

Uncommon Courtesy

We keep hearing about the death of civility—but it's alive and well in places you'd least expect

BY SIMON HEMELRYK

IT'S LUNCH TIME in Mexico City and a young man follows a slim girl in dark glasses into a restaurant. Without looking behind her, she lets the heavy glass door swing closed, almost smashing him in the face.

Rain lashes Berlin's city centre as estate agent Nicole Hatzijordanou, 34, struggles through the morning rush-hour crowds, her right arm in plaster. Ahead, a young woman drops a folder, scattering papers everywhere. Dozens of commuters walk on by, but Nicole stoops to pick up the sodden

documents. When thanked, she jokes, "I still have one good arm!"

From Thailand to Finland, from Buenos Aires to London, people worry that courtesy is becoming a thing of the past. But is such pessimism justified?

When *Reader's Digest* tested Britain's major cities to see if courtesy really is kaput (see "The Courtesy Test: Would You Pass?", RD December 2005), the results made headlines. So we decided to rank the world. RD dispatched undercover reporters to the largest city in each of 35 countries where the magazine is published. In every location



two reporters—one woman and one man—conducted three tests: “door tests” (would anyone hold one open for them?), “document drops” (who would help them retrieve a pile of “accidentally” dropped papers?) and “service tests” (which sales assistants would thank them for a purchase?). This was the world’s biggest real-life test of good manners, with more than 2,000 separate tests of actual behaviour. Here’s what we discovered.

Wonderful Town

THEY HAVE A reputation for being big-headed, but New Yorkers showed they are big-hearted too, by finishing first in our global courtesy ratings.

They were in the top five in all three tests and were particularly polite at holding doors open, with only two people failing to do so. “I don’t even think about it,” said syndications assistant Kirsten Chieco, who held the door of one of the Starbucks coffee shops where this city’s tests were done. “Most New Yorkers are courteous.”

Surprised? Not former Mayor Ed Koch. Asked to react to our findings, Koch pointed to a rise in New York niceness since the terror attacks on the

city five years ago. “Since 9/11, New Yorkers are more caring. They understand the shortness of life.”

The second most courteous place: prosperous Zurich, Switzerland. In a feat matched only in Sweden’s Stockholm, Zurich shop assistants thanked us for our purchase in every shop we visited. “I’m friendly to people whether they’re shabby or in a fur coat,” said Frieda Lütolf after we spent £1.50 on chocolate at exclusive confectioner Sprüngli’s. “Everyone I deal with is served attentively—even those who are rude to me.”

Swiss shop workers’ good manners were often inspired by pride in their work. “I’ve been here for 40 years,” explained tobacconist’s manager Ursula Gross. “I like it, so I’ve always arrived on time and been courteous.”

T for Tolerance

TORONTO, CANADA, came third among our 35 cities. “I’ve seen more politeness in Canada than in many other places I’ve been, particularly Europe,” litigation lawyer Mark Ellis, 48, told our male reporter after holding the

door open in the financial district.

Still, two European cities—Berlin, Germany, and Zagreb, Croatia—did well in our tests, tying with São Paulo, Brazil, for fourth place. Zagreb residents were world leaders in helping with dropped papers. Josip, aged 72, tried to pick up our female reporter’s documents despite having arthritis and a bad back. “I always help someone in trouble,” he said, “if I can!”

In São Paulo, even petty criminals were polite. As we bought a pair of cheap sunglasses from a trader at an illegal market on 25 de Março Street, shouts rang out that the police were coming. The merchant gathered up his goods to flee—but not before thanking us for our £1.50.

The region that most lacked courtesy: Asia. Eight out of nine cities there finished in the bottom 11.

In last place was Mumbai, India, where courtesy in shops was lacking. When our female reporter bought a pair of hair clips, sales assistant Shivlal Kumavat turned his back on her as soon as she paid. Asked why, the 31-year-old was unapologetic: “Madam, I am not an educated man. I hand goods over to the customers and that’s it.”

In a government-run supermarket a young female employee claimed that she hadn’t seen what happened when asked why she didn’t help our reporter

*The chart on the right ranks—from most courteous to least courteous—the 35 major cities included in RD’s Global Courtesy Test. Figures reflect the percentage of people who passed in each city. When multiple cities had identical scores, they are listed in alphabetical order.



World of Courtesy*

| | | |
|--------------|----------------|-----|
| New York | USA | 80% |
| Zurich | Switzerland | 77 |
| Toronto | Canada | 70 |
| Berlin | Germany | 68 |
| São Paulo | Brazil | 68 |
| Zagreb | Croatia | 68 |
| Auckland | New Zealand | 67 |
| Warsaw | Poland | 67 |
| Mexico City | Mexico | 65 |
| Stockholm | Sweden | 63 |
| Budapest | Hungary | 60 |
| Madrid | Spain | 60 |
| Prague | Czech Republic | 60 |
| Vienna | Austria | 60 |
| Buenos Aires | Argentina | 57 |
| Johannesburg | South Africa | 57 |
| Lisbon | Portugal | 57 |
| London | United Kingdom | 57 |
| Paris | France | 57 |
| Amsterdam | Netherlands | 52 |
| Helsinki | Finland | 48 |
| Manila | Philippines | 48 |
| Milan | Italy | 47 |
| Sydney | Australia | 47 |
| Bangkok | Thailand | 45 |
| Hong Kong | | 45 |
| Ljubljana | Slovenia | 45 |
| Jakarta | Indonesia | 43 |
| Taipei | Taiwan | 43 |
| Moscow | Russia | 42 |
| Singapore | | 42 |
| Seoul | South Korea | 40 |
| Kuala Lumpur | Malaysia | 37 |
| Bucharest | Romania | 35 |
| Mumbai | India | 32 |

No, You First: Test Your Manners

At Work

1. A colleague starts to tell you something about another colleague's private life. You...

- Stop him short. You're not interested in other people's business.
- Listen intently. It might be useful when playing office politics.
- Listen and comment. You love to share gossip.

2. Approaching a colleague's desk, you notice she's on the phone. You...

- Leave her a note saying you'd like to speak to her when she's free.
- Hover until she hangs up.
- Flash an index finger. You just need a minute.

In Public Places

3. Your mobile phone rings on a crowded bus. You...

- Answer and talk as you would anywhere.
- Answer and quietly say you'll call back.
- Simply turn it off until you're off the bus.

4. You've got 14 items in your trolley and the supermarket is packed. You...

- Race to the ten-item lane.
- Use the ten-item lane, but group your items as two purchases.
- Grab a magazine and use the normal checkout.

At Home

5. At the dinner table, your

son reaches past you for the food. You...

- Comment on how long his arms are getting.
- Tell him to return it until he can ask politely to have it passed to him.
- Ask him to pass it to you once he's finished serving himself.

With Strangers

6. You run into someone you've met, but whose name you forget. You...

- Keep the conversation short so as not to embarrass yourself.
- Simply pretend you know his or her name.
- Admit and apologise for your memory lapse.

Answers: 1. a; 2. a; 3. b; 4. c; 5. b; 6. c (A point for each correct answer).

HOW YOU RATE 0-2 Courtesy Clod 3-5 Socially So-So 5-6 Manners Maestro
Ready for part two of this mind-your-manners quiz? See page 7 for more details.

pick up his papers. Another worker stepped on them.

"In Mumbai, they'll step over a person who has fallen in the street," said the store's security guard.

Doors Wide Shut

WHAT WAS MOST striking in Asia was how few people held doors open. Many Asians don't include door-holding in their notions of courtesy. "How can we measure someone's value by whether they hold a door open?" observed 19-year-old student John Christopher Padilla, in the Philippine capital Manila.

But we found plenty of discourtesy outside Asia too. Moscow, Russia, and Bucharest, Romania, ranked as the least polite European cities. When a rich-looking lady in her forties failed to hold a door in Moscow's Prospekt Vernadskogo, she chided us: "I'm not a doorman. If someone gets hurt, they should be quicker on their feet."

Not So Poor

THERE WAS LOTS of courtesy on display in poorer areas. In Johannesburg, South Africa, our researcher said: "The better dressed the person, the less likely

he or she was to help. This applied across the board, irrespective of race."

Nonetheless, it was prosperous cities that were at the top of our rankings. Charles Mosley, editor at etiquette publisher Debrett's, ventures this explanation: "Wealthier cities aren't generally as crowded and competition for resources is less intense."

But being in a hurry isn't always a barrier to helping people. Tests carried out during morning rush hours produced almost as many positive results as those performed off-peak. For Londoner Gary Webber, a 46-year-old local government worker who helped gather up our papers during the city's rush hour, this was down to empathy. "You looked as if you were in a hurry. I was in a hurry. I thought, 'Let's work together and get us both on our way.'"

Many older people we encountered complained that courtesy was less prevalent among the young. But we found that the under-40s were, by a small margin, the most helpful of all age groups—and the over-60s the least.

Women were slightly more courteous than men and both groups were more polite towards their own sex. Some men told us they worried about patronising modern independent females. Perhaps that's why men over 60 were the least likely of any group to hold a door for our female researchers.



ADVICE SQUAD

"A word to the wise isn't necessary. It's the stupid ones who need the advice."

BILL COSBY

Fear of Crime

GLOBALLY, around 74 per cent of shop assistants said thank you. The most common reason given was that if you were nice to customers they would come back. "After the Argentine economic crisis of 2002, I would never risk losing a sale," said Buenos Aires toy-shop owner Amanda Herrera.

Just over half of people worldwide held doors open for us and only a third helped pick up our papers. A significant minority was more scared of crime—or being seen as a criminal—than rude. "Pickpockets use tricks like that," said a 50-year-old woman in Prague, capital of the Czech Republic. "One drops something, you help pick it up and their accomplice robs you."

Overall our 35 major world cities showed courtesy 55 per cent of the time. Does it matter? "Common courtesy is the oil that keeps society running," says George Erdos, a psychologist and expert on social values at Newcastle University. Mexico City pastry shop worker Rodolfo Mateo Santiago, 21, put it even more eloquently. He thanked our researcher for her purchase of a bottle of water and revealed that his grandmother had told him: "The most beautiful thing you can give a person is a genuine smile. Live your life by this and you will see wonderful results."