

# Thailand: Tips for the first-time traveler

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## ●●● The Royal Family

Across the country The Thai Royal Family is highly revered. Lack of respect or criticism is not accepted, in fact it is illegal. The law of *lesse majeste* is alive and well. In many areas throughout the country, and even at public events in cities, the Royal Anthem is played at eight o'clock in the morning, and at six in the evening when everything grinds to a halt and people stand still to pay respect. Be mindful even of offending images of HM the King such as stepping on bank notes, coins, etc.



## ●●● Etiquette

The hospitableness of Thai people is a topic often overheard when listening to tourists talk about how they enjoyed their time in Thailand. The welcoming nature of people in Thailand is something which brings people back to Thailand time and time again, after all Thailand isn't called 'The Land of Smiles' for nothing. In general Thai people are remarkably friendly, but learning a little about the culture will hold you in even greater esteem and will perhaps allow you to benefit from your trip even more.

Note the foot taboos, feet are considered both vulgar and low, so don't point your feet at anyone or anything. Another important point to remember is not to touch people on the head, try not to even pat young children on the head as President Johnson should have been warned. Thais will be pleased if you wai them on meeting, (join your fingers together and with palms touching, bend your head slightly and touch your nose with the tips of your fingers), but you may well find that the reply is an outstretched hand waiting to be shaken. When offered something such as a glass of water, try and receive it with both hands. Try not to pass between two people who are talking, if you have to, make the gesture of ducking slightly. None of these mistakes would cause you any trouble, but do it right and you will earn respect.



## ●●● Thai Culture

Don't be embarrassed when you see Thai people kneeling or even crawling before their elders and betters - it is for them perfectly acceptable and in no way humiliating. You do not need to follow suit.

Thai humor is splendid and often very bawdy, however it is sometimes difficult to translate foreign humor and vice versa, so don't be offended if

no one laughs at your jokes and equally don't worry if you don't find your tour guide's jokes hilarious.

The class system still flourishes here in Thailand. Things you can do and say with one person may not go down at all well with another. If you learn a little Thai from a friend who may use lots of slang, another friend will know exactly where you have been - so be careful! Accent has little place in Thai so by changing the words you use you can easily alter your social position.

It is better not to ask negative questions as Thais do not know whether to say yes or no in reply. Yes in Thai can mean many things. "Yes, I heard you but I haven't a clue what you mean". "Yes, I heard you, I understand what you want but I don't agree with you and I won't do it". Yes, I heard you, I agree with you and I will try and do it".

Thai day-to-day life exists rather peacefully. Thais prefer to speak softly and avoid aggression and confrontation. Try to keep calm and relaxed whatever the provocation or however frustrated you may be. Be polite, smile, try and make a joke and don't rush things. Thais are adept at working things out in their own way. An easy way to fit into another culture is to observe how the locals act and follow suit.

Although Thailand is a rather liberal and modernized country in many respects, dress and outside appearance are of importance. Thais value looking smart and clean, although it is warm wearing beach attire or going shirtless or shoeless in an urban area is slightly uncouth – think would you do this at home?

Tourists should not be too conscious about their behavior in Thailand. Thai people are usually very tolerant, however if you are consciously respectful to a culture that you are a guest of you are sure to have a better visit and interact with locals in a more positive way.

## ●●● Dress

Unlike neighboring more conservative and traditional countries, everyday dress in Thailand is modern and follows international fashion. Thai people are fashion conscious and like to be smart and keep up with trends. Because of the warm weather it is preferable to wear light and comfortable clothes. Shorts and T-shirts are the standard dress code for men and women. Flip-flops, sandals or other slip on shoes are useful when taking shoes off and on if entering a temple, house or shop which requires you to take your footwear off, a common Thai custom.

You will need to bring few warm clothes with you, although it is advised to bring some clothing which can keep you cozy for use on air-conditioned transport or for evening times in the winter months. There are many shops, malls and markets selling clothing and shoes so you can always stock up when here or buy anything you have forgotten. Unless you have formal engagements or are going to one of Bangkok or Chiang Mai's more swanky hotels or bars, you are most unlikely ever to be required to wear anything other than a t-shirt and trousers or a simple dress. However it's always nice to dress up for a night out, have you tried dancing in flip-flops?

## ● ● ● Tourist Tips

Before you arrive. Buy some travel insurance for peace of mind. You can buy it easily online and it really isn't that expensive.

Do not overstay your visa. The current fine is 500 baht per day - and with no maximum this will add up very quickly. In Thailand most nationalities are granted a free 30 day tourist visa, but if you want to stay longer without having to leave the country it's worth applying for a longer visa from the Thai embassy or consulate in your home country. If you are in trouble immediately contact your embassy - they may grumble but they are paid to be there for you and help you in any way they can.

The legal system is highly complicated and very slow, so never consider going to law unless absolutely necessary. If you have a problem take advice from your embassy or if you can, from someone you trust and knows the country well. Lawyers and the police are a last resort. Sad but true. But don't be put off tourists visit Thailand each year in the millions and the large majority of foreigners leave after having a safe, secure and happy time.

Stick to bottled water for drinking. Tap water is not recommended for drinking unless it is boiled for hot drinks, although it is safe for brushing your teeth and washing with. Despite what it says in some guide books ice and washed fruit and vegetables are usually completely fine to consume.

Tipping should not be something to worry about. When eating at roadside stands there is no need to leave a tip, but most people (including Thais) will leave the loose change from the bill as a small tip. At more moderate to expensive restaurants, however, it's customary to leave a 10% tip. For taxis, tuk tuk or songtaew, tipping is unnecessary, though up to your own discretion. As for massages and spa services, they merit about a 10% tip, or more if you've had an exceptionally good rub down! Large hotels and restaurants usually add 10% to the bill so you only need to add a tip if you have received exceptional service or if you are rich and famous. The tipping rules in Thailand are not cut and dried, so do what feels right. If you are happy with your service wherever it may be - leave a tip. It is always appreciated and a little bit goes a long way.

Try to carry smaller denominations of notes and change with you, often taxi and tuk-tuk drivers and small shops in Thailand do not have enough change for large notes.

This may sound like a ridiculous tip though when checking into a hotel always take a name card with the address of the hotel on it when you go out, just in case!

At times in Thailand things can take longer to get done than in your home country, or often appointments are later than scheduled. Just remember you are on holiday and to accept the little mishaps or annoyances you may encounter on the way. In Thai culture 'saving face', by not losing your temper amongst other things, is important so when things do not go as planned don't lose your cool, and remember the commonly used Thai saving face principle 'mai pen rai'. Meaning never mind, it's ok or it's fine!

If you are sensible, you will find Thailand is one of the safest and most friendly countries in the world.

## ●●● What are Thais Doing?

There are many things Thais do that confound and confuse foreigners. Here are some examples and explanations of them.

### **Spirit House Offerings**

In spite of being a Buddhist country, traces of animism and non-Buddhist spiritual beliefs still abound in Thailand. Most of these would be found outside the city, but one such superstition found everywhere from the heart of Bangkok's business district to a southern island is a spirit house. It is believed that there are spirits who live in the land and by building a house or utilising the land the spirit is disturbed and can sometimes be disgruntled. To appease the homeless spirit as well as ensure its happiness and patronage, small houses are usually erected following a small religious ceremony whereby the spirits can reside in peace. Food and drink offerings are often placed in these houses and sometimes little effigies of people or animals can also be seen residing in them. Man and spirit can therefore live in close harmony.

Some particularly impressive spirit houses are Brahmin and contain images of Vishnu or Shiva. Many of these shrines, such as the one in Bangkok near the Erawan Hotel, are highly revered. Brahminism is intimately entwined with Buddhism, particularly in such Royal ceremonies as the annual Ploughing.

### **Taking off Shoes**

For hygiene purposes, houses in Thailand are shoe-free. It is considered most rude to drag dirty shoes into Thai houses. This certainly extends to all temple buildings as well as some businesses and restaurants. A safe way to make sure that you are doing the right thing would be to look around at any building entrance for signs of shoes and take yours off if you see that everyone else has.

### **Releasing Birds and Fish**

Much merit is obtained by freeing captive animals. This can be done on any special day such as a birthday or anniversary but is most often seen during the Songkran Festival (The Thai New Year celebrated in April). Little birds can be bought to set free at many temples and shrines. Fish are released in temple ponds, where they will breed in safety or in the rivers and lakes. Sometimes even turtles, shell fish and eels are bought from markets and set free to save them from the wok.

### **Wai at Objects**

The wai is a form of greeting in Thailand used for young and old, rich and poor, monks and Royalty. The wai is an essential part of every Thai's daily life. However, sometimes foreigners get confused when they see a Thai wai a tree or a shrine or even a curve on the road.



This is very normal as sometimes certain trees or areas are said to have powerful spirits and it is as a mark of respect for the spirit that some Thais will lift two hands together in front of their chests and bow their heads - this can be dangerous when driving.

### **Giggling at Accidents**

Most foreigners are completely bemused when they find themselves in a near collision with a Thai person, and all they will get is giggles and a smile. This is because Thais would rather make light of something than lose face. It would be a loss of face to admit that one's bad driving could have nearly caused an accident, so the best thing to do is to laugh about it.