

WARNER'S CORNER

WHEN IN ROME...



JAMES WARNER

Do as the Romans! I've always been intrigued by the huge diversity in people, their ideas about life, and the way they go about their every-day activities. Having been educated in American public schools, I was indoctrinated to believe everything American was perfect, the very best that could be, and no others were nearly as wonderful. Fortunately, I encountered a few people with a more open mind; we should accept and we can learn from all people. Simply show respect and interest in the ways of others, and you will benefit hugely. This has been a lifelong practice of mine. When in Rome...do as the Romans! Now, I will admit that going along with local customs can be a challenge and sometimes less than pleasant, but the resulting education and relationships can be priceless.

I have never been able to forget a particularly distasteful evening a very long time ago. My Japanese hosts had taken me to an upscale traditional restaurant for dinner. As we entered, they paused over an open tank filled with terribly distasteful, live furry creatures, about which they talked excitedly (in Japanese). After the appropriate libations and toasts, it was time for solid food. The waiter set a large covered chafing dish on the table. Something in it was flopping around even displacing the heavy cover occasionally. The waiter and his assistant with beaming smiles would move the cover just enough to pour something in and, with each application, the flopping became less pronounced.

The time to serve arrived. And who got the first plate? Yes, it was I, the honored guest from afar. And what was it? One of those furry creatures we saw in the tank upon entering. It was difficult, but I did my best to keep smiling, while watching my hosts closely as they received their choice morsels. And when they picked the thing up in both hands chewing out the only area not covered with fur, I did likewise, doing my best to appear contented. About 3 hours later, after several different courses of food and drink, it was about time to leave when the senior host looked my way and exclaimed "Warner, I think you have eaten some new and strange things tonight." I smiled back and exclaimed "Yes, I have," to which the host replied, "You are a courageous man to try strange things, a courageous man

is a courageous engineer!" I had been accepted! And many good things have come my way as a result.

Another memorable event occurred at the site of a new 12-story building under construction in China. I was there as part of a delegation of foreign engineers, all of whom were astonished at scaffolding extending from the ground all the way to the roof. It was made of bamboo! And its individual pieces were only lashed with twine. When invited, none of the others would venture on the scaffold (too dangerous and, of course, not compliant with OSHA); but I followed the leader with enthusiasm. Occasionally, we stopped where interesting details would be pointed out and explained. After a few hours we reached the top, 12 stories scaled over a few-hour time period—and all the way on bamboo ladders!

Along the way, we discussed many things; and I expressed an interest in pressure grouting. That evening at a reception for our group, one of the guides on my scaffold adventure took me aside and said, "I have arranged a tour of an important dam grouting job for tomorrow; it will interest you more than the planned activities." And, yes, it did! After a few-hour train ride, we were met by a van for a memorable ride over a narrow, winding, and very bumpy unpaved road to the dam site. There I was treated like a VIP, introduced to all the key players, given full access to the site, had many questions answered, and learned a great deal. What a privilege! And all it cost was climbing bamboo ladders for 12 stories.

Everyone should make a special effort to not appear arrogant or superior when dealing with others. With humility and a respect for native customs, however, wonderful opportunities can occur. It is good advice: When in Rome...Do as the Romans!

James Warner, PE, is an independent Consulting Engineer specializing in foundation and structural restoration and repair. Formerly a contractor in these specialties, he organized the original concrete repair program for World of Concrete and presented those seminars for 19 years. It was at one of his seminars that the seeds were sown for what is now the International Concrete Repair Institute (ICRI). He continues an active consultancy and is an Honorary Life Member of the Institute.