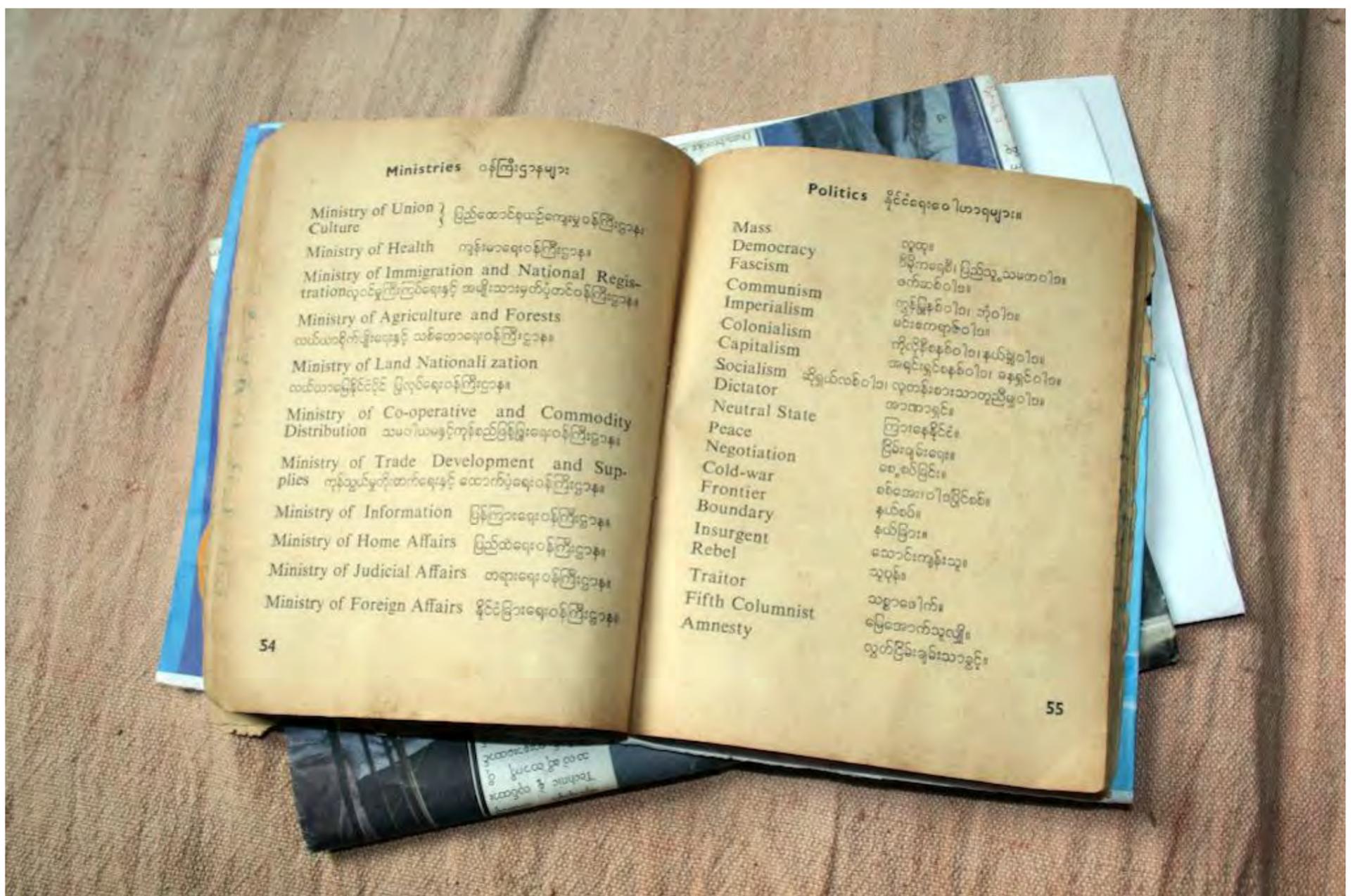


When The Natives Don't Speak Your Language, Part 1

James Albright February 18, 2022



A Burmese language textbook
Credit: fyunkie/Creative Commons

Before you travel beyond your own borders you need to make sure you can communicate at your destination

It is said that English is the language of international aviation and I suppose that is true. The problem is that not everyone knows that. Even if they do, their version of English can be different than yours. Before you venture beyond your own borders you need to make sure you can communicate at your destination.

Optimally, you will have brought someone fluent in the local language. Alternatively, you can arm yourself with the key phrases you will need to work with air traffic control, airport handlers and everyone you plan to interact with. You should also learn enough of the local customs so you don't offend anyone unintentionally and will be welcomed as a return visitor.

But even after you've done all that, you will need to be flexible and keep your sense of humor. No matter what you do, it won't be perfect. Have you heard the story of President John F. Kennedy going to the Berlin Wall and saying to a large crowd, "We are all jelly donuts," supposedly to the horror of the locals as reported by the American press corps? As it turns out, what Kennedy said, "Ich bin ein Berliner," does indeed mean "I am a Berliner" to those in Berlin and Eastern Germany. In those regions, a donut is a "pfannkuchen," whereas a "berliner" is a donut in North, West and Southwest Germany. "Ich bin Berliner" is what a local who is actually a resident of Berlin would say, but to be figurative, German grammar requires the "ein" be used, as Kennedy correctly did.

Know What to Expect

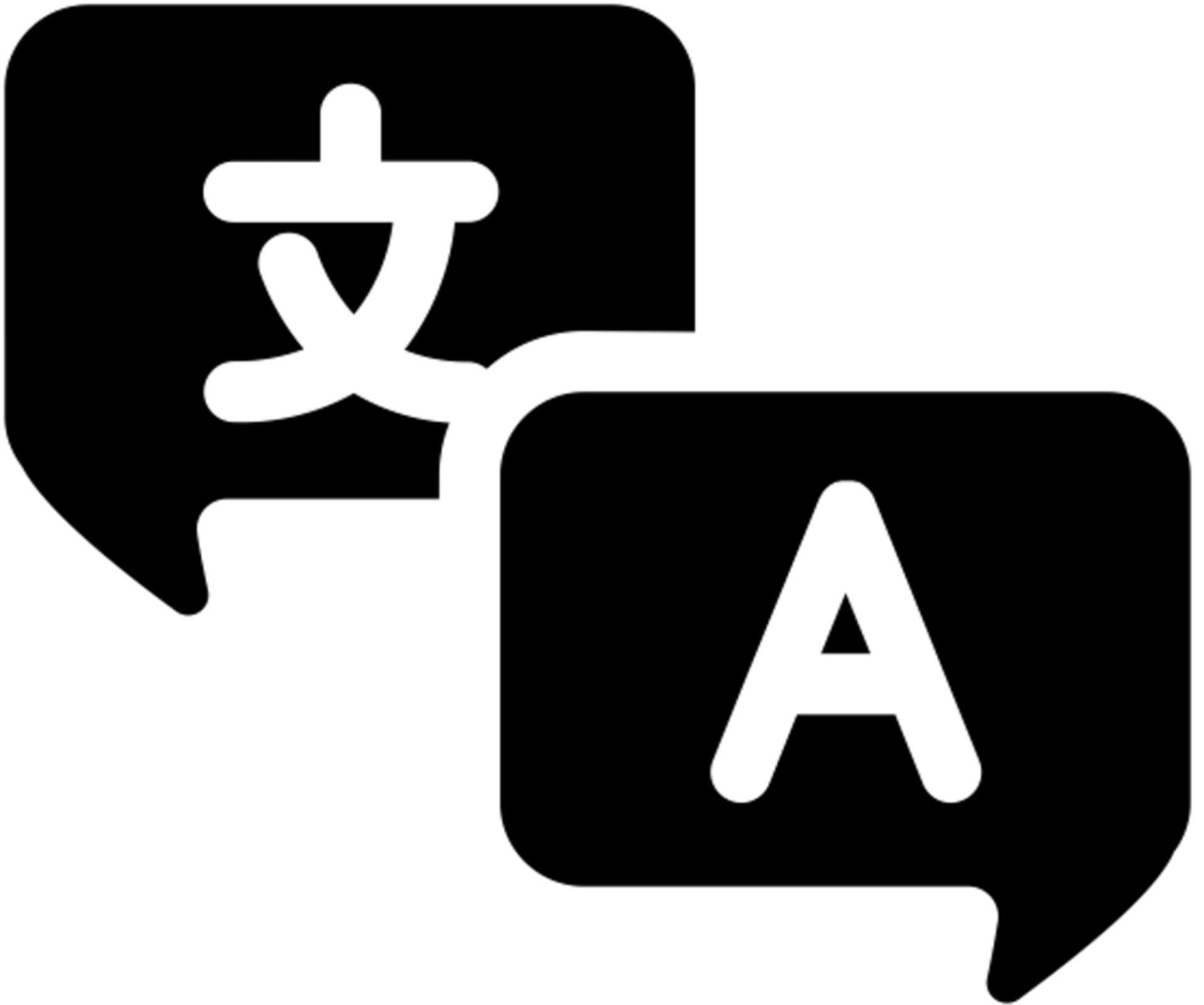


A 'Jeepney' taxi in the Philippines. Credit: Jorge Lascar

We can become complacent when traveling overseas, especially if we've had great success before. If you haven't been to the location before, you should find someone who has been there recently. In most parts of the world air traffic controllers speak English, but their accent may be so heavy you may have trouble understanding them. Even if the controller is understandable, they will often switch to the local language when speaking with other aircraft; your situational awareness may be diminished as a result.

If you are staying near a major city with frequent visitors and businesspeople from English-speaking countries, it will be easier to find cab drivers and people in hotels and restaurants who will lend a sympathetic ear. But the farther from these tourist spots you venture, the more likely you are to find yourself incommunicado. Fortunately, there are countermeasures to this, though the most effective solution will not be without cost.

Consider Bringing or Hiring a Translator



Credit: marcmiqel

I flew U.S. diplomatic missions as an Air Force pilot in a former life and when traveling to a location where a language barrier was known to exist, we had a member of the U.S. Embassy greet us and provide translation services. In extreme cases, we would have the translator meet us prior to departure, just in case we needed them when talking with air traffic control. Having a person available who knows the language and the customs is obviously convenient. Many times it is a luxury, but sometimes it is a necessity.

Now, as a civilian pilot, my international travels are either for business or leisure purposes. For business trips, the passengers should anticipate the same challenges and may have brought someone conversant in the local language. In those cases, I like to ask the person for a few phrases that I know I will need, but more on that later. I also ask for their cellphone number, just in case. For leisure trips, chances are the passengers will want to go someplace where other tourists are, and English may be common. If not, we will explore our options for tourist-friendly hotels and look for local allies.

Use the Local Handler or Hotel Concierge



A hotel concierge in Rome. Credit: Jorge Royan

There is debate among business jet pilots regarding whether to pay for a local handler to ensure everything goes smoothly. “Why pay for something you can do for yourself?” Or, “It pays to have someone with a vested interest in your success.” I like knowing that help is only a phone call away.

If you are a frequent visitor and use the same handler each time, it can be to your benefit to "tip heavy" on arrival and ask if you can call now and then for help. I was once presented with the last-minute task of procuring the finest Parisian pastries and ensuring they got onboard the aircraft within minutes of departure, free from any extra handling sure to happen once they showed up on the conveyer belt at customs. Our handler called in a few favors and the pastries left the baker's van under the watchful eye of a customs officer as they were brought directly to our aircraft.

You can also find a translation ally at the hotel concierge. In some countries the hotel desk is eager to please; in others a large tip can improve their willingness to come to your rescue in the future. Put their phone number in your cellphone's contacts list. A quick phone call can solve your problems by asking "how do you say?" or "please talk to this person and ask for me" and then handing the phone over. But no matter how much on-call assistance you have, knowing a few key phrases can make your life much easier.

Babel Fish



Caption: The Tower of Babel. Credit: Alexander Mikhalyuk

The Tower of Babel is a Bible story (Genesis 11:1-9) meant to explain why the world's populations speak different languages. While it is a good story, my favorite adaptation of it comes from the Douglas Adams book, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. It describes a Babel fish as, "probably the oddest thing in the universe." Babel fish, it seemed, digested language of any kind and out the other end came language the person in whose ear he (or she) was placed could understand. How nice.

I don't know of any babel fish available on Earth, so over the years I've recorded the translations to commonly needed phrases when venturing to airports in other countries. I would ask a local or someone fluent in the language to vet the translations, and I called the result a Babel fish. For example, here is my French Babel fish.

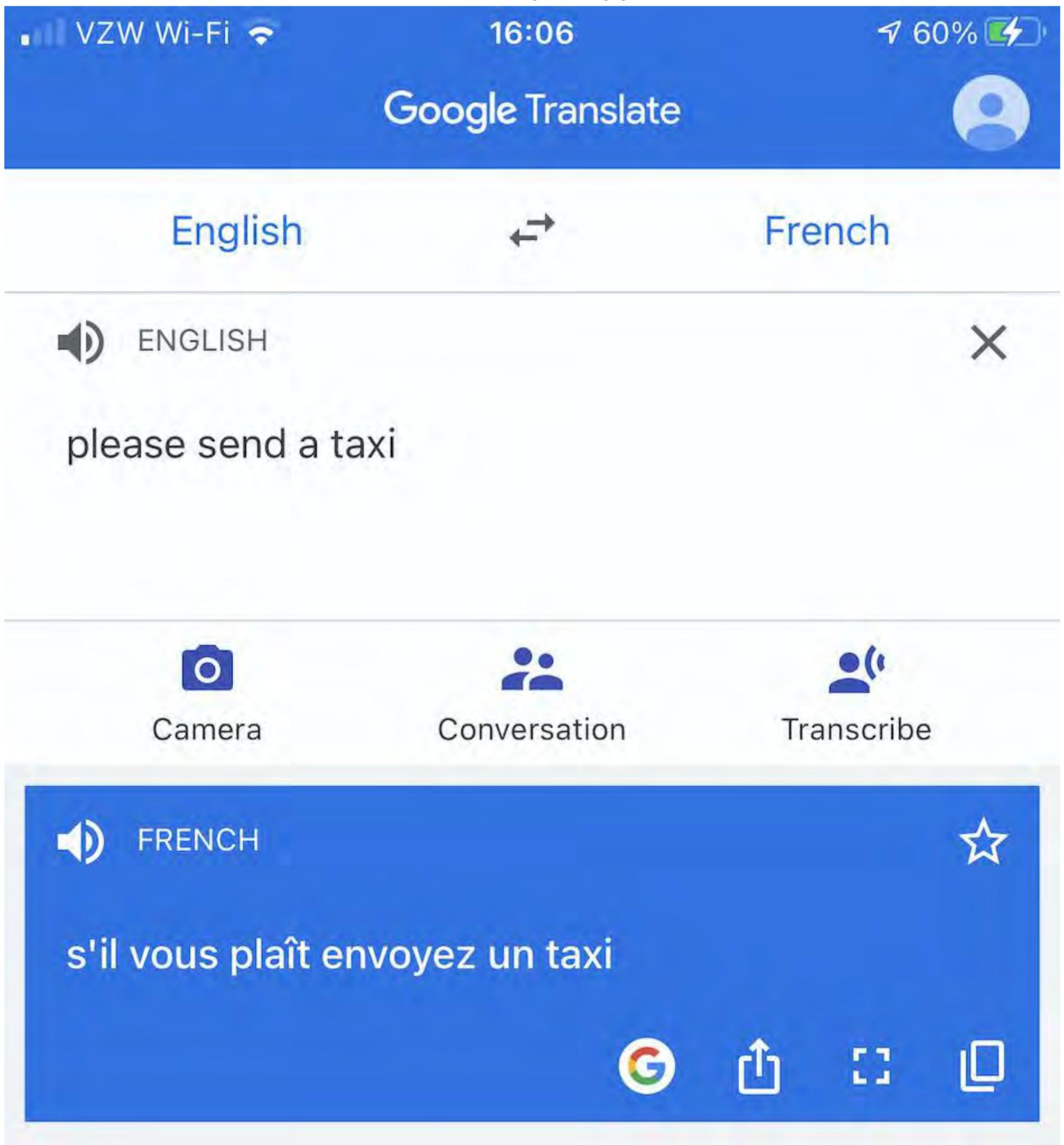
English	French
Do you speak English?	Parlez vous anglais?
Please send a fuel truck.	Envoyez-nous un camion de carburant, s'il vous plaît.
This much fuel in liters	Cette quantité de carburant en litres
We are ready for passengers.	Nous sommes prêts pour les passagers.
We are ready for the baggage.	Nous sommes prêts pour les bagages.
We are ready for ground transportation.	Nous sommes prêts pour le transport routier.
Do you need our passports?	Avez-vous besoin de nos passeports?
Please take us to the airport _____.	Emmenez-nous à l'aéroport _____, s'il vous plaît.
Please take us to the hotel _____.	Emmenez-nous à l'hôtel _____, s'il vous plaît.
Please take us to the restaurant _____.	Emmenez-nous au restaurant _____, s'il vous plaît.
The menu, please	Le menu, s'il vous plaît.

Don't be afraid to show your Babel fish to the person you are speaking with, and try your best to pronounce the words. Most people will appreciate your effort. If that doesn't work, point to the phrase and perhaps they will understand. This form of pointing to what you intend to say can be very useful even without a Babel fish.

In the second part of this feature, we'll provide additional tips for getting around in a non-English-speaking country.

When The Natives Don't Speak Your Language, Part 2

James Albright February 18, 2022



Credit: Author photo

In Part 1 of this article, we suggested hiring a translator or using the services of your local handler or hotel concierge.

Arm yourself with local materials.

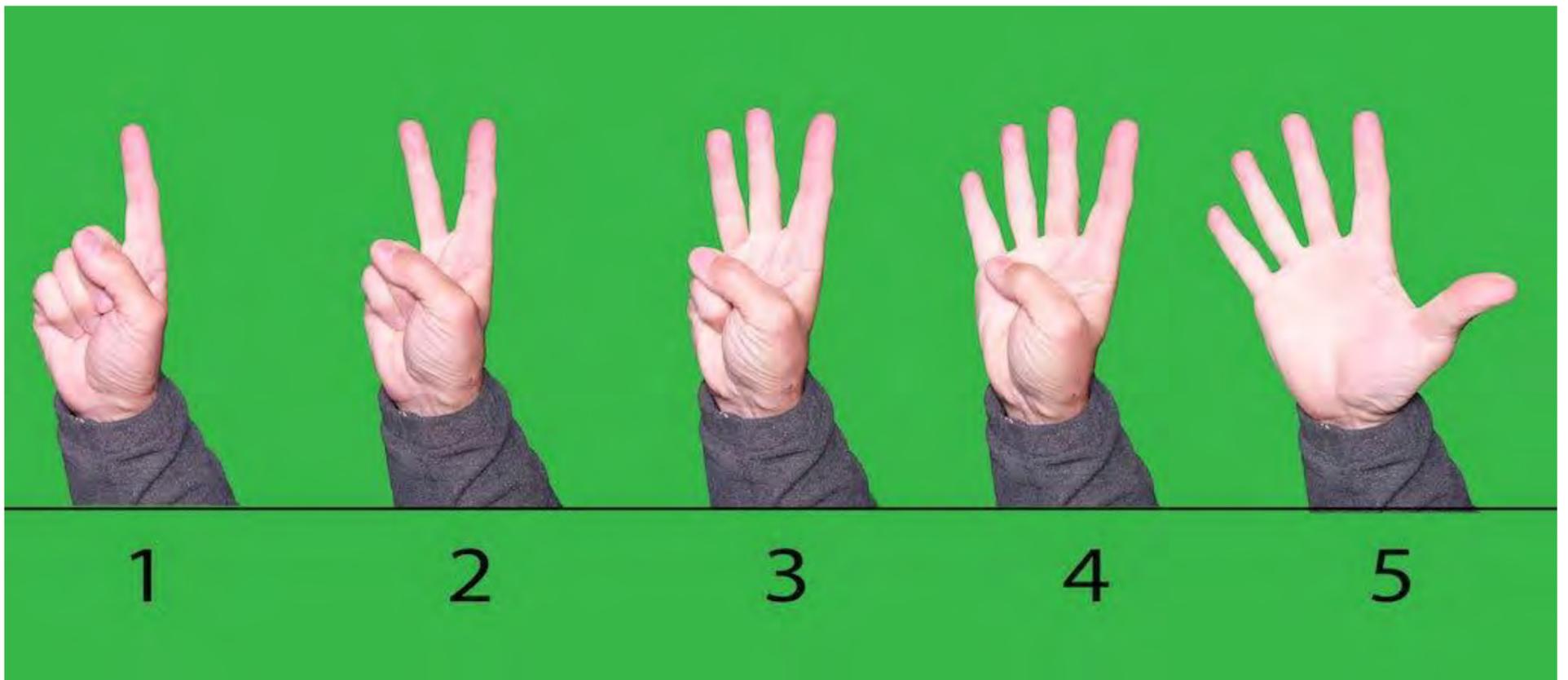
Many hotels will have simplified maps of the local area. Ask for one and have them mark the location of the hotel and any locations you would like to visit. This can be a great help with your cab drivers.

Don't leave the FBO, your hotel or other destinations without a business card, matchbook or other items that show where you've been and where you want to go. You can communicate your destination to a non-English-speaking cab driver by handing over the card and pointing.

Electronic Translator

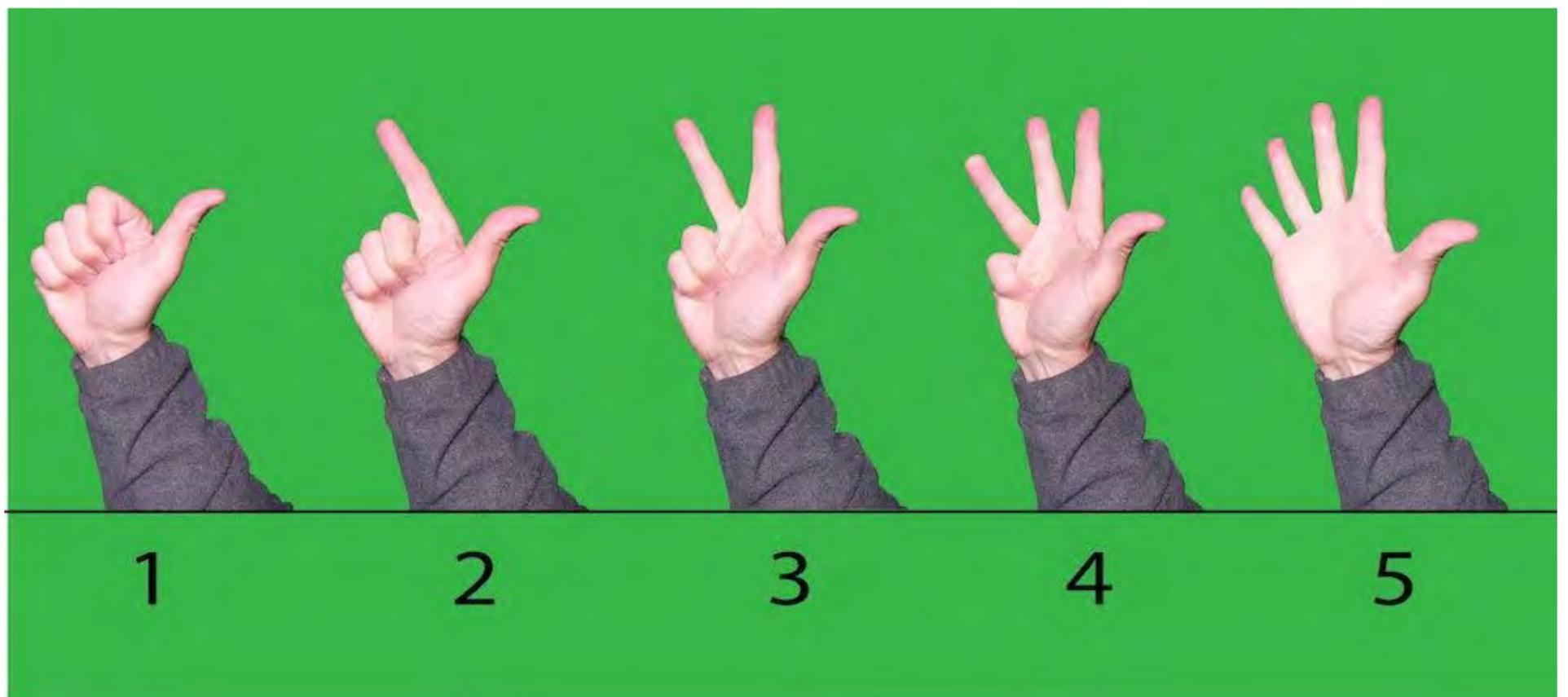
If you have good local area cellphone service, you can use phone applications that translate with reasonable success. They can translate menus, listen to locals speak, and even speak for you. Some of these applications are free. Warning: These applications are far from perfect, and the nuances of various languages make some of the translations suspect. I treat these as a last resort. You are far better off asking someone fluent in both languages for advice.

Learn How to Count and How Not to Offend



Counting to five with your hand in the U.S. Credit: Author graphic

If the person greeting you at a restaurant asks, "How many?" and you are with another person, how do you indicate that you need a table for two? In the U.S., you raise two fingers, your index finger and middle finger, usually with your palm facing you and the back of the hand facing the person you are talking with.



Counting to five with your hand in most of Europe. Credit: Author graphic

For an older person in England, that hand gesture can be offensive, and the correct way would be with the palm of the hand away from you. In most of Europe, the number 2 is indicated with the thumb and the index finger. In Japan, it is the same as the U.S. when indicating the number to others, but with three fingers extended and the thumb and the index finger retracted when counting to yourself to show others the act of counting. Confused? If you remember the U.S. and European methods, you should be OK for most of the world. (But don't be surprised if the person you are communicating with doesn't understand.)

While it may be tempting to use hand gestures to communicate when speech fails you, there are several to avoid. Just as raising only the middle finger with the rest retracted is offensive in the U.S., giving a thumbs up has an equivalent meaning in Iran, Afghanistan and a few of the surrounding countries. While some cultures look upon the circle formed by the index finger and thumb as the letter "O" and the three extended fingers as the letter "K" to mean everything is OK, other cultures view this as flashing a body part and is considered offensive.

You may find that natural hand gestures you use routinely can be seen as rude in other cultures. Pointing with your index finger, for example, may be seen as impolite in Malaysia. The alternative is to point with your thumb or with two fingers. Using your hand with your palm facing you and fingers moving back and forth in a beckoning motion is considered a way to say "come here" in some countries. At best, it is considered rude and demeaning in others. At worst, it is only used to summon dogs in the Philippines. It is never good.

Raising the index and pinkie fingers with the middle two fingers and thumb retracted with palms away is often used to support sports teams, such as the Chicago Bulls, by mimicking the horns of a bull. But in Italy, Spain and some other cultures, it is a sign that accuses a man of being a bull that has been castrated. Not good!

In parts of India and the Middle East, using your left hand for eating, passing money or picking things up can be seen as "unclean." The list of ways to offend goes on and on. The key is to research local customs before you go.

Avoiding The 'Ugly American' Syndrome



In some places, the person you are trying to communicate with may feign an inability to understand that may magically disappear when they are handed some "folding money." The amount varies by location and demand. I was once parked in a sea of Gulfstream business jets at the Olympics. Getting a fuel truck was next to impossible until I produced five \$20 bills. The aircraft owner thought it was highway robbery. I told him it was a cost of doing business. You cannot let a few international "entrepreneurs" dim your view of the world or impact the way you behave.

We often think of the 1959 novel by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, *The Ugly American*, as a critique of unthinking U.S. tourists, looking down their noses at the lesser peoples of the world. In fact, it was a critique of members of the U.S. government traveling abroad, particularly the diplomatic corps. These government officials were unwilling to learn the local language or adapt to local customs. They were indeed ugly Americans.

I think we in the aviation business have better reputations and that is due in part to the fact that we recognize our success is dependent on everyone's ability to communicate. English is the international language of aviation. But what we do encompasses more than just aviation.