

ABSURD & AMUSING SIGNS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

SIGNSPOTTING



Compiled by Doug Lansky

INTRODUCTION

Four hundred and six million native English speakers may sound a lot, but this figure represents less than ten percent of the world's population. Yet, thanks to American, Canadian, Australian, British, Irish, and New Zealand lingual stubbornness (or cerebral shortcomings) and an appetite for travel, the world has – without any formal treaty or prolonged UN convention – adopted English as the almost-official tourist language. An estimated 350 million to one billion people now speak English as a second language, which means, as an Anglophone, you can be understood (or misunderstood) by up to a quarter of the people on earth. The practical applications of this are as convenient as they are odd. For instance, German speakers (120 million worldwide) and French speakers (128 million worldwide) typically brush up on their English skills before heading to places such as Thailand, Sweden, Israel or Bali instead of attempting to learn the local language. Japanese tourists can be found bargaining for items in English while street shopping in the Netherlands. And when Norwegians, Danes and Swedes meet up they will most likely converse in English to avoid misunderstandings.

We native English speakers have long had a talent for mucking up our own language. Mastering proper English, even for the most educated Anglo, is no easy task. So, it comes as little surprise that those non-native English speakers who aren't as tuned in to the subtleties of English get things delightfully twisted despite their best efforts to cater to us by putting up signs. You have to give them credit for trying, though. Who among us would have the courage to put up a sign in a foreign language? Just imagine the hilarity if we tried to cover our English-speaking lands with signs for Russian, Turkish, or Chinese tourists. We'd walk around completely unaware of gaffes that would have these travelers rolling with laughter in our streets. Do you think we'd take the time to crosscheck spellings, grammar and possible double entendres in even a small percentage of the world's roughly 6,800 known languages (2,261 of which have writing systems)? I wouldn't be too surprised if the word "signspotting" translates to something bizarre in another tongue (I've never bothered to check). With some luck, the name will end up creating a lingual stir of its own in at least one language.

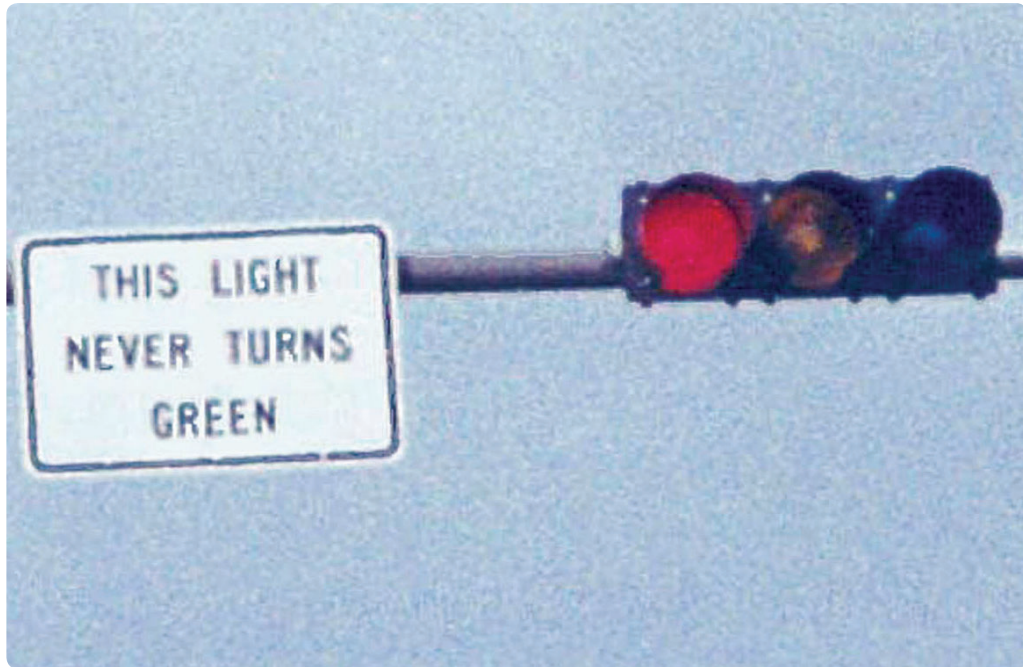
Many gaffes on signs around the world have been written down and shared. You many have seen some of these in a newspaper article, book or chain email. The classics include a menu claiming "the

waiter passes all water” or a hotel sign stating “all guests will be serviced by the chamber maid.” The trouble with these now legendary signs is that, despite much searching, I wasn’t able to find photos of them. After some time, I was forced to conclude that many of them come from the same place jokes are hatched: someone’s fertile imagination.

Funny signs have appeared in proof-positive photo form in various publications and on various websites for years. The images in this book represent the best of the collection I have been amassing for the last ten years (five years privately, five publicly). Since 2000, people have been sending their favorite shots to my website, and the ones selected have been published in various North American newspapers. Thanks to the Lonely Planet email newsletter, *Comet*, more and more funny signs are now sent in by travelers from around the world. Those people whose photos were picked for publication received US\$50, and a few lucky signspotters have collected a Star Alliance round-the-world ticket for their submissions. To check out the current annual grand prize or to submit a photo you’d like to share, please visit www.signspotting.com.

THE AUTHOR

Doug Lansky spent ten years backpacking the planet, during which time he visited 120 countries (if you count San Marino). He has written a syndicated newspaper travel column, penned several books, and hosted a Discovery Channel show. Doug started collecting photos of funny signs during the first year of his travels, and it has turned into a disturbingly addictive habit.



LOCATION: FORT WALTON BEACH, FLORIDA, USA CREDIT: RICHARD GAEBLER

Welcome to the traffic light from hell. At least it lets you know where you stand...or sit, idling in park, forever.

こまちのりばは後方(盛岡側)へ

For Akita Shinkansen Komachi,
Go back toward your behind.

LOCATION: JAPAN CREDIT: NATHAN BROOM

There's a Japanese proverb that says, "The reverse side also has a reverse side."
It seems that in this case they've tried to employ it literally.



LOCATION: LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA CREDIT: JUDY CARR

Once they get on the freeway, it's OK.



LOCATION: OLYMPIC PENINSULA, WASHINGTON, USA CREDIT: TED JOHNSON

All traffic will be temporarily rerouted through Mecca.



LOCATION: ASWAN, EGYPT CREDIT: DR JON SUZUKI

It's pronounced just as it looks.



LOCATION: SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA, USA CREDIT: ROBERT VAIS

It's nice to see the travel industry consolidating.



LOCATION: CHINA CREDIT: JEFF COE

Finally, helpful tourist information.



LOCATION: LHASA, TIBET CREDIT: GENE MCCULLOUGH

Well, you can't blame them for calling it as they see it.