Spanish Culture and Nonverbal Communication
Latin America vs. United States

Spanish culture can differ greatly from your own. Traveling South America, Spain, or anywhere else can be more enjoyable if you understand the culture of the place you want to visit.

Spanish Culture Differences

The same way that foreign languages feel strange to us, some everyday things in American life can seem strange to people in different countries and vice-versa. Something as innocent as tossing a pen can be misunderstood in Spanish culture. We may also be offended by some innocent action or word of a Latin American. In order to avoid misunderstandings when vacationing in foreign lands, you will find a few cultural highlights below.

- In Latin American it is considered impolite to toss things to each other. If you need to give something to a native, make sure you walk over and hand it to them.
- You may pick up a few slang words while visiting South America, Mexico, or Spain. Just remember that slang words vary from region to region. For example, the slang word for "friend" in some areas of South America is "choche" or "pana", in Central America it can be "pasiero" or "vato" depending on the region and country.
- Saying the word "stupid" in the English language is common and innocent enough. BUT in Spanish culture the translation is very strong and offensive. Avoid using the Spanish word for stupid at all times.
- Don't be offended when Latins call you a "gringo". To them the words simply describes someone as foreign and isn't meant to degrade. The word came from war time when American soldiers wore green uniforms. The Mexicans knew enough to say "Green, go!" in order to express their wishes for the American soldiers to leave. This eventually became "gringo" and is used for any stranger, especially if you have light hair and eyes.
- Latin Americans will usually greet friends and relatives more personally than do Americans. They give hugs--even the men! Men usually also greet woman with "besitos" meaning they touch cheeks while making a kissing noise with their lips. Woman also greet other woman with "besitos." These little kisses are purely friendly and have no romantic meaning.
- When traveling abroad, bargaining for a lower price in markets, small shops, and even for taxi rides is expected. Tourists are often given ridiculously high prices when shopping. Bargaining is a sport and can be very entertaining. So make sure you never accept the first bid. And remember, most things cannot be returned.

Nonverbal Communication in Latin America (hand gestures)

Nonverbal language in Spanish culture is different from nonverbal culture in the United States. Be careful with hand gestures when visiting other countries. A thumbs-up to someone in the United States might mean something else in a different country.
For example, the hand gesture we use for "come here," the hand palm up with the index finger extending in and out three or four times, has a very different meaning in Latin America. It means that you are very romantically interested in the person and is considered a solicitation. To motion to someone in Latin America "come here" extend your hand palm down and move all four fingers in and out together three or four times.

Watch for the "thief gesture" on buses when you travel. When standing in the aisles, pay attention to the grandmothers and mothers. They will let you know if a pickpocket is nearby by placing their hand sideways with all four fingers extended, and then moving one finger at a time to touch the palm. It takes only a few seconds to do, but can be important. When you see this hand gesture, hold on to your things!

You will appreciate their openness. The more you learn about the language and the culture, the more you will enjoy your vacation and other encounters with the Latin culture and its people.

http://www.spanishprograms.com/spanish-culture.htm