

CULTURE AND CUSTOMS

The culture of Siam Thai has been shaped by many influences, which includes Chinese, Lao, Burmese, Cambodian, and Indian. It is mainly influenced by Buddhism (Theravada form). Buddhism is practised in Thailand by over 90% of the population.



The **Buddhist philosophy** permeates all facets of national life. Shrines, Buddha replicas and temples are found in abundance in every city and village. Wherever you go, you will see monks with orange robes and shaven heads strolling the streets. **Becoming a monk** in Thailand is an intentional act to make merit and monks are treated with great respect. Even though the country has modernised and become a lot more prosperous over the past three decades, Thai people are still very traditional and bound by modest behavioural habits. Thai people live a conservative way of life, based on Buddhist and spiritual fortune.



Thailand is officially a **constitutional monarchy**, but the king's importance in the nation's life is apparent everywhere, from official buildings to people's homes. Thai people are extremely loving and respectful towards their King Known for his efforts to improve the living standards of disadvantaged communities and preserving the Thai way of life, pictures of the King adorn many homes, restaurants and businesses in Thailand. As a visitor, you also should pay respect to the royal family.

Thailand is a **land of traditions and customs** that differ greatly from those of the Western world. As a foreigner, you might not be expected to effortlessly navigate the complex world of Thai etiquette. However, having a basic understanding of what is acceptable, what is frowned upon, and what is outright taboo can make a big difference in showing your respect to the Thai's culture.



Thailand is regarded as the '**Land of Smiles**' due to a large part of the Thai culture until today 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 someone offers you a Wai in greeting, it is considered rude not to return it. However, you are not expected to return the Wai to children, waiters, or street vendors.

This generally use first rather than surnames. Often, the title **Khun** is added before the first name. This is similar to Mr. or Mrs., and is used for both men and women, regardless of marital status. Family names are typically only used in formal settings.

One other point regarding to Thai social conventions is that '**saving face**' is also an important part of being Thai, and this involves remaining calm, not losing your temper and avoiding confrontation in general. It is very bad manners to make public displays of anger, as Thais regard such behaviour as boorish and a loss of 'face'. Not only will you lose face and look bad, you will also find that this sort of behavior is not productive in accomplishing what you want to accomplish. Avoid doing anything that may cause you or your Thai friends to lose face.

When visiting temples, **dress conservatively**. Women particularly should wear long skirts or trousers and cover their shoulders and knees. Many temples state as you enter that photography is not permitted. Even if there is no sign, please be respectful and consider whether it is appropriate to be taking flash photographs in a place of worship. Even more so if monks are present worshipping!

Always **remove your shoes** when entering temples (the same rule applies when entering a person's home), and do not sit with your feet towards the Buddha. Sit either cross-legged, or with your feet tucked behind you. In many Asian cultures the feet are considered the lowest, dirtiest part of the body, and the head the highest. So do not point to things with your feet, hold doors open with your feet, point your feet to the Buddha images, or point at or touch peoples' heads. Under no circumstances should a woman ever touch a monk.

One of the most important points of etiquette often overlooked by some travellers is basic **personal hygiene**, Thai people take their personal hygiene and appearance very seriously. Since Thailand is a hot, humid tropical country, showering frequently is essential and not just every couple of days. Local laundry shops away from your hotel are plentiful and cheap (40-50 baht per kilo). You can drop off your dirty clothes and collect them the following day, clean, folded (often beautifully ironed) and packaged up like new.