



The long “hello”

By Nick Dall

Why Napoleon should have done us all a favour...

I recently attended a wedding back home after years of living abroad. Greeting the men was easy: a handshake sufficed; perhaps a slap on the back for real friends. But the women were another story. Wives, sisters, aunts... I didn't know what to do. A proper hug or just a cursory embrace? To shake hands or to kiss? If so, where to kiss and how many?

I avoided females and retreated to a corner with my Merlot. Had I been in any other country, my afternoon would have been much less stressful. But in the Anglophone world, greeting people is a minefield. That moment is such a poorly defined social event that abominations like the nose-kiss and the forehead-to-chest embrace are commonplace in bars, boardrooms and bathhouses around Britain and its former colonies.

When a man's introduced to a woman, it's often easiest for him to loosen his wrist and give her the wet fish. This puts him on the back foot, though, and he'll find himself defenceless when she tries to combine it with a hug – resulting in something which is closer to judo than an introduction. Perhaps the lady will view the handshake as a cop-out, in which case she may

go for the in-and-out-before-you-know-it hug-and-kiss combo. All this confusion could end up in a mouthful of hair, or a noseful of mouth.

Whatever the outcome, the encounter will almost certainly leave you wishing you'd met her around a crowded table in a pub. One of those rare, sacred places where a well-aimed nod and a smile will suffice.

Democracy's all very well, I thought as I refilled my glass, but sometimes strict legislation is preferable.

Mediterranean cultures have defined the rules of engagement far more clearly. In Italy and Spain, it's a kiss on each cheek; in France, it's often three kisses. In most Latin American countries, it's a single kiss on a cheek of the male's choosing. If any of these kisses – in any of these countries – goes anywhere near the lips, it's swords drawn at dawn with the girl's eldest brother.

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In Japan they're big into the bow, but I can't really see that working here. Nor do I give the Eskimo nose-rub much chance of catching on. In Vietnam (my favourite), a simple “Hello” is intimate enough.

No-one had spoken to me for

20 minutes and my bottle was rapidly emptying. I thought of what might have been, were it not for Lord Nelson.

After all, we have British stubbornness to thank for the fact that the whole world doesn't drive on the same side of the road. At the beginning of the 19th century, after the French Revolution had deconsecrated churches and chopped off heads, a very sensible decree was issued forcing carriages and sedan chairs throughout Napoleon's First French Empire to travel on the right-hand side. Unfortunately, Nelson's “never-say-die” attitude at Waterloo meant that England told the French where to put their Camembert and proudly continued driving on the left.

I like to think Napoleon would have carried on pushing through other sensible policies, ultimately touching on the Holy Grail of cultural misunderstanding: The Greeting. Whatever he'd settled on, it would have been better than what we're left with.

Too late! The mother of the bride ambushed me from behind and, in

trying to avoid her lip-kiss, I spilt the last of the wine down my shirt. There I stood as she sprinkled salt on the stain, wondering what Napoleon would have thought of Europe's garbled response to Greece's national debt. 🇬🇷