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Why 'The Sunday Times' guide to 'How to be Spanish' missed the mark

An article written by the paper's chief travel writer has raised the ire of Spaniards online, but left English Edition editor Simon Hunter somewhat conflicted

SIMON HUNTER

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Not since [Jamie Oliver shared his "paella with chorizo" recipe](#) has an article in the British media sparked such anger among Spanish readers... This time it's the hapless Chris Haslam, the chief travel writer at British daily *The Times*, who, with [an article entitled "How to be Spanish."](#) has scored a (probably unwanted) viral hit on social networks and prompted thousands of irate comments.

The article is, in the opinion of many commenters, full of lazy clichés about Spain, such as the need to "swear like a trooper, drink your red wine cold," and "always be late - unless a bull's charging at you." Or the contention that "being Spanish involves walking into a bar, kissing and hugging complete strangers, shouting 'oiga' at the waiter and chucking anything you can't eat or drink on the floor."



Eva Caballero @EvaNoBlue · Jan 27

I am more than offended. Expect apologies from @dromomaniac and @thesundaytimes for their inaccurate, offensive and not funny pic of a great country. [thetimes.co.uk/article/guide-...](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/guide-...)

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Olga @ArleneMachiave · Jan 27

[thetimes.co.uk/article/guide-...](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/guide-...) . The times decides to make fun of Spanish people in a disrespectful way.This article has been written for an uneducated journalist who has no clue about Spanish people. He owe us an apology #TheTimes @thetimes

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Jose L. Sahuquillo and 1 other follow



155 forever @pepeblai · 6h

How to be a british asshole.
[thetimes.co.uk/article/guide-...](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/guide-...)

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Some of the online reaction to the article.

As a Brit who is married to a Spaniard (with a very large extended family), who has lived in Spain for more than 18 years, and who has held jobs in Spanish workplaces for all that time (including 12 in this very newspaper), the article has left me with mixed feelings.

In the first place, the author is guilty of that most British of sins (one I hold my hands up to) of always trying to be funny. The problem is, the humor and the irony in the piece do not really come through – and I can imagine that is the case multiplied by a thousand for a Spanish reader.

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But the biggest problem with the article is the number of own goals Haslam scores, starting with the unforgivable: “Forget Anglo-Saxon notions of politeness, discretion and decorum.” Really Chris? This is your first instruction to Brits when in Spain? Have you been to Magaluf in high season? Have you seen how soccer fans behave when they’re in Madrid? Have you not searched YouTube for “Balconing”? Not surprisingly this comment has been picked up the most by Spanish readers, with some even going so far to send him videos on Twitter ([to his now protected account](#)) of the notorious “*mamading*” incident that hit the headlines a few years ago (if you don’t know what that is I recommend you DON’T Google it).

Some of the recommendations border on the faintly absurd, such as the need to get an obligatory suntan (again, has Haslam not noticed the amount of sunbed-worshippers in the UK?), the need to “kiss and hug complete strangers” in bars, and “nip out for a beer and a sandwich” at 11am. Then there’s the contention that Spaniards regularly enjoy a long three-hour *menu del día*, before a siesta.

But then again...

Having said all of that. I did have a three-hour lunch recently – in fact i regularly have a three-hour lunch with friends and family – albeit not in the week, but definitely at the weekend. And afterwards, yup, I had a nap, as did the rest of my brood.

And then there’s Haslam’s claim that to be Spanish you need to shout at bartenders. Well... again... that is kind of true. As a Brit I had terrible problems of shyness dealing with bar staff when I first moved to Spain, until I learned that confidence is the key and that a loud greeting and request for attention is a completely acceptable way of getting served, and not at all rude.

And then the suggestion to “drop the please and thank yous. They’re so unnecessary.” People who aren’t British will never understand how hard it is to get over our ingrained habit of constantly saying sorry, please and thank you in everyday exchanges, whereas they are not so necessary in Spain. So there is, for me, an element of truth to that. But again, I’m conflicted: I, and my close friends and family, would always say please and thank you when the moment called for it.

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As for “unlocking that potty mouth,” this is another thorny subject. I don’t agree with Haslam’s claim that swearing is such a necessary tool when speaking Spanish, and his story about a teacher using *tacos* with a bunch of schoolkids doesn’t quite ring true. That

said, the use of casual swearwords in Spanish can be surprising to Britons, in particular the liberal use – and versatile nature – of the “C” word.

Where, for me, the article really misses the mark, however, is in its rather quirky choice of ways “to be Spanish.” If you’re going to talk about bars and restaurants, why not mention how the presence of young children adds such a special atmosphere to late-night drinks? Or draw attention to how warm and welcoming the people are, encouraging Brits to drop the standoffishness and chat with strangers? (No need to hug and kiss them, Chris...).

As someone who has spent nearly two decades here, these would be a few of my suggestions of how to be Spanish:

- Enjoy life on the street, in the sunshine, as much as you possibly can.
- Spend a lot, but I mean a lot, of time with your friends and your family, whether it’s having a *caña*, lunch or dinner.
- Don’t drink to get drunk, and focus more on food than on drink.
- Be confident when you speak to other people, but always be polite.
- Forget about using *oiga* in a bar, a *¿Cuándo puedes?* will do.
- There’s no need to speak Spanish peppered with swear words (but once you do get to know them, they can be a lot of fun to employ).
- Use *por favor* and *gracias*, and leave a tip – even if it’s just a few coins.
- Don’t assume that all Spaniards love bullfighting and flamenco.
- Ladies, you can leave that fan at home – especially when, like today in Madrid, it’s going to be -1°C.
- And never, ever, watch *Sábado Deluxe*...