

Learning the Language: Travel Where English is Not the Primary Language

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

As English speakers, we should never forget how fortunate we are. There are so many countries around the world that we can visit who share our language with us. From the Americas to the United Kingdom, Canada to Australia and New Zealand, and even much of the Caribbean, English is the official spoken language.

Having said that, there are many other parts of the world where other languages are king. As a British resident, all you have to do is head across the English Channel to find a huge variety of languages. It's not just French, German and Spanish you'll come across, but a range of others, some specific to their country of origin, such as Flemish, the variety of Dutch that is spoken in Belgium.

The further afield you get, the more daunting the language challenge becomes. At least with the European variants, they use the same alphabet as English and numbers are always easy to understand. That's not necessarily the case when you reach more exotic destinations, such as China, Japan, and even Russia, all of which have their own bewildering spoken and written form of language.

Stepping off the plane at Hong Kong was quite an experience, as suddenly we saw completely unfamiliar characters in front of us. Fortunately, English is their second language, so we could immediately see where we were going. In truth, you could probably travel around most of the globe and get by without learning another language, as sign language and pointing can be exceptionally powerful ways to make yourself understood, but where's the fun in that?

I'll put my cards on the table at this point. I'm a linguist. I love learning languages and always have. It was always my dream that one day I'd be good enough to just switch between them, but sadly my talents don't stretch that far. Although my list of qualifications will tell you that I can speak French, Spanish, German, and Italian, as we all know, if you don't practice something regularly, it's quickly forgotten, and that's very much the case with languages.

However, what I've learned allows me to make an effort, even if it only gets as far as some of the basic greetings.

Learning the basics of a language though, just enough to get you by and impress the people whose country you're visiting, needn't be hard. If

you think about it, there are some phrases that are a must in any language. Being able to greet people by saying hello and goodbye is a good start, especially as the chances are that you'll have to go through Customs when you arrive in the country. A smile and a hello always gets that process off to a good start.

Good manners cost nothing, and that's why "please" and "thank you" are probably the next most important phrases. Even if you don't intend to learn anything else, finding out how to say phrases such as, "Do you speak English?" or "I don't understand," will help to get the message across that you're not fluent in the native language.

If you do want to have a go, then quite early on when you're learning the language, you might want to get to grips with phrases such as, "Can you repeat that?" and "Can you speak more slowly?," as those will help you as you try to fathom out what's being said to you.

Generally, when you travel, the two most important ways of communicating are speaking and listening to what's said to you. Reading will be useful, particularly with menus in restaurants, although it's unlikely that you'll need to do much writing in the language. Therefore, concentrate on language courses that have lots of listening and speaking practice built into them, as this is what you're going to need.

Learning a language is very much a personal thing, and there's no one course that will definitely bring you results. The important thing is to look at the various ones on offer, preferably in a bookstore, where you can browse the subjects that the course will be covering and see whether the way that they present the material appeals to you. I'm currently learning Japanese for our upcoming trip and that's exactly how I found the course book I'm using at the moment.

I did start off attending evening courses once a week and, although they were useful and it was a good way of meeting other people interested in the same language, I found the course to be geared too much towards business travel, so opted to learn on my own. Again, different things will suit different people. If you know that you're motivated enough and happy to work on your own, then this allows you to learn at your own pace, rather than getting left behind or frustrated at the lack of progress, as you wait for others in your class to catch up. However, it is all too easy to just not study for a few days, which then turn into a few weeks. The key to learning a language really is "little and often" to ensure that it stays in your head.

Critical situations that you're probably going to want to cover include

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ordering food in restaurants, perhaps getting around the country by train or plane, and maybe asking for tickets at places like museums. If your hotel accommodation isn't pre-booked before you leave home, then this is another area that you may want to cover to ensure that you know how to ask for hotel rooms.

Generally, you'll find that people are very keen to help you and usually impressed with the fact that you've made an effort to learn their language. Even if they reply back in English, as often happens to me, at least I know I've tried. After all, if we look at it the other way round, we do tend to expect visitors from other countries coming to an English-speaking country to make an effort -- and sadly, to our shame, they usually not only do that, they're usually more fluent than we could ever hope to be in another language!

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

Article last updated: 2/26/2009

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