

# Faux Pas Around the Globe

When it comes to cultural consciousness, even seasoned travellers make mistakes—often with comical effects. We spoke with a few globe-trotters who offered some favourite examples of their cultural missteps.

By Robert Isenberg

When Elizabeth Criss journeyed to Thailand, she found herself taking a ferry across one of the country's wide rivers. The ferry was packed, but there was one seat open—right next to a Buddhist monk. Without a second thought, Criss sat next to the monk, who suddenly paled with horror. “He did not speak English,” Criss says, “but somehow he managed to convey to me that he could not sit next to a woman.” She later discovered that this is a common requirement of Thai monks; instead of objecting, Criss understood and felt embarrassed. “I was just trying to fit in,” she says. And yet: “I was jeopardizing his manhood.”

Michael Cunningham, an editor and recording artist, was taking his first drive through Scotland. He was a little anxious about driving in the left lane (it's always a little jarring for Americans), but he was acclimating fast. What he hadn't considered was that the fast and slow lanes are also reversed: Speedier traffic stays right, slower traffic left and the right lane is the passing lane. As Cunningham took his time, driving the speed limit, drivers behind him started to get agitated. Finally, a driver sped up and passed him, gesturing with two fingers. “He gave me the classic U.K. reverse-peace symbol,” Cunningham says, referring to the British version of “the bird.” “I didn't even feel insulted,” he adds. “I would have done the same thing in his position.”

When analytical chemist Kyle Thompson visited Costa Rica, he was shocked to find that “dogs are considered dirty and are not usually let in the house.” In rural areas, he found, dogs were rarely given baths and tended to attract fleas. Exiling canines to the street, many Costa Ricans seemed equally shocked that Americans “coo and cuddle and pet their dogs.” Thompson was reluctant to show any attention to strays—after all, they might follow him home.

“You don't need to go to a foreign country to make a foreign culture faux pas,” reminds Heather McNeish, who is fluent in American Sign Language (ASL). Once, as a volunteer Service Support Provider for the National Association of the Deaf, McNeish attended a convention in Tulsa, Okla. Because so many attendees had hearing and sight challenges, McNeish found herself using “tactile ASL”—a technique that required others to feel her hands as she signed. The conference was an exhilarating experience, and in her excitement, McNeish met a stranger and started using tactile ASL—grabbing his hands and signing. The man waited for her to monologue for a while before replying: “I'm deaf, not blind.”

*Robert Isenberg is a writer and actor. He has travelled to 23 countries, but he always loves coming home to Pittsburgh.*