



# Culture Shock

## Take it Cool

**W**ith transportation and communication technology linking remote corners of the world to the information highway, we will all soon be inhabitants of a global village, so they say. International differences should yield to increased understanding, and peace on earth should prevail. That will be nice. But until we all get used to one another's funny ways, travelers would do well to practice the art of neither giving nor taking offense. It's not so easy when opposing views of socially correct behavior collide.

Imposing personal political and social ideals, bartering overzealously, intruding onto private property, photographing insensitively, disregarding local dress codes particularly when visiting religious sites – these are just a few of the ways tourists commonly label themselves as ill-mannered yokels. I was dismayed to find that the Balinese find it necessary to educate tourists by posting “correct-attire” posters in conspicuous locations.

No traveler deliberately intends to give offense. Certainly, I try to read up on foreign customs when I go abroad. I have learned to remove my shoes in homes and temples throughout the Orient. I know I should not pat people on the head – even a child – in Thailand. I am careful not to sit in such a way as to expose the soles of my feet to another person, and especially not toward a Buddha image. I have read that Thais would think me crass if I were to show exasperation by raising my voice. Come to think of it, though, I recall hearing a few raised voices among the Thais themselves, which just goes to show, we're all human.



Reading only goes so far. Experience is the best, if the strictest, teacher. Once, in Bangkok, I was aghast to learn the hard way that women must not, even inadvertently, touch a Buddhist monk. During an animated conversation with a young man wearing the signifying saffron-colored robe, my hand unconsciously rested a moment on his sleeve. The monk himself, polite at all costs, never even raised an eyebrow, but the tittering from others in the immediate vicinity let me know I had committed a serious *faux-pas*. I don't know what penance the poor man had to suffer for my blunder, but I endure pangs of regret to this day.

If it is important not to give offense it is equally so not to take offense at habits considered bad manners at home. In Hong Kong and Singapore, I had no trouble obeying "Please Don't Spit" signs. Conversely, I've had to work hard not to turn up my nose and purse my lips in disgust at such public scratching, hacking, snorting and probing as seems acceptable etiquette in various parts of the world.

If individual travelers have little influence in bringing about a better world, they may at least allow the world to effect a change for the better upon themselves. Cultural misunderstandings, I have discovered, are a good exercise in developing tolerance and a sense of humor, which are qualities no solo traveler can do without.

### Something in the Way You Wave Attracts Me Like . . .

After four days at Kuta Beach my sense of humor had begun to fray at the edges. I wondered if all of Bali was like this ramshackle version of Hawaii gone to pot. Head north, east, or west, urged my guidebook, and you will find a mythical, magical island where Balinese culture has resisted foreign influences for centuries.

So I squeezed myself into an overloaded bemo, the local form of cheap transportation, and went northeast, to Yeh Sanih, looking for the real Bali. I came to a stop at Bungalows Puri Sanih. Feeling frazzled, hot and squeamish, I detached my sticky self from the clattering contraption and walked tentatively toward the Bali of my imagination.

Shortly, a young man led me down a garden path toward rustic cottages set under swaying palms, flowering hibiscus and fragrant blossoming frangipani trees. The place oozed rustic charm and serenity. On the way, I met an amusing troupe of geese that seemed to have fun patrolling the grounds, bluffing unwary passers-by with threatening hisses and flapping wings. In the near distance I heard frolicking, splashing noises. With every step my taut nerves relaxed as the tranquillity of the place seeped into my being.

Within minutes I unpacked, got into my swimsuit (quite a modest one by modern standards, I hasten to add) and headed for the boisterous sounds. To my utter delight, I found a natural pool fed by fresh spring water effervescently tumbling down the rocky hillside.

A middle-aged European couple lounged on a small patio, and several Balinese youths cavorted in the pool. Everyone sang out friendly greetings as I approached. I breathed deeply of the sweet air, sighed with contentment and plunged into the cool water. There I lolled and floated lazily, thinking that this was certainly the Bali I had imagined and possibly about as close to heaven as I had ever been.

After a while the married couple left, and I was alone with the exuberant teenagers who were only too happy to include me in their splashing and teasing. I, on the other hand, felt much too prim and proper and old and female for such hijinks, so I kept aloof. Most of the boys got the message and let me be, except for one fellow who had learned a few words of English, specifically, "I love you." This singular phrase he sent my way frequently and rather more passionately than I thought fitting for the circumstances. At first I couldn't help giggling girlishly and thinking, how cute, he doesn't know what he's saying. But then I detected a certain disconcerting gleam in his gaze, and it began to dawn that the fellow might have seduction on his mind. And me old enough to be his mother, I thought, indignant, bewildered, and flattered all at once.

Growing discomfort with the situation finally compelled me to retreat to dry ground, which was annoying since I wasn't quite ready to leave the cooling water. "Romeo," however, also removed himself from the pool and perched at the edge next to me, idly sloshing his feet in the water and humming a tune that sounded vaguely Nashville in origin.

Not exactly distressed but no longer as relaxed as I'd hoped to be, I lay on my towel feigning ignorance until a party of four young people – two men and two women – arrived. The women, both perfect models of tanned, blonde, Nordic grace, asked me if I thought the Balinese boys would mind if they were to bathe topless as was their usual practice.

I suppose they figured maturity made me an expert on Balinese custom. Unconcerned about inter-cultural etiquette at that moment and assuming that Balinese boys would be as titillated by the sight of bare breasts as boys anywhere, I seized the chance to relinquish the limelight to these young beauties.

"I'm sure the boys wouldn't mind a bit," I replied, smiling innocently.

Shortly after, I left the jovial group and went to my own verandah to do some writing. Settled in a chair engrossed in reflective thoughts, I forgot the pool side Romeo until jerked from reverie by the sight of him, out of the corner of my eye, sidling up the path to my porch. There he was with the same intense glimmer in his eyes, blowing little kisses, and making pointed gestures toward my bedroom.

There was no mistaking his intention now. Evidently my matronly allure had something over blonde, beautiful and naked.

Concentrating earnestly on my notes, I decided that ignoring his presence was the best defense. And after a time, when I dared to sneak a glance his way, he seemed to have given up and was moving off down the path. At that moment, however, he stopped, turned back and seeing me looking, he waved at me shyly like a child. A wave goodbye, I thought, foolishly returning the gesture. This, of course, was all the incentive he needed to renew his ardent advances.

Enough. I grew exasperated and ended the nonsense by clapping my hands and shooing at him just as you would chase away a nuisance puppy. That sent him off to a lurking distance behind some shrubs where he hung around looking sulky, I don't know how long, because he was lost to my mind as a stream of new visitors began arriving at my verandah.

In my experience the Balinese cannot suffer anyone to be alone; they behave as though it is their bound duty to keep one company. As dusk approached, three new companions were gathered around my chair: a staff member named Made (pronounced Mah-day) who spoke passable English, the village carpenter, and the village masseur.

The masseur was a chubby little man with a round brown face, an impish smile and sparkling black eyes. Plunking down a bag of peanuts for sharing, he made himself comfortable, lotus fashion, at my feet then simultaneously commenced giving me a foot massage and a language lesson in Indonesian. Made acted as interpreter, and the carpenter offered friendly encouragement in the background.

Through Made they plied me with questions: "Where is your husband?" "Where are your children?" "How old are you?" I guessed I was a fascination because I was female and alone.

In the meantime, villagers began assembling on the beach for the evening bathing session, some playing games, others soaping themselves, unabashedly naked, in the rivulets that coursed from the springs to the sea. My companions, Made, the carpenter, and the masseur, decided it was time to go. As he left, the masseur waved at me shyly.

Without a thought I returned his wave then fixed my mind once again on my notes. I hoped to get some details of the day's events recorded before daylight receded into dusk.

Minutes later, coming from a grove of trees over by the beach, I heard a cheerful "yoo-hoo!" Glancing that way, I discerned a chubby figure peeking at me mischievously around the trunk of a palm tree. The next moment the chubby figure called gaily from behind a frangipani tree. Fleeting appearing like a paunchy Pan, the masseur, clad only in white jockey shorts, flitted from tree to tree, waving merrily and calling "yoo-hoo." Adding comically to the scene, the squawking flock of geese trailed the masseur in a gabbling, flapping entourage.

Clapping a hand over my mouth, I managed to restrain a volley of convulsive mirth before amusement turned quickly to embarrassment as a startling thought entered my mind.

Suddenly I wondered if hand-waving gestures held some significance beyond, "So-long it's been good to know ya." First the fellow at the pool, now the masseur. What to make of this I had no idea. Was I giving out provocative sexual signals? Was I too friendly? Or was I simply overreacting. Maybe, I reasoned, he's just inviting me to go bathing with the other villagers. Confused and near choking with trapped nervous laughter, I withdrew indoors as discreetly as I could, leaving the frisky masseur and his fowl attendants to their own imaginings.

I saw the masseur once more as I was leaving Yeh Sanih. While I waited at the bemo stop, he happened by on his bicycle. We held a conversation composed of a few English and Indonesian words and much gesticulating, from which I gathered that he wanted to meet me down in Kuta one of these days. I hoped he understood that I meant thanks, but no thanks I wasn't interested.

Had either of us any true idea of the other's meaning? I didn't know then, and I don't know now. I suspect the other participants in this travel scenario may have been as perplexed about my behavior as I was by theirs. The global village may soon be a reality, but dwelling there will take a little more effort than simply getting there.

**Note:** *Subsequent reading and research shed no light on the significance of hand-waving behavior in Bali. The experts do say, however, that the Balinese have a lighthearted attitude to physical matters, and besides that, they are fun-loving folk who like a good ribald joke.*

[See Going Solo Tips](#)

*Social Issues, Words for Women*