

Thailand: Cultural Tips

Appointment Times

Office hours in Thailand are generally 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., though a large number of people will work from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Most people will break for lunch from 12 p.m. to 1 p.m.

A lot of companies in the larger industrial estates around Bangkok, in an attempt to avoid large traffic jams at the entry and exit points from the estate, will have staggered start and finish times to the day. It is not unusual to find people working from 7:50 a.m. to 4:50 p.m., for example.

Appointments at the beginning and end of the day are best avoided due to clashes with company transport. This is more the case when dealing with middle level management, who may live in Bangkok and use transport provided by the company to travel to and from the office. Most senior executives will have their own car and driver, making this less of an issue.

Making an Appointment

Appointments in Thailand are always best made a few days in advance, and then confirmed again on the day. Being late for a meeting is sometimes unavoidable due to the horrendous traffic [or simply getting lost!] but is best avoided by careful planning. Nevertheless, a quick call to explain you are stuck in traffic is appreciated.

For people dealing with large government offices or the royal family, you can expect to be given a briefing by either your own organisation or that of the host.

Typical Vacation Times

The Thais are quite lucky in terms of public holidays--with a combination of public and company holidays due to the different influences of Thai, Chinese, Western and other cultures. Most staff at international companies will possibly have a few days leave for New Year, all the Thai Buddhist holidays, and the main break in April for Thai New Year, or 'Songkran.' It is best to try and avoid business trips to Bangkok during early April, as many staff will be on leave.

To make up for the large number of public holidays it is interesting to note that most employees have only 10 and 15 days of leave included into their employment contract.

Business suits are the standard office attire in Thailand: despite the heat most offices require a shirt and tie, with most people preferring to wear a long sleeved shirt.

Given the heat, a lot of people wear a singlet underneath their business shirt to protect their shirts from the sweat stains and to guard against the freezing air conditioning found in most office buildings. Sweating is obviously very difficult to avoid if you are not used to the heat, but an undershirt [while at first a ridiculous idea to many!] is a common solution to the problem of a sweat soaked shirt.

Jackets are a rarity, but may be carried over your arm and then worn once you're at your destination.

Outside of Bangkok, a lot of company employees, especially in the industrial estates, abandon their ties and just wear open neck shirts with collars. Visitors to the site often still wear a shirt and tie, in any case.

For women, skirts are generally always better than pants, and in some establishments [mainly some government offices and schools] are all that is accepted. Generally, skirts are below the knee. If wearing a skirt, most Thais will also wear a matching jacket to keep warm in offices where the air-conditioning is commonly set to a low temperature. Thailand is still very conservative and wearing sleeveless tops is not recommended unless a jacket is worn over the top.

Shoes

In some instances, mainly when visiting someone's home, you may be asked to remove your shoes. Having holes in your socks does not generally go down well!

As a general rule, when at work you can feel confident to talk business, yet when away from the office, or dining with your hosts or colleagues, try to include topics other than work. Thais generally appreciate stories about people's own experiences and families, and rarely are 'all business.'

Most topics are open to conversation, but never ever discuss the monarchy or issues such as national security.

If educated abroad, Thais are always quite keen to talk about their experiences there and, generally, all Thais are keen to hear about your experiences and impressions of visiting / living in Thailand. Be careful: Thais can take complaints about their country personally. It is always good to focus on your positive experiences.

If Thais do bring up a complaint with you, such as how polluted parts of Bangkok are, or apologize for how dirty their factory is, it is best not to agree with them directly, but simply state 'It's fine--don't worry about it.'

Be careful not to give too much praise in regards to a Thai's possessions, as he or she may feel embarrassed, or obligated to give you the item in question. It is best to give general praise, such as 'You have a wonderful office.'

Direct questions are also quite common, and people will often say something like 'I'm sorry, are you married?' Part of this is trying to identify your position in the group.

Age is also a common question, especially if you are not yet going bald or grey! Direct replies are appreciated, but can be avoided if you don't feel comfortable replying. 'I feel like I'm 21 again!' is a good example of an indirect response.

Be aware that Thais will often state bluntly that you are either fat or fatter than the last time they saw you. Don't take offence at this and simply laugh it off and give a simple reason--usually all the delicious Thai food you have been enjoying recently. There is no need to reply with a similar comment.

If you wish to include a bit of Thai culture into your daily life, the easiest [and safest] way is to use 'Khun' as a prefix, instead of Mr and Ms when addressing people. It can be used for both males and females. For example, a 30 year old female, Amporn Duangchit [first name, surname], will simply be Khun Amporn. Every Thai has a nickname, and once you are more familiar with people it is usual for them to encourage you to call them by their nickname instead of their first name. Most Thai nicknames are single syllable words they are given from birth and can be Thai or English words, colours, fruits, or shortenings of their first name. To keep things a little formal, it is still acceptable to call your colleague 'Khun Chai' instead of 'Khun Somchai.'

Also note that Thais will tend to translate Khun David to be Mr. David when dealing with foreigners, rather than Mr. Smith.

Thais typically don't add a specific title based on the job or qualification. Dr. is really the only exception, in which case it's Dr. [First name]. Engineers are still Khun [First name].

Always check beforehand if there are any special procedures for company to company presentations, as PR departments are always keen to make the most of such opportunities and the local media is quite receptive, especially for larger companies.

When giving a gift to an individual, something small and inexpensive from your home country is most appreciated, rather than something obviously expensive and 'run-of-the-mill.' Photographic books that show your home country are usually a safe option. Other small gifts at times such as New Year's are commonly company t-shirts, calendars, pens, and other similar products.

Don't be surprised if your gift is not opened in front of you, but instead completely ignored and put to the side until you leave. Don't feel put off by this, since Thais often prefer not to show their emotion as it may lead to surprise and possible loss of face. Follow their lead if an exchange has been made. Simply hold the gift or put it away and open it later in private.

At New Year's it is common to give gift baskets full of tinned fruits, cookies, whisky and other items. These are usually given and received on behalf of a company.

In terms of working in an office in Thailand, small gifts of food are greatly appreciated and it's never a good idea to go to the market, buy some fruit and only buy enough for yourself. Most offices will have a kitchenette that runs on the premise of everyone bringing in extra food that is shared openly. Don't announce your gift; instead humbly leave it in the kitchen unannounced, just like everyone else.

Do not give sharp objects, such as knives and scissors, and mirrors, as gifts. Perfume is generally only given to your girlfriend, as are handkerchiefs.

When making a presentation to Thais, especially in Bangkok, you can use English and have all of your slides and handouts in English. However, make sure to speak clearly and without any idiomatic or other complex language, as it will embarrass the people you are presenting to if you lose them with overly complicated language. Thais generally are the most comfortable with British and American speakers. Other nationalities and accents can sometimes cause hesitation. To overcome this, always keep in mind the need to speak slowly and clearly.

Don't be afraid to take an interpreter if the language will be a problem.

Make your materials colourful and full of photographs and other items that communicate the product or service being presented. Try to avoid large black and white tracts of text, especially if it is in English. Be careful also of losing your message through lack of content.

You can be confident, especially in larger companies and definitely in Bangkok, to use English as the language for all of your proposals. Contracts in English are also acceptable.

Business cards are almost always exchanged at the beginning of the meeting and it's good to try and explain exactly who people are on your team in the hope that key decision makers are identified. It is not always easy to identify roles in the organisation, especially if senior staff are uncomfortable speaking English.

Business cards should be exchanged with the most senior person / oldest person first if possible. Normally, the host of the meeting will initiate the exchange of cards. If none is offered, it is possible to present your card at the end of the meeting along with any materials you wish to present to the company as a part of your presentation.

Make sure to have lots of copies of your proposal--ideally one for each person attending the presentation and a few spare for staff unable to attend, but who may be interested.

Building a good relationship is an important part of the negotiation process, so don't be afraid of simple conversation, normally at either the start or end of your 'official' presentation. Thais place a lot of importance on 'liking' a person, and never underestimate this. Invitations to activities such as golf, dinner, and other functions should always be accepted and seen as an opportunity to get to know each other.

It is very rare for a decision to be made on the spot. Instead, a call back is required once a few days have passed. Thais generally are not confident decision makers and often need to consult with several different people before making a decision. If they are not ready to do business, then this is a common excuse. Don't be put off by this, instead see it as an opportunity to further develop the relationship by offering to meet again, or present more information.

When negotiating, be aware that if your Thai counterpart is focussing on small, insignificant details as problems, these may indicate there are larger problems that need your attention. Because your Thai counterpart doesn't want you to lose face, or confront you directly, these little sign posts are very important. To identify what the problem is, try standing back and asking questions about details, all the time avoiding the specific topic but being careful to place all the pieces together.

The pace of business is often much slower than in western countries and it is not a good idea to push things along at a faster pace. Confrontation is almost always avoided, and a cool head and a pleasant disposition are normally rewarded with a positive response.

Company policy is usually followed quite strictly, particularly in larger organisations.

Business cards usually include your name and your position, plus associated company information such as address, website, email address etc. A high quality business card is an important asset in Thailand.

Business cards almost always have Thai on one side and English on the other.

If you have a special title, such as Dr., or a special qualification such as a Ph.D., then this may also be included on the card.

Thais love to eat and food is a central feature of most activities. There are several things to remember when eating a meal in Thailand:

The vast majority of business dinners or lunches will take place at a restaurant. It is best to arrive on time and as a group.

The host and the more senior members of the group should be seated first and will normally encourage you to sit first. Politely refuse, encourage them to take a seat and be comfortable and then wait for them to sit. This is usually a very busy time as everyone gets organised; foreign guests are almost always told where to sit.

Thais will always do the ordering and take much pride in the choice of dish. If you are asked what you prefer, don't be shy in making suggestions or reminding the host of any allergies etc.

Generally, there will be several different dishes placed in the middle of the table and a plate of steamed white rice will be placed before each diner.

If there are any soups, then diners will also have a small round bowl placed in front of them. This bowl is for soup only.

Thais will usually have the restaurant staff serve the dishes if soups or more complicated dishes, such as some seafood, have been ordered. At finer hotels this is certainly the case, but at more casual restaurants, especially outside of Bangkok, all are welcome to help themselves. Use the serving spoons provided. Be careful not to get any rice on the serving spoon or back in the main dish.

Thai food is normally eaten with a spoon and a fork. Chopsticks are for Chinese foods and noodles.

Use your spoon for putting food in your mouth. Your fork is used for pushing food onto your spoon.

Don't put several dishes onto your plate of rice and then eat them. Instead place a small amount of one dish on your rice, eat it, and then add some more from another dish.

If the food is spicy, don't try to force yourself. Instead, enquire if some fried rice or another 'less spicy' dish is available.

Food may be passed from one diner to another during the meal. Follow the lead in passing dishes.

It is not unusual for a huge amount of food to be ordered--it is seen as bad form on the part of the host if not enough food is ordered.

Try, as best as possible, not to leave a large amount of uneaten food on your plate. This is seen as impolite. It can be avoided by always only adding one dish to your rice at a time and finishing it before adding the next.

Alcohol is not common at lunch, but always present at dinner.

If you are dining at a restaurant, the staff will work hard to keep your glass full at all times. Be careful to keep track of how much you have drunk, especially if you are not used to the humidity and are dehydrated.

Ice is almost always added to beer, and if you are not familiar with the local brews it can help reduce the bitter taste. Light beer is usually not available.

Any scraps, such as shell fish, are usually placed on a communal plate, typically one plate for every 3-4 people. If none is available and you have no rice left on your plate it is a good idea to request a new dinner plate.

Don't blow your nose at the table. Excuse yourself and visit the bathroom if you need to sneeze.

Toothpicks are common at the end of the meal, but be sure to cover your mouth with your free hand.

A popular toast is simply 'Good Luck!' or in Thai 'Chai Yo!'

Normally, the host will pay for the dinner, or the oldest or most senior person in the group.

If, as a foreigner, you want to host a meal and pay for it, a good trick is to arrange for the restaurant to present the bill only to you and at a specified time, away from the table. This way you may avoid an embarrassing situation with the Thai guests wanting to pay because you are the visitor to Thailand.

If eating a quick meal with Thai staff, such as a quick lunch at a local food market, it is common to split the bill based on what each person ate.

The bill is nearly always settled at the end of the meal.

If a service charge is included, then no tip is needed. Tips don't need to be any more than 10% of the bill, and change will normally be given in a series of smaller bills if you pay cash. A tip of between 10 and 50 baht is more than satisfactory.

If you pay by credit card, then a small amount of between 10 and 50 baht is appreciated.

Anytime is a good time to eat, and food can almost always be found at any time of the day, especially in Bangkok.

Typically, meals are eaten at around 7 a.m., 12 p.m., and between 6 and 8 p.m. for dinner.

Thai culture can, despite what you may first think when walking around Bangkok, be very conservative. It is always best to wear long sleeved shirts and pants, and shoes rather than sandals if you are unsure.

For females in particular, it is better to wear clothes that cover your shoulders and upper legs, especially if going to a social function where work colleagues will be present.

The dirtiness and crowded nature of most cities are countered by most Thais through an incredible level of cleanliness when it comes to their own possessions and in particular their car and house. Always remove your shoes before going into someone's home.

Holding hands in public and expressions of emotion are not really accepted, but younger generations are changing this. Touching is generally a sign of acceptance and trust, but should never be initiated by the foreigner.

Most often a Thai will greet a foreigner with a handshake. Following the lead of the Thai and being ready for a handshake are the most important points to remember.

Unfortunately, spitting and nose blowing in public are common, as is nose picking. Some public campaigns have tried to change this, to little effect so far.

General Cultural Points to Remember

Be careful not to step over anything, especially food or someone's work, or touch anything with your feet. Be careful not to point your feet at someone or something.

Be aware that it is not appropriate to touch people on the head, or pass things over the head. An example of this kind of mistake is to pass a microphone cord over someone's head.

Body odour can be an issue in this climate--always leave time to cool down before going to visit a client, and if you are going to be outside during the day and will be attending an event in the evening, a change of shirt may be a good idea.

There are no real rules for passing a temple, except that any Thais in the group may stop for a second and say a short prayer. If you do visit a temple, follow the signs in regards to cameras and shoes, and never step on a door sill. Observe how the Thais enter, and follow their lead.

Pointing is considered rude--instead use your whole hand to gesture carefully in the general direction of the thing you want to point out.

If you would like to gesture for someone to come to you, this is best done by extending your hand out with the palm down and gently motioning your fingers towards you.

Crossing your legs is an acceptable way to sit in Thailand.

To Wai or Not to Wai

If you are visiting a company with Thai colleagues they will *wai* [the traditional Thai greeting] the host of the meeting who will return the *wai*. As a foreigner be prepared to either *wai* or shake hands, especially if you are dealing with someone who is working at an international company or has travelled abroad before. The best way to deal with this is to follow the lead of the host--the large majority will shake your hand after *waiing* the Thais in the room. It is very rare to both *wai* and then shake hands with the same person.

If your host does *wai* you then you should definitely *wai* that person in return.

To *wai*, bring your palms together and your elbows in to your waist, and then raise your palms to be at the same height as your chin. It is also good to bow your head slightly at the same time, and when *waiing* older people, to remember to lower your head more than usual.

Do not *wai* children, waiters, taxi drivers, maids, or other service staff.

Don't panic if senior staff do not *wai* in return, as it is unusual for older people to *wai* younger people in return. The most common response would be a simple nod of acknowledgement.