

## Cultural Snapshot: Bosnia

### RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

- In modern Bosnia, the practice of Islam diverges sharply from what is considered orthodoxy in other Islamic countries.
- Alcohol consumption is tolerated, especially in urban areas, and many believers restrict their practice to the Sabbath and major religious holidays. This has sometimes been perceived as a lack of devoutness by Muslims from other countries.

### LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

- The language of Bosnia is called Serbo-Croatian. The English sounds “th” and “w” may be difficult for Bosnian children to pronounce.
- The use of auxiliary verbs in English *do* and *be*, and the modal verbs *might*, *could*, *should* and *would* present real hurdles. Prepositions may also be problematic.
- Almost all Bosnian family names end in *ic* (“child of”). Women’s first names tend to end in *a* and *ica* (pronounced EET-sa). Speakers of Serbo-Croatian have difficulty recognizing American names as typical of a man or woman as the lack of a sex-specific name ending is confusing.

### FRIENDS & FAMILY

- Emphasis is on the nuclear family.
- Most Muslims will be from urban areas.
- Intermarriage between religious groups was a common practice before the war.
- Women were guaranteed entry into the workforce in Bosnia, however, this meant that they held two jobs, one at the office and one at home. Men rarely contribute to household work.

### EDUCATION

- Education is very important to Bosnians and was free at all levels.
- Most Bosnians are literate in their own language. However, many children may have had their education interrupted due to the war.
- Children learn both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabet.
- Bosnian children start school at age seven. Attendance is mandatory for at least eight years.
- Secondary school lasts four years but is optional. After secondary school, students may go to vocational school or a university-prep high school (gymnasium).

### CULTURE AND CUSTOMS

- Bosnia is the only republic of former Yugoslavia established on a geographical/historical basis rather than an ethnic one.
- Before the war, Bosnia’s population was approximately 44 percent Moslem, 31 percent Serbian, and 17 percent Croatian.
- Especially in cities, where intermarriage is common, Bosnian families celebrate a number of religious, secular, and family holidays. Muslim festivities center around Ramadan, the month of ritual fasting associated with the lunar calendar. Exchanging household visits and small gifts is a particular feature of the three days at the end of Ramadan.



- Many Bosnian refugees were middle to upper-middle class before the war. Loss of status and financial capability can be a particular adjustment for them.
- Bosnians are often friendly, warm and outgoing people who enjoy **merak** (a relaxed pace of life). They do, however, value hard work. A sense of humor and the ability to laugh at one's own faults are valued traits in Bosnia.
- Shaking hands upon meeting is customary in Bosnia. Older people are greeted first, and women offer their hand first to men. Friends may also give a kiss on both cheeks as part of their greeting.
- Beckoning with the index finger or shouting in public is considered impolite, though these rules are frequently ignored.
- Family and friends visit each other often. Dropping in without making prior arrangements is customary, as is bringing a gift if you are an invited guest.
- As a sign of hospitality and wealth, visitors are offered more food than can be eaten and will be encouraged to eat more during a meal. It is expected that visitors will decline offers of more food several times before accepting. However, eating too much is still considered impolite.
- Urban families have one or two children and both the husband and wife work for a wage and share in decision making. Adult children often live with their parents until they marry.

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## Cultural Snapshot: Cambodia

### HISTORY

- During the mid- and late 70s, the Khmer Rouge government systematically eliminated those who had more than a rudimentary education or who in any way were identified as standing in the way of a new order. Between murders and starvation 35-50 percent (around 2 million people) of the Cambodian population died during the four years of Khmer Rouge domination.
- Hidden land mines left over from the war are still an issue in Cambodia. Thousands of people suffer from wounds they receive from stepping on such devices.
- Prior to arriving to the U.S., most refugees spent from one to six years in Thai refugee camps.

### RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

- The majority of Cambodians are Theravada Buddhists, with small populations of Muslims and Christians.
- It is a general belief that a man should have a monk's education for at least three months, if not several years, even if this is a drain on family and national resources.
- Despite the horrible conditions during the Khmer Rouge control and continued hardships, Cambodians are known to be optimistic.

### LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

- The Cambodian language derives from Indian Sanskrit. Though it is not a tonal language, it is difficult for Westerners to speak and write.
- Cambodians use a unique alphabet, which closely resembles the Thai and Lao alphabets which were developed from it.
- Raising the voice is a sign of a poor personality.
- Embarrassing another person in public is considered very improper.

### FRIENDS & FAMILY

- Many parents suffer from fatigue and depression due to the fact that virtually all of them experienced terror, starvation, and stress, and witnessed the destruction of family members.
- Intergenerational tensions exist due to three factors: 1) a parental culture that emphasizes absolute parental knowledge and child deference to that knowledge, 2) traditional standards for child behavior which are very different than those of U.S. culture, and 3) relative lack of information on the part of many Cambodian parents concerning American culture and society.
- The average family has four children and is often willing to adopt orphans or care for foster children on behalf of another family in need.
- Multiple generations usually live together or near one another. Their children care for the elderly.
- Cambodian girls are taught that their self-worth is enhanced by marriage. While boys and girls generally are able to choose their spouses, dating is organized in such a way that a girl's choices are limited to certain boys.
- Cambodian parents tend to use physical punishment as a major aspect of child rearing, and the parent's word is to be accepted by the child without discussion.



## EDUCATION

- The majority of Cambodian immigrants are from a rural agricultural background and most of the adult women and many of the adult men are limited to a second-or third-grade education. Those from urban areas tend to have higher rates of literacy.
- The Khmer Rouge killed nearly all educated people who did not escape the country. While there is progress towards rebuilding the educational infrastructure, most immigrants will have had limited access.
- In Cambodia today, less than one-third of Cambodian children continue on to secondary school.

## CULTURE & CUSTOMS

- The Cambodians call their country Kampuchea.
- Cambodians greet one another by placing both hands together in a prayer position at chest level without touching the body. The higher the hands, the greater the sign of respect, though they should never be held above the level of the nose. This gesture is accompanied by a slight bow to show respect for persons of higher status or age.
- Shaking hands is not common in Cambodia and it may embarrass women if attempted.
- One should not point the soles of the feet toward a Buddha image or any person, nor touch a person's head.
- Generally avoid sitting or standing on a level more elevated than that of an older person.
- Among friends and family, visiting is frequent and usually unannounced. Shoes are removed before entering the home and the guest receives the best place to sit and best portions of food.
- Cambodians eat with chopsticks, spoons, and their fingers—depending on the food and family custom.
- In the last week of September, an important Buddhist festival, Chun Ben, takes place. Those who have passed away are honored and one's own salvation is reflected upon. Other holidays in Cambodia are Liberation Day (January 7), Revolution Day (April 17), King Sihanouk's Birthday (October 31), and Independence Day (November 9).

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## Cultural Snapshot: Somalia

### HISTORY

- Somalia was colonized by the Italians in the south, the English in the north, and by the French in Djibouti, an independent country north of Somalia.
- It is believed that about 400,000 people died of famine or disease or were killed during the clan warfare that took place in the 1990s, and nearly 45 percent of the population was displaced inside Somalia or fled to neighboring countries.
- Many children have been residing in refugee camps in Kenya for most, if not all, of their lives.

### RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

- Most Somalis are Sunni Muslims. In recent years, Islamic fundamentalism has gained support, often a response to the tragedy and anarchy of the civil war.
- Egalitarianism permeates all aspects of society. It is not unusual for a poor and uneducated nomad to approach a high government official as an equal and engage him in a discussion about the affairs of state.
- Somalis believe strongly in independence, democracy and individualism.
- Generosity is valued, but Somalis generally do not express their appreciation verbally.
- Somalis respect strength and often challenge others to test their limits.
- Saving face is very important, so indirectness and humor are often used in a conversation.
- Loyalty is an important value and can extend beyond family and clan. Once friendships are formed, it is usually a life-long relationship.

### LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

- Somali has had a written form of the language since 1972. Spelling errors will be frequent in written Somali language due to its recent creation.
- All letters but p, v, and z are used in the Somali language. The English sounds most likely to present difficulties for Somalis are those represented by the letters c, q, r, and x, since they are pronounced quite differently in Somali.
- Somalis can have difficulty mastering the English indefinite article (a/an) because their own language has no equivalent. There are only four prepositions in Somali, so the use of the wide variety of English prepositions can also be difficult for them.
- In Somali, differences in gender and number are marked by grammatical tone. Therefore, a Somali will drop an apostrophe in favor of using a tone change when saying a person's name.
- Proverbs play a very important role in every day Somali speech. Some Somalis may make frequent use of proverbs when speaking English, which can sound awkward to native English speakers.
- Be aware that shaking hands or touching is frequently inappropriate between people of the opposite sex. Following the lead of the Somali person or using an oral greeting are the best practices.

### FAMILY & FRIENDS

- Somalis belong to clans and subclans. These are a source of great solidarity as well as conflict.



- Among Somalis, a primary division exists between the Samaale and the Sab. The Samaale are the majority of the Somali people and consist of four main clan families: the Dir, Isaaq, Hawiye, and Daarood, of which is further divided into subclans. The Samaale are primarily of nomadic origin and live throughout Somalia and in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. The Sab consist of two clan families, the Digil and Raxanweyn, located primarily in southern Somalia. They are more likely to be sedentary.
- The family is the ultimate source of personal security and identity. When Somalis meet each other they don't ask, "Where are you from?" Rather, they ask, "Whom are you from?" Genealogy is to Somalis what an address is to Americans.
- Somalis typically live in nuclear families, although older parents may move in with one of their children. One fifth of all families are polygamous.

#### EDUCATION

- Basic education was compulsory in the 1980s, but less than 10 percent of those students going to elementary schools attended secondary schools. Current attendance is lower in Somalia due to continued civil unrest and a lack of qualified teachers. Refugee camps often offer some basic education.
- The dropout rate for girls in Somalia is high due to the economic importance of having girls at home during the day. Some families do not place the same importance on education for their daughters as they do for their sons.
- Many students attend Koranic schools (duksis) during the weekends or evenings.

#### CULTURE & CUSTOMS

- As Muslims, Somalis are forbidden to eat pork or lard or to drink alcohol. In the U.S., kosher foods meet Muslim dietary requirements.
- Women and girls often wear a *hajib*, a colorful patterned dress that covers all but the face, hands, and feet. Among women, hand and foot painting using henna dyes is popular and often signifies a happy occasion, such as marriage or childbirth.
- Female circumcision and infibulation is performed on 98 percent of Somali girls between the ages of 8 and 10. Many women suffer all of their lives from a great variety of medical problems stemming from this practice.
- Birthdays are not often recorded in Somalia, perhaps due to the high infant mortality rate. Many parents honestly do not know the age of their children, nor understand the American importance placed on knowing one's age.
- Much of Somalia's population is nomadic. The idea of staying in one residence for an extended period of time may be unusual to some Somalis.
- At the end of **Ramadan**, the Islamic month of fasting, Muslims celebrate the **Id-al-Fitir** for three days. During this time, people dress in new clothes and spend their time praying and exchanging presents. Three months later, **Id-al-Adha** occurs, coinciding with the **Hajj**, or pilgrimage to Mecca. The celebration is similar to the Id-al-Fitir.

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