

WILLEM VAN DE PUTTE

LOCAL ETIQUETTE

The traffic wave and 'howzit': SA's secret rules of life

SOUTH Africa is often described as a high-stress, rough-and-tumble country, but beneath the daily hustle lies an unspoken code of courtesy that keeps life running smoothly.

From the subtle raise of a hand in peak-hour traffic to a quick "Howzit" in the lift, our day-to-day interactions are guided by rules nobody ever wrote down.

In a nation of millions of strangers sharing roads, queues, and shopping aisles, these tiny, ordinary gestures of respect are the glue that holds our communities together.

If someone lets you into traffic, you wave; if someone is standing behind you at the shop with two items while you have a trolley full of groceries, you at least consider letting them go first.

The interactions are so ordinary that we barely notice them, but they are part of what makes navigating South African life slightly more pleasant.

The traffic wave

The most important of our unwritten rules happens behind the steering wheel. Someone slows down in peak-hour traffic and allows you into the lane, you wave.

You don't need to wind down the window and introduce yourself, but a small lifting of the hand from the steering wheel, or perhaps just a couple of fingers raised in acknowledgement, does the job.

The same applies when someone lets you out of a driveway, gives way at a four-way stop or creates a gap in

a line of traffic that appears to have been designed specifically to prevent you from joining it.

The wave is important because South African traffic can be a fairly aggressive environment.

Some people will accelerate to prevent you from changing lanes, drivers who regard indicators as an admission of weakness and people who appear personally offended by your existence in the right-hand lane.

There's also the wave associated with specific car brands.

Older generation Land Rover Defender owners almost always give a wave as they pass each other to share a friendly sign of community and mutual respect for driving a vehicle that has become a legend.

It seems that new generation Defender owners, unless they owned an old one, aren't aware of the unwritten rule because driving a luxury SUV with a price range of R1 613 000 to R4 009 400 somehow puts them on a pedestal above those of us who use low range for something other than mounting a high curb at a Woolies parking lot.

It seems now the cheerful Suzuki Jimny has taken over "wave" duties from the old Defender crew, mostly because Jimny drivers seem happy, while new Defender owners are too busy calculating their balloon payments.

The petrol station greeting

You drive in, and the attendant approaches your window with a greeting followed by a request for fuel, and then you're asked about oil, water and tyre pressures.

The interaction is quick and friendly. You don't need to have a 10-minute conversation, but you also don't have to behave as though the person filling your car is part of the machinery. A simple "Howzit?" goes a long way.

The lift has rules

The lift is where South African politeness comes to the fore.

If somebody is approaching the closing doors, you hold them open unless you have already pressed the button and the doors are closing at speed, in which case there is a difficult moral decision to be made.

Do you press the button again? Do you make eye contact? Or do you pretend you didn't see them?

Once inside, you greet the other people, followed by everybody staring at the floor numbers.

We have acknowledged one another because that's enough.

The supermarket shuffle

South African supermarkets have their own etiquette.

If somebody is looking at a shelf, you don't squeeze between them but

wait, or you say, "excuse me."

If your trolley is blocking the aisle, you move it, and if somebody with three items is standing behind you while you have a trolley filled to the brim, you let them go first and a quick thank you is all that's needed.

And if somebody lets you go ahead, you say thank you.

It's not written anywhere, yet most of us understand the rules.

The stranger who becomes a temporary friend

Saying hello isn't necessarily an invitation to a conversation; it's simply an acknowledgement.

You greet the security guard, the person who opens the gate, the worker arriving at the house next door, or the person standing next to you at the braai, even if you have no idea who they are.

If you're watching a sports event at a bar or restaurant and you feel the referee has done your team in, the strangers sitting next to you instantly become friends as you lambast the official and for the rest of the game you're exchanging conversation.

It turns out we need these rules.

The 2024 South African Social Cohesion Index found that the country's overall social cohesion score was 53.3 out of 100, but it also found that respect for social rules had declined from 40.3 in 2021 to 36.6 in 2024.

At the same time, solidarity and helpfulness remained relatively stable, while general trust in people strengthened slightly. In other words, we aren't necessarily living in a country where everybody trusts everybody else.

But we still seem to understand the value of helping one another.

You don't have to trust a stranger to let them into traffic, or know the security guard at the shopping centre to greet him.

Gauteng has plenty of strangers

In Gauteng, where the Gauteng City-Region Observatory's latest Quality of Life survey involved 13 795 randomly selected adults across all 529 wards of the province.

It found that 36% of adults in Gauteng were born outside the province and moved there from elsewhere in South Africa.

So the person behind you in the queue or the person standing beside you at the coffee shop may have arrived here from Limpopo, the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal or somewhere else.

Perhaps that makes the small rules more important because when you live in a place where millions of people are sharing roads, shops, pavements, lifts and parking lots, you need some way of acknowledging one another.

It doesn't have to be complicated. A wave, a smile, a "Howzit?" or a "Sharp," won't fix the country's problems. But they do make an ordinary morning slightly less miserable.

Because in South Africa, we may not know each other, but we do have rules.

[Full Page Image](#)