

# Avoiding Misunderstandings

## Avoiding Misunderstandings – By country

Please note that these are general cultural norms that are not meant to stereotype and may vary from person to person.

### General Etiquette Rules (unless otherwise noted below)

- Err on the side of formality. Use “Mr.” “Mrs.” Or “Miss” and last name. It’s fine to ask the person what they would like to be called. Try to become familiar with basic name pronunciation rules.
- To start conversations, ask general questions like “Tell me about where you are from” or “...about your family.” If you do not know much about their country, let them tell you rather than make guesses based in small bits of information.
- Hand gestures (like to signal “OK”, to point to something or to summon someone) often do not translate across cultures. In general, avoid them. Likewise, using your foot (to point or move things) is problematic in some cultures. Use words instead.
- Avoid touching, even in ways that feel comfortable and conversational to you. Touch is OK in some cultures but problematic in others.

See [guide.culturecrossing.net](http://guide.culturecrossing.net) for detailed advice on each country.

### Korea

- Using two hands to hand or receive something shows respect. People lower in status/age shake hands with two hands.
- Do not write someone’s name in red ink (used for names of the deceased in family registers).
- In general, defer to the oldest people in the group.
- Try to avoid putting anyone in a position of being embarrassed or shamed – losing face.

### China

- In general, defer to the oldest people in the group.
- Do not be surprised out you are asked questions about your marital status, family, age, job or income. These are not taboo topics in China and are often asked in order to build connection. You do not have to answer these questions.
- Avoid Touching, but don’t be surprised if people are comfortable standing closer than you are in a crowd.
- Try to avoid putting anyone in a position of being embarrassed or shamed – losing face.

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### Vietnam

- In general, defer to the oldest people in the group.
- Try to avoid putting anyone in a position of being embarrassed or shamed – losing face.

### Latin America

- Don't be surprised if people are comfortable standing close to you, touching your arm or shoulder in conversation, and maintaining direct eye contact. It may be part of normal conversational style, although there are regional differences.
- Handshaking is a common greeting for men and women.

### Haiti

- Follow General rules above re: formality, use of title and family names.
- Don't be surprised if people touch your arm or your arm or shoulder in conversation, and maintain direct eye contact. It may be part of normal conversational style.
- Indirect communication is common; stories are a common way to communicate.

### India

- Light Handshakes or “Namaste” (nah-ma-stay) (palms together at chest level) are common ways to greet men or women.
- Touch, especially between unrelated men and women, is uncommon and may be uncomfortable.
- Indirect eye contact is common in some situations (women-men; elder-younger). Do not interpret it as disrespect or not listening.

### Russia

- Firm handshakes and direct eye contact are common.
- Touch between strangers is not common.

### Predominantly Muslim Countries

- Do not ask a woman to be alone with or sit next to a man who is not her relative.
- Touching between male friends/relatives and between female friends/relatives is common but is not a part of conversation with strangers
- Avoid all hand gestures unless you are familiar with each country's norms. Do not use your foot to point to or move anything.

We appreciate your cooperation and encourage you to contact Welcoming Atlanta - Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs at **404-546-0122** or via e-mail at **welcomingatlanta@atlantaga.gov** with any questions, concerns, or feedback.

