

Be a Welcome Guest: Thai Customs for Families

Thailand is famous for its welcome. A few customs return it. Learn them together before you fly, then use them on Samui.

You are a guest here

Samui is home to the people who live here. The person who brings your breakfast, drives your car or looks after your children is your host, not your servant. A smile, a thank you and a calm voice go a long way.

Children learn this by watching you. When they see you greet, thank and wait your turn, they do the same. This is the short version, with a page at the end to practice together.

The wai: hello and thank you

The wai is the Thai greeting: palms together in front of the chest and a small bow of the head. The younger person usually gives it first, and for an elder the thumbs rise to the tip of the nose.

- ✓ Let your child try a wai with the adults they meet. Thai children are taught to wai their elders.
- ✓ When someone wais you, put your palms together in return. You do not need to bow.
- ✓ Say hello and thank you in Thai. The three words are below.
- ✗ Do not greet Thai people with a hug or a kiss, especially women.

Heads and feet

In Thailand the head is the most respected part of the body and the feet the lowest.

- ✗ Never touch anyone's head, not even a child's. A pat on the head, kind at home, is rude here.
- ✗ Do not point your feet at people or at Buddha images, and never rest them up high, on a table for instance.
- ✗ Do not step over people, or over food or books on the floor. Walk around.
- ✓ Take your shoes off before going into a home or a temple hall, and wherever you see a row of shoes at the door.
- ✓ Point with your whole hand, not one finger.
- ✓ Lower your head and shoulders a little as you walk past adults or monks who are sitting.

At the temple

A temple is a place of worship first. Families are welcome when they treat it that way.

- ✓ Cover shoulders and knees: a top with sleeves, and shorts or a skirt past the knee, or light pants. No sleeveless, cropped or tight tops, and no beachwear. Dress children the same way; it is the safe choice.
- ✓ Take off shoes, hats and sunglasses before the hall, and step over the raised doorstep, not on it.
- ✓ Sit with your feet tucked behind you, pointing away from the Buddha and from monks.
- ✗ Do not climb on Buddha images or take selfies with them, and never place yourself higher than one.
- ✓ Silence phones, keep voices low and walk. A temple is not a playground.
- ✗ Do not photograph people while they pray.
- ✗ Leave snacks, cigarettes and alcohol outside the temple.

- ✗ Women do not touch a monk or his robes. To give him something, a woman sets it down near him or asks a man to pass it.

The anthem, the King and the law

Thai people hold the nation, the religion and the monarchy in deep respect, and Thai law protects the monarchy.

- ✓ Stand still when the national anthem plays at 8 in the morning and 6 in the evening, often over speakers in public places.
- ✓ Stand when the royal anthem plays before a film at the cinema.
- ✓ Treat pictures of the King and the royal family with respect. Thai banknotes carry the King's image: never tear or deface one.
- ✗ Never insult the nation, the religion or the monarchy, even as a joke. Thai law treats it as a serious crime, for visitors too.

Around town

- ✓ Keep your cool. Never embarrass anyone in public, staff included. Raise a problem quietly, in person.
- ✓ Dress modestly away from the beach. Thais value modest dress, so keep swimwear for the beach and the pool.
- ✓ Ask before taking a close photo of someone, and of other people's children.
- ✗ Do not bring e-cigarettes or vapes into Thailand. They are illegal, for visitors as well as Thais.
- ✓ Wait your turn, say thank you, and leave each place as tidy as you found it.

Three words to learn

Boys and men end with khrap, girls and women with kha. It makes any sentence polite.

สวัสดีครับ / ค่ะ
sa-wat-dee khrap / kha
Hello, and goodbye

ขอบคุณครับ / ค่ะ
khop-khun khrap / kha
Thank you

ขอโทษครับ / ค่ะ
kho-thot khrap / kha
Sorry, or excuse me

The spelling is a guide to the sound, and you will see others (sawatdi, krub). Thai has tones, and people are glad you tried.

Temples on Samui

Big Buddha (Wat Phra Yai) Tops or scarves that cover the shoulders, long pants or long shorts, and no beachwear, the Tourism Authority of Thailand asks.

Wat Plai Laem Close to Big Buddha, with the same dress.

Wat Khunaram Long pants or a skirt that covers the knee, and a shirt, scarf or sarong for the shoulders. A monk's preserved body is on show here, so tell younger children before you go.

Practice together

A week before you fly, try one box a day. Tick them off together.

The wai

- ☐ Palms together in front of the chest
- ☐ A small bow of the head
- ☐ For a grandparent or teacher, thumbs to the tip of the nose
- ☐ Wai each other at breakfast with sa-wat-dee

Three words

- ☐ sa-wat-dee: hello
- ☐ khop-khun: thank you
- ☐ kho-thot: sorry
- ☐ Choose khrap or kha for each of you

Heads and feet

- ☐ Sit for one minute with feet tucked away
- ☐ Point with the whole hand
- ☐ Walk around a picnic on the floor, never over it
- ☐ Dip your shoulders as you pass someone sitting

Pack the temple bag

- ☐ A top with sleeves for each child
- ☐ Shorts or a skirt past the knee, or light pants
- ☐ A sarong or scarf for the shoulders
- ☐ Shoes that slip off easily

At the temple, find

- ☐ The row of shoes at the door
- ☐ The raised doorstep to step over
- ☐ Monks in orange robes
- ☐ Flowers, candles or incense left as offerings

Stand for the anthem

- ☐ Play a freeze game: when the music plays, everyone stands still
- ☐ Know the times: 8 in the morning, 6 in the evening
- ☐ If people around you stop, stop too
- ☐ Stand when the cinema plays the royal anthem

Our family promise

Write it together, in your child's words. Sign it and pack it.

1. On Samui I will say hello by

2. At the temple I will

3. I will not touch

4. When someone helps us, I will say

Child signs

Parent signs

Checked on October 22, 2026 against the Thai government's guides on thailand.go.th (from the Ministry of Culture), the Tourism Authority of Thailand, the Thailand Foundation and the US Department of State.

From [SamuiKids.com](https://samuikids.com), the free guide for parents on Koh Samui: samuikids.com/thai-customs