

More Alike Than Different

Everyone listened attentively as the woman spoke.

"If you want to say 'OK,' don't make a circle with your thumb and first finger," the woman began. "That means OK here in the United States, but in Russia it's an obscene gesture."

The audience of 300 Americans chuckled; a few people took notes.

"It's all right to admire something," the woman continued, "but don't be too enthusiastic. Don't say, 'I *really* like your tablecloth.' Your Russian friend will offer you the tablecloth and will be offended if you don't take it.

"Remember that, in general, life in Russia is not as comfortable as life in the United States. You might not have hot running water, or you might have to share a bathroom with five or six people."

The woman was preparing the Americans for their trip to Russia. In Russia, the language, customs, and food would be different. Even simple things, like making a phone call, would be different. The Americans wanted to learn about these differences before their trip. They didn't want to experience culture shock.

When they arrived in Russia, the Americans were glad that they had prepared for their trip. Most of them experienced only a little culture shock. They enjoyed their visit and made a lot of Russian friends.

Making friends was, in fact, the purpose of the trip. It was planned by Friendship Force International, an organization that promotes world peace. Friendship Force International believes that people who are friends will not fight wars. So, to help people from all over the world become friends, it organizes exchanges of people. It has sent more than a half million people to live with families in other countries for a week or two. The U.S.-Russian exchange was one of the largest exchanges it has ever organized. Friendship Force sent 300 Americans to Russia and 300 Russians to the United States.

The Russians, like the Americans, prepared for their visit by learning about life in the other country. Still, they too experienced a little culture shock.

The Russians knew that Americans were fond of pets, but they were shocked to see pets inside homes. They couldn't believe their eyes when they saw dogs eating in the kitchen and sleeping on people's beds.

They were surprised at the differences between everyday life in Russia and in the United States. The Americans' lives, they said, were much easier. A Russian woman gasped when she saw an American pour rice directly from a box into a pan of boiling water. "You didn't wash the rice?" she asked. She explained that at home she had to wash the rice carefully and pick out all the stones. "Are you kidding?" the American said. "If people here had to do that, nobody would buy rice."

The Russians knew that Americans liked to eat fast food in restaurants, but they were disappointed to see that Americans ate fast meals at home, too. In Russia, the evening meal often lasts an hour or two because families sit at the table and talk. When American families eat together—if they eat together—they often eat quickly and don't take time for long conversations. The Russians thought that was a shame.

In spite of their differences in language and culture, the Russians and Americans became friends. In fact, most people who go on Friendship Force trips make friends, no matter where they go. The women in the photo, for example, became friends during a Friendship Force exchange in Vietnam. The woman with the light-colored hair is from the United States. For two weeks, she was the guest of a Vietnamese woman and her two daughters. By the end of the visit, the four women were friends, even though not long ago their countries were enemies.

Perhaps an 11-year-old girl summarized the Friendship Force experience best. She and some children from her school traveled to Russia with the American group. When they returned to the United States, their teacher asked them to write about their trip. She wrote, "I have learned a lot from this experience. I learned to adapt to a different culture. And I learned that people all over the world are more alike than they are different."

Cultural awareness – how to avoid faux pas in a new place

Moving to a new country, and making it a success, takes more than good logistics and a great new job. Discover the importance of cultural awareness in a successful relocation, from Santa Fe Relocation.

The one thing that is consistent with every international move is that you're about to enter a brand-new culture. Before relocating, it's important to submerge yourself in the local culture, customs and behaviours.

This cultural knowledge won't just help you settle in and make new friends, give you a sense of confidence about the move, and ensure you know what you're getting yourself into, it will prevent you inadvertently socially ostracising yourself or upsetting or confusing someone. Putting in the time and effort before, and during your first 6 months, to ingratiate yourself and learn more will pay dividends.

Get to know the basics before you leave

In the months before your flight, spend time discovering and researching your soon-to-be home. Treat this much as you might a holiday to start with: look at the history of the country, information about which languages are spoken and the tourist hot spots and highlights. By gathering this basic information, you can uncover a lot – you'll learn the historical influences, as well as which parts of the country's history they are most proud of.

Take some time to look into the political structure of the country, as well as the main parties in power, as well as the customs and behaviour of local police and governance. You should also spend time learning local laws, especially where those differ from the laws of your current country.

It's then time to spend some time learning about the weather and climate. This will inform a lot of social behaviour and activities, as well as the kinds of clothes that might be worn.

From here it's time to take a deeper dive into the do's and don'ts – in fact there are often great tourist guides which outline some very clear-cut behaviours which you should pay a lot of attention too. Learning basic etiquette and behaviour and starting to put it into practice will help prevent faux pas when you arrive.

Speak to other expats

No matter where you are moving too, there's a wealth of online resources and communities which can connect you to current or past expats with invaluable real-life experience of life in your new country. Reach out to them and try to get as much information as possible: learn from their experiences, both good and bad.

Ask a lot of questions, like what to expect from food and grocery shopping, whether there are specific clothes you should absolutely avoid or alternatively are absolutely necessary and ask about how holidays and birthdays are celebrated. Get ready to immerse yourself in local customs and be willing to shed behaviours and clothing which are not compatible with your new country.

Learn the language and culture for yourself

Now you know the basics and have some insights from others who have made the move themselves, it's time to delve deeper into the culture and language.

If there's one thing you can do to help you integrate and feel more confident about your move, it's to learn the language in your new country. Whether you use an app, textbooks, or take lessons, any language skills you can garner before you leave will become invaluable. You are also likely to learn more about the culture as part of your studies. We suggest one to one lessons as often as possible before you go for the best results: the more you know, the better it will feel. Our experience points to those with language skills having more successful relocation experiences.

While you now know the 'rules' and customs at the forefront of your new home country, understanding the core culture takes time and effort. For this level of understanding, you need to speak and study with a local expert, who can teach you the underlying 'why' to many of the behaviours and cultural preferences. Spend time learning about local religious practice, holidays, customs and attitudes. This is the level of knowledge that is key to cultural awareness.

Prepare yourself for culture shock, and keep learning

Despite putting the work in, you need to prepare yourself for one last thing: culture shock. No matter how much research and preparation you have committed too, you are sure to feel an element of culture shock once you arrive. There are some things you just can't prepare for, and that includes the reality of living amongst an entirely new culture.

Immerse yourself in local cuisine – almost all cultures have strong ties to their national food, specific dishes or cooking practices. Exploring the local food, trying new dishes and ingredients, and perhaps even learning to cook a local dish will all help you bond with those around you.

It's important to see this as an exciting opportunity for growth and learning: you can use this shock to keep learning and absorbing the culture. The more you lean into the differences and discover more, the quicker you will come to feel at home in your new country.

Reading 3

faux pas, settle in, ensure, inadvertently, dive into, invaluable, integrate

Have you ever moved? How long did it take to get used to the new place? What were some of the challenges you faced at the new place?

When have you inadvertently upset someone? Have you ever committed a faux pas abroad?

Have you been abroad? If you have been abroad, were you ever upset or confused by the culture, customs or behaviors you experienced?

Did you research Mokwon and Daejeon before entering university?

Before you travel, do you research the destination?

Is learning about a new place important to you?

What tourist guides have you used to gather information?

Have you learned a language in order to help you travel?

If someone asked you to explain the core culture of Korea, what would you say?

How would you explain 추석?

What is one invaluable life lesson you have learned?