

WINGSForum, 16-18 November 2006, Bangkok

Cultural guidelines for Thailand

Although WINGSForum will mostly take place in a hotel setting, there are still some important cultural guidelines about Thailand and interactions with Thai people that it will be important for all participants to know. We have compiled an information sheet with the most important points to consider for your visit to Thailand.

Most of the points below will be helpful if you take time to visit the sights of Bangkok or elsewhere in Thailand. Several of them will also be helpful within the conference setting itself.

General points

- In general, adopting a **modest voice, dress and physical presence** is very important; Thai culture is very formal, hierarchical and “quiet” in many respects.
- **A woman must never touch a monk**; as monks travel freely around Bangkok on buses, etc, it’s actually very easy to come into close contact and women need to take great care to keep their distance.
- Thai society in general is **conservative about touching** and public displays of affection.
- **Images of the Buddha and temples** are sacred and should be treated respectfully and seriously.
- The head is considered to be sacred and feet to be profane. Particularly in temples or other public places it is very important to **keep your feet down and angled away from anyone or thing** (note: in temples visitors would generally adopt a posture of kneeling).

Greeting / conversation

- A **topic to avoid** is the Royal Family (it is a complicated subject and better left unmentioned). Most other topics are quite fine in general conversation.
- **Shaking hands** in a business or meeting setting is generally very comfortable. It is best **not to try to “wai”** (a form of greeting involving raise your hands to your chin), as it is a complex traditional greeting and too easy to get it wrong. No one will expect you to try it.
- When greeting a Thai, **use the word Khun** (pronounced koon) in place of “Mr”, “Ms” or “Mrs”, and the person’s first name. For example, a Westerner with the name “Peter Moore” would be called “Khun Peter”. Among Thais, family names are not usually used. However never refer to yourself with the word Khun; simply say your first name.
- Thai people are very warm and appreciative of any attempts of visitors to **respect their cultural norms**. You will find that they make it easy for you to get things right.

Dress / clothing

- The dress for the conference will be **business casual**.
- When out of the conference hotel for sightseeing or visiting, women should keep their **shoulders covered** and, if wearing a dress or skirt, to keep their **knees covered** (note: if you visit the Royal Palace, you will be required to purchase a long dress if your clothing is not appropriate).
- Plan to wear loafers or other **footwear easy to slip on and off**, particularly if you plan to visit any temples, etc. (note: but no flip flops or other unsecured sandals).

Meals / eating together

- At mealtime it is common for rice and various dishes to be available for all at the table. Everyone has the opportunity to **take a couple of spoonfuls from a dish** to put on their rice. You should then eat those few mouthfuls of food before taking more food, rather than filling your plate to last the meal.
- The **spoon goes in your right hand, fork in the left**.
- If you are **invited out for a meal by a Thai colleague**, it can generally be assumed that they will be expecting to pay for everyone's meal.

Sightseeing / going out

- Bangkok is a very safe and welcoming city. The one caution is to avoid any one who approaches you **trying to sell gems or jewellery**. If you wish to buy those items, it is much better to find a shop which sells them.
- **Tipping** is not generally practised in Thailand, although because of tourists, it has become expected in some industries (for example, by hotel porters, and more expensive hairdressers and restaurants). Don't tip in hotel restaurants, where a service charge is added.
- Tipping is also more expected with **taxi fares**; you can round up to the nearest 5 or 10 baht

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