



Cambodia

This month, our attention turns to Cambodia situated in the southwest of the Indochinese peninsula. Cambodia borders Thailand to the west and northwest, Laos to the northeast, Vietnam to the east, and Gulf of Thailand to the southwest. The population of approximately 16.2 million people is concentrated in the southeast of the country, particularly in and around the capital of Phnom Penh. The ethnic group is predominantly Khmer 97.6%, Cham 1.2% with Chinese and Vietnamese less than 1%.

Cambodia has experienced strong economic growth over the last decade; GDP grew at an average annual rate of over 8% between 2000 and 2010 and at least 7% since 2011. However, it remains one of the poorest countries in Asia and long-term economic development remains a challenge. The problem is compounded by Cambodia's demographic imbalance – 50% of the population is less than 25 years old. Khmer is the official language of Cambodia. While visitors may wish to learn a few spoken phrases before or when visiting Cambodia, English is widely spoken and understood. French and Mandarin are also spoken frequently in the country; most elderly Cambodians speak French and many people in the Khmer-Chinese population speak Mandarin.

Thearavada Buddhism is the official religion in Cambodia which is practiced by 95% of the population – just like that of Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka. However, Christianity and Cham Muslim are active and popular and Daoism and Confucianism are also commonly practiced among the Chinese people.

People in Cambodia are well-known from their hospitality and warmth. Talking about your family, work and home country are all interesting to Cambodians. They, in turn, will talk happily about their own family, especially their children. They enjoy talking about places you may have visited, especially the famous city of Angkor which is a source of national pride. Do not discuss the Khmer Rouge period (known as Pol Pot time) until you know someone well although people do bring up the subject themselves.

Greetings between Cambodians are dependent on the relationship, hierarchy and age of the people. The traditional greeting is a bow combined with a bringing of the hands together at chest level. It is known as the 'Sampeah', where you join your hands at the level of your chest, chin, nose, eyebrows or over the head. Each position is directed to a different kind of person. If one intends to show greater respect the bow is lower and the hands brought higher. The Sampeah is different between friends, bosses or elders, greeting parents, grandparents, and teachers, and different again for saluting monks - with the hands highest when 'praying to the God or sacred statues'. Sampeah is not just a form of greeting. It is also to show recognition and respect to someone. It is impolite not to return a Sampeah.

People are usually addressed with the honorific title 'lok' for men and 'lok srey' for women followed by both first and last name. Following 'lok' only with a surname is impolite so be sure you catch both names. The simple rule is to respond with the greeting you are given.

Cambodians are also very conservative, modest in their dress and dislike public displays of affection. Even placing an arm around a local to pose for a photo can be misinterpreted. In Phnom Penh especially, they are used to working with Westerners however and it is appropriate to shake hands, if they make the first move.

Furthermore, in western culture, we tend to judge someone that will not meet our eyes as suspicious. In Cambodian culture, indirect eye contact is a form of respect and direct eye contact is usually only made with social equals.

Finally, the Cambodian society and workplace is highly hierarchical. As with other countries in Asia, staff will probably not be eager to volunteer their ideas. Rather, they will agree with whatever the boss suggests even if they know it's not in the best interests of the project. As a visitor to the country, conform to the company's President, Manager or Department Head. Show that person respect at all times. Understanding the concept of face is critical and this includes honour, reputation, dignity and social importance. Any sort of negative feedback should be delivered calmly in private and as indirectly as possible. Giving suggestions for improvement rather than criticism is the best approach.