

IMMERSIVE TRAVEL ASIA



Immersive Travel Asia

A Guide to Travelling Responsibly

NOTES FOR GUESTS IN ASIA

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INTERNAL & TRAVELLER STANDARD

FOREWORD

A guest, not just a visitor

A trip changes shape depending on who's taking it. The same street, the same temple, the same family home, can be a genuine exchange or a mildly extractive experience, and the difference usually comes down to small things: how a question is asked, whether a photo has permission behind it, whether a gift is actually welcome.

This isn't a list of rules to memorise before you land. It's the kind of guidance a good friend who lives here would give you over a coffee before you set off, the things that make the difference between being a guest and being a tourist.

We brief every traveller on this before a trip begins, and our guides are there to help if a situation isn't covered here.

EVERYDAY ETIQUETTE

Greetings & small habits

A few words of the local language go further than you'd expect, hello, goodbye, and thank you are worth learning before you land, and people notice the effort.

Physical greetings vary by country. In several Buddhist countries, a slight bow with palms pressed together at the chest is more appropriate than a handshake. Public displays of affection are best kept private, they read as offensive in many places rather than simply informal.

A FEW HABITS WORTH LOSING FOR THE TRIP

- Pointing or gesturing with your feet, or putting your feet up on furniture
- Touching someone on the head, even a child
- Using a toothpick without covering your mouth with your free hand
- Offering money or gifts with one hand rather than two
- Curling a finger to call someone over, use a downward wave instead

CULTURAL AWARENESS

Understanding where you are

The more you know about a place before you arrive, the more you'll get out of being there. When something feels culturally unfamiliar, a useful check is simply asking whether you'd act the same way at home.

It's easy to romanticise what you see, a bamboo house, a farmer in a rice field, without registering that the same scene can mean limited comfort, exposure to the weather, and a hard, short working life for the people living it. Most people want the same access to comfort and opportunity that any visitor takes for granted, and progress in a place isn't something to be quietly disappointed by.

Every country here holds multiple ethnic groups, each with its own customs, so treat a guide's advice as specific to where you are rather than a fixed rulebook for the whole region. Curiosity goes both ways, most people are just as interested in where you're from as you are in where they are.

PHOTOGRAPHY & CONVERSATION

A moment first, then a photo

A photograph taken without any connection first tends to feel exactly like what it is, a transaction rather than a memory. Take a moment to talk with someone before raising a camera. It rarely takes long, and the resulting photo means more to both of you.

Expect to be asked personal questions more than once, where you're from, where you're headed, whether you're married, how old you are. Most people asking aren't being intrusive, they're being friendly or practising their English. Privacy carries a different weight in much of Asia than it does at home, worth knowing rather than being caught off guard by.

SACRED SITES

Cultural & religious sites

Many heritage sites, including ruins, remain sacred ground. Stay on marked paths, don't climb on structures, and never take a stone or fragment as a souvenir.

AROUND MONKS, NOVICES & NUNS

- Don't initiate a handshake, and be mindful of a monk's shadow
- Women shouldn't sit directly beside a monk or hand him anything, place items down instead
- Avoid photographing or disturbing monks during prayer
- Don't sit with feet or back pointed toward a Buddha image
- Handle any Buddha image or sacred object with visible care, never on the floor

DRESS

Dressing with care

What's appropriate shifts with where you are, and the safest approach is to watch what the people around you are wearing and adjust accordingly.

Temples and religious sites generally call for covered shoulders and legs, with shoes removed at the door, the same often applies entering a home or a small shop. Nude sunbathing or swimming isn't accepted on any beach here.

In forest and jungle settings, long sleeves and trousers help with insects and sun rather more than they hinder the experience. At rural waterfalls and rivers, keep a t-shirt on rather than swimming in just a bikini or swim trunks. What you might see worn in a big city isn't a reliable guide to what's appropriate elsewhere, and men going shirtless outside a beach setting is generally read as inconsiderate rather than casual.

CHILDREN

Children come first

Please don't give money, sweets, or gifts to a child, or buy anything a child is selling directly, however kind it feels in the moment. It tends to do the opposite of help, it keeps children on the street rather than in school, and makes them a target for people who exploit that dependency. Our guides are trained to step in if this comes up, and we'd rather you flag it to them than handle it yourself.

We don't include visits to orphanages, care centres, or schools on any itinerary, and we'd ask you not to seek these out independently either. It's a position covered in full in our Child Safety Codes of Conduct, but the short version is that short, repeated visits from strangers do measurable harm to a child's development, however good the intention behind them.

The same caution extends to venues connected to the exploitation of children or to human trafficking. If anything you encounter raises a concern, however small, tell your guide immediately.

GIVING BACK

Giving back properly

If you'd like to support children, families, or communities financially during your trip, we'd always point you toward a vetted organisation rather than handing money directly to an individual. It's genuinely difficult to judge the reliability of a cause from the outside in an unfamiliar country, and a small number of bad actors can do real damage to trust in the good ones.

Ask us, we keep a list of organisations we're confident in, and we're glad to help you give in a way that actually reaches the people it's meant for.

LOCAL ECONOMY

Supporting the local economy

Buying food and handicrafts directly from local makers and markets keeps more of your spending in the community you're visiting, rather than routing it through a larger, less local, supply chain.

On local transport, the variety of tuk-tuks, cyclos, and rickshaws is part of the texture of travelling here, and you'll be offered rides more than you'll want, a polite decline is all that's needed. Always agree a price before you get in. Walking, cycling, or taking a slower local option tends to reward you with a better view of a place than a faster one would.

On bargaining, stay patient, stay warm, and keep your voice down regardless of the situation, visible frustration reads as a serious loss of composure in most of the places we operate, not as understandable haggling. A good negotiation, done with a smile, is genuinely part of the experience, and whatever you're buying, remember it's someone's livelihood on the other side of the price.

WHAT NOT TO BUY

Wildlife, dead or alive

Don't buy any wildlife, alive or dead, and that includes souvenirs made from shell, coral, precious wood, or any endangered species. Trading elephants, tigers, primates, or marine animals, along with their meat, ivory, bone, or shell, is illegal wherever we operate, and items made from turtle, pangolin, or seahorse shouldn't be purchased either, legal or not.

It's worth mentioning caged birds specifically, sold in some markets to be released for luck. Paying for that release doesn't free anything, it funds the next bird being caught. The kindest response is not to buy it at all.

Avoid furniture or objects made from unregulated timber or other material taken directly from a forest ecosystem.

ANIMAL ENCOUNTERS

Reading the warning signs

We take a cautious view of any attraction built around animals, elephant camps, primate centres, marine wildlife shows among them. The simplest rule of thumb: if an animal is being made to perform, is chased or lured into position, or clearly isn't free to behave naturally, it isn't somewhere we'd recommend.

At an elephant camp specifically, walk away from anything where an elephant is kept off grass and on concrete, left without shade, made to carry more weight than is safe for its frame, or trained to perform tricks like painting or football. None of that belongs in a genuine sanctuary.

Never touch or feed a wild animal, on land or in the water, and never stare directly at a primate, a fixed stare reads as a threat to them. Our complete position on animal welfare, including the standards every excursion we offer has to meet, is set out in our Animal Welfare Codes of Conduct.

PLASTIC

Plastic & refilling

Plastic waste is a genuine problem across the region, and a reusable water bottle is the single easiest thing you can bring to reduce your own contribution to it. We'll help you find refill points along the way, in vehicles, at hotels, and through apps that map public refill stations.

Bring your own bag when shopping rather than accepting a plastic one, and skip the straw where you can, if a glass looks questionable, a straw doesn't make it any safer to drink from. When you're packing for the flight home, resist the urge to wrap luggage in plastic film, a lock does the same job without the waste.

WASTE, ENERGY & WATER

The practical habits

In nature, carry out everything you carry in, including food scraps, which can introduce species that don't belong in a local ecosystem. Used batteries are worth bringing home with you too, reliable recycling for them isn't always available locally.

Where there's no toilet facility, stay at least fifty metres from any water source or home, and pack out anything that can't be left behind, sanitary items and diapers included. Fire holds particular meaning in many local cultures, so treat it as more than a rubbish disposal option.

In your room, a fan is often enough where air conditioning feels like overkill, and skipping a daily linen change is a small habit worth adopting. Water heated over cut timber is a resource worth treating carefully rather than using for a long, hot shower.

NATURAL AREAS

Staying on the trail

Wandering off a marked trail, especially in the wet season, does lasting damage, a shortcut taken once becomes a path, and a path becomes an erosion channel. In caves, avoid touching rock formations, the oils on skin discolour surfaces that took thousands of years to form.

Be cautious around unfamiliar plants, some found in tropical forests sting or carry toxins. If you're bathing in a stream or lake on a trek, use a minimal amount of soap, organic if you have it, and skip detergent entirely if you can, it's considerably harder on a natural ecosystem than most people realise.

The simplest version of all of this: take only photographs, leave only footprints.



None of this is about walking on eggshells for two weeks. It's about the fact that a good trip and a respectful one are usually the same trip, and the traveller who pays attention to these things tends to have the better story to tell afterward anyway.

If you're ever unsure in the moment, ask your guide. That's what they're there for.



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