

# Cultural Adaptation Guide for International Students in Poland

MS in Poland Resource Guide



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For International Students

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Understanding and adapting to Polish culture will significantly enhance your study abroad experience. This guide provides insights into Polish customs, social norms, and practical advice for navigating cultural differences.

Understanding Culture Shock The Stages of Cultural Adaptation

Most international students experience these phases when adapting to a new culture:

1. **Honeymoon Phase:** Initial excitement and fascination with the new culture
2. **Crisis Phase:** Frustration, anxiety, and homesickness as differences become challenging
3. **Adjustment Phase:** Developing strategies to cope with cultural differences
4. **Adaptation Phase:** Feeling comfortable in the new environment while maintaining your own cultural identity

Recognizing Culture Shock Symptoms

- **Emotional:** Homesickness, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, unexpected sadness
- **Physical:** Sleep disturbances, changes in appetite, low energy, minor health issues
- **Cognitive:** Negative comparisons between Poland and home, stereotyping, difficulty concentrating
- **Behavioral:** Withdrawing from social activities, avoiding local experiences, excessive contact with home

**NOTE:** Culture shock is a normal part of the international student experience, not a sign of failure. Almost everyone goes through this process to some degree. Being aware of these stages can help you navigate them more effectively.

## Polish Social Customs and Etiquette Greetings and Interactions

- **Handshakes** are the standard greeting for both men and women in formal settings
- **Direct eye contact** shows respect and attentiveness
- **Personal space** tends to be greater than in some cultures (arm's length is common)
- **Cheek kissing** (typically once on each cheek) is common among friends and family
- **Formal titles** are important; use "Pan" (Mr.) or "Pani" (Ms./Mrs.) followed by the surname

## Social Hierarchies and Respect

- **Respect for elders** is highly valued
- **Academic titles** are frequently used (e.g., "Pan Profesor," "Pani Doktor")
- **Formal language** includes a distinction between formal ("Pan/Pani") and informal ("ty") forms of address
- **Stand when** an elderly person or professor enters the room
- **Offer your seat** to elderly people, pregnant women, or people with disabilities on public transportation

## Visiting Homes and Gift-Giving

- **Remove your shoes** when entering a Polish home (slippers may be offered)
- **Bring a small gift** when invited to someone's home (flowers, wine, or chocolates are appropriate)
- **Flowers should be given in odd numbers** (except 13), but not yellow chrysanthemums (associated with funerals)
- **Arrive on time** or up to 15 minutes late for social gatherings
- **Wait to be seated** and to start eating until invited by the host

**TIP:** When receiving compliments or gifts, it's customary to initially decline once or twice before accepting. This shows modesty, which is valued in Polish culture.

## Polish Cultural Values Family Orientation

- Family is the cornerstone of Polish society
- Multi-generational family ties remain strong
- Sunday family gatherings are common
- Many students return home on weekends if they study in a different city

- Family opinions often influence major decisions

### Religious Influence

- Catholicism has shaped many Polish traditions and holidays
- Religious symbols are common in public spaces
- Many shops close on Sundays and religious holidays
- Religious celebrations combine spiritual aspects with family gatherings
- Respect for religious traditions is expected even from non-practitioners

### Work Ethic and Education

- Education is highly valued and respected
- Academic achievements are a source of family pride
- Strong work ethic and perseverance are admired qualities
- Dedication to responsibilities is highly regarded
- Practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge are valued

### National Pride and History

- Poles are proud of their history of resilience and independence
- Historical events and figures play an important role in national identity
- Cultural heritage (literature, music, art) is celebrated
- National holidays commemorate significant historical events
- Knowledge of Polish history is appreciated by locals

**NOTE:** Understanding these core values will help you make sense of many behaviors and customs you'll encounter. Showing respect for Polish history and traditions will be appreciated by your Polish peers and professors.

### Communication Styles Verbal Communication

- **Directness level:** Poles tend to be more direct than people from many Asian and some Western cultures, but less direct than Germans or Dutch
- **Formality:** Communication begins formally and becomes more casual as relationships develop
- **Topic sensitivity:** Politics, religion, and money can be sensitive topics with new acquaintances

- **Humor:** Self-deprecating humor is common; sarcasm is used but may be less obvious than in British culture
- **Conflict:** Open disagreement is generally acceptable in academic settings if expressed respectfully

#### Non-Verbal Communication

- **Facial expressions:** Poles may appear more serious in public than people from some cultures
- **Smiling:** Reserved for genuine pleasure rather than as a social courtesy
- **Gestures:** Animated hand gestures often accompany conversation
- **Personal space:** Medium distance (arm's length) is typical
- **Public behavior:** More reserved and formal than in some Western countries

#### Communication in Academic Settings

- **Professor-student relationship:** More formal than in many Western countries
- **Class participation:** May be less spontaneous; students often raise hands before speaking
- **Disagreement:** Express differing opinions respectfully and with supporting evidence
- **Group work:** Direct but diplomatic communication works best
- **Email etiquette:** Begin with formal greetings and proper titles

**TIP:** When unsure about the appropriate communication style, start more formally and adjust based on how others respond. It's better to be initially perceived as overly polite than as disrespectful.

#### Polish Food Culture Meal Patterns

- **Breakfast (śniadanie):** Substantial meal with bread, cold cuts, cheese, and sometimes eggs
- **Second breakfast (drugie śniadanie):** Light mid-morning snack
- **Lunch/dinner (obiad):** Main meal of the day, often eaten between 2-5pm
- **Supper (kolacja):** Lighter evening meal, often similar to breakfast
- **Sunday dinner:** Often a more elaborate family meal

#### Traditional Foods to Try

- **Pierogi:** Dumplings with various fillings (meat, cabbage, mushrooms, cheese, fruit)

- **Bigos:** Hunter's stew with sauerkraut and meat
- **Żurek:** Sour rye soup, often served with egg and sausage
- **Kotlet schabowy:** Breaded pork cutlet similar to schnitzel
- **Gołąbki:** Cabbage rolls filled with meat and rice
- **Oscypek:** Smoked cheese from the mountains
- **Pączki:** Filled doughnuts, especially popular before Lent
- **Kompot:** Fruit drink made from cooked fruits

### Dining Etiquette

- Hold your knife in your right hand and fork in your left while eating
- Keep your hands visible on the table, not in your lap
- Wait for the host to say "Smacznego" (enjoy your meal) before starting
- Finish everything on your plate if possible
- Bread often accompanies meals and is used to push food onto the fork
- Toast by maintaining eye contact and saying "Na zdrowie" (to health)

**TIP:** Polish hosts often insist on serving you more food and may be persistent. If you're truly full, leave a small amount on your plate to indicate you can't eat more.

Complimenting the food is always appreciated.

### Polish Holidays and Traditions Major Holidays

- **Christmas Eve (Wigilia, December 24):** The most important Christmas celebration with a special dinner
- **Easter (Wielkanoc):** Extensive traditions including blessing of food baskets and Easter Monday water fights
- **All Saints' Day (November 1):** Visiting and placing candles on graves of deceased family members
- **Constitution Day (May 3):** National holiday celebrating Poland's 1791 constitution
- **Independence Day (November 11):** Commemorates the restoration of Poland's independence in 1918

### Academic Traditions

- **Inauguration ceremony** to begin the academic year
- **Juwenalia:** Student festival held in May/June

- **Index book:** Still used at some universities to record grades
- **Academic quarter (Kwadrans akademicki):** Classes may start 15 minutes after the scheduled time
- **Student associations** organized by field of study

**IMPORTANT:** Many stores, offices, and services close during major Catholic holidays. Plan ahead, especially for Christmas (December 24-26), Easter weekend, All Saints' Day (November 1), and Corpus Christi (moveable feast day).

#### Navigating Everyday Life Public Transportation Etiquette

- Offer your seat to elderly people, pregnant women, and those with disabilities
- Validate your ticket immediately upon entering the vehicle
- Keep conversations quiet
- Form orderly lines when boarding
- Don't eat on public transportation
- Keep backpacks or large bags off seats and preferably on the floor

#### Shopping Customs

- Greet store staff when entering small shops
- Say goodbye when leaving
- Bring your own shopping bags or expect to pay for them
- Weigh produce yourself in many supermarkets
- Count your change carefully before leaving the counter
- Queue in an orderly line

#### Tipping Practices

- Restaurants: 10-15% for good service (not always included in the bill)
- Taxis: Round up the fare or add 10%
- Hairdressers/beauticians: Approximately 10%
- Food delivery: 5-10 PLN
- Coat check attendants: 2-5 PLN
- Hotel staff: 5-10 PLN for special assistance

**NOTE:** In small towns or villages, some customs may be more traditional than in larger cities. Urban areas, especially those with large student populations, tend to be more international in outlook and more accepting of cultural differences.

### Building Cultural Competence Language Learning Strategies

- Learn basic Polish phrases as a sign of respect
- Join language exchange groups to practice with native speakers
- Use language learning apps daily (Duolingo, Babbel, Memrise)
- Watch Polish TV with subtitles
- Label items in your apartment with Polish words
- Practice with Polish roommates or friends

### Making Polish Friends

- Join university clubs and student organizations
- Participate in orientation week activities
- Attend integration events organized for international students
- Volunteer for campus or community activities
- Sit next to different people in class and initiate conversations
- Join sports teams or fitness classes
- Participate in tandem language exchanges

### Cultural Participation

- Attend local festivals and cultural events
- Visit museums to learn about Polish history and art
- Explore different regions of Poland during breaks
- Try cooking Polish recipes with Polish friends
- Listen to Polish music and watch Polish films
- Follow Polish news to understand current events
- Observe how Polish students interact and adapt accordingly

**TIP:** Building real friendships takes time in any culture. In Poland, initial interactions may seem more formal or reserved, but Polish friendships tend to be deep and long-lasting once established.

### Overcoming Cultural Challenges Common Challenges for International Students



- Adapting to the Polish educational system
- Navigating bureaucracy and paperwork
- Understanding indirect communication
- Dealing with homesickness during traditional holidays
- Adjusting to Polish winter (particularly for students from warmer climates)
- Finding food that accommodates dietary restrictions or preferences
- Understanding humor and social cues

### Effective Coping Strategies

- **Observe and adapt:** Watch how Polish people behave in different situations
- **Ask questions:** Most Poles appreciate curiosity about their culture when asked respectfully
- **Find cultural mentors:** Connect with Polish students who can explain cultural nuances
- **Maintain flexibility:** Be willing to adjust your expectations and behaviors
- **Reflect regularly:** Journal about your experiences and what you're learning
- **Connect with other international students:** Share experiences and strategies
- **Maintain cultural connections:** Practice your own traditions while embracing new ones

### When to Seek Additional Support

- If feelings of cultural disorientation persist beyond a few months
- When cultural differences lead to academic difficulties
- If you experience discrimination or harassment
- When homesickness significantly impacts your daily functioning
- If you feel persistently isolated despite attempts to connect

**IMPORTANT:** Your university's International Student Office can be an excellent resource for navigating cultural challenges. They can provide guidance, connect you with resources, and help mediate misunderstandings that may arise from cultural differences.

### Maintaining Balance: Home Culture and New Experiences Cultural Identity

- Recognize that cultural adaptation doesn't mean abandoning your own cultural identity

- Share your cultural traditions with Polish and international friends
- Participate in celebrations from your home country
- Join student groups from your region or country if available
- Educate others about your culture when appropriate

### Creating Your Own Experience

- Find a personal balance between adapting and maintaining your identity
- Identify which Polish customs resonate with you and which don't
- Create new traditions that combine elements from different cultures
- Build a diverse social network including both Polish and international friends
- Remember that cultural adaptation is a personal journey without a "perfect" endpoint

### Bringing It All Together

- Notice how your perspectives change throughout your stay
- Appreciate the ways your cultural understanding expands
- Recognize the skills you're developing as a culturally competent global citizen
- Document your cultural learning through photos, journals, or blogs
- Reflect on how your experience in Poland is preparing you for future international interactions

**TIP:** The most rewarding aspect of studying abroad often comes from developing "cultural agility" – the ability to adapt to new environments while maintaining your authentic self. This skill will be valuable throughout your personal and professional life.

### Additional Resources Books and Guides

- "The Culture Map" by Erin Meyer (for understanding cultural differences)
- "Polish Customs, Traditions and Folklore" by Sophie Hodorowicz Knab
- "Culture Shock! Poland: A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette"
- "Poland - Culture Smart!: The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture" by Greg Allen

### Websites and Apps

- Culture.pl - English-language information about Polish culture
- PolishForums.com - Expat discussions about life in Poland
- Spotted in Krakow/Warsaw/etc. - Local Facebook groups for various cities

- Meetup.com - Find cultural exchange groups in your city
- Couchsurfing events - Often attract both locals and internationals

### Campus Resources

- International Student Office
- Cultural adaptation workshops
- Student mentoring/buddy programs
- International clubs and organizations
- University counseling center

**TIP:** Remember that cultural adaptation is a continuous process, not a single achievement. Even after months in Poland, you may discover new cultural nuances. Stay curious, remain open to learning, and be patient with yourself as you navigate this enriching experience.

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