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Thai spirit houses and spirit trees

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One of the first things travellers to Thailand may notice about their surrounds are the **colorful and ornate spirit houses** resembling miniature temples that are strategically positioned outside every home, business, school and in public areas. Other than making great photo opportunities for tourists, what is behind these impressive little structures? Spirits abound everywhere in Thailand, and Thai people go out of their way to keep them happy.



These spirits have a choice of residence

Spirit worship is probably the oldest form of religion in the world, and when Buddhism came to Southeast Asia, it developed alongside the ancient spirit worship already in place. Today many of the beliefs remain intertwined with Buddhism and form part of everyday life for Thai people.

One of these practices is the use of spirit houses (*san phra phum*). The spirit house provides an appealing shelter for the spirits who reside on the land where the house or business is built. Permission needs to be granted by the spirits before building commences and the spirit house is

erected to **entice the spirits to dwell in their own home and not in the house or shop**. The construction of a spirit house can be simple, such as a basic mini Thai-style bungalow home, or as intricate as a palace. They can be constructed of wood, concrete or brick, and one often sees roadside shops with hundreds of colorful houses for sale. They are often decorated with little figurines of people and animals, incense holders and vases for flowers and some contain furniture.



What spirit would not want to live in this well-appointed home?

The position of a spirit house is very important; it should never be placed where the shadow of the building will fall on it. One can regularly see Thais presenting offerings to the spirits. These can include fresh fruit, rice, chicken or duck, beer, water and other drinks — red and orange Fanta are particularly popular — candles and incense, fresh flowers in the vases and garlands. Spirit houses are often strung with fairy lights at night. Resorts in particular often boast elaborate spirit houses and generous offerings.



The spirits that reside outside BBC restaurant are provided with a feast.

Spirit houses are sometimes positioned at dangerous curves in the road or places of frequent accidents. This is done in order to keep the spirits happy, and ask for their protection of all that use the road. A good example of this is on **Ko Samui's Ring Road** just past Chaweng Noi, on the way to Lamai, where a large, impressive spirit house overlooks the bend. Locals driving past hoot three times to acknowledge the spirits.

Because spirit houses need to be well-maintained, there comes a time when they need to be replaced. Old spirit houses cannot merely be dumped. The spirits are coaxed into the new house, and the old one is laid to rest in communal ‘burial grounds’ for old spirit houses, usually a location well known to be rich in spirit activity. On Samui, a road known as the **Ghost Road** is the local spot to offload broken spirit houses. It is a rather eerie sight to drive along this road, a back route to the airport, and see hundreds of dumped spirit houses.



A happy garden with a spirit tree and spirit house.

One will often find colorful strips of cloth tied around large trees in forests or gardens. It is believed that spirits reside in old trees. Offerings are placed at the foot of the tree or in lower branches, and the bright ribbons are a symbolic warning for others not to cut down the tree.



A spirit tree at the waterfall has offerings of shoes and clothing

Longtail boats are decorated with the same bright cloth and ribbon. Keeping the spirits of the sea happy will ensure a safe journey, and bring in a bountiful catch. In the same way, cars, trucks and taxis display garlands of flowers to protect the occupants of the vehicle on the journey.



A longtail boat at Ko Pha Ngan's Haad Salad is protected on its journey

As intriguing as the spirit houses are to tourists, and as beautiful as they are to photograph, please remember that to their owners they are a place of worship, so please do show respect when taking pictures. A few tips: Never put your feet on any religious item, such as spirit houses or statues, don't touch or re-arrange items in the house to suit your photo, and don't take photos when people are praying.



Fresh flowers for nature-loving spirits