

AmeriSpan's Tips on Easing Cultural Adjustment

Whenever you study abroad, you experience some cultural adjustment. However, when you are participating in a language immersion program, this cultural adjustment is normally greater because you are living with a family of strangers who don't speak your native language. By immersing yourself in the culture, you will learn much more than vocabulary and verbs, you will learn how to communicate. The four golden rules of an immersion program are as follows:

1. Standards of living vary (especially in Latin America). Most of you are coming from a country with a higher standard of living where modern day conveniences are taken for granted.
2. Keep your expectations realistic. The number one reason for unsatisfactory experiences is unrealistic expectations. If you are unsure of something or have a special request, check with us. We'll give you a straight yes or no answer.
3. Respect your hosts. If you are going to miss a meal, inform your host family before they have cooked the meal. If you will be out late, tell your family so that they don't worry.
4. Take the differences in stride. If everything were exactly the same as what you are used to, where would the fun be? A few weeks or months with some inconvenience makes you appreciate your own life in a different way. More importantly, think of all the great stories you'll have!

Here is a quick synopsis of some of the most common cultural differences that participants have experienced:

IN LATIN AMERICA

The never say "I don't know" mentality: In general people in Latin America try to be as helpful as possible. They don't like to say they don't know. The most common example is when you are asking for directions and get pointed in the wrong one. This is not intentional, the person is only trying to be helpful.

Quiet and Peaceful Households, a rarity: Whether it is dogs barking, roosters crowing, street noise, neighbors or relatives visiting or a señora banging around the kitchen making a meal, much of Latin America is just plain noisy. Get used to it, and if you are a light sleeper bring earplugs.

Reality Check: Things Don't Always Work: Telephones are still a rarity in much of Latin America and reliable telephones are practically unheard of. Don't throw toilet paper in the toilet because it will get clogged. Be patient because, "hey", you are on vacation.

Family that stays together, lives together: It is common for three generations of families to be living together under the same roof. It is a way to increase the household income and to help one another. Can you imagine living with all of your relatives every day?

Macho, Macho Man...: Most men in Latin America are proud of their machismo and view whistling at women as a compliment. Ladies, take it in stride or see above... about earplugs.

Different Schedules & Routines: In much of Latin America, lunch is the big meal of the day which causes business to close for an hour or two each afternoon. In some countries like Argentina, dinner is eaten at 10:30 or 11:00 at night. When in Rome do as the Romans do.

Cash Is King, What's Plastic?: Sure, credit cards are accepted in Latin America, but not everywhere and usually with a 5-10% surcharge. If you want to live off plastic, use your credit card to get cash advances at the bank or at the ATM machines popping up everywhere.

Certain Topics Are Taboo: Although nosiness is common, certain subjects are taboo e.g. abortion, casual sex, social politics, etc. Listen first to get the norms.

And don't forget... Time Takes Time, Lots of Time: Punctuality may be a concept of the future. "Hora Latina" is different, enjoy it, don't take it personally.

IN EUROPE:

Family Definitions & Flexible Expectations: In Europe, it is not as common to have 3 generations of family members living together. In Spain/Portugal hosts tend to be a widow/widower, a divorcée, single parent or could it could be an entire family of five. Your experience with all can be just as rewarding! Western Europeans have a more reserved nature. It may take a while for your hostess/host to warm-up, be persistent and engage them in conversation. Going to your room or staying "out of their way" may be perceived as you don't want to be bothered.

Reset your stomach-clocks: In Spain lunch is eaten between 1-4pm, and is usually the main meal of the day. The evening meal, "dinner" is lighter and is served between 10 and 11pm.

Macho, Macho Man...: Even in Spain/Portugal you will need to take the whistling in stride. Men here are also proud of their machismo.

City Chic: Europe is very cosmopolitan, and Spaniards and Portuguese usually dress accordingly. In the cities dress is fairly formal (meaning no shorts, but nor do you need suits). You might want to bring something for special occasions or for the evening, as the nightlife is an integral part of everyday European life.