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## French Kissing in Brittany

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Friday August 22nd 2008

Much ado is made in this region of the inhabitants' distinctive and individual approach to greeting each other. Men meeting other men invariably exchange a firm and purposeful handshake, a civilised bonjour that breeds goodwill and bonhomie. I like it, for it seems to convey camaraderie, manliness and civilised behaviour in one warm gesture. Adolescents and even small children will shake your hand enthusiastically each time they meet you, a practice that, I'm sure, contributes to the impeccable manners of so many French people (except, admittedly, the odd waiter).

Upon arrival at social gatherings, shaking the hand of each male in the assembly is obligatory; it's a nice if tiring duty at the not infrequent village gatherings.

But when women, girls or very young children are involved the handshake is replaced by the kiss. For children and young girls the practice is again charming, and neither awkward nor onerous. In France, meeting groups of adolescents in the streets is not the alarming experience it can be in other lands, because the warm physical nature of their greeting removes any sense of threat.

However, the rituals around meeting and greeting a woman in this wonderful, oh so civilised country are an entirely different and much more dangerous matter. Greeting a woman in France can be a minefield of complexity, on which the unwary foreigner can easily come to grief. In many parts of France a single peck on the proffered cheek is quite sufficient, but in most regions a kiss on each cheek is more customary. Air-kissing would be frowned upon and of course its opposite, actual slobbering, is not permitted anywhere. In some regions the custom extends to three discreet kisses.

But in Brittany they go a little bit further. Here, to the consternation of natives and newcomers alike, the custom on greeting is four kisses. Though some people consider this utterly excessive and attempt to get away with fewer (which in large gatherings can lead to total confusion), four kisses, two on either cheek, is the norm – though if you meet someone you've already met and kissed that day, further kisses are usually dispensed with. Thus meetings involving more than 10 people (common in Brittany, where families are

mostly large) can lead to much head-bobbing, dribbling and general confusion.

In every such group, of course, there is always someone who can't quite get the timing or the sequence right. Oftentimes this will be a foreign male (women seem to me to be much better at these things), someone quite awkward and prone to blushing in female company even at the best of times. His greeting, though no doubt well intended, can lead to what might be termed 'the Breton head butt'. It doesn't need much describing, as I'm sure you can readily imagine what happens on such an encounter.

As an in-comer to this region (therefore foreign, ill-bred and capable of almost any degree of inappropriate behaviour) I've often been tempted to pretend that I think the actual number of kisses is six or eight, or just keep on going until stopped, to see what might happen. But Breton women are too intimidating. Maybe one day.

- This article is adapted from [Ken Burnett's](#) book *The Field by the River*, published by Portico Books.