

La Bise

Faire la Bise ~ French Cheek Kissing

Gestes Français - French Gestures

By Laura K. Lawless, About.com Guide

(Taken from <http://french.about.com/od/culture/a/faire-la-bise.htm> to make it easier for you to read. If you choose to read from the website, make sure you click through all 5 pages.)

Before you read:

- *tutoient*: People addressing each other as *tu* (you). People do not call each other *tu* unless they are friends, family, etc.
- *vousvoient*: People addressing each other as *vous* (you). French people use *vous* to address people that do not meet the criteria above.

Qui Fait la Bise?

La bise or *le bisou* means kiss: French family, friends, and some colleagues* exchange kisses on both cheeks upon meeting and leaving, as well as to congratulate or thank someone.** This most French of gestures may also be made by two people, especially kids and young adults, introduced by a mutual friend.

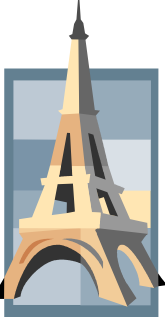
Whether to *faire la bise* depends on how close the two people are, their gender, and to some extent their age.

Two women who *tutoient* each other will always exchange *bises*, as will many who *vouvoient* - using *vous* doesn't necessarily indicate a distant relationship (see lesson on *tu vs vous*). When in doubt, let *la Française* decide.

One woman and one man who *tutoient* will usually *faire la bise*. If for some reason the woman is uncomfortable and chooses not to, she can make this clear by holding out her hand to be shaken instead (and by using *vous*, though again they may *vouvoient* each other but still kiss).

Between men, *la bise* is far less common. Family and very close friends do it, as do most teenagers (see *bro-bises*). Adult acquaintances, new friends, tennis partners... probably not, even if they *tutoient*. As always, if you're not sure, wait to see what the Frenchman does.

No matter the reason, whenever two people don't *faire la bise* as a greeting, they shake hands.



*Even while working. I can't count how many times my transaction with an employee at a bank, post office, or grocery store has been interrupted by *bises* and a short conversation from a colleague arriving or leaving.

**On some occasions, you might exchange *bises* with the same person three times: when you arrive, when thanking him/her for a gift or congratulating an achievement, and when leaving.

Comment Faire la Bise?

Faire la bise is often translated as "cheek kissing" or even "air kissing," when a more accurate (though decidedly less elegant) description is "lightly pressing alternating cheeks together while making kissy sounds."

Step 1: Turn your head slightly to one side (see page 3), let's say to the left.

Step 2: Lean in and lightly press your right cheek, which is now facing toward the other person, to his or her right cheek, while making a kiss sound with your mouth.

Step 3: Pull your head back a bit (so that you don't bump noses or brush lips) as you turn your head slightly to the right.

Step 4: Press your left cheeks together and make another kiss sound.

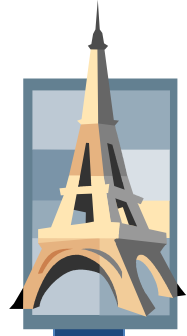
You may need to repeat with a third, fourth, or even fifth "kiss" (see page 4).

There is usually no actual lips-to-cheek contact, with occasional exceptions. A friend of a friend once planted a kiss on my first cheek but not the second, leaving me to wonder if he'd expected me to reciprocate with a kiss on the second cheek.

Bises Etiquette

If you're wearing glasses, consider taking them off before offering your cheek, especially sunglasses (so that the other person can see your eyes) or if the other person is also wearing glasses (so that the two pairs don't clash).

Likewise with oversized hats - nothing ruins a *bise* quite like hitting someone in the forehead



with the stiff brim of a baseball cap.

If you're sick, it is not only acceptable but preferred to avoid the *bises*, with a brief explanation.

Remember that if you can't or don't want to *faire la bise* for any reason, you should shake hands instead.

Quelle Côté?

I've never found any rhyme or reason as to which side to start on. Some say that it depends on the region of France, but in my experience, it's not that consistent - it seems more a matter of personal preference.

I'm not sure why, but I always turn my head to the right so that the first *bise* will be on our left cheeks. Fortunately, the French are sensitive to these movements, so even if the other person had intended to start with the right cheeks, he or she quickly adjusts.

Whichever side you choose, it's important to turn your head with conviction. During one of my very first *bises*, I was apparently a bit vague, because my friend realized he needed to turn his head the other way too late and we ended up smacking our cheeks together. *Quelle désastre* ! (or should I say *bisastre*? :-)

Another possibility is to wait and see which way the other person's head is going before turning your own and leaning in.

Combien de Bises?

The number of kisses varies by region and by other factors that are more difficult to pin down.

Two *bises* (one on each cheek) is the most common.

Three *bises* is typical in Provence. And a friend of mine in Rouen gave me three *bises* the day I arrived and the day I left, but only two during the week in between.

I've been told on good authority that four kisses are exchanged in Nantes.

This may sound confusing - it is! Sometimes the best thing to do is just hold still and let the French person do the *bises*.

There are a couple of websites that claim to know how many *bises* are done in the various French *départements*, but since they don't agree, I'm sticking with letting *le Français* decide. :-)





Les Bro-Bises

I can't find a real name for this, so I've coined *bro-bises*. I considered *bises à mecs*, but since the gesture itself is a mix of French and American culture, a *franglais* name seems fitting.

In any case, the *bro-bises* is when two young men add a bro hug to the *bises*. That is, they shake or clasp their right hands together, sling their left arms around the other's back (pounding optional), and *faire la bise* at the same time. It's not as complicated as it sounds, but it was pretty funny the first time I saw it - my husband and I spent 10 minutes laughing as we figured out the timing and logistics.

I don't know how common the *bro-bises* is or if it will stick around. I've seen it a few times in Menton and Nice, and I read somewhere that players on opposing sports teams sometimes do it at the end of games.

Your Assignment:

The author of this article did not wrap up with a conclusion. Write a 6-8 sentence conclusion in English to sum up the article and show me what you have learned about *la bise*.