



# BE A STAR TEXTILE AMBASSADOR

## How to Travel Sensitively and Sensibly in Textile Cultures

CLOTH  ROADS  
A Global Textile Marketplace





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# Introduction



In the years that the Clothroads team has been studying, researching, exploring, visiting and working with textile artisans, we've seen an explosion of interest in textile-related tourism. More and more, travelers are seeking out textile artisans and craftspeople all over the globe, with an interest in collecting, documenting, learning from, and finding inspiration in traditional and original work.

This is wildly exciting for those of us who are passionate about textile art and craft. Evolving interest means more visibility for the textile arts, more resources dedicated to preservation and protection, more hope of a sustainable and living wage for artisans, more value for the work and more friendships and business relationships between cultures. At the same time, there's more potential for exploitation on all sides, more instances of cultural misunderstanding or insensitivity, and more lack of awareness about basic travel etiquette --this can defeat the best of intentions to support and celebrate textile artists.

After hundreds of thousands of travel miles and many thoughtful conversations, we put together this guide to best practices for travelers who want to immerse themselves consciously and ethically in the textile world, and to contribute to a sustainable future for artisans everywhere. With just a few guidelines and a commitment to greater awareness, you can, as we have, approach textile travel with confidence, make wonderful friends, and expand and enrich your own textile life while making a better world for others. Here's our top ten tips to be a star textile ambassador which we hope will help you as you journey on the textile path.



## #1: Be money-smart.

**ACQUIRE LOCAL CURRENCY RIGHT WAY** and avoid having to change money frequently. Carry money in small denominations for shopping in markets. Keep your money in several places and don't pull out large wads of cash in public; that is an advertisement to pickpockets or worse. If you see street beggars and wonder whether to give, and how much, don't try to support everyone; follow your intuition. Ask someone local for a reasonable amount to give, and always carry small bills or coins.





## #2: Be language-smart.

LEARN SOME ESSENTIAL TEXTILE VOCABULARY. You'll need the words for water and bathroom, but also for cloth, yarn, and loom (or whatever textile technique or cloth you may be looking for). Artisans didn't learn language from a book so you might hear variations on the same term. You'll most likely encounter a primary local language but indigenous languages as well.





### #3: Be present and relaxed.

**LISTEN, ENGAGE, PARTICIPATE, AND DEMONSTRATE** your interest and appreciation – in short, give your hosts the gift of your attention. Interact as well as you can with what they are doing or showing you. Artisans love knowing you are a spinner or weaver so sharing in learning their way is often met with enthusiasm, and sometimes, downright laughter. Most rural people are quite subdued, so show your appreciation and enthusiasm in a low-key way, especially in smaller villages. To live in a village means to be careful about how you express and expose yourself; be sincere but sensitive.





## #4: Be mindfully curious.

**DON'T ASK AWKWARD QUESTIONS.** We've noticed that travelers ask two questions that can be difficult for artisans to answer: How long did it take you to make this, and what do the motifs or designs mean? Many artists struggle with the first question as they fit their textile production in and around many other household responsibilities. As for the meanings of motifs/designs, some just do not have meanings. Some artists may make up meanings just to satisfy travelers.





## #5: Be patient and inclusive.

**WAIT UNTIL AFTER THE HOSTS GIVE THEIR PRESENTATION** to start grabbing things to buy. This is a courtesy to the host and you'll learn a lot before you shop. Don't be that person in the group who is pushy and aggressive about getting to the front of the line and buying, leaving those who are shy or more reticent unable to see or touch the selections. Give everyone a chance, especially if the stock is limited.







## #6: Be a good guest.

IF AN ARTISAN OPENS THEIR HOME TO YOU, you're an honored guest. Remember that it is a home, and not a museum. Just as you would at home, be polite and respect their space. Always ask permission if you want to see a room or take pictures of the interior. Kitchens tend to be interesting communal spaces everywhere, and visitors are often welcome in them if you make a polite request.





## #7: Be a generous buyer and an ethical bargainer.

IF YOU ARE TRAVELLING THE WORLD to see traditional textile artisans, you almost certainly enjoy a far higher standard of living than the artisans you'll meet. You won't find fair trade any fairer than buying directly from the artisan, so travel with a gift list and take home beautiful textile objects as you contribute to an artisan and their community. If you're confused by pricing, ask your local guide to explain enough about the techniques, tools, and materials of various pieces to understand why A costs more than B – and should. Bargaining in many countries is not only okay, it's expected. Dive right in. It's a dance of numbers – your offer, their counter-offer, and so on. Begin by offering what you're willing to pay in a straightforward and respectful way. Don't try to gain advantage by finding flaws or criticizing the work.





## #8: Be respectful of what's not for sale.

**DON'T ASK FOR THE DRESS OFF AN ARTISAN'S BACK**, no matter how beautiful. Some artists only have three garments: the everyday one, the one worn to market, and one for ceremonial occasions. Also, don't ask to buy the artisan's tools without asking if they have others. You don't want to buy their only loom, spindle, or items of cultural significance. Don't be pushy about buying something that is not for sale.

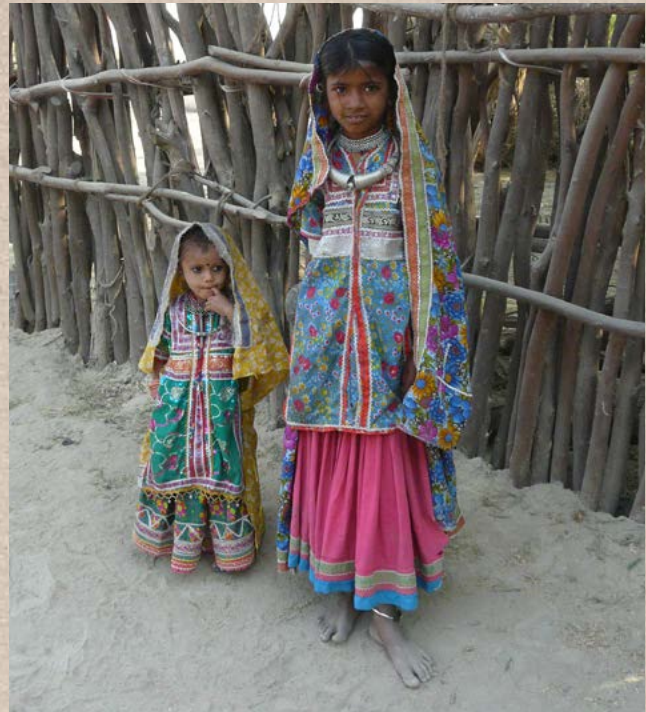




## #9: Be a photographer with permission and camera-ready.

APPROACH PHOTOGRAPHY THROUGH RESPECT AND APPRECIATION, and be willing to forego that perfect shot if it means invading someone else's privacy. Don't shy away from taking pictures of people – just learn to always ask. If you don't speak the language, make eye contact, lift your camera in the gesture of taking a picture, and ask with your eyes. You'll get a response. Most people don't mind a couple of quick photos, but might get uncomfortable, especially in public places. Know your camera and have it ready to shoot before you even ask (and when you get the photo you'll get a nice expression instead of a look of exasperation).

Businesses may have a sign with a camera in a circle with a slash through it. This means no photography; respect it. If the person is a vendor, try purchasing something before asking to photograph them. If they're not vendors and they ask, then a tip is fine.





## #10: Be a global friend.

**BE THE TRAVELER WHO'LL BE GREETED WITH JOY WHEN YOU RETURN.** You may make some cultural blunders, but you'll be fine if you make kindness and consideration your starting point; avoid being rude and treat everyone with respect and honor.





## Our suggestions for safe and happy cultural connections:

- Local guides, friends and fixers who know their way around a state, city, village or neighborhood can be worth their weight in gold, providing you unbeatable access. These might be people you hire or just happen to meet.
- Ask about appropriate clothing before you pack your suitcase. Every culture has norms that should be followed.
- Observe the locals and choose your manners accordingly. Don't be pushy about anything. Aside from bad manners, laws vary, and you want to stay on the right side of them.
- Bring pictures or small samples of your own work or studio (and your family) to share as a way of connecting.
- If you're offered a gift, accept it gracefully. It equalizes the relationship between you and recognizes and honors the gift-giver's value as artisans and human beings.
- Finally, expect surprises and things you don't understand – that's the point of travel, right? You'll get home with questions unanswered and mysteries unsolved. How fun to still have puzzles to solve and reasons to return.

### Why Artists May Decline Photos

Always ask an artist before you take photos – and if the artist says no, accept that answer. If you're wondering why an artist would ever decline the opportunity to be more visible in the world, some reasons might be:

- **STRONG PERSONAL PREFERENCE.** In almost all cultures, you'll find that there are some people who just don't like to have their photo taken.
- **RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS.** Many Muslim women do not want their faces photographed.
- **CAPTURING THE SOUL.** Some artists may believe that the act of taking a photo captures their soul.
- **SENSITIVE EYES.** Many elderly artists have significant cataracts or other eye issues. Taking a photo with a flash can be uncomfortable or temporarily blind to the artist.



People,  
Culture,  
The timeless  
touch  
of human  
hands.

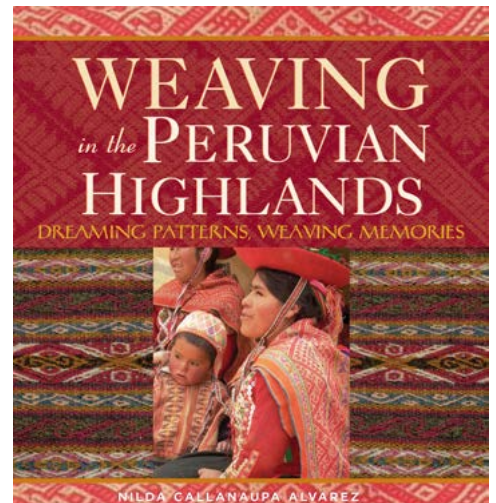
## Travel Resources for Textile Ambassadors

Dedicated to preserving  
the narrative of  
traditional textiles and  
their makers

# THRUMS

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## BOOKS



See the entire list of resources

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