

The wai: traditional greeting of Thailand

Very much like a handshake in the West, the wai is the traditional Thai way to greet someone. Unlike a handshake however, a wai can have different meanings in different situations. A wai is often used as a simple greeting, but it can also be used as a sign of respect, or as a visual representation of an apology, or as a way to show reconciliation after a dispute or disagreement.

WHERE SHOULD I PUT MY HANDS?

The wai, apart from being a greeting, also serves as a way to establish your standing in a social hierarchy. Where you place your hands in relation to your face determines how high you think of the person you are greeting. Let's look at the 4 different ways of doing a wai and what situations you would use them in.

THE SOCIAL WAI

The social wai is the version of the wai used to greet people that are slightly older than you, or deemed of a slightly higher standing. Your older sister, neighbor or an older friend. Fold your hands together and bring them upward until your thumbs reach the height of your chin.



THE FORMAL WAI

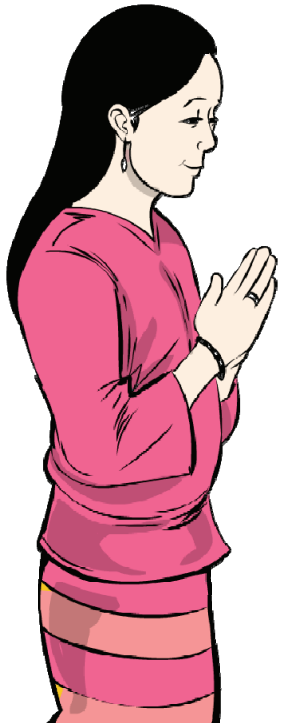
A formal wai is one that is performed by service staff towards guests, or by employees towards their boss (in a formal setting). Another example could be when you greet your grandparents or someone important in the community, like the mayor of the village or a highly ranked government official. Your thumbs should be touching the tip of your nose.

This wai is usually done more slowly than the social wai as to show more respect to the person you are addressing.

THE WAI FOR MONKS

Monks are to be greeted with your hands together, at the level of your eyebrows. It's pretty much the biggest sign of respect you can give someone, and as such the bow should be accordingly deep as well. Keep in mind that this type of wai is reserved for very few situations, and misuse of this gesture in an inappropriate situation can be deemed offensive. A Thai person's first reaction could possibly be "Is that foreigner making fun of me?," so don't overdo the "respect" that you put in your wai.

Pro tip! In case you want to show respect to the person you are greeting, fold your hands in the appropriate position and then bow your head forward until your hands and head are aligned where you want them to be. The hands should be "in position" before moving your head. Bring your head towards your hands. Don't bring your hands towards your head.



ACCEPTING OR RETURNING A WAI

A wai is always to be returned or accepted by placing your hands in front of your chest. It might be difficult to do this if you are carrying something in your hands. In that case a nod is also accepted. You might even see people accepting a wai by only placing their one free hand in the right position.

Pro Tip! Initiating a wai to service staff in a hotel or restaurant is a typical tourist mistake and even though foreigners mean well, it is strange and it might make the staff feel awkward.

WHAT DO PEOPLE SAY WHEN THEY DO A WAI?

A wai never comes alone, as a softly spoken “Sawasdee Krab” usually comes with the bow. This is the traditional Thai greeting and since there is a male and a female version, knowing which is which makes you the better tourist. If you are a man, you will say “Sawatdee krab”. Women however should say “Sawatdee ka”, as the different ending identifies you as a female.

ELDERS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

You will often see Thai parents letting their youngest one greet a new person with a wai. It is one of the very first things Thai teach children and it is considered a form of respect towards their elders. As such, it is very cute when a toddler gives you a wai, along with a round-cheeked “sawatdee krab.” You may wish to accept or return the wai from a young child, but it is not necessary to do so. Oftentimes, a simple smile will do fine.

Likewise, should you be introduced to someone who is obviously older than you are, and you want to make everyone understand you are comfortable with Thai customs, an appropriate wai is the best thing by far you can do in this situation.

***Pro tip!** Thai will address their older friends with “Pee” in front of their names. This goes as far as storing their friends name as “Pee Noi”, “Pee Miew” and “Pee Simon” in their phone instead of just their names. Younger people and children will be addressed as “Nong Chin” and “Nong Tom.” It is less common to store a person’s name in a telephone with that preposition, however.*

Customers, elders or people you want to show respect to will be called “Khun...” as in “Khun Nicky” or “Khun Boi”. This goes for people that are older or younger than you. You can compare this to “Mrs Bradshaw” or “Mister Fidler”. Note that Thai will always use the first name, even if it is in a polite setting.