
As Time Goes By

By Lothar Katz

Here's a story I still vividly remember, even though it happened many years ago: a recent immigrant to the country, I had been asked to provide identification at a store when paying with a personal check. Since I did not yet hold a U.S. issued driver's license, the common form of ID in the States, I presented my European passport. Looking for the expiration date, the clerk behind the counter seemed confused. Finally, she looked at me, smiled apologetically, and asked "Which month is the twentieth?"

The date shown in the passport was "20.11.2000".

I sympathized with the clerk's confusion. After all, hers is a common problem in the era of globalization, especially for those who don't get to travel much. Confusion over dates and calendars, such as the date format in my passport, which conflicted with U.S. conventions, is prone to cause irritation and misunderstandings. Let's look at a few pieces of information that might help you stay out of trouble:

Date Formats

The United States and the Philippines are among the handful of countries where month/day/year is the preferred format. Most of Europe and Latin America, as well as Australia, New Zealand, and many countries in South Asia and Africa put the day first, as in "20/11/00" or "20.11.2000". A third option, representing the official international standard, is common across East Asia, in a few European countries, and in South Africa. It starts with the year, followed by month and date, such as in "2000-11-20".

Date formats can doubtlessly be confusing. If you need to be sure about a given country, a good place to look up specifics is http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calendar_date. Note that in some countries, different formats may coexist. Curiously, only in Canada are all three concepts commonly used.

Calendar Years

What year is this? 2007, you say? Well, maybe. Some people might disagree. For instance, Jews may argue that this is 5767, while Muslims might insist on 1428. India's national calendar shows it as 1929, Korea's as 4340, Iran's as 1385; a Japanese business partner may tell you that it's Heisei 19 and someone from Taiwan may call it the year 96. It goes without saying that all of them are right within the framework of their religious or cultural heritage. Should you ever stumble into this kind of disagreement, it would be best to show interest in your counterpart's concept rather than argue your own perspective. Fortunately, there isn't a country in the world where the Gregorian calendar, the one telling us that this is the year 2007, is not at least understood and correctly interpreted.

Celebrating the New Year

When television stations all over the world show fireworks and New Year's celebrations in the early hours of January 1st, how many of us care? The answer is probably "not as many as you think". For starters, more than a quarter of this planet's population, living in China, Indonesia, Singapore, Taiwan and elsewhere, consider Chinese New Year a much more important milestone. This year, it falls on the 18th of February, when many

employees in the People's Republic will get a full week off to celebrate. Korea and Vietnam follow the Chinese practice.

Jews have Rosh Hashanah to look forward to, which this year will be celebrated on September 12th. Muslims will celebrate the upcoming New Year on January 20th. The Islamic calendar shifts versus the Gregorian one, which will make 2008 interesting as the world's Muslim population will be celebrating *two* new years in that (Gregorian) calendar year. In India, things are even more complicated: depending on the region they live in and the religion they belong to, people may celebrate the start of the next year on March 14, April 13, November 9, or on another day. Other countries and cultural groups celebrate yet other dates, leaving little more than half of the world's population focused on the first of January as the "big day".

Are any of these dates important to know? You bet they are. Try getting anything done in China in late February, and you'll know what I mean. If nothing else, knowing about local customs will earn you the respect of your foreign counterparts and help when trying to build important relationships. Therefore, be careful when habitually wishing others a Happy New Year on January 1st. Most people will appreciate it, but some might think it a bit inconsiderate.

In any case, and regardless of when your "personal" New Year starts: I hope it will be a good one!

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