

## EXTRA CREDIT

# When in Rome . . .

*Your international travel plans should include some cultural homework.*

**A**s Americans, we lug widely caricatured cultural baggage with us on our travels. We're loud, rude, aggressive, impatient, ignorant of the places we visit and the languages spoken there. We're the imperialist tourists from hell. The ugly ones.

On the other hand, we are also usually amiable, open types, eager to chat while careering across the globe to the next site on our itineraries. We readily befriend all comers. Alas, this too works against us. For we are sometimes perceived by foreigners as excessively forward, less than sincere, disingenuous.

As stereotypes go, there's rather more truth than exaggeration in this scenario of the American tourist. However, foreign travel need not be a grim series of gaffes and trampling of local color. With preparation, travel abroad can be made more enjoyable. By heeding the cues of the prevailing society, by reining ourselves in a bit, we Americans can blend. Or at least not stick out so much.

"People run into problems when they continue to behave as if they're still at home," says Jean Fallis, assistant director for admissions and student services at SU's Division of International Programs Abroad (DIPA). "It's a good idea to know something of a country's culture. One country's good manners are another country's bad manners. Amer-

icans often use first names; Europeans tend to be more formal. Sometimes eye contact is intrusive abroad."

A nation's literature is a source of illumination. South African graduate student Matthew Smith recommends the novels of Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, and Doris Lessing for clues to the South African psyche.

"We've just been through a civil war. People are now laying down their guns," Smith says. "It's an interesting moment to visit."

According to visiting Australian law professor Brian Bromberger, Australian-rules football offers profound insight into his culture. "For the sheer mix of socioeconomic levels of society, go to a match," Bromberger suggests.

"Learn at least a few essential phrases of the language," recommends Gail Rich, a DIPA admissions counselor. "It's appreciated when you try to speak the host country's language. Americans have to realize they are the visitors, the foreigners. Look around you. Stop and think: Do I see other people doing this?"

Learning a bit about the political and economic situations and history of nations you visit will lend a certain perspective. It's also a good idea to be conversant on American policies and politics, about which you may face close questioning.

Our campus sources have many more tips on becoming a welcome global villager. Here's a sampling:

*Arab countries*—Never give alcohol or food, nor sculpture depicting human or animal forms; don't send gifts to a wife; offer nothing with your left hand.

*China*—Service workers could be jailed for accepting your well-intentioned gratuity, so don't tip. Writing in red ink means you are cutting off a friendship.

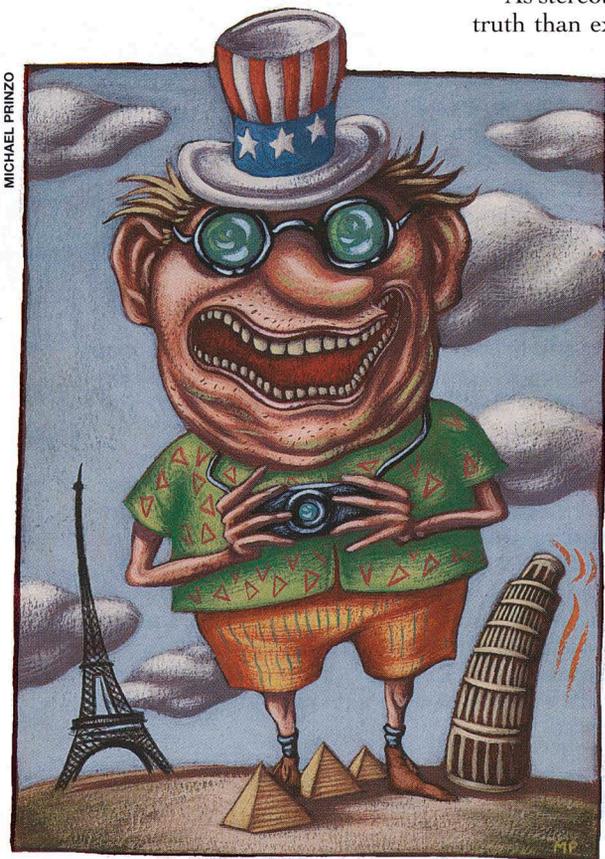
*Korea*—Don't give shoes as a gift; it implies you wish to kick the recipient. Flowers are only suitable for funerals.

Read, watch videos, speak to natives or people who've been there. Ask advice from travel agents and hotel concierges. Get permission before taking people's pictures. Be respectful. Be polite. Use tact and discretion. Fake it if you must.

"We are concerned at times about being perceived as ugly Americans," says Fallis. "We should realize that there is a lot of good feeling toward Americans. You can't assume it will always be there, but don't anticipate criticism or negative feelings."

Except maybe in France.

—GEORGE LOWERY



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