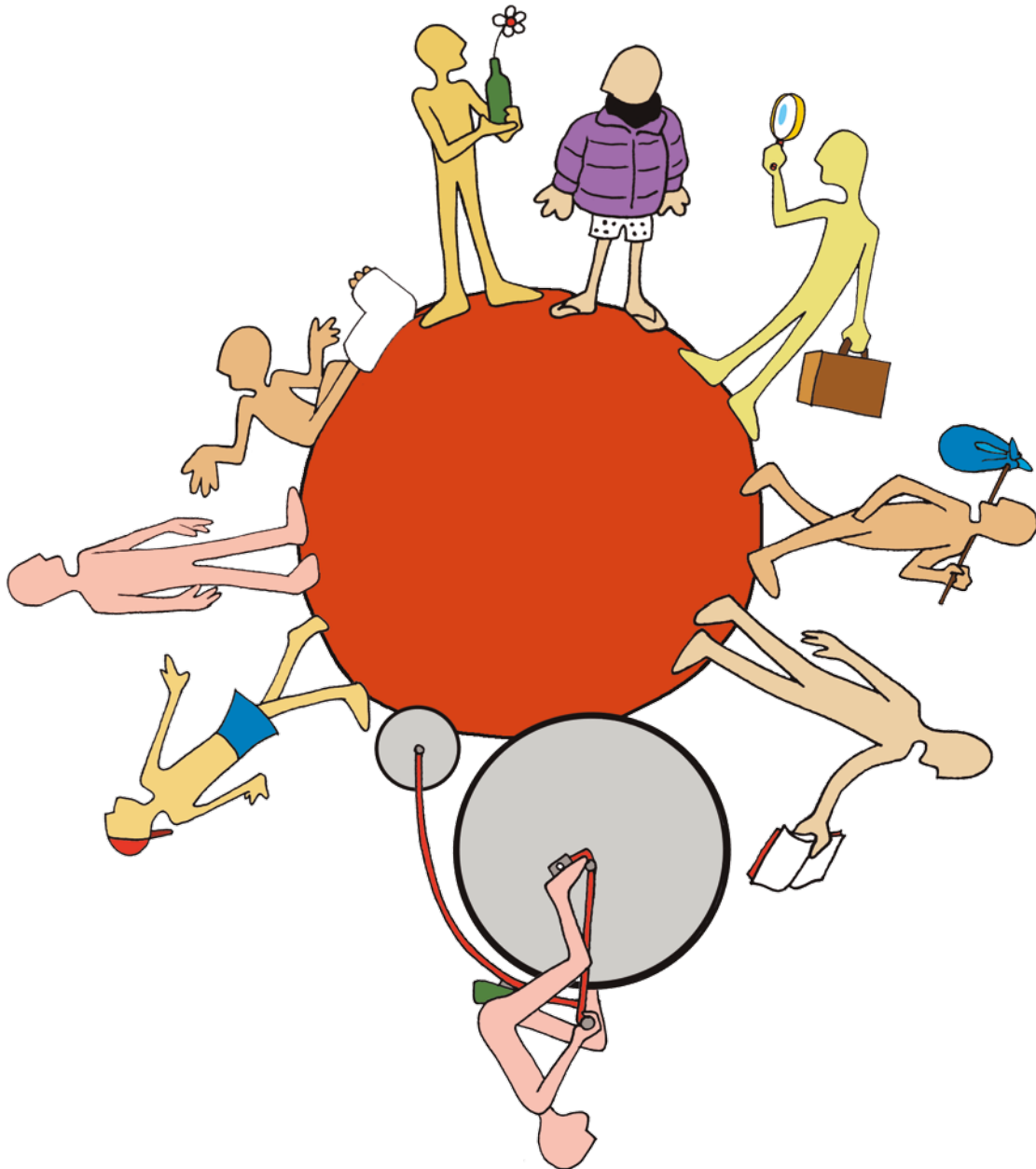


# A DIVERSE WORLD

## Intercultural guide



UNIVERSITAT POLITÈCNICA DE CATALUNYA  
BARCELONATECH

Servei de Llengües i Terminologia



## **PROJECT**

Language and Terminology Service, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya

## **COORDINATION**

Jordi Pujol

## **TEXT**

Guillem Vidal

## **GRAPHIC DESIGN**

Esteva&Estêvão

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## ..... INTRODUCTION

*A Diverse World* is an intercultural guide for the university community in general and, in particular, for those who plan to study or work abroad or are in daily contact with people from other parts of the world, whether on or off campus.

It consists of 55 entries\* – quick, practical reads – that encourage us to reflect on the similarities and differences between countries and cultures in terms of lifestyles and how they are organised: teacher-student relations, calendars, table etiquette, formal or informal dress, the importance of punctuality, noise levels, alternative forms of accommodation, writing systems and student salaries, among other topics.

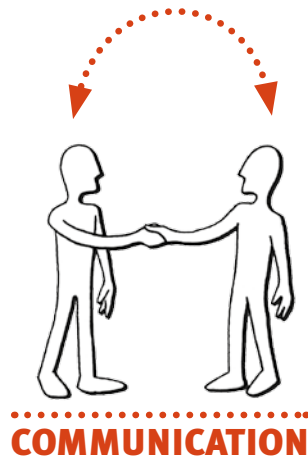
The guide is intended to give readers tools for managing cultural diversity. The current internationalisation process requires more than strong language skills: it is necessary to know how to communicate in diverse and changing cultural contexts.

In other words, not everything is done the same way in all places. To cite just two examples highlighted in this guide: in Bulgaria, nodding your head means “no”, while shaking it means “yes”; and in Thailand, you can let your shoes wait in a queue for you.

Are you ready to embark on this intercultural journey? If this guide helps broaden your view of the world and provides you with useful information to effectively interact with people from other cultures and countries, it will have done its job.

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\* Some of the entries reproduced here were adapted from the *Language Exchange Support Guide* and *Mou-te* resources, developed by the university language services.



### **Body language: the body does not lie**

According to an old joke, Italians use their hands so much when they talk, you could cover their mouths and they would continue to understand each other without missing a beat. While Italians may be the world's most renowned gesticulators, when it comes to 'letting your hands do the talking', the rest of the Mediterranean ranks right up there with them. The French use fewer movements, but they are unfailingly eloquent and precise, and in southern Europe, it is not uncommon for a person to drape an arm across their conversation partner's shoulders. Such a gesture would no doubt cause consternation in Nordic regions, where people rely more on meaningful looks, or countries such as China, where people are more averse to physical contact. Meanwhile, Arabs hold that the eyes are the first to speak and tend to judge whether a person is telling the truth by looking them in the eye. Greeks never tire of making eye contact not only with the person they are talking to – an unthinkable practice in, for example, Japan – but also anyone else who might happen to be nearby. In short, whether with their eyes or their hands, when two people communicate, around 70% of what they say is conveyed by their bodies.

### **Catching up over a drink**

According to the essayist George Steiner, cafés are one of the “essential markers” of European identity. Kierkegaard meditated in the cafés of Copenhagen; Danton and Robespierre conspired at the Procope in Paris; and, in interbellum Vienna, Freud, Robert Musil and Karl Kraus made three storied coffeehouses the preeminent places to discuss the burning issues of the day. Drawing the coffeehouse map, Steiner concludes, will give you “the idea of Europe”. In England, on the other hand, it was stocks of tea that the government sought to protect from German bombs during the two World Wars, on the grounds that ensuring a plentiful supply of the drink was essential to keeping up morale. Tea is China's national beverage, too, and has been for over a thousand years. According to one Chinese proverb, a minute in a teahouse is all it takes to know everything happening under the sun. Few things better reflect our respective identities than what we choose to drink when we are out with friends.

## Chatterboxes and silent types

Verbal communication is determined not only by the intricacies of language, but also, to a large extent, culture. As with any cliché, national stereotypes about volubility must be taken with a pinch of salt. Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom is that while the most gregarious Italian or Spaniard will happily talk your ear off, for the Chinese and Japanese, silence in a conversation is a sign of respect. In other countries, a silent ride in a lift can be excruciatingly uncomfortable. Often, though, *how much* we talk is less important than *what* we say. Whereas in the Romance-speaking world, a total stranger might pour his heart out to you, in Asia, open displays of emotions are considered bad manners. And while an American will probably break the ice by talking about her job, for a Russian, work is an entirely private matter. The list of differences is endless but ultimately enriching.

## Greetings and introductions

In every culture people greet each other, but... how do they do it? While kissing is increasingly widespread, the *number* of kisses varies. In Spain, people uniformly place a kiss on each cheek. Depending on where you are in France, you may need to give one, two or three kisses (always starting – like the Catalans but unlike the Italians – on the right), although in Normandy people usually give four and, in some northern villages, five. And none of these examples can hold a candle to the effusiveness of Russians, who, despite generally saving kisses for private settings, are capable of such passionate greetings as the iconic fraternal smooch between Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honecker, leader of East Germany, in 1979, which made headlines around the world. Kisses between men are common in Latin America (and, including quick-peck *piquitos*, in artistic circles in Europe), but are reserved for family in Germany and the UK, where handshakes remain traditional. When in doubt, remember: there is nothing more universal than a simple friendly smile.

## Personal space

In 1963, the anthropologist Edward Twitchell Hall divided the interpersonal space we each maintain with the people we are speaking to into four different zones. He warned that encroaching on an individual's 'personal bubble' can lead to conflict. Age, how well you know someone, the reason for the meeting, personality and, once again, culture all condition these spaces. Whereas in most Mediterranean, African, Arab and Latin American countries, there is a greater tendency towards physical contact and people are constantly closing the 18-inch gap considered 'appropriate' for a conversation, in English-speaking and Asian cultures people generally claim more 'vital' space and feel uneasy when someone gets too close. In the most extreme case, i.e. Japanese culture, even an overly warm handshake or direct eye contact may be considered rude, if not downright offensive.

## **Names and surnames**

Since they first emerged in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in the West, surnames have been part of our identity. In the registry offices of cities such as Madrid or Barcelona, as well as in other Spanish-speaking countries, newborns are registered with two surnames (the first, almost always the father's, although it is no longer required by law). In many other countries, people have only one surname. In France, women traditionally drop their maiden name and take their husband's surname when they marry; in Germany, families are free to decide which spouse's surname to take; and in the UK and the US, women may take their husband's surname if they wish, but do not have to. In other places, things are not so simple. In Iceland, surnames are formed from the father's name. Hence, an Icelandic Jón would bestow the surname Jónsson on his son and Jónsdóttir on his daughter, even though he himself, begat by a man named Bergur, would be a Bergursson. In Thailand, no two families who are not related may have the same surname. In Korea, where half the population is a Kim, Lee or Park, there are only 280 surnames (compared to more than 100,000 in Spain). And in Tibet, as many a thwarted genealogist can tell you, there are simply no surnames at all.

## **Business cards**

It's been a productive day at the conference. You exchange warm handshakes with a group of students you would like to stay in touch with. The time has come to say goodbye. Do you jot down your e-mail address on a scrap of paper? Do you tap 'add contact' on your phone? No. Although their days may be numbered in the digital era, for now, there is still nothing like exchanging business cards. While business cards are used virtually everywhere in the world, they are not treated the same way in all places. In the US and Europe, where it is perfectly normal to give one out without receiving one in return, they are merely a source of information and require no further courtesy upon receipt than a rudimentary glance at their content. In contrast, in Asia, where introducing yourself with a card is a veritable art form, they are regarded as key to forming an initial impression of what a person is like. In Japan, they must always be proffered with both hands and never tucked into a pocket when received. In Russia, they must indicate any degrees or qualifications you might hold. And in Arab countries, where business cards are common but not required, they must always be offered with your right hand.

## **Bowing**

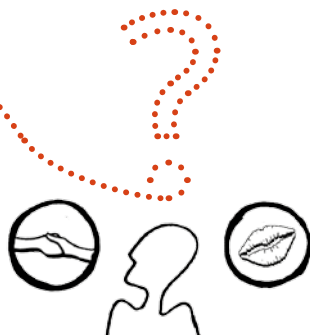
Bowing... in the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Yes. While in Europe and North America, bowing is considered so anachronistic that doing so in an informal context is likely to be perceived as a joke, in Asia, especially Korea and Japan, bows are so important that some companies provide training to employees to teach them the exact angle to be used for each situation. In countries that still have monarchies, such as Spain or England, there are protocols for bowing at official ceremonies with the Crown. Otherwise, in the West, today bows are almost exclusively the province of performers or those who, following a speech, humbly acknowledge the ovations of a crowd. In contrast, in Asia, where they are used in everything from business to martial arts competitions to having tea, bows are a sign of respect and humility towards people of a higher status. However, bows lasting more than three seconds should be reciprocated with another bow, and one must never do what President Obama did with Emperor Akihito of Japan, namely, bow and shake hands at the same time.



## Tone of voice

Although tone of voice plays a fundamental role in verbal communication, it, too, can be interpreted differently depending on cultural parameters. You may have heard someone say that the Chinese always “sound like they are arguing”. But Chinese languages are tonal. Understanding that one in ten Chinese words is pronounced with the same tone English-speakers use to express anger offers a fresh perspective on that. “Why does he have to shout?” asked the Queen of England when, in 2009, Italian president Silvio Berlusconi bellowed “Mr Obaaaaama!” at a G-20 photo shoot. In many cultures, especially Japanese, speaking softly is one of the foremost signs of good manners. In Arab countries, it is also a sign of sincerity. On the other hand, speaking loudly may be viewed as a hostile act in certain African countries, such as Nigeria, and can send a biased message to a Latin American. Nevertheless, such cross-cultural actions as raising our voices when using our phones are due not to any cultural difference, but a tendency to modulate our voices in response to loud noise known as the Lombard reflex.





## FORMAL OR INFORMAL?

### Pronouns

In some languages, choosing the proper pronoun with which to address someone can pose a veritable dilemma. In cities such as Barcelona, as in the rest of Spain, the less formal *tu* (or *tú* in Spanish) has inexorably been gaining ground for decades, with the more formal *vostè* (or *usted*) increasingly being relegated to only the most formal relationships. Today, not even patients use it with their doctors or students with their teachers. Nor is this growing use of more familiar pronouns exclusive to the south. In the 1960s, Sweden, a bastion of equality, saw a push to eliminate the use of the second-person plural *ni* as a catch-all formal pronoun in favour of the informal singular *du*, which has since become the polite way to address anyone, including authorities. The opposite is true, of course, in France or Germany, where *vous* and *Sie* are all but required when addressing any adult, or Latin America, where the use of *vos* is part of everyday life. In the English-speaking world, which has long since ceased to distinguish between various forms of *you*, formality is expressed through the use of titles such as ‘Mr’ or ‘Ms’ placed before a person’s surname or with generic forms of address such as ‘Sir’ or ‘Madam’, as well as through the use of certain conditional constructions. Meanwhile, the languages of Thailand, Korea and Japan have complex lexical, morphological and syntactic rules for reflecting the hierarchical status of the person being addressed.

### Imperatives

“Ponme una cerveza” someone might tell the bartender in Seville or Barcelona when out for drinks with friends. But were we to bark out a terse “Give me a beer” in London or Edinburgh – where, as in the rest of the Anglophone world, imperatives are used almost exclusively to give instructions, not place orders – we would be given the side-eye long before we were given our pint. Just because all the world’s languages have imperatives does not mean we should not be circumspect about using them. For instance, were a Spanish speaker to order at a restaurant in English, French or Italian translating directly from how she might do it in her mother tongue, forgetting that in those languages people generally use the conditional tense to place orders, she would probably be considered boorish. Similarly, although they share a language, the plethora of imperatives a man from Madrid might use would likely grate on the ears of his friend from Buenos Aires (where, as in the rest of Latin America, more courteous verb forms are the norm). The Germans are similarly cautious when it comes to imperatives: although they do use them in everyday language, generally accompanied by the word *bitte*, they never use them to place orders. The same is true of the Japanese, who are simply too polite to use them unless they can be properly offset with a long list of honorific prefixes.

## Small talk

“It looks like it might rain today”, says the third-floor neighbour as the lift doors slide shut. Welcome to the world of small talk, the practice of making polite conversation about uncontroversial topics with a view to being sociable, first studied by the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski in 1923. The reigning champs of this practice are, of course, Americans, for whom asking people how things are going or weighing in on last night’s match are everyday ways of striking up a friendly conversation with a stranger. This is inconceivable, of course, for the Germans or Swiss, who prefer to get straight to the point, or the Swedish, who only ask you how you’re doing... if they truly want to know. Bergman made that clear in his films, where conversations were for serious matters, not just to break an awkward silence. In contrast, Arabs (who are more likely to talk about the latest electronic gadget than the weather) and Asians in general, for whom a business meeting may be preceded by several hours of pleasantries, are other avid small talkers.

## Gestures and meanings

We make them unconsciously, without the slightest ill will. But depending on the country, hand gestures can have dramatically different meanings. In Turkey and Iran, the thumbs-up sign is an obscene insult; and in Russia and Greece, it has the same meaning as what in Catalan is called *fer la buti*, in Spanish *hacer la peineta* and in English *give the finger*. In most Western countries, people cross their fingers for good luck, but in Vietnam it is a vulgar reference to female genitalia. In the Philippines, curling your index finger to call someone over is used only for dogs. And an inward-facing ‘v’ for victory or peace can be a real headache in the UK or Australia, where it is regarded as an insult. When you travel, then, mind your fingers... but also heads! In countries with Buddhist traditions, touching even a child’s head is offensive, and in Bulgaria, unlike nearly everywhere else in the world, nodding means “no” while shaking your head means “yes”.

## Public displays of affection

As many a film has taught us, a passionate kiss in the middle of a park can be the epitome of romance. Yet some countries eschew such public displays of affection, punishing them with fines of several thousand euros, prison or, in the case of the UAE, deportation. For moral and religious reasons, in Malaysia, only tourists may kiss in public (and even then, only chastely). In India, where friends often hold hands, the ban on public kissing has come under constant fire from the younger generations. “Don’t forget your manners; there are children watching” warn controversial posters in the Chilean city of Valdivia. And while public displays of affection may be governed only by prudence and common sense in the West, kisses between elderly or same-sex couples still elicit disapproving stares from a significant part of society.

## Asking someone's age

In the West, telling someone they “look young” is a compliment of the highest order. By the same token, asking someone how old they are, especially a woman, is an inexcusable breach of etiquette. “Never ask a woman her age or her weight” goes a saying in the US, where people fear that revealing their age can colour others’ perception of them. In contrast, knowing how old someone is is vital information in Korea, as it determines the vocabulary to be used to address them. You can only truly drop the formalities if the person you are talking with is *donggap* (i.e. was born the same year as you). “The man who asks a question is a fool for a minute; the man who does not ask is a fool for life” goes an old Chinese proverb, where knowing someone’s age is simply a quick, pragmatic way of figuring out who you are talking to. And while cosmetics shops in the West have an ever-burgeoning array of ‘anti-aging’ products, in Africa, aging remains an unequivocal sign of prestige, respect and social status.

## Informal greetings

As our parents never tired of telling us when we were kids, saying hello, please and thank you is simply good manners. But in Catalonia, no one would think it was rude for someone to flag over a waiter and say, “Ei, hola, em poses un tallat?” (literally, “Hey, hi. Give me a coffee?”) or order a tapa of olives after a cursory “Buenas”. In contrast, in France, where greeting someone is a staple of good manners and the casual “Salut!” is generally reserved for close acquaintances, failing to preface your order at the bakery with a proper “Bon jour” will make you look uncouth. Every culture has its informal greetings, but knowing when to use them – and when not to – is often the difference between being perceived as outgoing and friendly... or simply a boor. *Ciao*, that nice little Italian word for both hello and goodbye, is better used with people you already know than strangers. The famous Spanish *tío* should mainly be used when the person you are addressing is young. And the bits and pieces of American slang that have made their way into our daily vocabularies through music, television and film (“Hey, dude!”, “What’s up, bro?”, etc.) should only be used once you’ve grasped, for example, that while they are fine for addressing your best friend, they are entirely inappropriate when speaking to a professor.

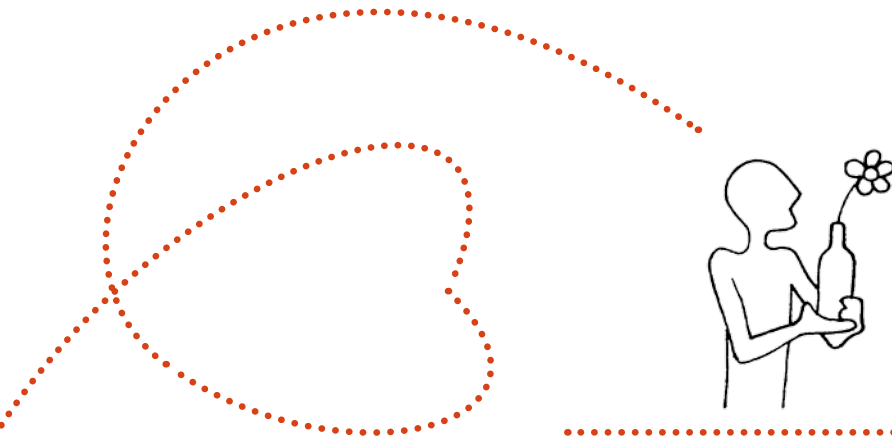
## Eye contact

An Asian student looks down when called on by the teacher. Is it a show of submissiveness? Is he shy? Is he just plain tired? The answer is none of the above. He is expressing respect and observing the strictest propriety. Like all body language, how and when we make eye contact is very much a product of our culture. Thus, in the US, looking someone in the eye when you talk to them is understood as a sign of trust and honesty, whereas in Japan (and, in fact, most of Asia, Africa and South America) it is considered a challenge to authority. In Western Europe, what some colloquially refer to as *aguantar la mirada* is a way of showing respect, yet holding someone’s gaze for too long (more than 3.3 seconds, according to some studies) will make most people feel uncomfortable. Finally, in the Middle East, eye contact between two people of the same sex denotes trust, but eye contact between a man and a woman is considered completely inappropriate. As the Occitan poet Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas said, the eyes are “the windows of the soul”. He may not have realised that, in the world, there are as many such windows as there are cultures.

## Saying thank you

How to say thank you is one of the first things we learn when we venture into a new language. But while gratitude may be a universal sentiment, different languages and cultures express it quite differently. In the West, whether face to face, by phone or on WhatsApp, we say thanks about 20 times a day: Italians, often emphatically (“Grazie di cuore!”); Americans, every two seconds (“Thanks, man!”); and the English, in different ways depending on the degree of formality (from a simple “Cheers” to “I appreciate it” to the even more genteel “Much obliged”). “There is no excess in the world so commendable as excessive gratitude”, said the French philosopher Jean de la Bruyère. This may explain why, in many countries, we can thank someone “a bunch”, “a tonne” or even “a million”. Of course, in some places words of thanks are not tossed around so lightly. In India and Pakistan, they are used when thanking someone for a favour, while looking them straight in the eye. In China, thanks are often expressed not with words but through a small gift.





## PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

### The importance of family

Today more than ever, the family is the first place people turn to mitigate the hardships of unemployment, illness or a lack of access to housing. But there are as many understandings of what constitutes family as families themselves, including some that would have been unimaginable in the not-so-distant past, such as single-parent or same-sex-parent families. In many English-speaking countries, where children are taught to be independent from an early age, families often get together only at Christmas and, in the US, Thanksgiving. In Mediterranean countries, where family members are more likely to smother each other in kisses than in other cultures, children routinely live with their parents until ages that would be unthinkable in northern Europe. Families are particularly stable in Japan, where reduced pressure to marry has resulted in more and more children continuing to live with their parents into adulthood. Meanwhile, in Africa, the concept of family can encompass an entire village.

### Contraception

Despite the sexual freedom attained by Western women in the 1960s, when the use of contraceptives became commonplace there, more than 222 million women around the world are presently unable to make their own decisions regarding how many children they want to have or when to become mothers. Notwithstanding government efforts to guarantee access to reproductive health services, the use of contraceptives remains unequal (the international average stands at around 63%) and varies greatly between developed and developing countries. In the West, it is common (in parts of northern Europe, up to 88% of the relevant population uses some form of birth control; in parts of southern Europe, around 75%). In contrast, in Africa, it remains rare (Somalia has the lowest rate, at 1%).

## **International romance**

Finding love abroad is the ultimate hope of those who believe that if they have not yet found their better half, it is simply because they have been looking in the wrong places. Every country has its own culture, and despite the universal nature of seduction, one country's sure-fire flirting techniques can easily fall flat in another. Still, many people are attracted by the idea of returning home triumphant after a tryst in an 'unfamiliar land', as evidenced by the conclusions of a recent European Commission study on the Erasmus programme (or 'Orgasmus' programme, as it is jokingly called): one in four Erasmus students who study at a foreign university end up meeting their long-term partner while there (an even larger percentage – one in three – get involved with a classmate); moreover, since 1987, over one million babies are thought to have been born to these Erasmus lovebirds. Although the jury is still out on which countries are easiest to hook up in, it is vital to remember that in other countries, such as Yemen or Saudi Arabia, doing so can be punishable even by death.

## **Friends forever?**

Defined by Aristotle, the first to theorise about it, as "the most necessary thing in life", friendship – a concept that has taken on new dimensions through today's social media jargon – can mean many subtly different things depending on the culture. As the great Russian novelists have shown, in Russia, it is an essential part of a person's values. In Germany, where loyalty is much more than a word, people have only a small number of friends, but they tend to last a lifetime. This stands in sharp contrast with the United States, where losing touch with friends with whom you were once inseparable is quite common. Likewise, whereas in the US a person can have dozens of best friends, in Asia, being considered someone's best friend is among the highest honours. Regardless of the form it takes, studies have found that a good friendship can have myriad beneficial effects, from lowering blood pressure and cholesterol to reducing the risk of heart disease.

## **The art of saying no**

As anyone with the slightest business acumen can tell you, saying no can be a veritable art form. There is no culture in which people do not say no, yet we do it in different and often convoluted ways. In some Asian cultures, for example, openly disagreeing with someone is taboo. Instead, to say no, people employ an array of handy euphemisms to keep the peace that would exasperate, say, an American, who is more used to straight talk. For the Germans or French, speaking frankly is a sign of honesty (in the latter case, especially, when done meticulously and politely). In other cultures, including many Asian ones, where rejecting another's opinion is tantamount to rejecting the person, a "yes" sometimes means only "I see"; the preferred and most common way to say no is to say something is "complicated".

## Personal hygiene

The proliferation, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of public transport and office jobs made people more aware of how they (and the people around them) smelled. But the degree to which these smells are considered unpleasant, as well as certain personal hygiene habits, depends on the specifics of each culture. The fact that Brazilians, Australians and the British buy more deodorant than anyone else in the world offers some clues as to where we should be most self-conscious about the state of our armpits. Likewise, given the Chinese's relative tolerance of flatulence and belching, it is not nearly as mortifying for someone to pass gas in a lift there as it might be in the West. As for bathing, Colombians and Brazilians (who also hold the record for highest per capita spending on perfume) take between ten and twelve showers a week, while the English, Japanese and Chinese take 'only' half that number. Finally, Sweden has the unique virtue of being the only country in the world where women... shower less often than men.

## Trust

When you are assigned a group project, does a particular person immediately spring to mind? Do you need to borrow a classmate's notes? If so, you will naturally need to feel you can trust them. Yet trust is not cultivated the same way everywhere. In countries such as the US, it is earned by being punctual and meeting all your deadlines, with no excuses. In Japan, it is achieved not with promises but with actions (and patience, as it can take time to gain a person's full trust). In Romance-speaking countries, it is usually determined by how well you know someone (the more coffees and dinners you've shared with someone, the closer you will consider them). Many sociologists use trust in others as an indicator of a country's prosperity. In Sweden or Norway, where it is common for parents to 'park' their children in their prams at the entrance to a restaurant, or Canada, where very few people lock their doors, nearly 70% of the population claims to fully trust others; in less 'trusting' countries, such as Brazil, Colombia or Turkey, this share is closer to 10%.

## Apologising

Oh dear. Have we made a mess of things? Then we say we're sorry! In Canada and the UK, it seems one can never apologise enough. In Argentina, there is nothing like a lunch to make amends; in Brazil, you might apologise with a small gift. In Japan, where there are twenty different ways to say you're sorry, people still remember the prolonged bow of contrition made by a senior executive at Toshiba in the midst of a 2015 corruption scandal. It was a *saikeirei*, considerably more important than an *eshaku* ("I'm sorry; it was my mistake") or a *keirei* ("I made a mistake; it will not happen again"), reminiscent of the now famous and much parodied *mea culpa* intoned by the Spanish King Juan Carlos when he came under fire for a 2012 elephant-hunting trip: "Lo siento mucho, me he equivocado, no volverá a ocurrir" (I am so sorry. I was wrong. It will not happen again.). Finally, in Africa, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in the wake of the apartheid years showed, the culture of forgiveness is deeply ingrained in society. In Burkina Faso, for example, many drivers have bumper stickers with the words *mam sugri* ("Forgive me"), effectively apologising in advance... for whatever they might do.



## A good shower

Ever since personal hygiene emerged as a top concern in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, showers – or baths – have become an essential part of our daily routine. While in most Western countries, people are more likely to shower, with baths being saved mainly for the wee ones and their rubber duckies, in Japan, some 80 to 90% of the population relaxes each day in a *furo*, a practice some studies have highlighted as the secret to Japanese longevity. In places such as Spain, where people spend an average of eight minutes in the shower, bath gels are far more popular than bar soap, which is more common in countries such as Brazil or Russia. And unlike in many other parts of the world, in China, the vast majority of people shower not when they wake up, but in the evening or before they go to bed. But whether you prefer a soak in the tub or just a quick rinse, be warned: one study put the death toll for bathing-related accidents in the United States at a whopping 400 per year.





## Tipping

To tip or not to tip, that is the question. And if we do, how much should we leave to keep our waiter happy without breaking the bank? Questions about tipping are normal when we travel, and the answers vary depending on the country. In Japan, a simple “gochisosama deshita” (“thank you for the meal”) will suffice. In Mexico, where tips account for a substantial part of hospitality workers’ income, leaving anything less than 15–20% of the tab is considered rude. In the US, where similar percentages are expected and some aspects of tipping are even regulated by law, the check often includes a service charge to guard against unfamiliarity with the practice or plain stinginess. In most of Europe, in contrast, tips are simply an expression of gratitude for good service. Whether for this reason or not, the Spanish, French and Italians are among the world’s least generous tippers.

## Eating insects

Some cultures have been eating insects for millennia. Today, there are many countries where some (or lots!) of the one thousand edible species of insect are still consumed. While such delicacies may have a place in the finest gourmet shops in London and Paris, insect eating is still a niche activity in the West. The practice is far more widespread in Asia, Africa and Latin America. There is no shortage of examples. In parts of China, one can treat one’s taste buds to water beetles marinated in soy sauce or stir-fried silkworm pupae with ginger. Thailand’s markets offer a wide variety of crickets and cicadas. *Chapulines*, a type of grasshopper, make Mexicans’ mouths water. In Africa, almost 10 billion mopane caterpillars, the juvenile form of the emperor butterfly, are farmed each year (to be eaten dried, fried, smoked or cooked). And in Colombia, roasted ants rather than popcorn are the go-to snack at cinema concession stands. According to the experts, insects are packed with proteins, vitamins and minerals.

## Schedules and meals

It is almost three in the afternoon in Barcelona. The restaurants are humming and hundreds of diners are enjoying meals that, in many cases, will last for almost two hours. Sitting down in the hopes of ordering the *menu du jour* at a restaurant in Nantes or relishing the dish of the day at a pub in Cambridge at that hour would surely be an exercise in futility. In Spain, land of the *café, copa y puro* (coffee, drink and cigar), lunch is indisputably the main meal of the day. When the first Norwegians are just sitting down to dinner around five, in a restaurant in Madrid, the last few lunch patrons will still be capping off their meal with a sweet *licorcito*. In Spain, some say it was the need for so many people to work two jobs in the wake of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and, thus, eat lunch and dinner late that ultimately led to today's standard supper times, often past 10 p.m., which is also prime time for television. In many other countries, people have already been digesting for a while by then: in the UK and US, dinner is usually served around 6.30 p.m., and in countries as different as Australia, Japan and Portugal, the latter with a workday similar to Spain's, people generally sit down to supper only an hour or so later than that.

## Table etiquette

The importance cultures attach to eating translates to table etiquette. The time-honoured act of gathering for a meal calls for a whole set of manners in countries such as France (where food has always been a matter of great importance) or Japan (where the way a dish is presented in this setting, where diners sit on a straw mat called a *tatami*, is as important as the dish itself). Whether around a table, as in the West, on a rug, as Arab customs dictate, or on solid ground, as in Polynesia, sharing a meal with others means accepting certain codes: leaving food on your plate is considered wasteful (Germany); asking your host for extra Parmesan cheese for your pasta is gauche (Italy); asking for salt if there is no salt shaker on the table is insulting to the cook (Portugal); do not start eating until the oldest person at the table has begun (Korea); use only your right hand for eating, as the left hand is 'unclean' (Arab countries); etc. In India and China, a deep belch at the end of the meal is synonymous with having enjoyed it.

## Guests

In India, guests are said to be forms of God. As in all cultures, however, certain unwritten behavioural norms must be observed so as not to be the devil incarnate instead. And, as is often the case, these norms can be diametrically opposed depending on where you have been invited. For example, while showing up late is considered blatantly disrespectful in Germany, in Tanzania, punctuality may be regarded as an insult to the host. And while in Kazakhstan, a half-filled cup may be a subtle invitation to leave, in Mexico, not even being dead on your feet or having small children is a valid pretext to get up from the table. Nevertheless, in most cases it is standard not to show up empty-handed (the insistence of some European hosts, such as Catalans, that there is "no need to bring anything" does not actually mean you cannot come bearing a small gift), not to overstay your welcome in your host's home, and not to stick your nose into their most personal or valuable belongings. Finally, customs also vary when it comes to helping to clear the table: in Japan, doing so is ill-regarded, while in North Africa, one must never throw away bread.

## Street food

The vicissitudes of modern life, combined with centuries-old customs, mean that every day some 2.5 billion people eat on the street. While kebabs, noodles, hot dogs and hamburgers remain perennial favourites of the street food scene, at least in the West, the global offer is as varied as the menus of places where food is served indoors: *panzerotti* in Italy, *antojitos* in Mexico, pasties in England, *pani puri* in India, *mini-churrascos* in Brazil or rice with chicken in Singapore, the first country in the world with a Michelin one-star street vendor. Seeing someone chow down on *yakisoba* in a crowded subway car is no longer an unusual sight and, only in cultures such as the Japanese – where no one would dream of eating sushi anywhere other than right next to where they bought it – is having a bite to eat on the street frowned upon. On the other hand, eating on the street is increasingly difficult in Bangkok, which, home to some 20,000 food vendors, is a global street food capital: the Thai authorities have begun to regulate the city's food stalls for hygiene reasons.

## We are what we eat

It's August and we are sitting next to someone of Indian origin on the bus. We notice a pungent smell of spices. No doubt he notices our smell, too. Is it a matter of origins? Hardly. Hygiene? Guess again. It is a question of diet, since what we eat ultimately shows through in every particle of sweat, fluid or mucus to come out of our body. Our travel companion's intense aroma is due to the food he eats, which, like that of so many other Asians and Arabs, is probably rich in spices; curries remain unparalleled when it comes to influencing how we smell. Not all smells, however, are the result of regularly eating Madras-style meat. Too much dairy, as may happen in Switzerland, the world's milk consumption capital, can have consequences too, as can a feast of smoked salmon, such as more than one Norwegian may have enjoyed. Contrary to what people may think, body odour is not determined by race or ethnicity, but by what many a dietician has long proclaimed: we are what we eat.

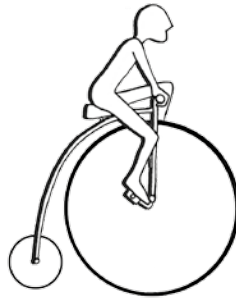
## Waste

We have just finished a big meal and the kitchen is full of empty wine bottles, seafood shells and cardboard boxes. It is time to sort the waste and throw out the rubbish. But each country has its own specific approach to recycling. It is not unusual, when abroad, to accidentally dispose of the glass where the plastic goes or take out the brown bin the day only the green one is scheduled for pick-up. In Switzerland, where recycling is compulsory and there are separate bins for glass bottles of each colour, using the wrong one can result in fines of up to 10,000 euros. In Sweden, which, together with Switzerland, tops the rankings of countries that recycle the most, some 250,000 homes are powered by electricity produced by modern rubbish-burning recycling stations. In Germany, recyclers are rewarded: machines at supermarkets return a handful of coins to people who return certain types of packaging. And in Spain, unlike, say, England, there is no specific collection calendar, but rather intensive campaigns to encourage better recycling habits at home ("Envàs... on vas?" went one successful advert in Catalonia a few years ago). Latin American countries bring up the rear, with only 4.5% of materials being recycled on average.

## Having lunch

If we have made lunch plans with a friend from abroad, it is worth clarifying exactly what we mean by 'lunch' in advance. In some countries, people take the old adage "eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince, and dinner like a pauper" to heart; in others, lunch is the main meal of the day. In Catalonia, as in Spain, Italy or France, *fer un menú* means sitting down to a hot first and second course, with bread, a drink and pudding. In France, where countless *brasseries* offer irresistible *formules*, such prix fixe meals can trace their origins to the parchments hung at the Palais Royal in Paris in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And in Spain, it was a Franco-era Minister of Information and Tourism who, during the tourism boom of the 1960s, imposed them at restaurants. But modern life and the fact that, in Nordic countries, for example, people often have only half an hour to eat, have given rise to other types of midday meals, as well: a sandwich and crisps as part of a packed lunch in the UK; the *matpakkes* that thousands of workers eat in Norway each day; or the *gyoza* you can purchase from some of the set-meal vending machines in Japan.





## TRANSPORT

### On two wheels

Urban congestion, the environmental impact of cars and, more recently, the economic crisis have resulted in increased use of two-wheeled vehicles in cities, more and more of which have bike lanes and, in some cases (e.g. Paris, Barcelona, Seville, Vienna and Stockholm), public bicycle rental services. While central and northern Europe may not have the best weather, environmental awareness there is quite high and bikes are ubiquitous. In Amsterdam, the unofficial world capital of cycling, 40% of residents use bikes to get around, twice as many as in Beijing, a city that once teemed with bicycles but where the democratisation of cars has taken a toll on the use of human-powered vehicles. Nonetheless, bicycle use is on the rise in the vast majority of the world's cities, although the Netherlands and Denmark, where people cycle an average of 1,000 kilometres per year, are still far ahead of Italy (200 kilometres) or Spain (30 kilometres).

### Water taxis

Captured in film and literature, Venice may be the world's best-known place for getting around by boat, but its romantic gondolas are by no means the only form of water-based transportation. In Beirut, for example, water taxis are an alternative to the heavy road traffic faced by thousands of drivers each day. In Dubai, they are used to cross Dubai Creek, which divides the city in two. In New York and Paris, they are used for both tourism (to enjoy a picture-perfect view of the Manhattan skyline or Notre Dame Cathedral from the water) and general mobility purposes. And in the jungles of Brazil and Peru, where the dense vegetation prevents travel over land on foot or by vehicle, the most widely used means of transport is the canoe.

## Driving licences

Getting your driving licence is always a headache. But the headache is more or less painful depending on where you are. Driving tests in Germany are notoriously hard, comprising a written part, consisting of 30 questions selected at random from a total of more than 1,000, and a practical part that includes at least four hours of driving on the motorway. Such a situation is a far cry from Mexico, where, until recently, with a view to combatting the traditional *mordida* (whereby getting your licence had less to do with your skill behind the wheel than the depth of your pockets), applicants only had to meet three requirements: show an ID, bring a recent utility bill in their name, and pay a 30-euro fee. Likewise, in certain remote areas of the Andes, all you need to do to get your licence is take a stroll around the town square and treat the local authorities to a generous round of *cachaça*. In most countries, the minimum age to drive is the same as the legal age. However, as Hollywood has often shown us, in many states in the US – where getting your licence costs around 27 euros, compared to nearly 800 euros in Spain or 1,200 euros in France – minors can often drive, too, although sometimes only in the company of an adult.

## Traffic laws

Although the most basic rules of driving are the same the world over, driving in a northern European country is a dramatically different experience from driving in an Asian one, where survival of the fittest is the name of the game and breaking the rules... is the norm. In Scandinavian countries, as well as in the US (despite the all but *de rigueur* chase scenes in most blockbuster action films), respect for traffic laws is quite strong. In contrast, in India, traffic lights are an afterthought; the only ‘traffic signals’ that matter are cows, who have the right to roam wherever they please. But while horns – strictly for emergencies in the US – may be one of the most salient features of urban soundscapes in Asia, they are hardly limited to Delhi or Cairo. In Italy, for example, people honk both to warn fellow drivers of an imminent speed trap and to pass other vehicles. And while we’re on the topic of passing, for the Russians, weaving through traffic is something of a national sport and cars, akin to soldiers’ horses. Harmlessly tapping the car in front of you as you park, a common occurrence in crowded cities such as Barcelona, would be a grave offence in Moscow, where it would surely cause tempers to flare.

## Combined fares and tickets

The price of public transport is one of the clearest indicators of how expensive a city is. The main reason it is worth planning in advance when travelling in Copenhagen, London or Stockholm is because they have the most expensive underground systems in the world, with single-journey tickets costing between 4 and 5 euros. On the other hand, both of the Danish capital’s underground lines run 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In the home of Big Ben – where taking the famous double-decker buses is not much cheaper – riding the Tube without an Oyster Card – a prepaid card that caps the amount to be paid each day – is as good as throwing your money away. And in Stockholm, as in Moscow, the stations themselves have attractions worthy of a museum. Kiev (where the 20-cent trips are no doubt one reason why 40% of the population takes the metro each day) and Cairo (where, as in other megacities, there are special cars for women) are more pocket-friendly. Cities such as Barcelona, Paris, Amsterdam and Brussels, where tickets cost around two euros, fall in the middle of the global fare ranking.

## Subway systems

Rapid transit systems based on underground railways have driven the development of large cities and remain the most effective antidote to continuous traffic congestion. Since the British engineer Charles Pearson conceived of their construction in 1843, underground railways have been deployed in 160 cities in 55 countries around the world. The London and Paris systems, inaugurated in 1863 and 1900 respectively, are the oldest. With more than three billion users each year, Moscow's is the most heavily used. And New York's not only has the 'distinction' of being the system with the most stops (472), but also the most convoluted when it comes to planning a trip. At least, so found one Oxford University study, whose authors concluded that navigating some transportation networks can exceed our cognitive limits. Meanwhile, Bogotá is just one example of a global metropolis that does not yet have an underground rail system at all, although that is projected to change by 2028.

## New forms of urban transport

The days when the choices for getting around a 21<sup>st</sup>-century city were limited to buses, trams, undergrounds and bicycles are long gone. The growing enthusiasm for electric scooters, Segways, hoverboards and other personal vehicles has prompted big cities such as Barcelona (where, in 2021, the police fined an average of 66 scooter drivers a day) to pass pioneering laws to regulate their use. Paris is even considering creating a special driving licence for *trottinettes*. Not showing up to class drenched in sweat or the fact that many of these vehicles fit handily into a lift are just some of the advantages their proponents cite compared to the more traditional benefits of a bike. The debates over which lanes these vehicles should use or whether they should be required to have licence plates is unfolding alongside another debate to emerge in recent years in major cities in Spain, Italy and Portugal, namely, that concerning the co-existence of conventional taxis and the new fleet of licensed private-hire vehicles. However, such futuristic projects as the Transit Elevated Bus (a Chinese streetcar able to lift itself over traffic jams) or the now, albeit, defunct Vahana (a flying taxi pilot-tested by Airbus) suggest that, when it comes to mobility, the speed of innovation is frenetic and cross-town trips on a Segway may become as obsolete as horse and buggies sooner than we might think.

## Taxis

"Taxi!" It is often one of the first things we say when we arrive in a new country. In London, the hackney carriages, expressly manufactured to be used as taxis and driven by professional drivers, are a veritable tourist attraction. In Havana, the classic American vehicles used as taxis are virtual museum pieces. The unusual black and yellow design of Barcelona's taxis served as an inspiration for those of Buenos Aires. Bangkok's *tuk-tuks* (three-wheeled motor taxis) are surely among the world's most original. Meanwhile, films such as *Taxi Driver* have made New York City's canary yellow taxi cabs instantly recognisable around the world. But often, more than on the vehicle itself, it is the meter we need to focus on. Although a fixture in the West, this 1897 invention is less common in parts of Africa, Asia or Latin America, where you would be better advised to negotiate the fare before the meter starts running. A few quick facts to help you stretch your budget: Zurich, Oslo and Tokyo have the most expensive taxis of any city in the world. In contrast, in Cairo – where, at ten cents a kilometre, you can climb in without fear of having to mortgage the house – taxis cost thirty times less than in Switzerland.



## Electric cars

A world without noisy, gas-guzzling cars would be a better world indeed. Yet everything seems to suggest that this idyllic scenario will take far longer to achieve in some places than others. In 2020, Norway, where electric cars are not subject to the same taxes as vehicles with combustion engines, became the first country in the world to have more electric than petrol-powered cars, a milestone that Iceland, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, which has the largest network of charging points in all Europe, all hope to emulate soon. But Norway's roads may seem futuristic to drivers in Italy or Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria or Romania, where, in 2020, electric cars accounted for less than 1% of the entire fleet of automobiles. University students around the world are already working on all kinds of projects with a view to changing this one day. The ETSEIB Motorsport team at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, for instance, has been designing single-seater electric cars for several years, and in 2018, a group of students in Eindhoven built the 'ecomotive' Noah, an electric vehicle made entirely from recyclable materials.





## HIGHER EDUCATION

### Student salaries

The goal of enabling all university students to study full-time, one of the main aims of the Bologna Process, has been a reality for decades in northern European countries, Great Britain, Australia and Japan, where students receive government loans or grants to ensure that a lack of resources does not prevent them from continuing their studies. Although this approach, which ‘professionalises’ studying and prevents students who would prefer to work while they study from doing so, has its detractors, few Catalan or Italian students would deny envying their Danish counterparts, for example, who receive a monthly stipend of 700 euros from the government. Today, all European Union countries have scholarship, loan and other financial aid systems for students, although the chances of obtaining such aid range from 100% in Denmark to just 1% in Greece. In both countries, however, as in Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Malta, Sweden and Norway, university tuition is free.

### Gap years

Since the 1970s, it has been common for students from the US, Australia and, in particular, the UK to take a gap year between finishing their secondary education and starting their university studies. According to the experts, such gap years, whether spent backpacking on the other side of the world, waiting tables while learning a language, or volunteering for a charitable project, make students better able to set goals and help them acquire personal and professional skills that future employers hold in increasingly high regard. Although numerous studies have found that students’ academic performance at university improves following a gap year (some scholars have even suggested that taking a year off should be compulsory), students’ families and society in general often still take a sceptical view of the practice in countries such as Spain, albeit acceptance does seem to be gradually growing. In other countries, such as France and Italy, taking a gap year is an increasingly popular option.

## Teacher or professor

The classes with the best outcomes are those in which the students trust and respect the teacher and work to ensure that he or she trusts, respects and has high expectations for them. How close the relationship is between them, however, will depend on each country's cultural traditions. Whereas in China, as a result of Confucian philosophy, professors are so venerated that they can even visit students at their parents' home if necessary, in Europe, calls are just beginning for universities to embrace the concept of tutors, which is already widespread in the English-speaking world although there they play a lesser role. In Japan, *nomikai* (informal gatherings where, no matter what people might say, no one will hold it against them the next day) are common not only in the business world, but also academia, such that students and professors who interact with polite reserve in class might later go out on the town together for a night of karaoke. Finally, following in the footsteps of Yale some years earlier, in 2015, Harvard banned sex and romantic relationships between teaching staff and students to avoid the potential ethical conflicts arising from the power imbalance between them.

## Bureaucracy

The old joke about the American spy who wanted to turn himself in to the KGB but couldn't get past all the red tape to do so is such a classic that President Putin himself has told it at official international summits. Russia, where bureaucracy has been a chronic problem since the time of the czars, has long had the dubious distinction of being a place where the requisite paperwork can drive a person mad, but bureaucratic obstacles are hardly exclusive to Moscow. In a merciless parody of French bureaucracy, Albert Uderzo and René Goscinny, the creators of the diminutive Gaulish warrior Astérix, seldom devised such a gruelling challenge for their hero as the adventure in which he had to obtain the elusive Permit A38. In places where order is not always the norm, such as Italy or Catalonia (as is, unfortunately, all too often apparent at universities), it can be difficult to know what to do in the face of so many seemingly contradictory instructions. At the other end of the spectrum, Finland and Sweden are considered the world's least bureaucratic countries, while Estonia (or *E-stonia*, as it is sometimes winkingly written) has rolled out a pioneering mechanism in recent years to enable a wide range of processes, including for universities, to be carried out online.

## Assessment systems

Some questions are constantly running through students' minds during their years at university: how will my professors mark me? Will they be fair? Will they focus on my critical reasoning skills or would I be better off sticking to rote memorisation? Assessment methods differ considerably from one university to another and in fact reflect specific ways of understanding education. At some schools in the US, where many institutions take pride in encouraging competition, students are graded on a curve, meaning set numbers of As, Bs, Cs, Ds and Fs are given out, with students being marked in direct relation to how their classmates perform. Other schools, such as Harvard and Yale, use a pass-fail system in order to lessen the pressure on students. In Germany, where students are assessed on a scale of 0 to 18, the highest marks are almost never awarded (offering students an object lesson in humility). In European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries, continuous assessments are used, although the method has not yet reached its full potential. And in northern Europe, which is often an early adopter of innovative methods in education, oral exams and, increasingly, self-assessments are the norm.

## Playing truant

Few actions have such a wealth of names as skipping class in order to sleep in or spend time with friends. In Spain, this type of absenteeism is referred to as *hacer novillos*, although in Valencia a person who skips class *fa un nuc al rabo*, while in Catalonia *fa campana* (an expression that dates back to a time when the parish school rectors would order anyone who skipped class to ring the massive, heavy church bells). In Argentina, playing hooky is referred to as *hacerse la rata*; in Portugal, *fer gazeta*; in Germany, *schwänzen*; and in France, *faire l'école buissonnière*, in reference to the clandestine schools of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which, to evade the bishops' watchful eyes, were held deep in the forest. Although skipping class in university is not generally penalised, in China – where students were categorically banned from missing class on the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre – repeated truancy is punished. Finally, it is an open secret that dubious websites such as *El Rincón del Vago* or *Patatabrava* are a go-to resource for the most committed slackers on Spanish and Catalan campuses.

## Coffee breaks as social occasions

You would be amazed to learn just how many brilliant ideas have arisen as people socialised over coffee. Or, in academia, the numerous international projects that have been hammered out during the half hour that conference attendees have to network over refreshments. The studies pointing to coffee breaks – or tea breaks, depending on the country – as excellent tools for motivating, socialising, boosting performance and trust, or reducing stress are almost universal. And seeing how much more openly and empathetically people act in an informal setting is something we have all surely experienced in person. Hence, meetings held during a Swedish *fika* break (practically a national pastime!), Australian *smoko*, or German *Kaffeeklatsch* to discuss the main plans for the day tend to yield great results. The title of 'Birthplace of the Coffee Break' goes to the American town of Stoughton, Wisconsin, where every August a festival is held to commemorate how a group of Norwegian immigrant women came up with the idea in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

## New forms of exams

"But I knew it last night!" It is a classic phrase that speaks to a situation all students have experienced at some point: reading a question and coming up blank, whether due to fatigue, stress or an information overload. This is one reason why alternative types of examinations that go beyond traditional memorisation-based systems are proliferating at schools around the world. With open-book exams – already common at universities in educationally advanced countries such as those in northern Europe and increasingly popular in countries such as Australia and India – students bring a laptop to class and use it to solve a case study over the course of three or four hours. Oral exams are the order of the day at many European and North American universities. And with take-home exams, a common method in, for example, Denmark, students usually have between twelve hours and three days to turn in their work, in a move partly intended to alleviate any anxiety. Lest anyone think this is a great opportunity to get someone else to do their work for them, think again: some 20 European universities have been testing methods for verifying test-takers' identity based on typing and facial recognition for years.

## Earning a degree

In 2001, the Spanish Royal Academy added a curious new word to the dictionary referring to the outsized importance placed on university qualifications: *titulitis*. Whether because of this obsession with official qualifications or the conviction that an undergraduate degree is no longer enough, master's degrees and postgraduate courses are an increasingly common stage in the curricular paths of thousands of students. According to data from 2016, in Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom, about 20% of young adults were pursuing one, compared to only one in ten in Spain. Although in countries such as Austria and Denmark, master's degree courses are free, Spanish and Catalan schools, which have been making concerted efforts to attract foreign students for years, top the lists of favourite places to enrol on one: in the 2015–2016 academic year, they received some 6,000 students from elsewhere in the European Union, around 4,000 from Asia and almost 19,000 from Latin America. But *caveat emptor*: big companies such as Google and Apple no longer consider degrees in their recruitment processes, and more and more voices are sounding the alarm that the reason so many young people are prolonging their studies is ultimately the increasing difficulties they face to enter the job market.





## UNIVERSITY LIFE

### Classroom attire

In 2013, students at the Hungarian University of Kaposvár made the news around the world. In response to a new dress code imposed by the rector (no shorts, flip-flops or unkempt nails allowed!), students showed up to class... naked. The action underscored how anachronistic such rules can be today for adult students in the West, where both students and teaching staff often dress absolutely casually. In cities such as Barcelona, tracksuits are practically an unofficial uniform. But in some places, especially private schools, such relaxed attitudes are still frowned upon. At Hampton University in the US, for example, students may not wear baseball caps to class or trousers that show their underwear. African and Asian universities such as Covenant (Nigeria), where students may not wear more than one earring per ear, or Manila (Philippines), which does not allow clothing that exposes a person's midriff, are even stricter. Finally, in countries such as India, feminist movements are increasingly pushing back against dress codes that they argue are stricter for women than for men.

### Be careful how you smell!

We are meeting up for a group project and the classroom air is heavy with what might euphemistically be described as the pungent scent of 'humanity'. Do we crack a window despite the frigid temperatures outside? Do we directly pinch our noses? Or perhaps we should try to speak to the person in charge so as not to hurt anyone's feelings? Understanding the sensory reality of each culture is the first step to avoiding embarrassing situations (and – who knows? – perhaps to prevent people from fainting). Arabs, for whom smell is an essential part of daily life, do not seek to eliminate all body odours as they view them as vital to certain interactions. In contrast, Americans can be obsessive about neutralising theirs. In Europe, deodorant is also unavoidable, although overdoing the perfume or cologne before class may earn you a withering stare. In contrast, certain ethnic Asians, such as Koreans, produce a type of bacteria that keeps their sweat from smelling, no matter how many hours they spend at the gym. Meanwhile, the Japanese, perhaps to save themselves the unpleasantness of having to tell someone they smell bad, have invented the *kun-kun*, a body-odour checking device that warns you when you stink.

## Graduation ceremonies

No matter how often they are depicted in Hollywood productions, graduation ceremonies did not originate in the United States but in mediaeval European universities, where graduates mounted on horses filed past a crowd in the presence of the chancellor. Although at some of these hallowed institutions, such as Oxford, Cambridge or Salamanca, these ceremonies still include speeches in Latin, they do not always end with students in gowns enthusiastically tossing their mortarboards into the air. In Coimbra (Portugal), students burn ribbons in the highly touristy *Queima das Fitas*; in Padua (Italy), they dress up in silly costumes and are affectionately heckled by friends and family; at the Kanazawa College of Art (Japan), they receive their diplomas dressed up as Pokémon or any other anime character; and at Smith College, in Massachusetts (USA) – just to add an extra twist – each graduate is handed a diploma with someone else’s name on it and then has to track down her own.

## Earning a master’s degree... with your family?

A Colombian engineer has come to Salamanca to finish her studies... with her husband and children in tow. Such undertakings – unimaginable just a few decades ago – are increasingly common. In recent years, the number of students seeking new opportunities abroad in the company of their families has continued to grow. For language reasons, Spain is a top destination for Mexicans, Brazilians and Chileans, but it is not the only one. Many decide to pursue postgraduate studies in England, the US or Canada. The host universities are aware of the needs these special students have and strive to make things easier for them. In the US and the UK, for example, some student halls of residence have play rooms and even free day care. In Canada, children are offered free schooling. Still, the dream of studying in another country surrounded by your loved ones often requires all sorts of financial acrobatics so as not to drain your savings, as well as time-consuming and often endless paperwork to obtain the necessary residence permits, scholarships or family reunification.

## Praying during class hours

It is a quiet afternoon in the library. A student borrows a book, a professor is putting the final touches on a talk, and, in one corner, a scene is playing out that, until recently, might have raised eyebrows but, today, given the growing number of Muslim students, is increasingly common: a student is facing Mecca and performing one of the five daily *Salah* that are part of his religion. While the religious habits of observant Christians, who attend church services on Sundays, or Jews, for whom the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday, do not interfere with the class hours at universities, no matter how busy they might be, practising Muslims have to pray daily during their stay on campus. In the US and the UK, many schools have prayer rooms. In proudly secular states such as France, prayer rooms are non-existent. In Germany, the closure of three university chapels in 2016 – on the grounds that, with 130 nationalities on campus, it was unfeasible for every religion or culture to have its own space – sparked a controversy. And in Spain, a nominally non-denominational state whose public universities are nevertheless home to 33 oratories, the debate is also heated, with many students forced to seek refuge, so to speak, in the peace of a library to practise their faith.

## The price tag of a degree

While in some countries, such as Australia, earning a degree can cost up to 20,000 euros a year, in others, such as Norway or Finland, university tuition – even for foreigners! – costs less than a pack of tissues. In Germany, a 50-euro bill is enough to cover the cost of tuition. In proud Argentina, free university education dates back to 1949. And in Chile, following a series of constant student protests, it once again became free in 2016, 35 years after the Pinochet regime had done away that system. Ireland, Latvia and Lithuania, where it costs more than 2,000 euros to enrol on an undergraduate course, are among the most expensive European countries in terms of tuition. And in England, the fees – which are hardly cheap – have the distinctive feature of falling due... only after graduation. If, however, you plan to study in the UAE, Singapore or the US (where, as film after film has shown us, families often spend their entire life savings to send their children to school), you will need deep pockets, as those countries have some of the most expensive university education in the world.

## Gender issues in student services

A husband enrolling his wife on a course at the registrar's office? A student at reception who insists on being attended by a man? Another student who is clearly ill at ease and unsure how to respond when the woman assisting him tells him how to complete a form? Such situations are increasingly common at our universities. In the West, the gender of the person you are dealing with is not generally an issue. You are as likely to be assisted by a woman as a man. But this reality stands in contrast with that of some countries, especially in Asia and Africa, where gender segregation is widespread. Students from these places are used to a greater male presence in the public sphere. When, for example, they go on exchanges in Europe or the US, they are often surprised by such role changes. Being aware of these differences and addressing them from an intercultural perspective can make it easier for us to navigate moments of mutual confusion and discomfiture.

## Associations

University associations date back to the first universities themselves; their strength depends on the traditions of each country. In the US, fraternities and sororities exert a powerful influence on and off campus; despite the ongoing debate over whether to ban them (for decades, not a year has gone by without someone dying from alcohol poisoning or a hazing 'prank' gone tragically awry), some nine million students are members. In Germany, rituals and tradition play an important role in the *Studentenverbindung*; in Sweden and Finland, the *nations* organise all manner of sport and cultural activities; and in Coimbra, Portugal, the *repúblicas* take the form of self-managed community housing. Indeed, the range of associations at European schools is broad and diverse, extending well beyond the centuries-old traditions of many countries: the University of Barcelona has both a magicians' club and a *tuna* (a group of students who don mediaeval garb and play traditional instruments to serenade passers-by); the University of Bath (England) has a club for curry enthusiasts; and the University of Essex, also in the UK, has a Mario Kart Society, which organises activities based on the classic video game.



## Campuses

University life is not limited to the classroom; it also – and especially – takes place on campus, a term first used in 1774 to refer to the fields adjacent to modern-day Princeton University (USA). Campuses may have cinemas, as at the Autonomous University of Barcelona; Pritzker Architecture Prize-winning theatres, such as the Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College in New York; spectacular libraries, such as the Philological Library in Berlin, designed by Norman Foster; and even huge football stadiums, such as the one that hosted the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico and is today home to the UNAM Pumas. Those who are not intimidated by crowds might consider the campuses of the world's largest universities, Indira Gandhi National Open University in India (four million students) and Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan (two million). And anyone wary of the concept of campus in general can always apply to Deep Springs College, a tiny institution with only 20-odd students, located an hour from the nearest town in the desert on the California–Nevada border.





## LEAVING HOME

### Aid for leaving home

With young people spending more and more time in formal education and struggling to enter the job market when they get out, the period they spend living with their parents has increased across Western Europe. In southern European countries, the average age at which people leave home is 24 for men and 22–23 for women; in central and northern Europe, in contrast, few women over 20 or men over 22 have not yet ‘flown the nest’. These differences between the regions can mainly be explained by the employment, housing and education policies applied in each country (in the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland, public rental housing is hugely important; in Greece and Portugal, it plays only a minor role), but also cultural factors. Although times are changing, in countries such as Italy and Spain, children have traditionally left their parents’ home only to live with a partner. In the rest of Europe, other forms of co-habitation are more common, such as shared flats or student residences.

### First jobs

Landing your first job in the midst of an economic crisis can be a real nightmare. Whereas in the past, people usually entered the job market through summer jobs or with the help of a whole network of family and friends, today’s young people face a hostile panorama plagued by instability. The virtual disappearance of apprenticeships without a more modern equivalent to take their place, coupled with the view many companies take of interns as a mere source of free labour, makes it even harder for anxious young people to access a world that often seems well beyond their reach. To remedy this situation, Germany invented *minijobs*, i.e. positions paying less than 500 euros and requiring no more than 15 hours a month, a concept that many European countries are trying to import. But what some see as a suitable mechanism for finding a first job, others view as a tool for further increasing job insecurity. Regardless, around half of working-age young people under the age of 25 in Greece and Spain are unemployed, and youth unemployment remains one of the most pressing issues for the European Union.

## Child labour

According to the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1959, “The child shall not be admitted to employment before an appropriate minimum age; he shall in no case be caused or permitted to engage in any occupation or employment which would prejudice his health or education [...]”. Over half a century later, 215 million children are still being deprived of their childhood, mostly in Africa, Asia and the Pacific region. Is it because of poverty? Certainly in part, but other factors play a role, too, such as gender, caste and religion, often in combination with families’ belief that working is good for children, as was also commonly held in the developed world until little more than a century ago. Although the number of children affected is falling, the decline is so slow (only 3% in five years) that many wonder how the international economic powers that be are benefiting from child labour. The International Labour Organization’s aim of having eradicated the worst forms of child labour by 2016 is already a lost cause.

## Work, work, work

In some countries, people live to work; in others, they work to live. Once again, centuries of culture and customs inform these realities. In countries where Protestantism took root, hard work is generally viewed as a means of self-fulfilment, whereas in Catholic countries, the Judeo-Christian point of view whereby work is a form of punishment prevails. Whatever the reason, in the US – where the word *workaholics* was coined – many view not taking all your vacation days as a sign of commitment, and in Japan – which has its own word, *karoshi*, to refer to people who work themselves to death – work is deeply associated with values such as honour and pride. In contrast, clichés notwithstanding, in countries such as Spain, where people work longer hours but are less productive than in, say, Germany, finding outlandish excuses to get out of work obligations is almost a profession in itself.

## Interns

Interns: cheap labour or a critical stage in any learning process? The status of these young people who – often with the help of a small grant – are gaining their first taste of the working world differs greatly from country to country. In the US, where young people interning at Silicon Valley tech giants such as Google or Facebook can earn up to 7,000 euros a month, interns work at the same level – and are required to perform to the same standard – as any other employee. Interns at companies in cities such as Barcelona, Seville or Valencia, in contrast, complain more than anywhere else in Europe that no one tells them exactly what they have to do. And the pay in these and other southern European cities is often not enough to cover even basic living costs, unlike in Nordic countries, such as Finland or Denmark, where interns are often given tasks entailing more responsibility. In many European countries, calls for a minimum wage for interns are growing.

## Having kids

As a result of factors such as women's incorporation into the labour force, low purchasing power and difficulties accessing housing, the average age at which European women are having their first child has risen to 29. Although in Romania or Bulgaria, the countries with the youngest mothers in Europe, women on average have their first child at 25, in places such as Catalonia, Italy and Greece, not only do women wait the longest to have children, they also have the fewest. Inequalities in terms of maternity and – increasingly – paternity leave, however, are even more glaring. Despite the recent expansion of paternity leave to four weeks, in Spain, total leave is 140 days. Meanwhile, in Sweden, the push for better work-life balance and a more equitable distribution of childcare has resulted in 90 days of leave for each parent, plus an additional 303 days to share. Such benefits remain a pipe dream in South America, where no country offers more than eight days of paternity leave, or Sudan, where paternity leave is not recognised at all.

## Student residences

Once they decide what to study, many students are immediately assailed by a new doubt: where will they live? One classic option, especially for out-of-town students, is student residences. Both England and, especially, the US, where 'going to college' is often synonymous with leaving home, have a long tradition of such housing. In Spain, despite the historical renown, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, whose most illustrious occupants included Lorca, Buñuel and Dalí, two out of three university students still live with family, and the construction of new halls of residence is viewed as a golden opportunity for investors. As the silver screen has so often shown us, in American 'dorms', students often room together. Rooms at Germany's *Studentenwohnheim* or France's *chambres universitaires* are generally singles. And if you are looking to brag about your current quarters, few places are as impressive as the Cité A Docks in Le Havre, made out of shipping containers, or London's Paris Gardens, with their spectacular views of the London Eye.

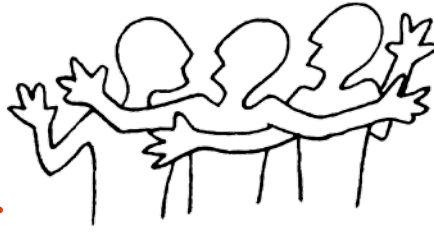
## Tying the knot

Not many generations ago, leaving your parents' home entailed a visit to the chapel. But for some time now, in developed countries, getting hitched before getting a good start on your career is increasingly rare. Sweden is the country in the world where people wait the longest to tie the knot: the average age is 33.8 for women and 36.6 for men. Despite lingering forms of social pressure – such as calling an unwed woman a *solterona* (akin to 'spinster' or 'old maid' in English) or warning her that *se li passarà l'arròs* (her clock is running out) – in Catalonia, as in the rest of Spain, people also wait to marry until after they have graduated from university and, often, had kids: the average age is 33.2 years for women and 35.4 for men. At the other end of the spectrum, the least developed countries are where people marry youngest; hence, in much of Africa, the average age at which women wed is 19, and men, 23. How old you are when you say "I do" has to do with cultural and human development factors. This also explains why, according to data from 2019, the 30 countries in which gay marriage is legal today include only one in Asia (Taiwan) and one in Africa (South Africa).

## Goodbye to the city

Increasingly, young people are not only saying goodbye to their parents when they move out, but also to the city. Soaring property prices and the profound loneliness a person can feel in the heart of a bustling city – captured in films from *Taxi Driver* to *Lost in Translation* or *Night on Earth* – have prompted many self-declared urbanites to pack their bags and head for the hills. In the US, the exodus of many millennials to the suburbs has given rise to a new term: *hipsturbia*. In Italy, more and more picturesque hamlets are selling off houses for just a euro in a bid to repopulate the countryside. Likewise, students who choose to enrol at a university in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan may be paid up to 18,000 euros. And, in 2017, the local council of the hearty Swiss mountain village of Albinen offered up to 54,000 euros to families willing to move there and add their names to the local population register.





## PARTY TIME

### Alcohol

Alcohol has played a huge role in culture since Neolithic times. Only countries in which religion is immensely influential, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, have effectively managed to ban it. As a result of this historical baggage, the way people conduct themselves after consuming drinks such as wine or beer can in many ways be said to owe more to social and cultural factors than the chemical effects of ethanol itself. Thus, while problems directly attributable to alcohol are relatively moderate in countries such as Italy and France, where wine is served with most meals and virtually all celebrations and business deals end with a toast, social traumas caused by the consumption of strong spirits are a major national concern in Nordic countries such as Iceland and Finland. Average per capita alcohol consumption (measured in litres of pure alcohol) stands at 6.1 litres per year worldwide. Countries in Eastern Europe, such as the Czech Republic, Latvia and Moldova, top the list of the world's heaviest drinking countries year on year.

### Calendars of the world

Around 40 different calendars are used around the world. Some are based on the solar cycle; others on the lunar cycle; still others on both solar and lunar observations. The most well-known is the Gregorian calendar, introduced in 1582 CE by Pope Gregory XIII and used officially by most of the world due to its extreme efficiency: it requires a one-day correction only once every 3,300 years. In other countries and cultures, time is measured based on different parameters. Examples include the Chinese calendar (lunisolar), Jewish calendar (lunisolar) and Muslim calendar (lunar). Throughout history, many calendars (e.g. the Egyptian, Hellenic or Roman) have, for different reasons, been abandoned or become obsolete. Finally, certain major historical events, such as the French and Russian revolutions, have given rise to calendars of their own.

## The morning after

All too often a night of partying ends in a hangover, any of a range of unpleasant physical symptoms that, as luck would have it, are more common in women than men. While there is no shortage of traditional cures – from tripe soup in Romania or pickled herring in Germany to a *cañita* of beer in Spain or the traditional Bloody Mary in many other countries – none are scientifically proven. Nor, according to one study, have any of them managed to prevent the economic costs of excessive drinking in the US (in terms of employee absenteeism and decreased productivity) from reaching an astonishing 130 billion euros a year. All things considered, then, it is better to get something in your stomach before you go to bed (in Spain, it is traditional to cap off a night out with *chocolate con churros*; in other European countries, a savoury kebab) and listen to what nature tells us: if you are not immune to hangovers (it is estimated that around 23% of people are), you are better off drinking in moderation.

## Group behaviours

As any Erasmus student soon learns, even how we party largely depends on where we are from. Blessed with a climate that is all but a fantasy in northern Europe, young people in Spain are partial to *botellones*, gatherings of one or more groups of friends in public squares where you generally only need to bring your own *litrona* to join a group conversation on a massive scale. While such bustling outdoor revelry might have certain parallels in Italy, it is unthinkable in Sweden and other northern European countries, not only because of the cold but also because of group dynamics. There, social circles tend to be smaller, consisting of friends from school, and chatting with more than one person can require considerable patience. The classic German *Biertisch*, in contrast, can be a great way to make new friends. At these long shared wooden tables, groups who start off as strangers often end up buying each other rounds and sharing jokes and conversation before the night is through.

## Noise levels

Second only to poor service, noise is one of the main causes of complaints at restaurants. In the US, where the decibel level at one in three establishments can be harmful for your hearing, restaurants have begun to open for diners looking to eat in silence. In the UK, venues are subject to more and more noise reduction and soundproofing requirements. In Spain, home to numerous cacophonous folk traditions, a campaign was launched in 2015 to raise awareness of the need to keep voices down at restaurants. In this regard, the old chestnut that whereas in a group of Germans, one person talks and the others listen, in a group of Spaniards, everyone talks and no one listens can seem a bit too on the nose at Spanish bars. And while in Nordic countries, fast food restaurants might as well be places of worship given the hushed tones people use, in southern Europe, it has never required a particularly keen ear to listen in on the conversations at three or four nearby tables at once. Regardless, noise tolerance can be largely cultural: what is regarded as ‘shouting’ in one country might barely register as a whisper in another.

## It's my treat

Dinner was delicious; the laughter, genuine and constant. But when the waiter leaves the check on the table, many a diner will start to wonder how it will be paid. While in northern Europe, it is normal to ask for as many tabs as might be needed, doing so in a southern European country may earn you an irritated glare from the server. In some places in Spain, asking for separate checks is referred to as *pagar a la americana*; in Italy, *pagare alla romana*; in English-speaking countries, *going Dutch*; in Central America, *ir con cuyo* (from *cada uno con lo suyo* or “each his own”) or *la ley de Cristo* (*cada quien con su pisto*). Regardless, such customs are unusual in the Basque Country (where a common *bote* or pot is used to pay for the *pintxos* and *zuritos*) and all but unheard of in regions of Asia such as India (where splitting the tab is taboo) or China (where the highest-ranking person at the table foots the bill). Nevertheless, no country has a monopoly on freeloaders, and strategically timed phone calls or trips to the toilet when the check arrives to avoid having to open one's wallet are entirely cross-cultural tactics.

## Holiday

*Holiday*: it is the most anticipated word for hundreds of millions of students and workers the world over. This right to rest, which, in the working world, was won during the Industrial Revolution and, in the world of education, dates back to the universities of mediaeval Europe, takes different forms in different countries. The summer holiday for students ranges from 6 weeks in the UK, Japan and some German Länder, to 10–11 weeks in Spain and 13 in France, Italy, Turkey, Russia and Portugal. But before you feel too bad for those students with the fewest days off in summer, remember: in Switzerland, students get a week off every two months, and in England, every month and a half. In the working world, the magic word sounds even sweeter when it is preceded by the adjective *paid*. However, while in Finland, France, Kuwait and Nicaragua, workers receive 30 days of paid holiday each year, in countries such as China and Nigeria, the number of paid days off can be counted on one hand.

## Smoking

Taking a drag on a cigarette between sips of your drink at a bar, like placing a call on a strange device found in a bright red booth on the street, is something that today lives on only in old films. Anti-smoking laws, which ban smoking in closed public places, have proliferated around the world. Some cities are veritable nightmares for smokers, such as New York (where smoking is also prohibited at beaches and parks), Tokyo (where you can only puff away on the street in one of the increasingly common designated smoking areas), Nairobi (where having a smoke while you wait for the bus can land you in jail) and Singapore (where the use of e-cigarettes and chewing tobacco is banned outright). In Europe, anti-smoking laws are now the norm, although in Greece, where one third of the population are active smokers, people generally turn a blind eye and the taverns are still thick with smoke. As a result, “I'm going out for a smoke” is a common statement in cities such as Paris and Barcelona, and it is only growing more so now that flirting while you smoke outside a bar has become so common that there is already a word for it in English: *smirting*.



## Birthdays

Cakes and candles in the West, long longevity noodles in China, a handful of flour in the face when you're least expecting it in Jamaica... Birthdays are celebrated in all sorts of ways around the world. In Catalonia, Italy and Spain, where the person celebrating often treats others to a round of drinks on their big day, it is customary to tug a person's ear once for every year they are turning. But be careful! Pulling on someone's ear to wish them a happy birthday in India, where ears are considered sacred, could be deeply offensive. The Canadian practice of slathering the birthday boy or girl's nose with butter, or *nose greasing*, and the elaborate *piñatas* used in Mexico are ways of celebrating a child's birthday, but other traditions don't kick in until people are much older. In Germany, if a man is still single when he turns thirty, he has to sweep the city steps... until he is kissed by a girl. But birthdays are not celebrated everywhere. In Vietnam, rather than individual birthdays, everyone celebrates becoming one year older together on the same day, and in Tajikistan – as one local pop star learned the hard way when she was fined for doing so – celebrating birthdays in public is prohibited.





## ..... LANGUAGES

### Writing

Writing, the use of symbols to represent a language, is such an incredible achievement for humankind that its emergence marks the boundary between prehistory and history. There are currently more than 200 known writing systems worldwide. The most commonly used, by some distance, is the Latin script, followed by the Cyrillic and Arabic scripts. Some are genuinely complex. The Japanese writing system, for instance, is based on ideograms: you need to know around 2,000 to fluently read a newspaper. More recent systems include one based on abbreviations that has been referred to as a *teen Esperanto*: over the last decade, internet shorthand or *chatspeak* has emerged as both a key youth identity marker and a real acid test for language scholars.

### False friends

Watch out! If a Catalan who is *constipat* asks an English chemist for something for his *constipation*, he'll likely be given a box of laxatives. If a pregnant Spanish woman (*embarazada*) tells an Italian friend that she is *imbarazzata* or an English friend that she is *embarrassed*, they will be far more likely to ask her why on earth she should feel so abashed than whether she has already picked a name out. And if a French dry-cleaner tells you your shirt will be ready in a *décade*, you don't have to wait ten years to come back, but ten days. All of these are examples of false friends, i.e. words (often with shared roots) that look and sound quite similar in two languages but can have dramatically different meanings in each one. Although these false friends (or *faux amis*, in French) give rise to truly incongruous situations every day, they are the inevitable price of learning a new language. While most are harmless and amusing, there are still quite a few that can leave you feeling utterly mortified.

## Speaking more than one language

Even though Europe is home to ten times fewer languages than Africa or Asia, and a mere 12 languages account for 90% of all content on the internet, the world's linguistic diversity is nevertheless staggering. While it is calculated that some 6,000 languages are still spoken today, they are not at all evenly distributed around the globe. In Papua New Guinea – which, together with Indonesia, is the country in the world with the greatest wealth of languages – three times more languages are spoken than in all of Europe (832 vs 260). In fact, 96% of the world's languages are spoken by only 4% of its population, and 46 languages today have only one surviving speaker. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by this constantly shifting profusion of languages, it is worth recalling the many proven benefits of mastering two or more: bilingual children may be better able to focus, and knowing multiple languages can help delay the onset of age-related diseases such as senile dementia.

## Different languages, different world views

Every language expresses a specific world view. All are equally important and necessary. Preserving this diversity should be a critical goal for humankind. To this end, it is instructive to realise that, no matter how you look at it, *llepafils* (a Catalan term for an extremely picky eater) or *dépaysement* (a French word encapsulating the disorienting, apprehensive, but also almost giddy feeling of being in another country) are words without clear one-word equivalents in most other languages; that, notwithstanding any approximate parallels one might draw, *saudade* is a type of melancholy the exact shade of which only the Portuguese and Galicians can truly grasp; or that Finnish has 40 different words to describe snow and other wintry precipitations. In short, every language ultimately expresses a particular world view that allows its speakers to organise and name the things around them. Hence, Welsh has a specific term for a false or mocking smile (*glas wen*); in Indonesia, *jayus* are jokes so cringingly bad you cannot help but laugh; and in Italy, a tanning bed addict is called a *slampadato*.

## Toponyms

Did you know that Los Angeles was originally called El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles del Río de Porciúncula? Or that the full name of Bangkok in Thai clocks in at stunning 185 characters, making the notoriously lengthy place names of Wales look almost monosyllabic by comparison? While searching for unusual or amusing place names (such as the Austrian village of Fucking, which, in 2020, decided to change its name to... Fugging) can certainly be a fun way to pass the time, in the fascinating world of toponymy, nothing is ever simply because. Toponyms provide information about a region's setting and history and are an undeniable part of our heritage. We encounter them so often, we do not even realise the extent to which they are present in our daily lives, whether we are greeting a Spanish friend with the surname Sevilla or scheduling an appointment with a Dr London in the US, choosing between a *frankfurter* (named after the German city) or a slice of *Emmental* cheese (named for the Swiss region where it is made) at dinner, or capping off the evening with a *bourbon* (a county in Kentucky, USA) or a toast with *champagne* (produced in the eponymous region of France).

## Mutual intelligibility

International mobility for business or to study is increasingly common. And, obviously, the more you travel, the more languages you need to learn. Still, the experience of short-term stays such as Erasmus exchanges shows that when you will only be in a new place for a few months, it is often more helpful to master the rudiments of the language, in order to understand and make yourself understood, than embark on the odyssey of achieving true fluency. Capitalising on the many similarities between closely related languages is often one of the best tools to this end. According to the experts, Romance languages share around 80% of their vocabularies. As a result, an Italian exchange student in Barcelona would be hard pressed to feign incomprehension when his professor announces an *examen* (*esame* in Italian). Likewise, a Portuguese student can easily celebrate having passed that same exam later by ordering a *cervesa* (*cerveja* in Portuguese) at the bar. Similarly, studies have shown that, thanks to the proximity between Nordic languages, a young person from Oslo can understand around 70% of Swedish, and the Faeroese have virtually no problem understanding Danish.

## Language and gender equality

It's time to fill out a form. In Catalonia, even today, women often have to choose between *senyora* (Mrs) and *senyoreta* (Miss), thereby indirectly indicating whether they are married. Men, in contrast, need simply mark the more discreet, all-purpose *senyor* (Mr). But times are changing. In France, the distinction between *madame* and *mademoiselle* was eliminated from official forms in 2012; in the UK, the option 'Ms', which is acceptable regardless of a woman's marital status, is now commonplace; and even in Spain's most traditional cities, referring to a grown woman as *señorita* sounds antiquated and absurd. Still, gender inequalities live on in many other aspects of language. The traditional default use of the masculine plural in Romance languages to refer to groups of both sexes is something that universities – and government agencies in general – are striving to change with guides that recommend, for example, using *estudiantat* (student body) rather than *estudiants*. Similarly, in the political arena, as witnessed in some parliaments in speeches by *diputades* (women MPs) that have used feminine forms for generic references, there is a growing awareness of the need to work on the use of non-sexist language. However, as heated as this debate has become in some places, the masculine-feminine gender binary exists in only 15% of the world's languages.

## Language certificates

It's time to pack our bags to study abroad. Some universities offer incoming exchange students the chance to demonstrate that they can say more than “hello” in their new country's language in an interview. In general, though, you will need to provide a certificate that guarantees that, if you are called on in class, you will at least have a general idea of what has been said. The most widely recognised English language certificates at the international level are the IELTS (which includes a speaking test with a certified examiner) and the TOEFL (completed online at an accredited testing centre). The French Ministry of Education offers two tests for French – the DELF and the DALF – which some 285,000 students take each year at testing centres in 167 countries. Those who dare to try their hand at what many believe is the language of the future, Chinese, will have to learn at least 150 words to qualify for the easiest level of the HSK. And although there are currently no official tests to certify your knowledge of Arabic, more and more sectors of society are pointing to the need for an 'Arabic TOEFL'.

## Slang

We have earned the full battery of certificates for our chosen foreign language, yet the day we get lost in a city where it is spoken, we realise we don't understand a thing. What happened? The answer is slang, a form of speech that differs from the standard language taught at most schools and tends to send language purists into a tizzy, but can also be the ultimate passport to integrate into a society. Some slangs, such as Cockney rhyming slang, which originated in London's East End and shows up in *Mary Poppins* and the works of Charles Dickens, or *lunfardo*, from Buenos Aires, used in countless tangos, are inextricably tied to a specific city. Others, such as certain American slang terms (you don't need to be anyone's brother to be addressed as "Bro") or Brazil's *gíria* (where the local version of *bro* is *mermão*) have been embraced by almost an entire country. In addition to such geographical considerations, almost every profession has its own jargon, too. Naturally, so do students: the English *all-nighter* might be rendered *fer colzes tota la nit* in Catalan, while failing a subject can be slangily referred to as *catejar*.





## ..... CULTURE

### Original version with subtitles

Subs or dubs? It's an open question. Some find reading superimposed text distracting. Others claim that dubbing undermines actors' work. With the emergence of 'talkies' in the 1920s and 1930s (when, it is worth recalling, many people in certain countries were still illiterate), every country chose one option or the other. Subtitled original versions of films have since become the norm in most of Europe. However, dubbing prevails in Italy, Germany and Spain, all of which were seeking to assert their identities at a time of rising nationalism. Many of the 30,000 people employed in Spain's voice-over industry work in Catalonia. Nevertheless, the fact that the countries whose populations have the best foreign language skills (Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden) all opted for subtitling has prompted countries that have traditionally dubbed films to take a variety of measures to promote original-version programming with subtitles at cinemas and on television, with a view to nurturing multilingualism.

### The social value of music

History has shown that music can influence people at every level: biological, physiological, psychological, intellectual, spiritual and, of course, social. Ever since the days of Ancient Greece, when it was taken for granted that music could foster social harmony or incite a violent riot, music has helped shape the development of both personal and collective identities. Executions such as those of the Chilean singer-songwriter Victor Jara (at the hands of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1973) or the composer and labour activist Joe Hill (ordered by a court in Utah, USA, in 1915) show that the powers that be have never underestimated the potential of songs to bring about change. Today, the social responsibility of famous and, thus, influential musicians is the subject of fierce debate.

## Eating and taboos

Every religion has its prohibited and sacred foods: Jews and Muslims do not eat pork; in Hinduism, cows are sacred; Buddhist vegetarianism can be quite extreme; and Christians, although not bound by specific prohibitions per se, consider gluttony a capital sin. Often, however, food taboos have nothing to do with faith. In Germany, horse meat is sold at specialised butchers and tasty *solomillos de caballo* can be found in some parts of Spain, but horse steak would never be on the menu at a restaurant in the US or UK. Likewise, given dogs' status as 'man's best friend' in Europe, eating their meat – common in times of hardship – is inconceivable today (unlike in China or Congo). On the other hand, despite the popularity of turtle soup in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England, today endangered species laws ban trade in this and other meats, such as whale, in many countries. Nevertheless, adventurous eaters can always travel to Ghana or Thailand to sample rat meat or Mexico to savour a bowl of crispy insects.

## The cultural value of punctuality

In the United States, time is money. In Africa, on the other hand, where time is never what matters most, there's an old adage: Africans do not wait for time, time waits for Africans. The importance of punctuality clearly varies from one culture to another. In Latin America, where many would surely agree with Evelyn Waugh that "punctuality is the virtue of the bored", economies lose billions due to delays. In Europe, Catalans, Spaniards, Italians and the Portuguese are the populations that take schedules the most lightly. And in the Philippines, people still remember how, after proclaiming a national Punctuality Week in 1997 intended to change local customs, President Fidel Ramos... showed up an hour late for its launch! In contrast, in Germany, Japan, Switzerland and Finland, arriving on time is the least you can do to show respect and the trains, for example, run like clockwork.

## Park life

Just as the arts are a very effective way to revitalise parks, parks can be the perfect venue to attract new audiences to the arts. Ever since military bands began to offer evening concerts in the parks of the USA's largest cities, music, theatre, dance, art and circuses have had an ally in parks. Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Terrassa (Catalonia) and, of course, New Orleans (United States) are just three of the many cities in the world that host jazz festivals in their parks. In Vienna, every summer, the Wiener Philharmoniker offers a free open-air concert in the Schönbrunn Palace gardens. In Amsterdam, the summer theatre performances in Vondelpark are always top-notch. And in New York, Central Park has hosted the 'Shakespeare in the Park' programme, featuring renowned Shakespearean actors, every summer since 1954. The list goes on and on, and that is a good thing. Today, city parks are not only the perfect place to meet friends, kick back and relax, but also to soak up some culture.

## 'Unlucky' numbers

In Japan and China, people are so intimidated by the number 4 (the word for which sounds eerily similar to the word for death in the local languages) that buildings do not have fourth floors, and nobody wants a telephone number with a 4 in it. In contrast, in the West, where the *Friday the 13th* horror saga has given multiple generations nightmares, the fear instilled by what some euphemistically refer to as “12 + 1” is so widespread there is even a word for it: *triskaidekaphobia*. Some say the roots of this superstition can be traced to the number of people in attendance at the Last Supper. Regardless, it is reflected in everything from European Formula 1, with no number 13 drivers, to local transport in Madrid, where the number 13 bus has never been used. In Italy, in contrast, it is 17 that is considered bad luck (as an anagram of how it is written in Roman numerals, VIXI, means “I have lived” in Latin, ergo, I am now dead). Fortunately, some numbers are also considered to bring good luck. In China, the number 8 is a sign of prosperity (which is why the Beijing Olympics began at 8:08 on 8 August 2008), and in the West, a triple 7 means you've hit the jackpot on a slot machine.

## Sense of humour

We take the plunge and try to translate a favourite joke for some friends visiting from abroad. But, when told in another language, the same story that elicits hearty guffaws at home lands with a thud or, almost worse, is met by blank stares. Aspiring comedians of the world, beware: what is considered funny can vary greatly from one place to the next. Some things are universal (Spanish jokes routinely involve a ‘guy from Lepe’, the English never pass up a chance to roast the Irish, and the French always make Belgians the butt of their jokes), but the fact that in some societies, such as Mediterranean ones, it is harder to separate a joke from its context than in more individualistic societies, such as English-speaking ones, makes some types of humour harder to export than others. In any case, it is worth remembering that, in the US, humour is frequently understood as a tool for overcoming adversity; that, in England, but also places such as Catalonia, it is often ingeniously dry; that Jews and Scots, unlike the Japanese, have a healthy habit of laughing at themselves; that, in China, people will be taken aback by humour that is too caustic; and that, in Italy, you never make fun of someone's mother, because *la mamma no si tocca*.

## Women in culture

In 2015, a popular British blogger uploaded a new version of the Reading Festival line-up poster with one *minor* change: all the bands without at least one female member had been deleted. In one fell swoop, the original hundred or so names were abruptly whittled down to under a dozen. The new all-but-empty poster starkly underscored the miniscule presence of women artists at such events. Gender-equal line-ups – in music, but also theatre or film – remain an elusive goal, but initiatives such as Barcelona's Primavera Sound (which, in 2019, advocated for a ‘new normal’ with a line-up that was 50% female), London's Loud Women Fest, Beijing's China Women's Film Festival, the Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival, or Madrid's Ellas Crean festival are working to give greater visibility to female artists in the face of inequalities such as those criticised by Unesco in 2017: only a third of cultural policy leadership positions worldwide are held by women, and only one in five films produced in Europe is directed by a woman.



## Streaming series on your phone

Television series are one of the great social phenomena of our time. They have altered our vocabulary (who doesn't know what a spoiler is today?) and even our social expectations: when was the last time a dinner with friends didn't include, at some point, at least a mention of the season finale of *Narcos* or *The Crown*? One 2018 study found that half of all young people lied to their friends in order to stay in, binge-watching a show. According to Netflix, series bingers from Canada, the US and Nordic countries such as Norway, Sweden or Denmark are the most likely to scarf down an entire season at a go, whether from their couches... or in the most unlikely places. Again, times are changing, and as can increasingly be seen in cities around the world, people today not only enjoy watching their shows with a hot slice of pizza in the comfort of their own home, but also on their phones as they ride the underground or on their tablets while waiting in line at the airport.





## Different lives

In late 2011, the NGO Save the Children launched the “Lottery of Life” campaign. The interactive website made hundreds of thousands of internet users aware of just how small their chances would be of starting out with the same advantages if they were to be born again somewhere else. A simple spin of the wheel showed, for example, that a person born in India would have a 39% chance of being illiterate and a 47% chance of being forced to marry while still a child. A person coming into the world in Burma, Uganda or Congo, on the other hand, would be at risk of being recruited as a child soldier. Across the planet, 360,000 babies are born each day. The initiative’s report concluded that the most fortunate are born in Sweden, where almost everyone enjoys good health and education. The least fortunate are born in Somalia, where one child in six dies before the age of five, 70% do not have access to drinking water and only one in three attends school.

## Low-cost air travel

First launched in the US in the 1970s and having caught on in Europe by the 1990s (and in Asia and Australia by the turn of the century), low-cost airlines have changed our travel habits in record time. In the case of Europe, the creation of the single market, the aviation industry’s deregulation and new lifestyles facilitated by strong social safety nets paved the way, for example, for 183 million passengers to take cheap flights within the continent last year. The companies’ business model is simple. The fewer services they offer (in-flight meals, printed tickets, checked bags), the cheaper they can make it to fly with them. Nevertheless, recent proposals (mostly by the Irish carrier Ryanair), such as a surcharge for overweight passengers, charging to use the toilet or even offering discount tickets to those willing to travel standing up, raise the question of where the limits of low-cost culture lie.

## Alternative forms of accommodation

New forms of accommodation might seem like passing fads born of the economic crisis, but their proliferation suggests they might better be viewed as a sustainable, personalised tourism success story. This is the era of couch-surfing (an online hospitality service offering close to a million sofas at private homes in 200 countries where tourists can sleep free of charge), in addition to the more ‘traditional’ home exchange. The latter, a form of tourism based on the belief that exchanging homes with someone requires an act of mutual trust and which has been growing at an annual rate of 30% in Catalonia, enables you to sleep in a flat in the Marais in Paris or on Avenida de Mayo in Buenos Aires while its owners spend the night in your home. But the possibilities don’t end there. There are also farmhouses that offer accommodation in return for help with farm work or people who invite travellers not to stay in their home but to enjoy a decent meal in their dining room. There are even options for homebodies. ‘Postcrossing’ communities, in which people exchange postcards with strangers from all over the world, make it possible to ‘travel’ without even leaving your home.

## Shaped by the climate

Ever since the first cavemen began to wrap themselves in the skins of the animals they had hunted to protect themselves from the cold, humans have had to dress and undress. From the sealskin and bear-fur coats sewn with sinew used by the Inuits to the thin cotton clothes recommended for a trip to the Amazon, almost every climate has its own garments. In countries where it gets very cold, there is little sense in debating aesthetics: half of our body heat is lost through our head, so we’d better wear a hat. Should we choose a *ushanka* (a sturdy Russian hat with ear flaps) or a *chullo* (the iconic alpaca wool hats worn in the Andes)? For your legs, nothing beats the three-layer system used by the Lapps: long johns, followed by an insulating middle layer, and then a layer of outerwear suitable for skiing. In hot countries, light-coloured clothes made from natural fibres help keep the mosquitoes at bay, especially in tropical regions such as Brazil and India. Likewise, as seen in so many African countries, turbans and loose dresses allow a layer of cooling air to circulate between our bodies and clothes.

## Say cheese!

Digital technology and smartphones have changed how we approach travel photography. Whereas once upon a time, you could only take as many photos as your roll of film could hold and would thus think twice before snapping the shutter, the digital world encourages tourists to document every detail of their trip. However, there are globe-trotting shutterbugs – regardless of country of origin, those who travel today without some type of camera in their bag are few and far between – and then there are the Japanese. Proponents of the selfie stick when it was still a regular feature in books about ‘useless inventions’, the Japanese are peerless when it comes to travel photography. While there are many theories that seek to explain this obsession, one should not overlook the status boost that comes from having been photographed in front of the Eiffel Tower or enjoying a gelato by the Fontana di Trevi in such a status-conscious culture. Although there are no cultures, in the developed world, in which taking pictures is taboo, it should be borne in mind – especially in Muslim countries – that certain images should not be caught on film.

## **The art of bargaining**

While in the West, an item's price is usually whatever is stated on its price tag, bargaining is a fact of life in the bazaars and markets of Asia, Africa and parts of Latin America. Marrakech's merchants drive some of the hardest bargains in North Africa; in Istanbul, a simple sale may require several rounds of tea; in Delhi, you have to haggle for everything from your taxi fare to your nightly hotel rate; and in Bangkok, where smiling is an intrinsic part of the local way of life, you'd better not lose your temper if you want to avoid awkward situations. Greeted in Cairo or Istanbul with phrases in their own languages and erudite references – sometimes even to their specific hometowns – Spaniards (especially Catalans!), the French and Italians have a well-earned reputation as tenacious hagglers, due to their refusal to give up. In contrast, as several travel forums can attest, the Japanese, Russians and Germans are easy marks for sellers looking to turn a pretty penny by refusing to budge from the opening price for a carpet, scarf or sachet of saffron.

## **Plugs, taps and toilets**

It's a situation all travellers encounter at some point: you get to wherever you're staying abroad, unpack your bags, take out your camera to recharge the battery... and realise you need an adapter to plug it in. Because technological development has not exactly been a collective global effort, today at least 14 types of plugs are used around the world, including the two-pin plugs used in most of continental Europe and the three-pin plugs used in the UK. But a trip to the bathroom reveals even more differences. In England – where you often have to tug a chain to turn on the light – sinks usually have two faucets: one for cold water, the other for hot. In the multifaceted and exciting world of commodes, there are up to ten different types of toilets, including the squat toilets used in Turkey; South American toilets, where it is often prohibited to flush toilet paper due to inadequate plumbing; and Japanese toilets, which come with a remote control for a mind-boggling array of features, including one that imitates the sound of a toilet flushing without actually causing it to flush!

## **A day at the beach**

Although women have been going topless on the beach for more than half a century, it is not yet a global practice. On the sun-drenched beaches of the Catalan or Andalusian coasts, around half of women choose to sunbathe topless. In contrast, in France, the country that first exported the practice to the rest of the world, young people increasingly view going topless as something only old people do. Ireland and Russia are the only European countries with restrictive laws on the subject. In the US, going topless is allowed in California, but strictly forbidden in Texas. In Latin America, only Cuba fully recognises the right to go topless. And as idyllic as certain Tunisian and Egyptian beaches may be, exposing your breasts on them can land you in prison. Nevertheless, topless or otherwise, today women who would like to avoid the often awkward experience of sharing a spot on the sand with a bunch of strange men have an ever-growing selection of exclusive beaches to choose from. Nordau Beach in Israel is open only to women three days a week; men are not allowed to go to the beach in Antalya, Turkey, in the morning; and at Pedocin Beach, in Italy, a concrete wall separates women from men in a scene more reminiscent of countries such as Iran than Europe.

## Open on Sunday

It is worth familiarising ourselves with local business hours when we travel so as not to run out of coffee, shampoo or eggs on a day when everything is closed. Due to the widespread liberalisation of business hours, shopping on the traditional Christian ‘day of rest’ is more and more common. Nevertheless, in countries such as Norway, Switzerland and Germany, the streets are still eerily empty on Sundays. In the US and Canada, shops are open year-round except on Christmas, Easter Sunday and Thanksgiving. In China, where there are few regulations, business on Sundays is not all that different from any other day of the week. In France, where a growing number of exceptions allow shopkeepers to open on bank holidays, the traditional day of rest has long since ceased to be observed. And in Spain, where, as in France, the debate over opening hours on bank holidays has been dragging on for decades, it is now quite common for shops to be open on Sundays around Christmas.





## ..... SOCIAL LIFE

### Urban tribes

Metalheads, punks, emos, goths, hipsters, skinheads and mods are classic examples of groups of young people whose behaviour and/or aesthetics set them apart from the mainstream. These groups, which have drawn the attention of anthropologists and sociologists since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, have been referred to as “urban tribes” ever since 1990, when Michel Maffesoli published his book *The Time of the Tribes*. Decades after the Beatnik and hippie movements peaked, and long after such iconic films as *West Side Story* or *Quadrophenia*, video games and the rise of social media have sparked a subculture revival. The flagship tribes of yesteryear have been joined by *pokemones* (a Latin American subculture involving a positive, self-assured outlook on life), instagrammers (Instagram devotees) and *frikis* (unrepentant new technology junkies). All are caught up in young people’s constant search for identity.

### Recycled clothes

Nowadays, a simple garment can have more lives than a cat. Like the increasingly widespread practice of making clothes from recycled materials, enthusiasm for giving other people’s cast-off trousers, shirts and jackets a second life is alive and well thanks to a combination of environmental, economic and fashion-related factors. Fashionistas have embraced second-hand shops, which are so long-standing in the UK and US that there is even a specific word for rummaging through their racks and bins: *thrifting*. More and more people are uploading photos to Facebook and Twitter to sell off their own used clothes. Meanwhile, designers such as Gary Harvey are calling for “an ethical fashion revolution”, involving clothes made out of recycled tins, plastic and cardboard. And although the statistics still suggest that middle-class women in the US use only a quarter of the clothes in their closets, there is no denying the newfound influence of sustainability in the fashion industry or that many people are once again seeking forgotten gems in Grandma’s old trunk in the attic.

## All you need is love

Love is the most universal sentiment; anthropologists have yet to discover a group of humans that has not been organised into couples or families. Most are governed by polygamy, a system allowing a person to mate with various individuals at the same time, especially encouraged in Islamic countries, where, with few exceptions, it is men who are entitled to have two or more wives. However, the most common form in the Western world, especially as a result of its Judeo-Christian tradition, is monogamy (a practice that restricts sexual contact to a single partner). Yet only 3% of mammals are monogamous, a figure that has prompted scholars to question whether it is truly the natural human state or whether, as Freud postulated, we are all just repressed polygamists. Free love, which conceives of marriage as a form of social slavery, polyamory, which enables consenting adults to engage in multiple long-term relationships at the same time, and casual sex, which seeks to satisfy the curiosity that all humans feel to experiment, are just three examples of the thousand-plus forms of *loving* that have been studied.

## Dressing up or dressing down

As a result of the vicissitudes of modern life, saving your best clothes for the weekend (an action for which some languages even have a specific word, such as the Catalan *endiumenjar-se*) is no longer the iron-clad norm it once was. More often in towns than cities, and in some regions more than others, there are still parts of Europe where you can tell what day of the week it is simply by looking at how people are dressed. The dapper *señor andaluz* out for a morning stroll in Ronda or the young people in Romania – where, as in other Eastern European countries, putting on your Sunday best is a custom that dates back centuries – who put on their traditional *opinci* shoes to attend mass on Sundays are still fairly common sights. Special occasions or otherwise, rankings and surveys continue to name Italians (especially the men), the French (especially the women) and Swedes as the best-dressed Europeans, and Poles, Greeks and Germans as the worst.

## Queues

The origin of queues is intrinsically linked to urban and industrial development, making the English genuine pioneers. But while the Brits' ability to queue politely in neat single-file lines, as witnessed each summer at Wimbledon, is certainly admirable, the Japanese – who kept unprecedented order in the queues to buy groceries in the wake of the 2011 tsunami – and, especially, Canadians are clear contenders for the title of the world's most civilised queuers. Quite the opposite is true in India, where clustering chaotically around the objective is the norm; African countries, where queue-jumping is less a sign of disrespect than the product of a particular way of understanding time; and China, which, in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games, instituted a monthly 'Queuing Day' in an attempt to eradicate bad queuing habits. More fun facts: in Thailand, you can simply leave your sandals to mark your spot in a queue, and in Eastern Europe, you can tip people to queue for you. In most countries, however, politely asking the person ahead of you to save your spot will suffice.

## Gift giving

In some cultures, giving (and receiving) a gift is an act so loaded with symbolism that you need to proceed with care. In Asia, in general, it is customary to politely refuse a gift several times before accepting it. Furthermore, as in Germany, when you do finally accept it, it is rude to open it straightaway. In Japan, where gifts are artfully wrapped with *furoshiki* cloths, how a gift is presented can sometimes be more important than the gift itself. And, in China, be careful lest a seemingly innocent gesture end up causing offence: clocks are considered bad luck due to their close association with death, and an umbrella is a conclusive signal that the giver wants to break up. Finally, gift giving is a true art form in Russia (where bouquets should always have an odd number of flowers, as even numbers are exclusively for funerals) or Italy (where children are taught from a very young age to add a 'personal touch' to their gifts and business lunches are always preceded by gifts in the form of boxes of delicious *cioccolatini* or bottles of select liquors).

## Taking your shoes off

Our host greets us at the door to her home and we are struck by a sudden doubt: do we take off our shoes or can we tread on her carpet with boots that have been pounding the pavement all day? Taking your shoes off as a matter of hygiene is standard practice in countries such as Sweden, Norway and Russia. Doing so as a token of respect for your host or to ward off 'bad vibes' is common in Korea, Thailand and Japan (where *uwabaki* slippers are donned in place of shoes, including at temples and restaurants, and students do not enter the classroom with their own footwear until university). However, in the wake of several disturbing studies – including one by a University of Arizona microbiologist that found an average of 420,000 units of bacteria on shoes or another by the University of Houston in which 40% of samples taken from doorsteps were contaminated with the virulent *Clostridium difficile* bacterium – the practice of leaving your shoes at the door has spread beyond Nordic countries and Asia and is increasingly common in Canada, Australia and many other regions of the world.

## Changing rooms and saunas

An unbeatable antidote to the stress of modern life, saunas are the top choice for relaxing in many countries. But... do we have to take all of our clothes off to use them? It is a common question the first time we are invited to partake in the pleasures of a steam bath. In Germany, Austria, South Tyrol, Poland, Russia and the Netherlands, nudity is the norm. And in Finland, considered the birthplace of the sauna and where even the Parliament building has one, saunas are often mixed, provided all the bathers are close friends or family. According to an old Finnish proverb, you should behave in a sauna as you would in church. In Italy, France and Spain, in contrast, people keep on a minimal amount of clothing. And despite the effusiveness with which people tend to greet each other in those countries, it is worth bearing in mind that saunas are not the best place for a hug. Where everyone does bare it all is in the changing rooms, which, with a few exceptions in Germany and Austria, are segregated by sex around the world. However, a recent experience at a secondary school in the Basque Country suggests that unisex changing rooms boost self-esteem and positive body images and help combat sexist mentalities.



## Tattoos

Once upon a time, tattoos might have been the preserve of sailors and edgy miscreants. But today, with 38% of the world's population sporting some sort of ink (according to a 2018 study from Germany) and celebrities proudly flaunting their 'tats' on Instagram, in the West, at least, tattoos are no longer frowned upon. Italy, Sweden and the US are the countries with the highest percentages of tattooed inhabitants. And Sweden (again), Denmark and Israel are the countries with the most people who have tattoos that... they wish they had never got. Although for more and more people, getting a tattoo is no different than getting your ears pierced, it is worth recalling that in South Korea, for example, tattoos can only legally be done by medical doctors; in France and Germany, tattoos of fascist symbols are punishable by law; in Turkey, they are not allowed at primary or secondary schools; and in Japan, where they are stigmatised if not technically outlawed, showing them at public pools, gyms or restaurants is often prohibited.





## E-learning and new forms of teaching

Blackboards, desks and stacks of notes: all are vestiges of a distant time. Traditional teaching systems are increasingly being questioned, and new forms of instruction – almost always involving the internet – are proliferating. Gamification (the use of aspects typical of gaming environments to promote values such as effort or concentration), Moodle (software for hosting multimedia content or administering online exams) and MOOCs (massive open online courses) are all buzzwords at 21<sup>st</sup>-century universities, where flipped classrooms (where students study content at home and use class time only for group work) and the open-plan concept (classes conducted in flexible spaces, which are all the rage in Finland) are on course to gain considerable ground in the future. E-learning, which the Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated, is growing exponentially around the world, especially in countries such as India (where geographical factors often make face-to-face teaching difficult) or South Korea (where the internet speed, even in rural areas, is conducive to online education).

## Dating apps

Sidling up to the bar to ask someone whether they ‘come here often’ is ancient history. Apps such as Tinder, which generates 1.5 million dates a week worldwide, or Badoo, with 200 million registered users, are the new nightclubs. There is virtually no country in the world today where people do not use their phones to flirt. According to some surveys, Brazil is the country where it is easiest to hook up via a social network. Italy and Spain, two countries with equally strong reputations for passionate lovers, round out the podium. London, Paris, New York, Berlin, Moscow, Stockholm, Rio de Janeiro, Sydney, Barcelona and Buenos Aires are the top ten destinations for Tinder’s new Passport feature, which allows users to change their location so they can keep dating while they travel; Oslo is the European city with the highest proportion of single people (53%); Tokyo is where ‘swiping right’ is growing fastest; and half of all Mancunians... admit to having been single for at least ten years.

## Smartphone use

For some time now, we've used our phones not only to place calls, but to play games, shop, chat, listen to music, watch series, do banking and check the weather, among myriad other things that the *phono sapien*, as 21<sup>st</sup>-century humans have been called, cannot imagine doing without. Needless to say, the time we spend daily on these devices is increasing every year: Brazil (4 hours and 48 minutes a day) and China (3 h 4 min) have the 'honour' of being the world's biggest phone addicts, while Italy (2 h 34 min) and Spain (2 h 11 min) top the European ranking. Aside from average daily screentime, smartphone use differs from place to place for cultural reasons. In Japan, where respect and harmony are prized cultural values, it is considered so rude to talk on your phone in public that bus drivers may even bar you from boarding if they see you jabbering away on what they call a *keitai*. In Italy, Spain or Catalonia, on the other hand, people frequently discuss their personal lives or business on the phone in the most unexpected places.

## Friends 2.0

The concept of friendship has taken on a new dimension with the emergence of social media. How many Facebook friends do we have that we can't remember... ever having met? The Philippines has the dubious distinction of being the country in the world whose citizens spend the most time (4 hours and 1 minute a day) on Instagram, WhatsApp and other contemporary social platforms. In Brazil, which ranks second worldwide, people spend an average of 3 hours and 45 minutes a day, positioning Latin America (as well as countries in other regions, such as Nigeria or Indonesia) amongst the world's biggest consumers of these platforms. In Japan, where, due to the deep-seated respect for privacy, the use of social media is not as widespread (the internet is used for other things there!), people spend an average of just 45 minutes on them. And in Europe, probably due to the ageing population – and with the exceptions of the two and half hours spent in Romania and two and a quarter in Portugal – people do not spend more than two hours on average making and liking posts.

## The age of streaming

Netflix, Filmin, Spotify, Amazon Prime... these are just a few of the brands that, like VHS and Betamax in the 1980s or Napster and MySpace at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have come to form part of our everyday vocabulary. Streaming, or the consumption of content such as films, series and music by means of streams of multimedia data, is on the rise around the world. In 2020, Netflix, for example, had 61 million registered users in the US, 15 million in Brazil, 3 million in Japan and 2 million in India. Stymied for now by various obstacles and bans, today it has only four regions left to 'conquer': China, Syria, Crimea and North Korea. In Africa and the Middle East, due to the lack of broadband, licencing issues and the continued high cost of internet access, widespread streaming is still a long way off, but in China or India (where Gaana, a music streaming app with 152 million registered users in 2020, has blown Spotify out of the water), local services are making a fortune. Just like the olden days of bootlegged VHS tapes, however, piracy lives on. In Europe, Spain, Croatia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Latvia continue to be the countries whose populations consume the most online content illegally.

## **New forms of participation**

New technologies have reshaped how government and civil society interact, to the extent that people can now make proposals, protest and, ultimately, participate in public life, as in so many other arenas, with a few quick clicks of the mouse. The Decidim platform, a freeware project developed in Barcelona for citizens and organisations and used in more than 100 cities in some 20 countries, enables everything from allocating funding from the municipal budget to promoting projects such as repaving a road or fixing up a school yard. In Iceland, half the population is registered on the Better Reykjavik platform, and each month the government studies the top five ideas to come out of it. MyGov, launched in India in 2014 by the government itself, allows any citizen to make proposals and put them to a vote. In Taiwan, the vTaiwan portal, which brings together politicians, experts and citizens, was used to regulate Uber's transport service in the country. And in Latin America, the Latinno database compiles the mechanisms for citizen participation of 18 countries in the region.

## **Car-sharing apps**

Since the earliest experiences in Switzerland and Germany in the 1980s, the car-sharing philosophy has made rapid inroads around the world. In 2019, there were 12 million users worldwide and fleets of up to 30,000 vehicles in cities such as Moscow, which ranks first in terms of the popularity of car-sharing, Tokyo (second) and Beijing (third). As in so many other areas of life, apps are playing an increasingly important role in this practice, and in Europe or the US, virtually all universities today encourage car-sharing communities and, thus, making new friends, spending less and helping to reduce pollution and traffic. At European universities (three out of four vehicles arriving on Barcelona's campuses have only one passenger!), student (and staff) car-sharing platforms are increasingly common. And in the US, few students are unfamiliar with Zipcar, a car-sharing company present on 600 campuses across the country. So, you can start thinking of conversation topics now: by 2030, Europeans will make an estimated 35% of their trips in shared vehicles.

## **Paying online**

Cutting a cheque, wiring money at the post office or paying with a handful of coins from the piggy bank we keep on the shelf are, in today's 'contactless' era, things of the far distant past. Using our smartphones to pay for even just a loaf of bread has become so commonplace that, in some countries, the very survival of cash hangs by a thread. In Sweden, where even churches accept alms by credit card, fewer than 10% of transactions are still done in cash. In South Korea, where the government is determined to save the 40 million dollars it costs to mint coins each year, hard currency's days are numbered; in China, the rapid growth of new forms of check-out is driven, in part, by the popularity of payment apps based on QR codes; and in the UK, it is firmly believed that eliminating cash would reduce crime. In countries such as Spain, however, despite the rise of providers such as Bizum, some shops still require a minimum amount for non-cash payments.

## Inventions to change the world

“I do not think there is any thrill that can go through the human heart like that felt by the inventor as he sees some creation of the brain unfolding to success.” Inspired, perhaps, by the words of Nikola Tesla, the theorist who invented the alternating current, thousands of students wrack their brains each day for ideas that could change the world, just as the pill, X-rays or the rules of football – all of which came out of universities – did in the days of yore. The examples are endless: a microphone to prevent sudden infant death syndrome, conceived of on the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya’s Terrassa campus; a robotic kitchen able to whip up tasty meals automatically, devised by a team of students at MIT; gloves fitted with sensors to translate sign language developed by four university students in Ukraine; etc. Stanford, which filed 728 patents in 2019, and other US universities top the rankings of the world’s most innovative schools, although KU Leuven in Belgium, Postech in South Korea, or the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg in Germany, for example, usually patent around 300 inventions each academic year.

