



Mother Knows Best—Except When You're Traveling

Lucy Corne revisits the top five cultural lessons that are best forgotten when visiting certain countries around the world



'Stand up straight'. 'Don't forget to say thank you'. 'Use your indoor voice'. Parents are full of advice for their offspring and for the most part, their words of wisdom are pretty useful. Until you start to travel that is—then suddenly the lessons you learnt in childhood aren't just irrelevant—sometimes they're downright detrimental. Here are five lessons your mum taught you that need relearning when you hit the road.



1. A dozen red roses is a romantic gift

While a dozen roses—or any other flower—might be considered the height of romance in some countries, in others you're sending a more sinister message. In Russia, Romania and Hungary, among others, even numbers of flowers are reserved solely for funerals, so if you're wooing a sweetheart, ensure your bouquet contains an odd number of blooms. The colour of the petals is also crucial—red might be romantic in some places but red flowers will give the heebie-jeebies in Mexico and Hong Kong. Yellow means

separation in Russia, white flowers in China are associated with death and in Egypt, flower-giving is strictly reserved for weddings, illnesses and funerals.



2. Everything is A-OK

Innocent hand gestures can get you into far more trouble than your mouth ever could and it's important to know that the shapes your fingers make don't mean the same the world over. That cheerful finger-meets-thumb symbol you flash to mean 'everything is OK' is tantamount to raising your middle finger if you're travelling in Brazil. Elsewhere the sign might not be so offensive, but it could certainly be confusing—in Japan it means 'money', while in France it's the sign for 'zero'. And this is not the only hand signal that can spell trouble—when you're travelling, take care with beckoning, pointing and even something as seemingly innocent as waving.



3. Always clear your plate

When I find myself in a restaurant with particularly generous portions, I curse my mother for bringing me up to eat every morsel on my plate. But polishing off each piece of food can bring more trouble than a tight belt and an expanding waistline—in some countries, scraping the plate clean tells your host that you haven't been fed enough and can cause huge embarrassment or offence. Mexico, Egypt, Iran, Thailand and the Philippines are

a few places where leaving a few bites will leave a good impression, while mum's message of cleaning every mouthful is the thing to do in Japan, Kenya and much of Western Europe.



4. Look people in the eye

While some countries value direct eye contact, considering it a sign of honesty and respect, trying to gaze into the eyes of the person you're addressing is not the done thing the world over. In the United Kingdom, fleeting and sporadic eye contact is expected, but lingering looks during conversation can make people uncomfortable. The USA and many Western European nations value eye contact, but in Japan and Korea, locking eyes can be deeply awkward at best and profoundly threatening at worst.



5. Don't make noises when you eat

'Close your mouth', 'chew quietly', 'don't slurp your soup'—sound pieces of advice in some parts of the world, but sometimes eating vociferously is not only OK, it's actually encouraged. In Japan, slurping when you eat a bowl of noodles is practically expected. Sucking in air and ending with a smack of the lips conveys a sense of enjoyment when it comes to liquid dishes like noodles and soup. You can also get away with audible eating in China and Korea, but don't even think of trying it in polite British company.