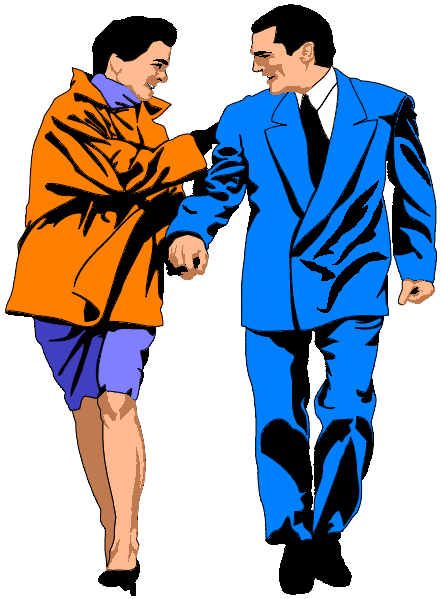
Getting Along

Learning to get along in another culture is a matter of experience. Simply being in a place does not ensure that you will come to understand and be comfortable with a new say of life. The image of the "ugly American" about which we read so much is not a portrait of bad people, but simply Americans who didn't learn from their experiences and who made no attempt to understand the ways of their hosts.

Things do not always appear the same to people from different cultural backgrounds. You may think you know what is going on, but don't jump to conclusions. Watch what people do, the gestures they make, how they greet each other, the way they drive automobiles, how they act in stories and restaurants, whether they speak loudly or softly and how they respond to a friendly smile. Behavior which may seem irrational to you, even unnatural or immoral, may be perfectly correct to them; from their point of view, if may be your behavior which is incomprehensible. Keep in mind that it is their country and the way they do things is influenced by their history and environment. They live in a comfortable and familiar environment to whey they react automatically. In short, they are expressing and acting out the patterns of their culture. The most important thing to remember is that culture is not something one is born with but is learned. Ask questions; exchange information. Also remember, although you represent the United States you are not expected to make the rest of the world over in the American image. Consistent lectures about "How you ought to do it" or "Back in the Untied States we do it better" can be terribly irritating and rude.



The Way You Dress

While in another country, you should be particualry careful about your appearance and that of your family. Some countries have dress codes which are much more rigid than others. Men are almost always expected to dress more formally in social situations than required in the United Stated. Women almost always wear a skirt instead of slacks and shorts are almost never worn in public. Hair curlers are a sight you will seldom see. The customs in your host country will soon become clear as you look around.

Be Active

Most commands offer a variety of activities. The various spouse clubs and support groups are very active and often undertake projects off-base which will also enable you to learn more about your host country. Your talents and desire to help will be most welcome. In Japan, for example, service members and their spouses are often called upon to lead classes in conversational English.

There are other familiar organizations overseas you might like to contact. The YMCA, the scouts, youth organizations and most churches have branches worldwide. Your local Family Service Center and base recreation office will give you details of what is available in your area. The large overseas installations have many of the same recreational facilities as stateside (e.g., golf courses, swimming pools, tennis courts, ball parks, bowling alleys, gymnasiums, skeet clubs and archery ranges). Most bases also offer baseball, football, swim teams, racquetball, self-defense, snorkeling and/or scuba diving, sailing and skiing. Lessons are numerous! All sorts of classes are in operation around the world and include: flower arranging, painting in all techniques, dancing, sewing, knitting, cooking, and ceramics to name just a few. If there isn't a class for your interests available, ask if you may start one.

Whatever your interests are, develop them further, but try to be beyond the confines of the U.S. base community. Somewhere nearby there is a group which has your interests. Your Special Services office can help. Any hobby can be pursued with pleasure and can open he door to lasting friendships.

Communication

If at all possible learn a little of the language of your host country. Your effort will be greatly appreciated and your enjoyment of the country will be increased. But don't wait until you learn some of the language to venture off base. World travelers have long understood that you are welcome anywhere with sign language and a smile. Words come later. Obtain a pocket dictionary and phrase book of the local language. If your pronunciation is not good, point to the word or phrases you are trying to say. In places such as East and South Asia, the Middle East or Greece where different writing systems are used, be sure the books you get include words or phrases written in the host country system as well as our own alphabet.

In some countries it is the custom for the newcomer to call on the neighbors. If you don't know the language or can master only the "hello - good-bye" phases, smile, nod and be as pleasant as you can. Most people will understand your dilemma and meet you halfway. Your children will also act as go-betweens when they become friends with other children in the neighborhood.

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