

CULTURE AND CUSTOMS

The culture of Cambodia has had a rich and varied history dating back many centuries. As the Indian culture and civilization, including its language and arts reached mainland Southeast Asia around the 1st century, the culture of Cambodia has been heavily influenced by India.



Throughout Cambodia's long history, a major source of inspiration was from religion. The culture of the Cambodian people can also be seen as a **mixture of hinduism and buddhism**, and reflects a country rich in history and heritage. The official religion of the Kingdom of Cambodia is Theravada Buddhism, which is practised by more than 90% of the population. The Wat (temple) is the center of community life and religious festivals and ceremonies are important parts of daily life. In Cambodia, most villages have a Wat. Buddhist rituals follow the lunar calendar and there are several significant religious holidays and festivals that are widely observed. Due to most Khmer people are Buddhist, monks have played an important role and are highly regarded and respected in the Cambodian society. They often serve as the educators and counselors.



The golden age of Cambodia was arguably between the 9th and 14th centuries, during the time of the **Khmer Empire**. At this point in history, Cambodia's achievements in the arts, architecture and other cultural elements were unparalleled in the rest of Southeast Asia. The impressive **Angkor Wat** temple, once the centre of the empire, is a lasting symbol of Cambodia's dominance and remains a monument of great national pride for the Cambodian people.



The history of Buddhism in Cambodia is also seen most clearly in the way that Cambodians interact with each other and their national festivals. When greeting people or to show respect in Cambodia people do the "**sampeah**" gesture, identical to the Indian namaste and Thai wai. The Cambodian sampeah which can be seen all across Cambodia is a symbol of prayer and a particularly elegant and respectful way of greeting friends and strangers, with palms held together, and a slight bow of the head. The lower you bow the more respect you are showing. These days, except when greeting elders or public officials, the sampeah has largely been replaced by a handshake. In Cambodia it is not polite to have eye contact with someone who is older or someone who is considered a superior with higher social position.

As with most of Asia, **saving Face** – the concept of retaining your honor and reputation in front of others is very important in Cambodia, to "lose one's cool" in public is completely unacceptable. You should keep calm in tense situations, Cambodians don't appreciate it when visitors lose their

temperatures. Avoid pointing your feet at people or touching their heads, as Cambodians believe one's vital essence resides in the head and the feet are considered the dirtiest and least sacred. You Cambodians are conservative in sexuality and strongly frown upon public displays of affection. Be mindful in your contact with the opposite sex, even placing an arm around a local to pose for a picture can be misinterpreted.



Cambodian fashion is divided by the people's differing castes and social classes. Cambodians traditionally wear a checkered scarf called a "**Krama**". The "krama" is what distinctly separates the Khmer (Cambodians) from their neighbors the Thai, the Vietnamese, and the Laotians. The scarf is used for many purposes including for style, protection from the sun, an aid (for your feet) when climbing trees, a hammock for infants, a towel, or as a "sarong".

Clothing in Cambodia is one of the most important aspects of the culture. **Modest dress** is the rule in Cambodia, particularly for women. Although many tourists are stick to lightweight, breathable materials and wear shorts to deal with the heat, the locals tend to cover as much skin as possible. In Cambodia, shorts are considered proper attire only for schoolchildren. Men in Cambodia typically wear collared shirts and long pants. Women should not wear short skirts or show their shoulders. As a tourist, you should avoid clothing that is too revealing. A hat and closed-toe shoes are recommended, particularly for touring the temples.

Despite the infiltration of modern ideas and concepts, **Khmer customs and traditions** are kept alive with traditional dance, art, festivals and costume enduring alongside modern pop music and dance.

