



## Bracelets For Buildings Inc. (B4B)

### Cultural Notes

Cultural sensitivity is the awareness that there are differences and similarities between people of different countries and ethnic backgrounds without judging them as right or wrong, better or worse. We are just different. Something that may seem rude to you may actually be a sign of respect to someone else. A couple of general rules for international travel:

- Come with an open mind. Bring your sense of humor and a smile; be prepared to laugh at yourself.
- A little bit of effort and a genuine interest in the local people and customs buys a lot of forgiveness. You will likely still make little cultural mistakes, but the fact that you are making an effort to engage is greatly appreciated.

### Specific Information Regarding Cambodian Culture

The traditional way of greeting and saying good-bye in Cambodia is to place your hands together in front of you (prayer hands) and bow slightly. This is called a *sampeah*. Where you place your hands in front of your body, and how deep you bow, depend on the age and relationship of the person you are greeting. The higher your hands and the lower your bow, the greater the respect.

- People of the same age and social standing: hands in front of chest, bob head
- Older people, your boss: fingertips just below your mouth.
- Parents, older relatives and teachers: fingertips at nose level.
- Monks and the king: fingertips at eyebrow level.
- Forehead level *sampeahs* are exclusively for prayer, sacred sites, and temple worship.

This is one area where it is best to err on the side of caution. Greeting a waitress with a monk-level greeting can actually be seen to cause a loss of face – another important aspect of Asian culture. See note below.

Traditionally, Cambodians do not *sampeah* to children, street vendors or beggars – in these cases a nod and smile is the polite response to a greeting. Some Cambodian men will now shake hands, particularly with western men; however, women will shy away from shaking hands, especially with men. When they greet you with a *sampeah*, it's important to return the *sampeah* properly. Not doing so would be like not shaking a hand that's been offered in greeting.

Since **relative age is important** in Cambodian courtesy, a local may ask you how old you are before they ask your name. They are not being rude; they want to be sure that they greet and address you in the appropriate manner, as their language uses titles which convey information about relative age and social status. Likewise, they will only make **eye contact** with their social equals. So, if someone avoids making eye contact when greeting you, they are showing you respect, not rudeness.



## Bracelets For Buildings Inc. (B4B)

Cultural sensitivity is extremely important in **issues relating to sexuality when dealing with children or the beneficiaries of work projects**. It is not considered polite to touch a person of the opposite sex. Even friendly hugs among opposite-sex friends are avoided. However, same sex friends may walk hand-in-hand or display affection in other non-sexual ways.

**“Face”** is perhaps the single most important concept in etiquette throughout Asia, and it is often confusing and difficult for westerners to understand. The following are excerpts from an online article entitled *“Saving Face and Losing Face,”* by Greg Rodgers. To read the full article go to:  
<https://www.tripsavvy.com/saving-face-and-losing-face-1458303>

**Face can be described as a combination of social standing, reputation, influence, dignity, and honor.** Causing someone to lose face lowers them in the eyes of their peers, while “saving” or “building face” raises their self-worth. Causing someone to “lose face” — even if done on accident — is a serious infraction. On the other hand, “giving or building face” is about shifting the spotlight away from yourself. **Humility is considered a highly honorable trait in Asia.** Giving face is a game of boosting egos while simultaneously declining and deflecting praise.

### Simple Tips to Prevent Someone from Losing Face

- Do what you can to avoid all potential embarrassment for others.
- Avoid pointing out someone's mistakes openly in front of their peers.
- Politely refuse a gift at first, but always eventually relent and accept with both hands. Don't open it immediately unless the giver requests it.
- If you give to beggars, do so discreetly.
- Show extra respect by deferring to all elders and people of rank, title, or uniform.
- When negotiating prices in Asia, be a little flexible on your final price.

### Simple Tips for Building Face in Asia

- Always be quick to give credit when due. Give sincere compliments when they are merited.
- If you see that potential embarrassment for someone else is imminent, do something to distract from it (e.g., quickly change the subject). Preventing someone from losing face is a very good way to make a new friend.
- Politely deflect compliments that come your way. Quickly acknowledge that your achievement is due to the wise instruction of your family or teachers.
- Laugh and smile at your own mistakes but then let them go. Move on without making a big deal!
- Turn the attention away from yourself. Don't be the loudest person at the table.
- Express interest in the local culture and history of a place you are visiting.
- Accept business cards with both hands; hold them by the corners and treat them as cherished objects of high value. Don't stuff them into your back pocket!



## Bracelets For Buildings Inc. (B4B)

### **Tipping**

There are no rules for tipping in Cambodia – it's completely up to you. Although it's not required, and nobody will be upset if you don't leave a tip, leaving a dollar or two is fairly typical and greatly appreciated by the recipient.

### **Bartering**

If you're in a store where locals shop and prices are posted, or in a restaurant with menus, including prices, you are not expected to barter. However, in markets, especially those catering to tourists with local artisan products, clothing, etc., bartering is expected. If an item has a price tag, the price is fixed; however, if the vendor gives you a price verbally, they are probably expecting you to try to talk them down.

There will often be multiple stalls selling the same items. Check around to find out what the going rate is, and know what you are willing to pay before you engage a vendor. Sometimes buying multiple items will help you get a better price per item. Negotiate with a smile and a friendly attitude. Remember, the point of bargaining is to reach a deal that you can both feel good about. Keep in mind that you're contributing to the livelihood of local artisans and vendors in a country where many people earn less than \$100/month. A few dollars may not make a difference to you, but it will to them.

### **Sensitive Subjects**

Be wary of bringing up political issues with locals. There was an election in 2013 in which more support for the minority and anti-ruling party was expressed than ever before, and many are resentful about the current political situation. Related to this event is a long history of animosity toward Vietnam, which was recently stirred up by a minority political leader.

Officially, the Vietnamese are celebrated for their role as liberators when they intervened and overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. However, the pro-Vietnamese government that was established at that time continues to this day, so those dissatisfied with the current government often blame it on the Vietnamese. Any comparison between Vietnam and Cambodia which doesn't overtly favor Cambodia may be met with scorn and anger.

The Khmer Rouge is a very delicate issue. Be sensitive to the fact that anyone over 40 years of age has survived a genocide and imagine the trauma they experienced. Since most of them do not want to talk about it, many of the younger generations are unaware of their family history and have little understanding of what happened.

Books to consider for further information on the history of Cambodia:

1. **Top 10 books about Cambodia** <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/19/top-10-books-about-cambodia-pol-pot-peter-froberg-idling>
2. **First they killed my Father:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_They\\_Killed\\_My\\_Father](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_They_Killed_My_Father)
- 3.