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Tipping: Knowing When and How Much

by

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Recently in a downtown Washington restaurant an Arab millionaire handed a waiter a hundred-dollar bill as a tip for waiting on his table of one. "Sir, do you realize how much you gave me?" the waiter gasped. "If you wanted more," the Arab told him. "Then maybe next time you could try to serve the food hot!"

That might be overstating it a bit, but it's a fact that for many travelers, tipping people for their services is an everyday occurrence. Whether you're dining in a local restaurant, staying at a hotel, riding in a taxi or having your shoes shined everyone who travels faces the situation of tipping the person who serves them. Knowing how to and how much to tip is the question many tourists face when they visit our nation's capital or any other large American cities.

"I don't mind tipping," says one executive of a major corporation. "But the services I received in some cities was so bad that, on a number of occasions, I could not reward them with money." He went on to tell me about a New York cab driver that took him from Kennedy Airport to the city refused to give him change from the \$30 he presented to pay a \$24.75 fare. "I thought you would let me keep the change," the cabby told him.

One of the problems is that there are no official rules to tipping. Sometimes the problem is complicated by cultural differences. In France, the tip for the waiter is included in the check as a service charge. You leave a franc or two on the table if you are "really" satisfied with the food and service.

An executive from France recalled the first time he visited a restaurant in Philadelphia, he felt insulted when a waiter followed him to the door, handed him a dollar he'd left on the table, and told him: "I think you need this more than I do. Take it." The visitor, of course, had assumed that he was paying "the regular tip of 15 percent" for the waiter with his check at the cashier.

In Japan and several other countries there is basically no tipping. For example, in China, law officially prohibits tipping. When visitors from these countries come to America, they quickly have to learn how to tip. Often they never know when to tip and how much to leave.

The custom of tipping comes from England where, at Christmas time families would put coins in a small box for those who served them throughout the year. At one point in time English taverns were said to have put a small sign suggesting a "small gift" to the server would insure promptness. Down through the years this practice has become known as a tip.

Today more than three million Americans depend on tips as apart of their income. Tips constitute about three-quarters of a waitress's pay, about half a bartender's pay and quarter of a taxi drivers pay.

Because we pay over \$2-billion annually in gratuities, there's an old adage that says, people who depend on tips can tell you the shape of the economy better than the high paid analysis by the tips people leave.

Leaving the Right Amount

How much should I leave? It depends, of course, on a lot of different factors. But the standard these days is about 15 to 20 percent of the bill. But that could increase depending on the number of people in your party, how many people served you, and how your service was; did the people who served you help make your meal enjoyable.

"Fifteen percent is acceptable and 20 percent is preferable," says a spokesman for the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union.

Many waiters are getting the minimum wage of \$3.85 an hour from their employers. They depend on tips for most of their livelihood. The amount of tips a waiter varies from as much as \$100 a day in expensive restaurants to \$15 dollars in coffee shops. Workers at fast-food restaurants get no tips at all.

In some restaurants you might have a captain who takes your order, tosses your salad, and carves the meat. You'll need to split the tip between him and your waiter for the evening. You should tip the maitre d' if you order something special like a flaming dessert or something not on the menu. He should also get tipped if you table hop or if he gets you a special table.

But even for a just a light lunch in a cafeteria styles restaurant you should leave a percentage of your bill for the waitress.

Bartenders should get 15 percent of tab. Other people who might get tipped during your travels include, at the hotel, the bellhop, who should get at least \$.50 per bag. Room service should get at least a \$1.00 or 15 percent of the check. Depending on how long you stay the maid who makes up your room should be tipped about \$.75 to \$1.00 a day. This tip is usually left on the last morning of your stay.

A good idea when staying in a large city to always take care of your doorman, especially when it's raining or it might take awhile before you get a cab.

Taxi drivers in large cities make between \$80 to \$100 dollars a day, of which 25 to 30 percent comes from tips. One driver, who drove taxi for more than a decade in New York, confessed that there were times when he threw coins back at departing customers from his taxi when the customers asked for specific change in return for the fare.

"On the whole, I found that customers including foreigners were generous tippers", he said. Asked who were the worst tippers, the driver thought for a moment and replied. "Those rich, old ladies out shopping on Fifth Avenue".

When having your shoes shined to get fast service in the future you should leave the shoe shine person at least \$.50 per shoe and \$.75 to a \$1.00 per boot. By leaving tips like this, you'll get good, quick service the next time you come to get your shoes done.

When Not to Tip!

One thing you should remember is that a tip is a monetary favor for services rendered. Slow, sloppy, or bad service does not deserve a tip of any kind. One restaurant manager said, "Most people tip not because they have received fast or courteous service. They just do it out of habit." "Believe it or not, they tend to leave more tips for waiters who are said to be slow and haughty or intimidating to their customers," he added. This is a mistake. In the case of particularly bad service the offender should be reported to the management. Some restaurants have become locally famous because of their bad service.

In a recent survey on tipping, most people disapproved of the practice but felt that it was expected of them. Many people feel that if they don't leave a big tip friends and associates will label them as tightwads. On the other hand if an employee has done an extra service to make your meal at the restaurant or stay at a hotel this is one way of letting him know it. It's also good to let the management know how happy you were with the service from the employee. In both cases letting management know what you thought of the service will help them to serve you better next time.

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