

Cultural Tips for Latin America

FOOD AND DRINK

As in most cultures, food and drink that is prepared and offered to you is a way of showing friendship and love. If you are offered something that you do not want or cannot eat, it's best to accept it, say thank you, and then just leave it on your plate. Saying "no" outright would be considered rude and ungrateful. If you're offered a drink (that's already been poured) that you do not want, just leave the full glass in front of you – as long as your glass remains full you won't be offered any more. If you are a vegetarian or have food allergies, it's good to alert your hosts well in advance of when they'll be preparing the food. Taking the last piece of food on a serving plate, such as the last cookie or the last slice of cake, without offering it around to everyone else first is considered very rude. Several kinds of food are eaten with the fingers (tacos, tortas, churros, etc.) Eating them with a fork and knife is viewed as both comical and snobbish. In case of doubt, follow the lead of other diners. Before starting to eat it is a common courtesy to say/be wished "*Buen provecho*" (as in "Bon appetit") when in company of new people. This courtesy is usually not used between long-time friends. On StoveTeam trips all gratuities are included in the total trip cost.

TIME

Arriving on time and sticking to a schedule are not high priorities when dealing with family and friends. You shouldn't be surprised if people show up to a party two hours after the time indicated by the hosts. In the business world things tend to be a little stricter, however it will still more laid-back than most Americans are used to. This goes for the service industry as well, so it's best not to expect super efficient service. In order to stay sane, cultivate patience and learn to go with the flow. And don't forget, the customer is NOT always right.

PERSONAL SPACE

The accepted amount of personal space that each person has or needs is much smaller in Latin America than in North America or Europe. People will touch you more, bump into you without saying "excuse me", stand closer when they talk to you, crowd you in buses, lines, elevators and on the street, and generally get up close and personal.

PERSONAL HYGIENE

In most countries in Latin America, being clean and wearing clean clothes is extremely important. Leaving the house in the morning without showering is unheard of, especially in tropical climates. How you take care of yourself is a personal decision, of course, but just know that if you show up somewhere not having showered in days and wearing dirty

clothes, most people will not take you seriously. When doing volunteer work, appearances do matter. It is not common for men in Latin America to wear shorts and we discourage our volunteers from doing so.

GREETINGS AND MANNERS

Greetings are very important in most Latin American cultures, so proper greetings, such as saying *buenos días* (good morning), giving a kiss on the cheek for women and a handshake for men, and taking the time for small talk is very important. Proper greetings happen both upon arrival into a place and departure. In a large group it is customary to greet each and every person individually with a handshake or a kiss on the cheek.

Good manners and personal relationships are the foundation of Latin American societies, and are important to maintain, even in difficult situations. Simple things such as beginning each conversation with *cómo estás* (how are you) and telling your host family *buenas noches* (goodnight) before turning in for the evening will make people feel more comfortable around you.

DEALING WITH ANTI-AMERICANSIM

If you are an American traveling or living in Latin America, you will, at some point or another, encounter someone who wants to pick a fight with you about American foreign policy, past or present. Regardless of your political views, it is almost always a bad idea to get into this fight. Though you shouldn't take it personally, you can avoid offending people by referring to yourself (if you're American) as *Estadounidense* and not *Americano/a*, since most Latin Americans consider everyone in western hemisphere to be "Americans." By the way, in most places "gringo/a" is not considered a derogatory term.

GENERAL TIPS

- Loud voices can be annoying. Speak in soft, well-modulated tones – especially in public.
- An invitation to a Latin American home is offered for the purpose of getting to know you personally. This is not a time to discuss work. Good topics of conversation are tourist sites, your family, hobbies, travel... avoid political discussions.
- Do not feed or pet dogs. Rabies are endemic so be careful.
- Do not take photos in village until the last day. **Always** ask permission.
- Obscene gestures: tip of thumb protruding between fingers of a closed fist and the American "OK" sign are both viewed as obscene in parts of Latin America.
- Do not give gifts or candy to children. If you want to bring a gift, the gift will be given to a teacher at a school. An appropriate gift would be a pack of pencils.



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- If you decide to bargain when shopping remember to be friendly and to understand that bargaining is considered a process not as getting the best deal possible.

Source:

International Volunteer Directory:

<http://www.internationalvolunteerdirectory.org/during-trip/37-during/109-cultural-tips-for-latin-america>