

Gulliver
Business travel

Kissing business acquaintances **X, XXX or XXXXX?**

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WHEN doing business in today's globalised world, we are forever being advised to empathise with others' cultural sensitivities. That is clearly a sound thing, but it can put your head in a spin. Gulliver came across this [map](#)



(http://www.radicalcartography.net/frenchkisses_sm.png) , created by [Radical Cartography](http://www.radicalcartography.net/) (<http://www.radicalcartography.net/>) , while browsing the [Jaunted website](http://www.jaunted.com/) (<http://www.jaunted.com/>) . It shows how many times French people in different regions typically kiss one another when they greet. Social kissing in France is a cultural labyrinth. I spend a fair amount of time in L'Herault, the *department* around Montpellier. There it is the norm, as the map suggests, to kiss every woman you vaguely know—or are introduced to—three times when you meet. It is all delightfully friendly, although sometimes at a drinks party it can take forever to reach the bowl of peanuts on the other side of the room.

Still, because L'Herault is a solid three-kiss constituency, it is easy enough to remember what is expected. A colleague tells of a friend who found himself on the border between a three- and a two-kiss stronghold. In his words, the number of times you were expected to touch cheeks literally depended on which way you turned when leaving the house in the morning.

There are other pitfalls. In Britain, as with most of my compatriots, I am solidly in the one-kiss camp. But for a day or two after returning to London from France, I find myself instinctively puckering up for more, which can be awkward. (Although it does not present quite the same peril as trying to remember which way to drive around a roundabout, another thing it sometimes takes me a couple of days to relearn.) To complicate matters further, the way that Brits greet one another is evolving; we are slowly moving from a one kiss society to two. When people with incompatible greeting strategies meet, the result can sometimes be a never-ending dance of thrust and withdraw.

Still, it is in business circles that offering a cheek becomes most fraught with danger. Some rules of engagement are obvious: one would never peck on first introduction, for example, no matter where in the world you were. But it is also best not to appear too stuffy or aloof. So with continental contacts, you can probably relax into the informal greeting pretty quickly. On the other hand, Americans, as far as I can tell, would much prefer to go un-kissed. Brits, as ever, straddle the awkward transatlantic space. We would probably only think of kissing once we had been to lunch a few times, and then only if we had managed to talk about something other than work. But generally, in a work setting, we too keep our lips to ourselves.

All in all, the Americans probably have the right idea. Everyone knows where they stand with a firm handshake. That is particularly evident given that, as the map shows, not even the French can agree a standard greeting. In Corsica, it seems, 18% of people think that five kisses are normal. If you ever get invited to a party in Ajaccio, it might be best to bring your own nuts.
