



Basic Etiquette in Kenya

Overall, the Kenyan culture is a blend of many different tribal cultures. Cultural common courtesies vary depending on location, but following general etiquette will prove to be beneficial during your visit.

Should you have any questions about etiquette during your time in Kenya, it is always best to err on the side of caution, and seek advice from the In-Country Coordinator, Program Director, Volunteer Coordinator, or those with whom you are working.

Greetings

When greeting a Kenyan, it is expected that one says "hello" and shake hands. Hugging is not always appropriate. It is also typical for conversations to start with a polite greeting and an inquiry into one's health.

When addressing individuals older than you in most Kenyan cultures, you would call them either "Mama" or "Baba", with their eldest child's name, or any of their children's names. For instance, in a Luo village, if the oldest daughter's name is Loyce, you would call the mother Mama Loyce or the father, Baba Loyce. By supporting your right forearm with the left hand while shaking hands with an elder, one shows respect. To casually touch an elder, however, is considered improper.

Day-to-Day Interactions

It is considered improper to point at someone with your index finger. When pointing to someone or something, it is polite to use all fingers of the hand. Using the left hand to pass something is rude in the Kenyan culture; one must use the right hand, or both hands. When seeing guests out, it is considered polite to walk with them to their car or to the bus stop. To say goodbye at the door is thought of as a sign of inhospitality, unless one is clearly busy or cannot leave the house.

Public displays of affection among men and women are frowned upon. This rule applies even to holding hands.

Kenyans have a different concept of personal space than Americans. Kenyans will stand much closer during conversation, and you may find someone almost leaning against you while waiting in line. Kenyans are also uncomfortable with eye contact.

The concept of time is much different in Kenya than you may be used to at home. Expect delays for social invitations and official meetings.

Respect

Respect is a very important aspect of the African culture. The idea of respect for one's elders is limitless. Not only must a child respect those that are older than him or her, but also the elders respect those who existed before them and now exist in the afterlife. There are many customs that represent ways in which one can honor one's elders. One is that a young person may not sit in a chair while a more senior person is present. When children do converse with their elders, they are much more polite in their use of language.

Age and social status hierarchies influence many factors within the society, such as the arrangement of the houses and villages and the seating position at ceremonies. The oldest member of the family almost always leads the group. The purpose of education seems to revolve around raising and cultivating brave, educated and respectful individuals.

Photographs

It is discouraged to photograph and film the local people without their consent. Most people are comfortable with being photographed and when they have become your friend, it's perfectly fine. It is prohibited to use moving and still images from villages for commercial purposes such as advertisement.

Bargaining

As a tradition in Africa, buyers and sellers bargain for better prices. Make sure you bargain and do not feel obligated to buy products from articulate merchants. Bargaining gives volunteers a chance to interact and learn about the concept of their market economy. Try not to feel uncomfortable bargaining and have fun.

Do not collect or buy wildlife products or items that are obviously very old and have significant cultural value.

Politics

As with your community, the community has its own politics. Please refrain from getting involved with local politics.