore the spiritual and religious beliefs of the locals.
- *Adjust your expectations about what you can get done. In the U.S. I am constantly on the go, and I can get a lot done in a day. However, I remember taking a two-hour train trip to Halkis from Athens, conducting a 45-minute interview in Greek (which I was not fluent in), and then returning home on the train. It was only 2 p.m., but that was it for the day. The language, the traveling, the heat of summer—I was wiped out, physically and mentally. ~ Suzanne Hay, Greece*
- *At the beginning of my stay, I never wore a watch, so I was forced to ask people on the bus or on the street what time it was. This built my confidence and helped me meet people. ~ A. J. Fleming, Spain*
- *Try to develop a routine that integrates you into the culture. With repetition, that is, frequenting a certain restaurant or café, locals will become comfortable seeing you and you might make new acquaintances. ~ Julie Radmar, France*

# Strategies for Interacting With Your Hosts

Whether or not you have a homestay, you will probably have an opportunity to visit the home of a local person or family during your travels. In order to prepare for your homestay or visit, take a few moments to focus on the following items. While some of these things may be very minor, feeling prepared and comfortable will help increase your confidence that you will make fewer mistakes and lessen the chance of offending your hosts.

## Greetings and arrival

- What is the expected greeting? A handshake, hug, bow, or simply words?
- What is an appropriate time to arrive? At exactly the invited time, early, a few minutes after the stated time, or hours after the stated time?
- Should you take your shoes off at the door? If so, are you expected to bring indoor shoes to wear? Go barefoot? Or wear something provided by the host?
- How should you be dressed?

## Gift giving

- Is a gift expected? If so, what is appropriate?
- What can you bring from your home culture that would be a nice gift?
- Are certain numbers or colors considered especially good or bad luck?
- Does a gift need to be wrapped? If so, should you encourage your hosts to open the gift in front of you?
- What is the appropriate way to thank someone for a gift?

## Food and meals

- If invited for a meal, should you bring something? If so, what is appropriate to bring?
- Are you expected to help prepare for meals?
- Do you sit down or wait to be invited to sit in a certain place?
- What signals the beginning of a meal—an invitation to eat, a saying, a prayer? Are you expected to participate? Initiate?
- Are you supposed to serve yourself or wait to be served?
- Are you expected to eat everything on your plate or to leave something?
- Are there certain rooms or areas where food and drink are not allowed?
- If you are a long-term guest, is it OK for you to buy food for the family? What about food for just yourself?

## Toilet, bath, and shower

Our experience is that this one room (or two if the shower/bath is separate from the toilet) can be the biggest source of irritation in a homestay. This misunderstanding is typically centered around how often one bathes (often criticized as too often) and how long one takes in a bath or shower (too long). Spending a few minutes talking to your hosts and others can help you prepare for your hosts' expectations. Consider discussing these questions:

- What is the best time to take a bath or shower?
- How long is it OK to spend in the bath or shower?
- How does the faucet work?
- If the bath is viewed as a family tub or communal place, should you wash up before you get into the bathtub? Are others expected to use the same bath water after you've finished?

## Common courtesies

These general questions can help you understand what your role is as an extended guest in someone else's home.

- Will you be asked to follow a curfew?
- Is your room considered private and your own, or can others enter and use your things, even when you are not there?
- Are you expected to be home for all meals? If you are going to miss a meal, what should you do?
- Is it OK to bring your own guest to a meal?
- Does your host family expect to know where you are each day and what you are doing?
- Are there any special rules about using certain areas of the home? For example, an area that is open only to the family? To servants?
- Are there certain items you should ask permission to use, such as the phone or television?

## Departure

- How long does a meal last and how long is it appropriate to stay after a meal is completed?
- If you are a long-term guest, are you expected to do something special for your family upon departure, such as give a gift or take the family to dinner or prepare a meal?