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CROSSING CULTURES INDEPENDENTLY: BEYOND TOURISM

by

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The policeman and I were sharing a bowl of crunchy snacks as the morning sun warmed the clear mountain air. I had hitched a ride in a truck to this roadside hamlet in northern Thailand a few minutes earlier. I bought an odd juice drink and as I sipped, the policeman had invited me to sit down.

Several minutes later a jeep full of young Europeans pulled up and noisily stocked up on snacks at the adjacent stands. They spoke their English to the shopkeepers, who smiled and slightly overcharged them. They had a quick look at some goods being offered by the local Lasu tribespeople before piling back into their jeep and continuing on their three-day hill tribe trek, probably to see other Lasu peoples, ride an elephant and take a raft trip.

A few of them shot me a curious glance before they zoomed off, but none of them had even ventured to question me, much less try to speak Thai to the shopkeepers. The policeman and I had a shrug and a laugh at their expense, and before I hitched on he suggested a couple villages I should visit where tourists seldom go.

Several years earlier, I was in line at a campground in Amsterdam, and a woman was complaining because the recreational vehicle she had just arrived with from the States had a different electrical system than what she found in Holland. When the Dutch clerk explained how the system worked, the woman snorted, "Well, we don't do it like that in Ohio." This really happened.

While these two stories seem to be unrelated, they illustrate a central point: neither group was interested in digging below the surface of the local culture, and as a result they missed out on the opportunity to really learn from their travels. In the latter case it led to a basic form of culture shock.

This is something I rarely find in travel guidebooks: they discuss where to go and what to see, but they do not discuss things like integrating into the local cultures and avoiding culture shock. If you are traveling independently, these are issues you are going to face daily. Along with planning your itinerary and packing your bags, there are several things you can do to prepare your head for the cross-cultural realities of travel.

The first thing to do is get a dictionary and phrasebook. These are the keys to the culture, and your first step in getting to the level beyond tourism. It will be awkward at first but you will surprise yourself when locals not only understand what you say, but are delighted that you are making the effort. For a few dollars, these books are by far the best travel investment you will ever make. Period.

The next step is to do a little of what anthropologists like to call "participant-observation." This means that you should sit back in a cafe or park or other public place, and just watch what the local people do. Listen to how they address each other, watch their gestures, and get a sense of how they interact. This is most important to do when you first arrive; exactly the time when you want to get moving along and begin "seeing stuff." This sounds simplistic but it surprises me how often people move too quickly to notice the subtle nuances of local patterns of interaction.

Get a sense of how polite or casually the locals address each other. Then try striking up a conversation with someone. Obviously you won't be able to say much to them but you can really communicate a lot with basic, general words like "good," "pretty," etc. (The first things to learn probably should be basic greetings and thanks, and then the five "w's", some numbers and so on.) Admittedly a lot of travelers struggle on this point but it does get easier as you go along (try to stop thinking in phrases). This comes from someone who nearly flunked high school German and ended up working in a non-English speaking restaurant in Austria. The need was there and I had to speak it, so I learned. Be patient with yourself.

You should also be aware that cross-cultural trainers have charted a cycle which nearly everyone living within another culture experiences. It looks sort of like a roller coaster: it starts with a high (when everything is new and exciting), takes a serious nosedive (first signs of culture shock), swings back up again (as you work yourself through culture shock and get a handle on the local culture) and then may dip again (as you face

unresolved issues) or continue on an upswing (as you feel more and more comfortable within the host culture).

A problem is that everyone goes through this cycle at different rates: for some it takes a year, others will go through the cycle in a few months, while others will never make it beyond the first "crash." Knowing that it occurs, though, will help you prepare for the experience. If you are traveling with someone, chances are you will adjust differently so be prepared to help each other out.

International exchange student groups and organizations such as the Peace Corps have developed cross-cultural exercises of different sorts to help prepare their volunteers and students for integration abroad. Get a few friends together and try a few of the simpler ones. The point of these is to make you aware of the feelings you may experience while traveling; vulnerability, frustration, uncertainty. Going through the emotional ringer a bit before you go will help you recognize and cope with these situations while abroad.

The first one is a non-verbal communication exercise. Get 10 friends to choose a number from one to ten. Then, with everyone blindfolded, and without speaking, try to line up from one to ten. The point is to develop ways of communicating non-verbally, and to show that even simple tasks can be difficult and frustrating without language.

Another remarkably simple yet effective exercise, needing only two people, is often called the "trust walk." One person is blindfolded and the other person becomes the guide, leading the other around the house or yard without speaking, and with minimal physical contact. (Some variations guide the blindfolded person by the arm.)

Here the blindfolded person will feel anxiety, dependency, uncertainty, confusion; in other words, some of the emotions felt when you land in another culture. How you react may tell you how you will handle cultural adjustment. The leader may feel heavy responsibility, guilt (if they lead you into a wall, for example), stress at the inability to communicate effectively: these are all things a host abroad may experience, and it helps you to know how they might be feeling.

Yet another simple strategy is to list out all the things you are looking forward to, and all the things you may be fearful of about your trip. Then go over the list with someone who has already traveled there, and see if they think you are being realistic. If you don't know anyone who has been there, try to go through the list yourself to determine what is reasonable and not. If nothing else, it often helps to organize your thoughts on paper so that you can step back and get a sense of yourself.

Absolutely the most important variable to your success at cultural adjustment will be your attitude. If you go with an open mind and realistic expectations about the culture and of your travels, you should have few difficulties beyond the basic adjustment. If you spend several months or more abroad, your most difficult transition abroad may be the reverse culture shock you will suffer when you return home. I know of no cure, except to do a lot of crying on the shoulders of well-traveled, sympathetic friends.

There is one more delicate issue I should touch upon, and that is cross-cultural romance. It happens to many of us, and I think it perhaps the most difficult, perilous, stimulating and exciting issue we face across cultures. Keep in mind that all cultures handle romance differently, and while you may realize it, the other person may not. Think about how difficult relationships can be within your own culture; the international component adds an extra element of difficulty.

If you have a successful romantic relationship across cultures, you have negotiated one of the most intricate of cultural barriers. And hey, if it all goes down in flames, grab a bottle of wine, sing the blues to the moon and get on a train and start again somewhere else. It is all part of crossing cultures, and all part of being human.

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