

Culture Shock:

What it is and How to Master it.

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Presented by Denise and Frederick Cook

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cul·ture *noun* \ 'kəəl--chəər \

: the beliefs, customs, arts, etc., of a particular society, group, place, or time

: a way of thinking, behaving, or working that exists in a place or organization (such as a business)

shock

: your reaction when **everything** you thought you knew turns out to be different!

How do YOU define culture?

Do you realize that you have a culture?

Most Americans associate the word “culture” with things like classical music, education level, and manners. But culture goes far beyond that to every aspect of life. The following are culture.

- The language you speak.
- What and when you eat.
- Whom you greet and how you greet them.
- When you arrive for a meeting, a party, or a class.
- What you and others wear.
- How you deal with people, for example – the elderly, government employees, waiters, and other people who serve you.
- How you deal with strangers versus how you deal with your family.
- Personal traditions.

The list goes on. ***The first and the most important point is to understand that you DO have a culture and that your culture may differ from that of others.***

So, if we can accept that culture is more than Beethoven, what is culture shock and why should you care?

culture shock *noun*

Perhaps the only reason for the overland traveler to care about culture **shock** (as opposed to culture) is that it can ruin your trip. It can result in what we would call “Overlanding Burnout.”

An overland traveler can become tired of not understanding people, tired of nothing working the way they expect, and tired of everything associated with the challenges of putting up the differences which they are experiencing. Mix in a language that you do not understand, and it gets worse. They have reached the point that they no longer want to stop to visit the attractions of the next town or country; they simply want to go home.

The good news is that the reverse is also true; the more comfortable you are dealing with a different culture, the more you will enjoy your trip.

The purpose of this paper is to help you develop the skills you need for a great trip.

The Stages of Culture Shock

Scholars differ on the stages and you can find lots of lists on the Internet, but here is our take.

We're not in Kansas anymore:

This is the first, easiest stage. It begins with the realization that not all people act the same way. In a different country they may eat different food, speak a different language, or drive on the other side of the road. Even within a huge country like the US, there are major differences of food, lifestyle, music, and history from state to state.

For the overlander, the first reaction to this may actually be very positive; after all, we are a self-selecting group who choose to travel - we **want** to get outside of our culture. We want to see the new sights, meet the new people, eat the new foods, listen to the new music, etc. So, overlanders should be immune to culture shock, no?

No. How long does it take before all of this change begins to grate? How do you react when you begin to realize that people say "Yes" when they mean "No", you cannot find the foods you like, the weather is not what you expected. All that and your truck just broke down, again, and you cannot find the parts easily. At this point, you start experiencing the negative form of culture shock.

All one Tribe:

With good coping skills, the purpose of this paper, you can move to a point where you have the skills to be successful in a different culture. You can speak a bit of the language, you understand what people really mean, not just the words they say, and more to the point, you know how to be successful, how to get things done, in the new cultural context. At this point you can see that another culture is not “wrong” but merely “different.”

The Third Stage:

This is really beyond the scope of this paper, but let us just say that when you spend long enough in a foreign culture -- say several years, and perhaps even develop ties of work, marriage, etc., you come to the third stage when you realize that foreigners can be **really** foreign and that there are some differences that simply cannot be bridged.

Overlanders rarely reach this point, but should always be aware of the fact that there are practical limits on just how well you can ever adapt to a foreign culture.

The Danger Zone

What are some of the things you need to watch in a foreign environment? Any of the following can lead to missed social cues.

- Gestures: Watch which hands or finger(s) you use and which way you point them. Similarly, be very careful about public displays of affection.
- Dress: What you wear matters, a lot.
- Places of Worship: Foreigners and nonbelievers are not always welcome and there may be requirements about clothing, and foot and headwear.
- Photography: While many parts of the world accept photo taking, others do not.
- Food: Can you eat in public? Is it more polite to eat all your food, ask for seconds, or leave some?

The list goes on much longer.

Strategies for Mastering Cultural Differences

Once you accept that culture shock is an issue, the question turns to how to deal with it. The most critical point to remember is that there are too many different cultures in the world for any person to be able to master them all. While there may be common elements in any part of the world, there is no single culture which works everywhere.

So, the best idea for the traveler is to simply relax and pay attention to what you see around you! We recommend a process of what we would call *steps forward* and *steps back*.

Step Forward:

There are several things you can do to better understand and integrate into the target culture. For example:

- Read a Book -- Even something as basic as the “Lonely Planet” can be a starting point. Try not to go into a country completely blind. One overlander commented to me that culture can be very localized. Specifically, learning that an idyllic village had been, with recent years, a center of violent conflict, went a long way towards explaining why the local people seemed so reserved and wary.
- Learn the language. Even the most basic greeting in the local language can go a long way to breaking down barriers. At the first, most important level, it shows that you are making an effort. Later, as you begin to gain fluency it becomes much easier to understand and be understood, and this, in turn, can provide many opportunities to meet local people and get into a situation where they may feel more comfortable discussing their own culture.
- Go to local events. We particularly like the suggestion of attending a sporting event as this immediately gives you common ground for discussion.
- Be alert for opportunities. For example, don't be shy about discussing your vehicle or your trip. Similarly, you might talk to local people in a 4x4 or camper; use your imagination.

The point is that you want to reach out and breach barriers. The more you get to know people and their culture, the easier it will be for you to be effective in that culture.

At the risk of sounding a bit cynical, the goal is to be effective; the knowledge gained is a bonus.

Step Back:

There is a reason that almost every city in the world has some form of expat club -- sometimes you simply have to get back into your comfort zone for a while. You need to speak your own language, eat your own food, listen to your own music, etc., at least for a while. While some might find this shocking, it is a simple fact. (Even in the United States you can find “Sons of Italy” clubs and you may be sure that most foreign embassies have some form of bar, club, or restaurant where their staff can hang out.) Remember that the US can be quite “foreign” also. For those not born in the US, there are many instances where life in the US is very different from the life in other countries.

How do you do this when overlanding?

- Take advantage of your vehicle -- most overlanding campers have a bit of room and give you the option of cooking your own food, etc. Campgrounds that cater to overlanders can give you a bit of a buffer zone as well.
- If you don't have a vehicle -- consider paying for a night or two in an international grade hotel. Familiar food and a shower can go a long way to recharging your cultural tolerance and acceptance.
- Don't forget that the even act of living in an overland vehicle for weeks at a time can be stressful -- don't be ashamed to take a break. Inclement weather can be a source of stress and a break from heat or cold can help.

I realize that there are some purists who will decry this as somehow being wrong, that we should be able to totally and instantly immerse ourselves into a foreign culture, but we would submit that taking a step back to release the pressure for a while actually lets you adapt faster in the long run.

Some (semi) Universal Rules:

While every society is different and it is thus impossible to make universal recommendations, the mere fact that many foreigners can make generalizations (often very accurate ones) about Americans means that it is similarly possible to make some suggestions on basic “American” customs that are often inappropriate overseas.

Greetings First, business later -- Many people find the American insistence in getting straight to the point to be extremely rude. Take the time to say “hello” and discuss the weather. In rural France, for example, it is common to greet everyone in a store or restaurant when you enter. (And do the reverse when you leave.) Would not recommend this at your local Safeway or Kroger, but it is often expected in other countries.

It is a Formal Affair -- People outside of the United States tend to be much more formal and often react very badly to American informality. (Remember that Romance languages actually have separate familiar and formal grammatical forms.) While Americans may pride themselves in democratic informality, in many parts of the world, this can be seen as boorishness and a lack of education. One of the greatest insults in Russian is to call someone “nekulturny” -- uncultured. Remember, while everyone has a culture, not everyone is “cultured.”

Dress for Success -- Americans tend to dress down, no matter what the circumstance. The good news is that you are less likely to need to dress for dinner when overlanding. The bad news is that Americans often dress inappropriately for the occasion. Consider, for example, the person who shows up at the border or to request a visa dressed in basketball shorts. And unshaved. This can be seen as highly insulting and you don't want to insult the very people from whom you need something.

The rest of the world tends to be much more formal. And this carries over into attitudes towards government officials. Americans often hold the opinion that they are superior to public employees. (I'm a taxpayer; I pay your salary.) In some other countries, government employees are seen as very important people to whom much deference is owed. Remember, they can have a lot of control over your life!

Take off your sunglasses (and your hat, too!) -- In many countries, hats are still close to their original purpose, a helmet. Lifting your helmet shows that you have no hostile intent. The American habit of keeping a ball cap on in a store or restaurant can be taken very badly. Similarly, most people, including Americans, respond badly to sunglasses. (Think about the stereotype of the highway patrolman with the mirror sunglasses.) Take them off, at least while exchanging greetings.

Go native -- Many Americans can find an overseas market overwhelming. The moment that you step out of your vehicle you are likely to be mobbed, by beggars, guides, bearers, and people who want to guard your car. Expect and accept it. Always have something for *one* beggar, hire *one* person to carry your shopping, and hire *one* person to watch the car. Once you do this, the others will usually back off immediately as you can be seen to be someone who understands the local customs. (But do remember who you engaged to guard the car; you only want to pay once!)

I remember, as a small child in India, being overwhelmed by the number of servants we were expected to engage; a cook, a bearer, a gardener, a nightwatch, and an ayah (to take care of me). All of that for a family of three. An Indian friend of my parents reminded me that if we did not hire them, they would starve. I was only five years old, but I never forgot.

There are many more examples and, of course, they vary from country to country.

And this brings us to perhaps the biggest secret of all -- you don't have to try to memorize all of this in advance, indeed, you can't. Since you can't learn all of the rules of a foreign culture before you arrive, the goal should be to make contact with members of that culture and let them guide you into it.

See the "Step Forward" section for ideas on how to meet cultural guides.

A Sample Scenario

Let us consider a hypothetical border crossing and see how some of this might be applied.

You reach the border between Costaguana and Erehwon. What might you do to make the process easier? Consider these steps:

- Camp nearby and approach the border early in the day, before the various officials are tired and burned out.
- Dress and groom yourself appropriately. You are going into somebody's office. You may think that you are at an unimportant little town in the back of beyond, but the chances are good that the people working the border might live there. And, in any case, because of their position, they are much more important than you are. So, wear your cleanest clothes, real shoes (no flip flops), be shaven, etc. Be polite and respectful, take off your glasses and hat, and make sure that you have all of your paperwork ready; do your best to make it easy. Make it clear that you are expecting the best. And a small suggestion, always assume that people speak your language and have superb hearing. Many a tourist has dug himself a deep hole by loud comments about "stupid," "lazy," and "corrupt" "natives" while standing in line at a border.
- Be patient. This is especially important should you be asked for some "special consideration." Someone asking for a bribe usually assumes that an American is in such a hurry that they will pay rather than be delayed. Turn this around; take your time and make it clear that you have all day. If pressed, try to offer something that you can "share" rather than a direct payment; candy, food, a cold drink -- any of these things can deflect from actually having to pay a bribe.

- Finally, be human. I remember once being faced with a difficult meeting with a recalcitrant person. My boss, a savvy diplomat, made a simple suggestion -- ask him for a favor or a ride home. I did, and on the drive, he had to deal with me as a person. An experienced overlander commented that he always asked the police or military for directions toward his next destination. This simple, human contact, often pays huge dividends. Suddenly he was a real person, not just a faceless stranger. Reactions can range from recommendations on roads, attractions, food, and lodging, to officers riding all the way with you and whisking you through all subsequent checkpoints.
- Do not discount using such tactics within the US also. Visiting a museum with limited parking within a university complex in Texas, we asked a university policeman where we could park. He not only took us to a parking lot labelled “no unauthorized parking at risk of towing”, but drove us to the door of the museum in the pouring rain.

Does all of this work, all of the time? Of course not, but you would be amazed how often it does.