Etiquette 101: Hand Gestures

Whether in travel or politics, we’re encouraged to be as communicative as possible. Yet body language—and common hand gestures in particular—routinely sow confusion in everything from the simplest tourist transactions to moments of great import. Was Churchill flipping off his electorate when he gave them the British V-sign? (No.) Are Iraqis cheering on American troops when they give the thumbs-up—or actually saying up yours, as the gesture traditionally communicates in Iraq? (Probably.) Wars have been started over less. This primer might help you avoid your own international incidents—and open a window onto cultures that no phrase book ever could.

**How We Say It**

**Hello/Good-bye**

Wave the full arm side to side.

**Where It’s Not Okay**

In East Asian countries, it’s considered overly demonstrative—and can also be confused in Japan, Europe, and Latin America for no, and in India for “Come here.”

**What To Do Instead**

In northern Europe, wag your hand back and forth from the wrist.

In Greece and Italy, the palm faces inward, fingers curled in. Don’t mistake this for a beckoning motion.

In Japan, bow slightly. In India and other Buddhist/Hindu areas, place your hands together and say “Namaste.”

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**Stop/Excuse Me**

Hand and arm out in front, fingers outspread.

In Lebanon, it simply means no. In Greece, it’s an awful curse called the moutza (made worse by using both hands and pushing the palms forward), and it has similarly rude meanings in Spain, Nigeria, and Chile.

In Greece, just avoid putting your hand out with fingers outstretched, no matter what the intention. Count and beckon with the palm facing inward or downward.

**Come Here**

Either curl the index finger, or four fingers, toward you.

In the Philippines and other parts of East Asia, the index finger is used only to beckon dogs. In Latin American countries, it’s a come-on, and in Indonesia and Australia, it’s for soliciting prostitutes. In southern Europe, the all-finger version would be mistaken for good-bye.

In most of Asia (including India) and parts of Latin America, the palm faces downward and the fingers are curled below in a beckoning motion.

In Korea, hold your arm out and move your fingers up and down, as if signaling good-bye in Europe.

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**That Guy Over There**

Generally, we use the index finger to indicate something or someone.

In parts of Africa, the index finger is pointed only at inanimate objects. In Europe, pointing is not particularly polite; in China, Japan, Latin America, and Indonesia, it has very rude connotations.

In Indonesia, you can use your thumb (never use the index finger, even to make a point).

In some Latin American countries, it’s okay to purse your lips (or even pucker a kiss) in the direction of the person.

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**Counting 1, 2, 3...**

Start with the index finger, move toward the pinkie.

Germany and Austria, where a forefinger held up could mean two instead of one. In Japan, the thumb alone means five. In Greece, the gesture for five or ten can be mistaken for a moutza.

In Germany and Austria, start with the thumb, indicate “one” with the thumb, “two” by pointing an imaginary gun.

In Singapore and Malaysia, a yapping or quacking hand motion means five, or five followed by any number of zeroes.

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There’s a range of what’s acceptable: In Zambia, you can point to objects; in France, it’s best to point discreetly; in Japan, a speaker indicating himself will point to his nose.

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The Chinese count to ten on one hand—which is not for amateurs. In Indonesia, they start with the middle finger—but be careful with that one.