

Mekong Kayaks

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Cultural Tips Guide on Village Behaviour

Introduction:

You need to be aware that villages along the Mekong where there is no road access, have been very insulated from farangs (westerners) and have had very little exposure to international tourists and how they think and behave. To them westerners are all wealthy, are awash with money and branded goods and can afford to "spread the love" with money and gifts.

We want to develop tourism to the villages in a sustainable manner, to retain the authentic experience without it becoming commercial and soulless, so that all parties can learn and benefit. Do not become an *Ugly Tourist* with inappropriate and disrespectful behaviour.

Lao culture is quite conservative so to avoid any potentially embarrassing cultural situations it is best to follow a few simple rules, as unlike in the west, the villagers are lifestyle rich but cash poor, and live a sustainable, happy existence growing or catching whatever is to eat around them. Most of them do not have an income and will barter for goods within the village.

Laos people are predominantly Buddhists and even though they have little to give, are very warm, generous, polite people with a great sense of fun. Any show of anger or lack of respect to older people is considered extremely rude. Always be polite and courteous, don't shout, and smile even if you're upset about something.

Your guide is there to help, please ask him. If he notices you are doing something culturally insensitive, he will politely tell you. Please do not take it personally, he's merely ensuring that you are doing the right thing and everyone enjoys themselves.

Expectations:

- Do not offer them money in the unlikely event they should ask you. Just politely decline. The home-stay fee for food and lodging is included in your tour ticket price. However it's fine to make a donation to the school dance troupe who have practised their cultural dancing to entertain you and are not paid for it. It's also customary to donate some money at the baci welcoming ceremony if asked, typically 100 Bt or 250,000 kip. A donation at the temple is OK too. If there is any cultural misunderstanding, get your guide involved to sort it out.
- They'll offer you fruit, bottled water, coffee etc all of which is included in your tour price. You do need to pay if you order a beer or some other food/drink which is bought at the local shop. Typically if you order some beer, you are expected to pay, and all the men will drink with you who won't pay. They view it as a gift from you. Best to agree first with your travelling companions before you get to the village on how you want to handle it. Good news is that Beer Laos is a great beer and very cheap at ~US\$1.50 a large bottle. We just always pay for a crate and everyone helps themselves until it's gone.
- In exchange you'll probably be offered shots of home brewed Kao Lao (rice whiskey but tastes more like sake), for which you don't normally have to pay. Be warned it has a real kick if you are not used to it and the villagers will play hilarious drinking games with you.

The most fun you'll ever have with your pants on

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- Your home-stay hosts have been advised not to ask you for a tip. However, should they do so when you leave, it is over to you. If you do not wish to tip say so politely as in some western cultures tipping is common while in many others there is no tipping. Leaving a small gift like soap or toothpaste when you depart is always appreciated.
- Take off your shoes before going inside any home or large boat, as the feet are considered dirty at all times. Never point the soles of your feet at a Buddhist person while sitting on the floor. This can cause some older westerners problems who cannot sit in a lotus position or on their knees when at a baci. Best to always try and point your feet away from anyone close by. If it proves impossible in a crowded room turn around, smile, point at your feet and apologise for it, they'll laugh and appreciate your polite gesture
- Never place a hand on a Laos person's head (young children are OK)
- You'll notice all the Laos women and girls wearing a conservative sinn (a long, wrap-around dress similar to a sarong). Lady tourists should not wear bikinis, extremely short dresses or shorts, cut-offs, or halter necked tops around the village and should cover bare arms and legs if going inside the temple. In the kayaks and on the boat it's OK but cover up when you arrive at a village. For the men please put on a shirt at dinner, inside a home, or at a baci to show respect.
- Ask before taking a close up photo of anyone. But rather than click and run try and interact with them. They don't speak English but it's amazing what can be communicated with hand gestures and smiles. The kids are real hams and will love having their photographs taken with you and also closely examining the results. To protect village children, please do not take pictures of them swimming naked in the river and never ever post on social media.
- It's illegal in Laos for western men to fraternise with Laos women, so watch your step, but don't let that stop you enjoying yourself, they'll still be keen to dance with you.
- Drugs. Need we say more; you'll not be offered them at Ban Lad Khammune, but you may be offered them elsewhere while travelling in Laos. Being incarcerated in a Lao prison is simply not worth the risk.
- In other parts of Laos you may be offered animal parts of endangered species – furs, ivory, turtle shells, etc. You can even buy some of these in the Luang Prabang night market. Please do not buy them as it only creates a demand which will further impact the decline of the species. It is also against the CITES Convention. If your home country is a member, you can be prosecuted on your return.

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