

## Getting Oriented

*Toto, I've [got] a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.*  
— Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*

In the beloved musical-fantasy *The Wizard of Oz*, a tornado transports Dorothy and her little dog Toto from their house in Kansas to the magical Land of Oz. She immediately recognizes that she is “out of her element,” a stranger in a strange land. Her declaration to Toto, however, carries significance beyond the enchanting fable. Like Dorothy, we are embarking on a step-by-step journey. We are on the verge of change. Dorothy’s words speak to that process of change, especially the disorienting angst so many of us feel as we move from “home” to “abroad.”

Kansas represents home – everything that is safe, stable, familiar, and predictable. It may be flat and gray and ordinary, but for Dorothy (and I suspect the rest of us) it’s a “comfort zone,” a place of least resistance. The Land of Oz, on the other hand, represents the strange, unstable, and unknown world abroad. In Oz, anything can happen: scarecrows talk, horses change color, monkeys fly—and few of the familiar rules of Kansas apply. It’s a land of “not knowing.”

It’s precisely this plunge into the unknown that awakens the sleeper in us, exciting a sense of childlike wonder. “Of the gladdest moments in human life,” Sir Richard Burton writes in *The Devil Drives*, “is the departure upon a distant journey into unknown lands. Shaking off with one mighty effort the fetters of Habit, the leaden weight of Routine, the cloak of many Cares, and the slavery of Home, man feels once more happy. The blood flows with the fast circulation of childhood. Afresh dawns the morn of life.” In this transitional space between home and program site, Kansas and Oz, our field orientation begins.

The flight to our chosen field is often filled with built-up anticipation. At the same time, it can be marked by Oz-like discomforts and uncertainties (as we saw with Hanna in the last chapter). Long-distance air travel is often exhausting, as jumbo jets offer precious little legroom—much less sleep—during the time warp of traversing the globe at 550 miles per hour. Even exiting an aircraft can sometimes be an ordeal. Aika, a Japanese study abroad student, along with several hundred other passengers, were prevented from disembarking at Melbourne Airport. “Two passengers complained of a high fever and the captain was afraid that we all might be infected with bird flu. It was hours before we were finally released from the airplane.”

Then it’s the challenge of negotiating formal entry into another country while stranded in that netherworld known as jet lag. No longer in the air but not quite on the ground, it’s hard to imagine being in a state of mind *less* prepared to gather our bags, pass customs, and defend against the horde of besieging porters and cabbies lying in wait just outside the airport doors. No wonder a cyclone had to pick up Dorothy and Toto and drop them in Oz; few folks would willingly subject themselves to the disorienting confusion involved in getting there!

## The First 48 Hours

If you're not traveling with a chaperoned group, do yourself a favor: pre-arrange to have a trustworthy resident pick you up from the airport (or train or bus station) and provide transportation to someplace safe and secure. Arriving in a strange country in an exhausted state is stressful enough; having to then haggle with extortionate cab drivers or catch a public bus to a place you've never been can be overwhelming. What you need most is a comfortable, quiet place where you can rest your body and reset your internal clock. You'll also need a telephone or internet connection to let family and friends back home know that you've arrived safely. Though this is the ideal, the reality may be quite different – like arriving solo and without any form of welcome, and then to be immediately thrust into the vast unknown to reach a distant field site. Helen's Oz experience is all too common:

The bus from Guatemala to the city of San Salvador was slow and excruciatingly stuffy. We passed the body of a dead man lying unnoticed on the side of the road. The person who was supposed to meet me at the bus station had not turned up. I sat on my luggage in the crowded and dirty station and fought hard to quell the rising panic. (Cited in Scheyvens & Storey, 2003, p. 120)

Consider yourself fortunate if, soon after arrival, you find yourself winding down in a college dorm room or a local family's home. Though your fatigued body will likely crave sleep, try to stay up until 10 p.m. or 11 p.m. local time. Secure your luggage and then take a brief walk (as long as it's not in a dangerous area). This is one way to immediately acclimate yourself, not only to a new time zone, but also to your new surroundings. Walking helps to ease the restlessness of trying to sleep in an unfamiliar place. Use these twilight moments to remind yourself why you've left home for another social world. Then try to get a "normal" night's sleep. Ultimately, you'll need to give yourself 48 hours or so to unwind and to prepare for entry into the community.

## Settling In

In his allegorical novel *The Castle*, Franz Kafka tells of a wandering surveyor summoned to work in a village controlled by elusive, whimsical leaders in a nearby castle. He struggles to find a way to the castle, but soon realizes that no roads lead there. The village's sly and suspicious residents alternately welcome and dismiss him. Despite continuous rebuffs and reversals, the civil servant is determined to decipher the mysterious customs and conventions of this Oz-world. He's convinced that there *must* be rules that fit together and structure everyday life. Part of his job is to figure them out and adopt the expected behaviors. Only by doing so will he be able to win local acceptance and complete the task for which he was sent.

Like Kafka's character, one of our main tasks in our new community is to settle in to a new social environment. The advantage we bring to this undertaking is that we've done it before. We've already passed through hundreds of other life adjustments, big and small, within our homeland. Perhaps your family moved from the country to the city (or vice versa), or you left home to go away to college. At school or work you've likely had to adjust to roommates and workmates whose personal habits, language, ideas, and preferences in music and food were

different from your own. If you've ever married or been involved in a serious relationship, the process of entering into another human being's reality shouldn't be entirely foreign to you. These adjustment skills are part of what you bring to this novel cultural setting. It's now time to "unpack" them.

Many education abroad programs assist in the transition process by arranging for a formal orientation to the host campus and community within the first week after arrival. Besides providing basic academic and health-and-safety information, orientation sessions aim to ease students into a strange milieu and hopefully minimize their cultural blunders. The underlying assumption is that if we *know* some basic facts about our new circumstances, we will *feel* more positively inclined to adapt ourselves to them. There is some truth to this, especially for novice sojourners. But pre-field orientation shares the same potential drawback as pre-marital counseling: providing answers to questions that are not yet being asked. It's not until we actually settle into our host community, and concrete realities begin to hit us, that "getting oriented" takes on a whole new feel of immediacy and relevance.

### **Wandering About**

Even with a strong felt need, gaining a foothold in the local community is far from automatic. Physically "being there" is just the first step. Our actual entrance into the community requires that we venture out to observe everyday life, interact with strangers, and slowly absorb an alternative reality. Philip Glazebrook in *Journey to Kars* writes, "When you have submitted to looking about you discreetly and to observing with as little prejudice as possible, then you are in a proper state of mind to walk about...and learn from what you see."

The link between walking and learning is significant. We humans are pedestrians. And while we're used to covering ground quickly by motorized vehicle, we need a slow-motion mode of transport to truly absorb our surroundings. Especially when we walk, we're limited neither by time or pace. We can stop at a place, focus attention on a particular person or object, wonder, and ask questions to discover clues of something we desire to know or understand. World-walker Paul Otteson (1996) attests:

Walking is a great teacher. Your imagination wanders through the scape as your legs pound out a rhythm. You see detail instead of scenic blur. You meet humans, but not as you rush to find a museum or make a train. You meet them when you're tired and need some water. You earn an openness that's inviting. The effort you exert walking drives a place into memory. When you've walked it, it's yours. You've "been" there. The walk-story is a journey unto itself that you can recall forever after with gladness, longing, and a humble pride. You own a piece of the world, and ownership gives strength. (p. 35)

Some students prefer to jog their way into the community. For Maureen McGranaghan (1999), jogging offered not only physical exercise but also exposure to back street sounds and smells that would have been screened out in a taxi or sightseeing bus.

After arriving and settling in, I adjusted quickly to life in Prague, and I took the initiative to explore my surroundings. As a college runner attempting to keep up my training, I

worked out different routes, and while I thought, at first, that all the streets twisted and wound back on themselves in a huge labyrinth, I soon discovered loops and made connections. In fact, my running led me to observe the city closely; even while riding a bus or tram, I was often looking out the window and poring over the map trying to put it all together.

Many European cities are more or less accustomed to the presence of solitary foreigners darting through city streets in bright tracksuits or swim trunks. In other areas of the world, however, the political and cultural climate may not be so supportive. While living in India, my daily jogs through the locale surrounding our flat never failed to excite local dogs and children. Both would chase me, the latter yelling “angraiz! angraiz!” (foreigner, foreigner). They simply weren’t used to someone of my skin color loping around their neighborhood. After triggering these reactions for several weeks, I settled for less conspicuous morning walks.

An alternative to taking the world on foot is to rove the countryside on bicycle. Writing from a small town in China, Ben recounts his delight in going where curiosity beckoned:

The last three days have been incredible! I have met *so* many people and have just gone out into the community in my free time. I take two-hour bike rides, but the distance I cover might take only 30 minutes. People just stop me, wanting to talk, though I don’t speak much Mandarin yet. I spent 30 minutes with a goat herder, one hour with three students sitting in a field, an hour and a half in a family’s home (they invited me in, gave me two popsicles, and just talked and laughed with me). I met a man who works shoveling coal into a burner at a factory, and two hay balers who have told me every day to come back the next day. I met a college student who took me down by the river to his favorite spot to sit and talk. I met a girl in an Internet cafe who looked over my shoulder for one hour as I typed a paper -- and she doesn’t even read English! I have just been making time to ride my bike places and just see who will stop me to talk.

Whether on foot or cycle, set out to explore the length and breadth of the surrounding area. Follow the curiosities and questions that naturally surface: What is the immediate vicinity like? What types of vehicles are on the roads? How crowded is it? What kinds of people live here? What types of clothes do they wear? What do they do at different times of the day?

Move through the streets expecting to encounter the unexpected. The genius of slow-moving travel is the way it orchestrates surprise and serendipity. A turn down this street and we discover a favorite eatery. The next day, a right instead of a left and we happen upon an open-air market populated by rural produce-sellers. To become familiar with the spaces that people occupy is to learn something important about their lives, even before meeting them personally. Wander along boulevards and waterfronts, through parks and backstreets, between buildings and sidewalk stalls. Exchange glances and greetings with merchandise vendors, storeowners, and street children. When you’re ready to rest, pop into a local café and position yourself with a clear view out to the streets. Then take a few minutes to compose a record of your observations and initial impressions. Kerrie offers us a model in her description of a bustling road adjacent to Delhi University (India):

Walking down Probyn Road, I'm struck by the fact that people are doing every kind of imaginable activity—sleeping, eating, traveling, urinating—at all times of the day, and all in the street! My senses are full and I have only this page to empty them. In one blink of my eyes (to be sure it is not my imagination) there are cycle rickshaw drivers carrying heavy loads of cargo and up to three passengers; litter of all types finding its way to depressions in the street; a man urinating on a wall; another man sleeping on his ice cream stand before opening for business; and a white sky enveloping it all. My ears are filled with the honking of horns, the howling engine of scooters, the bells of rickshaws, and the chirping of birds. The sun is intense enough to feel through the filter of air thick with moisture, and of course sweat is a constant coolant. For my taste, I try coconut juice sipped from its own shell after a vendor cuts the top off. And this is a calm road...

Detailed observational notes like these are an important part of cultural discovery. They allow for continuous dialogues—internal and with community members—related to aspects of local life that confuse, intrigue, or even offend us. Writing heightens our awareness of what's around us. It also anticipates the many impromptu opportunities that we'll have to probe under the surface of our experiences with residents.

At the same time, try to resist the temptation to ask too many questions of too many people too soon. An extended period of simply wandering-with-awareness enables us to identify aspects of local life that are worthy of amplification. As William Foote Whyte (1989) learned in his study of urban young men in the Italian neighbourhood of Cornerville in Boston, "one has to learn when to question and when not to question, as well as what questions to ask" (p. 78). Our goal at this point in the orientation phase is simply to sensitize ourselves to the social spaces where local residents "do life." With each successive foray into the community, the places and peoples we discover will become more familiar and less threatening.

### **Crossing Thresholds**

In ancient legends all the way up through Hollywood blockbusters, heroes of different types pass beyond the veil of the known into the unknown. Dorothy finds herself in Oz and, in time, steps onto the yellow brick road. In the *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo crosses out of the Shire into a world totally foreign to him. In *Star Wars*, Luke leaves his home planet of Tatooine to confront Darth Vader. Strange and foreboding lands exist at the limits of the hero's life horizon and cultural competence. They are full of wonder and promise, but also danger and dread. It is only as the hero-wanderer advances beyond her limits that true "entrance" into another realm of experience occurs.

Having safely arrived in our host community, we already **have** passed the first threshold. Other tests and thresholds await us over the first days and weeks. Every day something new or different is likely to happen. We may feel like a child again, learning how to eat, bathe, shop, cross the street, and communicate in ways that stretch us to the limits of our cultural adaptability. For some of us, this is precisely why we have consciously chosen to cross into stress-producing situations. One student recently told me "I decided on a program in Kathmandu (Nepal) for the sheer density of the stimuli."

There's a certain wonder, delight, and exhilaration that comes with having all our senses placed on "full alert." Yet we are just as likely to respond to those stimuli with confusion, desperation and exhaustion. Every peak experience in an unfamiliar culture is also, on some level, a cultural puzzle to solve, a window into a facet of the culture not yet comprehended. Peaks and valleys tend to be mingled in the intercultural experience, and the latter rarely leave us feeling ecstatic. It's safe to assume, for example, that you will get lost, swindled, or harassed along your heroic path -- maybe several times. Other tests and new thresholds are sure to follow, requiring not just patience and composure, but new understandings of yourself and the surrounding culture. There are at least three inevitable struggles that warrant special attention.

### *Dealing with people who approach you*

As educational travelers, most of us want to build bridges to the local culture. We wish others to see us as warm, friendly, and generous. Instead of insulating ourselves from residents, we're eager to enter the culture on its own terms. So when someone approaches us with special offers (e.g. to change money or show us around) or special requests (e.g. to give money or buy their product), often our immediate reflex is to oblige.

Exercising a principled openness to local influences is an essential threshold to cross-cultural learning. At the same time, we need to use discernment in dealing with **strangers**. Many of those we meet in the community will exude an easy friendliness, with a genuine interest in encouraging and helping us. Others are intent on one thing and one thing only: fleecing culturally naïve travelers. Especially in cities of the two-thirds world where masses of people teeter on the edge of survival, learning how to tell one from the other becomes a major challenge. To do so accurately requires contextual awareness that is only built up over time.

Poverty is the breeding ground for con artists and thieves, many of whom possess a sophisticated arsenal of tricks. A favorite target are trusting and unattached foreigners who are clueless to the social landscape. Women are particularly vulnerable to being approached by men on the streets looking either to sell them something or charm them into feigned friendship in the hopes of getting sex. Knowing how to position ourselves in relation to hucksters of all stripes is a critical test – one that we should study hard to pass.

Our options are actually fairly limited. Some travelers simply resign themselves to getting conned or ripped off as the price paid for an outgoing and interactive field experience. Others determine to keep all locals at arm's length, refusing to stop and talk with anybody, anywhere. Between these two poles we must learn to tread a fine line between precaution and paranoia, especially in crowded tourist centers where hustlers and touts tend to concentrate.

Street beggars are a special case. Many rural-to-urban migrants, finding neither work nor opportunity in the big city, have no recourse but to send their children out to beg for change or hawk petty items at street junctions. Amber writes from Ethiopia: "Addis Ababa is *so overwhelming!* It's swarming with tons of street children, tons of old and disabled people. I constantly get people asking me for money – I mean *all* the time! I just don't know how to handle it." How *do* we handle it? How are we to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving?

Adding to our natural ambivalence is the fact that begging is oftentimes big business. In India, for example, thousands of young children are involved in a veritable “Beggar Mafia.” Kidnapped while they are still infants, they are then disabled, drugged, or denied adequate nourishment before being paired with another maimed beggar to elicit the sympathies of passers-by. Knowing this, it’s easy to become jaded. Amber continues: “When I first got here and saw disabled street children, my heart would break. Not knowing what my response should be, I just followed the example of others: I told the street children to ‘go away.’ Now I find my heart completely closed off to the dozens of begging children I pass every day.”

Begging may be a deeply flawed method of redistributing wealth from the haves to the have-nots; yet allowing ourselves to lapse into callous indifference only injures our moral sensibilities. Whether to give or not to give must ultimately be decided case by case, as much depends on our knowledge of the beggar and the larger social context. We simply cannot give to all beggars; nor must we refuse all beggars. Our giving will likely be selective, biased towards those that provide some service (like helping us practice language or find a store). A “gift” can either reinforce the notion that poor folk are simply welfare wards of wealthy Westerners, or become a legitimate and dignifying form of payment for services rendered.

### *Haggling with vendors*

Walking through bustling open-air markets or commercial centers, we should also expect to encounter vendors of various local goods and services. Fruits and vegetables, clothes and curios, taxis and tour guides – almost anything you need (or don’t need) are there. Yet more often than not, prices, instead of being fixed or stickered, are negotiated between buyers and sellers. Particularly in the developing world, bargaining is a way of life. As an outsider to this tricky commercial world, remember that you having the leisure time and money to travel abroad automatically makes you fantastically rich compared to virtually any street seller, taxi driver, or shopkeeper you encounter. Knowing this, many vendors will inflate the fair price up to ten times, hoping to extract as much money from foreigners as possible. Buyers are expected to be familiar enough with the value of local products and services to figure out the lowest price the seller is willing to take.

The “game” of haggling for a mutually acceptable price officially begins when you see something you want to buy. Stay relaxed but emotionally detached. Any sign of over-excitement or uncertainty instantly gives the seller the upper hand. Like on EBay bid, consider what the item is worth to you and set a maximum price point in your mind. Then casually ask the price of the item. When the seller names the price, pause and then offer about *half* of the asking price. If the vendor immediately accepts, you’re probably getting ripped off. More than likely, though, they will laugh or feign astonishment, telling you that your low-ball offer is ridiculously below their cost. Don’t be intimidated by their reaction. Allow the offer/counter-offer process to play out until the price reaches what you’re willing to pay. If your price point isn’t reached, tell them you’re going to shop around. Then leave. If they call you back, another round of gagging begins. If not, chances are the last price was their best price.

There are some who regard this kind of hard bargaining as exploitative of “barefoot businesspersons” struggling to make a living within failing economies. “If you really want something,” a friend once advised me, “you should expect to pay a fair price, not the lowest possible price.” Like giving to beggars, the appropriateness of haggling depends on the context. While bargaining is rare in the South Pacific, many Egyptian and Turkish shop owners would be insulted if you refused to haggle over prices. In much of North Africa and Asia, bargaining serves as a social lubricant that creates and sustains relationships.

It also matters what you buy. Some things—like hotel rooms, restaurant meals, and bus fares—often have fixed prices that can’t be bargained down. For tourist handicrafts and curios, however, we may actually want to pay top price (and even more). Doing so provides added income to sellers without driving up prices for local residents (who rarely purchase tourist items). On the other hand, paying high prices for basic goods like produce and clothing may actually harm local residents. If local merchants can get premium prices for their goods and services from foreigners, they will be less likely to sell to their neighbors at normal rates.

### *Managing time*

A third threshold to pass during our orientation period concerns time, or more specifically, time management. Having left the ordinary routines of the traditional campus, most of us will be eager to cross into the field of adventure. Compared to intense Oz-land experiences, “schoolish” activities like attending lectures, reading academic materials, analyzing issues, and writing papers appear a dull and dissipating use of time. “Time is limited,” we tell ourselves, “and it’s best spent meeting new people, seeing new sights, and having fun.”

Those of us disposed toward experiencing much and studying little should bear in mind that many of the encounters we tend to regard as “eye-opening” and “life-changing” may not take us far intellectually. I recall interviewing a student recently returned from one month feeding and bathing destitute people at one of Mother Teresa’s homes in Kolkata. “I’m forever changed,” she told me in a subdued but utterly sincere voice. Clearly, her self-donation on behalf of the suffering had affected her deeply. But when I asked her to explain what social and political conditions had made the need for such a home so great, she replied, “I have no idea.” Time invested in developing her emotional mind had not been balanced with time dedicated to probing causes and consequences with her thinking mind.

Even those with more academic- and research-oriented goals may have difficulty balancing competing time demands. Any given week on the field may be taken up with language learning, service activity, directed reading, casual interviewing, and report writing. Then there are the inevitable periods of “wasted time” resulting from illness, bad weather, no-show appointments, and late buses. Weeks can go by without adequate physical rest and “down” time, especially in intense urban environments where quiet places to relax and unstring the bow for an extended period of time are few and far between. Surviving punishing conditions and work schedules require regular times of “retreat” where we can enjoy a good meal or movie and do some reflective journaling. By building natural breaks into your schedule from the beginning, you will be less likely to sideline your studies out of sheer physical and emotional exhaustion later on.



## Community Reconnaissance

The thresholds we cross through informal movements and encounters prepare us for the core of our orientation experience: a formal and systematic reconnaissance or exploration of a settled area. Whether an integral part of in-field training or a self-directed, independent process, this reconnaissance offers a basic strategy for gathering and developing specific forms of “cultural intelligence” through a series of 10 field exercises.

This phase of orientation is best done with the assistance of a trustworthy guide. If you are living with a host family or serving with a community organization, family members or co-workers may be willing to assist. Otherwise, you can return to residents with whom you’ve initiated casual conversations and solicit their help. In Guatemala City, a young man agreed to escort me throughout the city for a week in simple exchange for shared meals. In the town of Lampeter (Wales), the local postman invited me to accompany him on his morning delivery route to the town’s homes and businesses. Both guides proved to be rich sources of local knowledge as we rambled, side by side, through the community. Perhaps more importantly, they modeled the kind of socially appropriate behavior that saved me from repeated *faux pas* over the months that followed.

Sometimes all-too-willing guides come looking for us. Areas with a lot of tourist traffic seem to breed a special class of “stranger-handlers” who are quite practiced at spotting outsiders, introducing themselves, and offering assistance. Most have picked up English by watching Hollywood films or dealing with foreigners like yourself, and are genuinely likeable, helpful people. Others, however, are disaffected and rather sleazy marginals whose only “business” is to befriend travelers and collect “commissions” for their services. They have nothing to lose and everything to gain, whether money, status, sex, or a way abroad. You would do well to avoid them.

The alternative to pre-arranging a guide is to simply ask for assistance from various residents on an as-needed basis. At this point in our global learning term, there’s no need to conduct formal interviews with regular informants. Our goal is much more modest and immediate: to learn how to meet survival needs in an unfamiliar setting. Most of the cultural assistance we’ll need can be found along the way. Clerks in stores, pedestrians on the street, waitresses in restaurants, local residents waiting at a bus stand – these are suitable helpers. Most will not have expertise on every aspect of the local culture, but they will serve as valuable sources of the specific information you need.

### *Procedure*

1. Coordinate with a community “guide” to complete the 10 orientation exercises listed below. You may want to schedule certain blocks of time over several days. If you are working as a team, divide into pairs, as groups of three or more tend to overwhelm local conversation partners. Exercises can be split between three or four team pairs.
2. Use your residence as a base for going out, gathering information, and reflective writing. If your residence is not in walking distance of a commercial center, plan on busing it to an

“epitome district.” These are ceremonial places, often in town center, that express the essence of the larger area by hosting parades, folk festivals, religious carnivals, and the like. They tend to offer a variety of public places—like parks, plazas, a central avenue, or an outdoor market—that reveal much about the city as a whole and give it a heart.

3. As you progress, collect various field materials (e.g., a local map, currency and coin, menus, agency brochures, bus schedules, etc.) that illustrate aspects of community life and can be referenced at later dates. Bring enough cash to change into local currency (paper money and coins) and buy a map, newspaper, and lunch. And be sure to carry a hand-held pocket notebook and pen or pencil. You’ll need it to jot down key information related to each exercise.
4. At the end of each day, convert your “jotted” notes into an expanded journal entry for each of the exercises. Resist the temptation to think that you can simply commit the information to memory without recording it. In each entry, include as much relevant detail as possible. Label each orientation exercise with the date and topic title (e.g., “local currency”).

*A final note:* As you begin to walk and talk, don’t worry too much about getting lost. Carry the phone number and address of “home” with you, and give someone an estimate of the time when you will return. If you find yourself completely disoriented, call home or simply use the opportunity to engage someone who can assist you.

## Orientation Exercises

### 1. *General directions and impressions*

Using a map of your orientation area, find the center point. Read the names of the north-south streets and the east-west streets. Is there a consistent naming or numbering scheme? **Record** the name of the nearest main intersection. From your starting point, begin walking in one direction for several blocks, then return. Do it again, walking in another direction several blocks and then returning to where you started. Try to get a “feel” for the immediate vicinity -- the movements of people, the sounds and smells, and the types of buildings. **Record** your general impressions. Try to identify key landmarks and institutions (banks, factories, hospitals, schools, markets, department stores) serving the local area. **Record** several of these.

### 2. *Local currency*

Locate a bank or legal money changing office. **Record** the current exchange rate. Change a desired amount of money. While still in the office, take a few minutes to study the notes and coins. What different denominations are in circulation? What symbols are represented on the various bills and coins? Ask a clerk or customer to explain the meaning of the symbols. **Record** the denomination, symbols, and meanings.

### 3. *Personal safety*

Identify one or two informed persons (e.g., a hotel manager, a tourist advisor, a police official) to question about personal safety: How does one best guard against pickpockets and bag snatchers? What should one carry or not carry on them? What streets or city sections should be avoided? What special precautions should be taken by a woman walking alone or in a small group? Are there certain times of the day when it is unsafe to move about? **Record** their responses.

#### 4. *Food services*

(a) Notice the kinds of places where local residents buy grocery items. Is there a local bazaar with assorted stalls? A municipal (open-air) market? Small neighborhood general stores? Modern supermarkets? Discuss the different types of stores with your guide or a temporary helper. What stores are most popular with different kinds of people? What differences are there in the varieties and prices of merchandise? **Record** what you learn. (b) Obtain information about three different kinds of eateries frequented by locals (not tourists), ranging from a street stall to a full-service restaurant. Find out the times they open and close. Walk into each eatery. While in the stores, examine their respective menus and their bathrooms. (Ask for a take-home menu, if available.) **Record** the names of five similar drink and food items from each store and compare their prices. Then observe the customers in each place. What can you infer from their dress, behavior (verbal and non-verbal), and grooming habits? **Record** how particular restaurants seem to cater to different customers. (c) Select one of the surveyed restaurants to take a lunch break. Study the menu. Consult the waitress or waiter and your dictionary in deciding what to order. Relax and enjoy your meal.

#### 5. *Local history*

(a) During your meal in the restaurant (above), try to identify a bilingual customer or restaurant worker to engage in conversation. (You may also find this person at an Internet café, market, or bus stand.) Casually introduce yourself and ask several questions about the area: How long have you lived in [place]? How has [place] changed since you've known it? What is causing the changes? What do you like most about living here? What do you like least? **Record** their responses. (b) Find a bookstore selling English language materials. Ask the store clerk for help in locating and recommending books describing the city's local history. (Also check for language-learning materials, a local newspaper published in English, a detailed city map, a scheduling calendar indicating national holidays, and a durable notebook for journaling.) **Record** the title(s) of books on the local history. Before you leave, purchase an area (city) map, a calendar, and a daily or weekly English-language newspaper.

*Note:* Neighborhood libraries and community centers can also be valuable sources of information on local history and current affairs. Librarians, in particular, are invaluable guides to books, newspapers, newsletters, periodicals, and maps that paint a picture of the place and its people, over time. They can also identify local clubs, sports teams, and community associations that would welcome you as a temporary guest.

#### 6. *Current affairs*

Find a relaxed setting (perhaps a park) to spread out the newspaper (above). Thumb through the various sections of the paper, noting the subjects of various articles. Select two to three articles that investigate matters of local or national concern. Read the articles. Then identify an adult in the setting you feel comfortable initiating a conversation with. Approach this person, introduce yourself as a newcomer, and invite him or her to offer their opinion about the subject of one of the articles. **Record** the name of the newspaper, the titles of the articles, and a short summary of the issue or event that you read and discussed.

### 7. *Social etiquette*

Find out what is customary behavior in the following areas: (a) In a *restaurant*, how do you politely attract the attention of a waiter? If a *social or business event* is scheduled to begin at 11 a.m., when should you arrive? Can an invitation be refused without causing offense? When invited to a *home* or *office*, what are some routine courtesies you should observe? Are you expected to eat all foods and to drink the local beverages? What is the appropriate response when an *unknown person* (e.g., a beggar) asks for money, food, or help? (b) When are you expected to bring a gift? What kinds of gifts for what occasions? When gifts are exchanged, is it impolite to open the gift in the presence of the giver? (c) How do people greet and take leave of each other? What words and gestures are used? Are there differences based on age, gender, or social status? When entering a room, does one greet everyone, only females or males, no one, or only the first person that greets you? (d) Are there special ways of showing respect to certain persons (e.g., bowing, lowering head, or standing)? Are there customs affecting the way one sits or where one sits? (e) Are there particular facial expressions or gestures that are considered rude? What are considered “personal” questions? **Record** the information.

### 8. *Romantic relationships*

Romance is defined differently from one culture to another. Foreigners may find themselves either the object of someone else’s interest or unwittingly communicate interest in another person, who then responds. Pose the following questions with a same-sex guide or helper who knows the culture well and with whom you share good rapport. (a) What rules govern “romantic” relationships in this country? Is it appropriate for husbands and wives to touch, embrace, or kiss in public? How does a man show he is interested in a woman (or another man)? How does a woman show she is interested in a man (or another woman)? How should a woman show she is not interested in a man who *is* interested in her? (b) How do you know when a relationship is becoming something more than just a friendship? What are some common signs that the other person is taking the relationship much more seriously? Do unmarried women and men date? If so, do they date in groups? Do they need a chaperone? In what types of social activities do young women and men participate together? What is the norm regarding touching and kissing in public? Is premarital sex tolerated? What do men/women do to signal that they want to pull back or cool down the relationship? **Record** the information.

### 9. *Public transportation*

(a) What modes of public transportation are evident on the streets (e.g., bicycle, bus, donkey cart, rickshaw, motorbike, private automobile, taxi, etc.)? **Record** the names locals use to refer to

them. (b) Identify the bus stand nearest to your residence. How is it marked? Inquire of someone waiting for a bus: Where are the buses going? How are the buses marked? Where can you catch a bus to [a destination of interest to you]? How much is the fare? Do you pay the driver, a bus runner, or place money into a box? Does the bus require exact change? **Record** the information. (c) Take a taxi with a host family member or experienced friend to the central market or local shopping area. How do you signal for a cruising taxi to stop, or do you have to look for one at a designated queue? How do you know how much the fare will be? Is it negotiated or clearly indicated on a meter? Where should riders sit? Are there any restrictions on the number of passengers allowed? Do drivers typically engage the riders in conversation? **Record** the information.

### 10. *Do's and don'ts*

This final exercise follows naturally from the previous conversation on the attitudes held by community residents toward foreigners. With the same person, discuss how someone of your nationality, gender, religion, and socioeconomic status can be sensitive to local customs and expectations. (a) What behaviors (ways of talking, walking, eating, dressing, socializing) would convey respect for different sectors of the local society? What common courtesies and formalities do local people appreciate? Which behaviors tend to annoy, confuse, or offend? (Probe for gestures, language use, dress styles, mannerisms, social interactions, food likes and dislikes.) **Record** several insights that can help you adapt to the local culture. (b) In order to guide conversation on a range of do's and don'ts, ask your helper to comment on how the community would treat the following behaviors if exhibited by a foreigner of your gender and age. **Check** (✓) the most applicable box.

	Customary	Allowed	Frowned Upon	Criminal
Spitting in public				
Whistling in public				
Cursing in public				
Giving money to beggars				
Combing hair in public				
Wearing sunglasses indoors in public places				
Walking barefoot in public				
Laughing aloud in public				
Littering				
Haggling in the marketplace				
Taking photographs of people without their permission				
Taking photos of airports, and train or bus stations				
Tipping waiters and waitresses at restaurants and hotels				
Making eye contact				
Speaking loudly in public				
Tipping taxicab drivers				
Wearing visible tattoo marks				
Men wearing dreadlocks or braided hair				
Wearing body piercings				

Men walking in public without a shirt				
Women smoking in public				
Women wearing sleeveless blouses and shorts in public				
Women wearing bikinis				
Men and women swimming together in public pools				
Young men and women hugging in public				
Sitting with legs crossed in the presence of elders				
Blowing one's nose in public				
Addressing people by their family name/surname				
Removing one's shoes when entering a private home				
Presenting a gift with the left hand				
Touching or patting someone's head/hair				
Placing one's leg(s) on the table or chair				
Counting money in someone's palm				
Using an iPod in public places (buses, parks, etc.)				
Using "thumbs up" sign to indicate OK				

*Adapted from: Roger Axtell and John Healy, Do's and Taboos Around the World: A Guide to International Behavior. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1993.*

## Regions Beyond

Once we have completed these tasks and found our bearings, our first steps to becoming an accepted presence in the community are over. We have learned our way around and struck up conversation with local residents. We have learned how to execute “survival” tasks and to be a perceptive observer through the keeping of a field journal. Potential perils have been faced and key thresholds crossed. Having eased our way into the immediate area, we can now look forward to exploring regions beyond.

Even as individuals cannot be understood apart from the social and physical environments that shape them, it is also impossible to understand a single community outside of its larger regional context. Villages and towns are inextricably bound to the land and systems of urban centers, and vice versa. Megacities like Beijing (China) and Sao Paulo (Brazil) excavate the surrounding countryside for building materials, divert water from neighboring agricultural lands, and provide daily labor for thousands of rural migrants. In central Los Angeles, young Latino children sell cigarette lighters or candy at traffic lights, a Third World niche within a First World city. In Dhaka, Bangladesh the cycle and auto rickshaws are decorated with colorful country—not city—scenes. These images speak of a regional reality—the countryside in the cities, and the cities in the countryside—that follows the global inter-penetration of the Third World in the First World, and the First World in the Third World.

In the weeks ahead, carve out of your schedule several days to thread through various points of the surrounding region. For these excursions, bus travel replaces foot travel (unless you're an avid cyclist). Virtually everywhere in the world, be it an urban metropolis or a rural province, there is a network of bus routes that connect you to points beyond. Although buses are notorious for their *lack* of comfort and speed, they provide an unequalled exposure to regional life in its relentless motion.

First there's the view outward to the city streets, sidewalks, buildings, parks, cafes, and storefronts. "Through the window," Maryada notes during her morning commute into Brussels for language school, "I see a man with shaving cream on his chin and a group of women chatting over coffee on the patio of a café. I watch a youngster buying foot-long sausages in the *boucherie* and special cheeses from the *fromagerie*. The doors to the shops with shoes in the window are being opened and a line has already formed in the *boulangerie* for fresh baked bread or sweet croissants." The bus lets us feel the flow of geography and comprehend the seamless interface between local people, daily business, and material culture.

Then there are the bus riders themselves, a veritable "community on wheels" inviting us into direct contact and conversation. Effective global learning requires a certain public vulnerability. On the bus we must rely on another's driving ability, another's timetable and directions, and another's civility. Melissa's bus-riding experience in Oaxaca (Mexico) suggests only some of the surprises that await us:

Around midday the bus becomes a crammed roller coaster barreling down the highways, sliding by other vehicles in near-miss maneuvers, and refusing to slow down for pedestrians crossing the streets. In the morning it's common for vendors to step aboard and walk up and down the aisles hawking their goods. If we're lucky an occasional street musician will belt out popular songs to the captive audience, hoping to earn a day's wage. The bus is my constant reminder that I'm in another country where a different set of rules applies.

*Bon voyage!*

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