

# Do's and Don't's, Customs and Traditions

One of the most enjoyable things about visiting Thailand can be experiencing a new culture and immersing one's self in many of the age old traditions that a lot of Thai people still live their daily lives by.

If you are a first time visitor to Thailand it is probably the case that you have heard from friends or relatives who have already been to Thailand about the huge cultural differences between Thailand and the West, which can result in difficulties or confusion when trying to interact with the Thai people.

You may have come across masses of information online regarding things you should and shouldn't do when you visit the country, let's face it that could be one of the reasons why you stumbled across this site!

At first glance, it may seem like there are a lot of rules regarding greetings or the way you should act and because of this it might seem like there are plenty of ways in which you could easily offend a Thai person. It might even feel that Thailand and its people could be difficult for you to understand or get along with both personally and culturally.



However, Thailand is known as the Land of Smiles for a reason and its people are some of the friendliest, warmest and most welcoming you are ever likely to meet. Before travelling to the country do not get too caught up or worried about things that you should or shouldn't do when in the company of Thai people.

The vast majority of Thais, especially the younger generations and those that live in or around the country's popular tourist destinations understand and are very much aware that foreign visitors or 'farangs' also have their own unique cultures and customs, many of which will also probably seem a little strange to them too! Therefore, many social and cultural indiscretions or faux pas will be forgiven in Thailand without anyone even thinking twice.

That said it is important that you are polite and courteous at all times during your stay; after all, that is only basic good manners, isn't it?

There are also some traditions and customs in Thailand that every foreign visitor to the country should make sure that they are aware of. Whilst some of them will be discussed on this page, the main thing to remember is that you should be particularly respectful towards the Buddhist religion and towards Thailand's Royal Family.

Here is a useful list of do's and don'ts that are good to know when you visit Thailand:

## Do's

- Respect anything to do with The King, The Royal Family and Buddha.
- Always remove your shoes or footwear before entering a temple, someone's home and even some shops.
- Have a relaxed attitude and try to always stay calm.
- Always treat Buddhist Monks with the upmost respect.
- Try to learn a couple of Thai phrases such as 'hello' – 'sa wa dee khap/ka' and 'thank you' – 'kop khun khap/ka' (men say 'khap', women say 'ka'). Thai people really appreciate it!
- Smile a lot!
- Have fun and enjoy yourself.
- Make sure you have a suitable visa.
- Always purchase travel insurance before your trip

## Don't's

- Don't be disrespectful in any way, shape or form to the Royal Family or to the Buddhist religion.
- Don't raise your voice or get angry as it is a sign of disrespect in Thailand. Never become aggressive.
- Do not touch a Thai person on the head.
- Use your feet to point at anything.
- Become involved either with the consumption or sale of illegal drugs.
- Overstay the length of your visa.

## Greetings

A large part of the Thai culture from one day to the next is about being polite and respectful to other people at all times. Probably the best and easiest way that foreign tourists can be respectful to Thai people is via the traditional greeting and hand gesture called the 'wai'. The wai is used

when greeting or thanking someone and it can be done, quite simply, by putting your hands together (similar to praying) in front of your chest and bowing your head slightly.

When visiting Thailand you will not necessarily be expected to wai to every Thai person that you meet. However, it is a courteous and respectful thing to do in the different situations that are mentioned above.

If, for example, you are at a social gathering where someone wai's to you first then you probably would be expected to wai back. There are exceptions to this rule, as you are not expected to wai to children or to wai anyone who is serving you, such as a hotel porter or a maid.

If you are still unsure about when to wai and when not to wai, then a good general rule of thumb is as follows – Always wai to people who you are meeting for the first time, say at a dinner party, to people you are thanking for something or to people who you are greeting generally.

The higher you hold your hands when doing the wai and the longer you bow your head, the more respectful the greeting is. For example, it can be a good idea to bow your head for a little longer than normal if you are meeting your Thai girlfriend's parents and family for the very first time.

## The Monarchy

As we mentioned above, it is really important to be respectful towards the Royal Family when staying in Thailand. Unlike in other countries around the world, Thai people are extremely loving and respectful towards their King. During your stay, you might notice that you will see Thai people with yellow bands around their wrists, which have 'we love the King' written on them. It is also commonplace to see pictures of various different Thai Kings in a Thai person's home, in their workplace and even in public buses or trains.

Thai people are also really proud and respectful towards the country's national anthem and it is played daily at 8am and 6pm through loud speakers in nearly all of the towns and cities throughout the country.

When the anthem is playing out loud, people are expected to stop what they are doing and stand still. Of course, foreigners are not expected to do this but it does show a great deal of respect for which many Thai people would be grateful of.

Also, if you happen to visit the cinemas during your stay in Thailand, you will see that the anthem is played before the start of the movie. Again, when the anthem is playing you are expected to stand up as a show of respect.

Doing anything derogatory, such as vandalising, destroying or damaging any images, statues or monuments of the King or members of the Royal Family, past or present, is dealt with very seriously by the Thai authorities and can even lead to imprisonment. Therefore, it is important that you never underestimate the importance of the King and The Monarchy to the people of Thailand.

## Religion

Buddhism is Thailand's national religion, although you will find a significant number of Muslims, as well as a small number Christians in the country too. As well being respectful to The Monarchy in Thailand, it is also really important to be respectful towards followers of all religions, whatever they might be, whilst staying in the country.

If you happen to visit any religious buildings such as shrines or temples, then you will need to make sure that you are dressed appropriately. Items of clothes such as mini skirts, bikinis, sleeveless T-shirts or any item of clothing that might be considered unkempt or dirty will almost certainly not be permitted. If you do visit a temple wearing any of these types of clothes, you will probably be given a sarong or long sleeved shirt to wear in order to cover up. At some of the larger temples or at other important religious sites you could even be asked to leave the temple altogether, if your clothing is deemed inappropriate.

Images of Buddha are also very important and sacred to Thai people and to followers of Buddhism throughout the world. This might sound obvious but never do anything derogatory towards an image of Buddha and you should also be careful about photographing them too. When visiting some temples, it might be the case that cameras are not permitted, whereas in others, it is OK to take pictures. If you are ever unsure about taking pictures in a temple, look for signs or ask someone before you start happily snapping away.

You should also be careful not to point your feet in the direction of an image of Buddha or to a Buddhist Monk as this is seen as being highly offensive and gross act of sacrilege. It is also not permitted for a monk to be touched by a woman and they are also not able to accept any items that might be given to them by a woman. If a woman does need to give a gift or goods to a monk, they need to give the item to a man who can then pass it onto the monk or they need to place the particular item on a special cloth in front of the monk. He will then drag the item towards himself, before collecting the item from the cloth.

If you happen to use public transport in Thailand, you should look out for the allocated seats, which are specifically for monks to sit down on and which are found on buses and trains. These seats will usually have a sign on them that will say 'Reserved for Monks' and if you see these types of seats, don't sit on them.

## Shouting or Becoming Angry

In Thailand, becoming angry, getting annoyed, raising your voice and shouting are very much frowned upon by the Thai people, regardless of what the situation is. During your visit to Thailand, there will no doubt be occasions when your train might be late or your taxi might be stuck in one of Bangkok's notorious traffic jams; you might be give food that you didn't order in a restaurant. Whatever the situation might be, you always need to try and stay calm.

Raising your voice or shouting is not only considered to be disrespectful but Thai people see it as a form of indiscipline or having a lack of self control. When a person, especially a foreigner, starts to become angry, annoyed or raises their voice in frustration, many Thai people will often start to smile and sometimes even laugh as a way to try and diffuse any situation that might occur.

Some foreigners do not understand the meaning of this and the site of a Thai person laughing at them whilst they are already frustrated can lead to them becoming even angrier. Therefore, it is very important to keep calm, carry on and always try to ensure that you smile, no matter how frustrated you might be!

## The Head and the Feet

When you are back home, patting a child on the head or giving their hair a little ruffle is often seen as a supportive or friendly gesture. However, to Thai people, the head is considered the most

sacred part of the body and touching it in any way is highly offensive to Thai people and should be avoided at all costs.

As the head is considered to be the most sacred part of the body, the feet are thought of in Thai culture as being the least sacred part of the body. Because of this you should make sure that you do not point at anything with your feet or show the soles of your feet to other people as it is likely to cause offence.