

CAMBODIA: LANGUAGE, DIALECTS & ETHICAL COMMUNICATION GUIDE

Language is a direct window into the warm and gentle spirit of Cambodia. While English and French are widely spoken in tourist hubs like Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, learning basic Khmer (the Cambodian language) shows respect for the local culture.

This guide introduces you to the structure of Khmer, regional dialects, essential vocabulary for responsible travel, and the rules of "ethical bargaining."

1. UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE & PRONUNCIATION

Khmer is the official language of Cambodia. Unlike Vietnamese or Lao, Khmer is a non-tonal language. You do not need to worry about changing the pitch of your voice to change the meaning of a word.

- **Vowel Complexity:** Khmer has a highly complex vowel system. The same written consonant can sound different depending on the surrounding vowels.
- **Pronunciation Tip:** Khmer words generally put the stress on the final syllable (e.g., Ar-kun - stress on kun). Speak softly and clearly; a gentle delivery is highly valued in Cambodian society.

2. THE ART OF "ETHICAL BARGAINING" (CHOR CHOV POLITELY)

Bargaining is common in open tourist markets (like the Russian Market or Central Market in Phnom Penh). However, in responsible tourism, bargaining must be conducted with empathy and respect.

The "Mork-Hang" Custom (The Morning's First Sale)



First Sale of the Day

The Belief: Similar to neighboring countries, Cambodian shopkeepers practice the custom of the first morning sale (Mork-Hang). The first transaction of the morning sets the spiritual energy and financial luck for the vendor's entire day.

The Taboo: Avoid harsh bargaining, walking away, or starting disputes over the very first sale of the morning (usually between 7:30 AM – 9:00 AM).

The Ethical Choice: If you are the morning's first customer, negotiate gently, keep the conversation light, and try to make a purchase to support their daily luck.

Put Prices in Perspective

Cambodia is a developing country, and many market vendors support large extended families in rural villages. A difference of 2,000 to 4,000 Cambodian Riel (\$0.50 – \$1.00 USD) is insignificant to an international traveler, but it pays for a local meal. Avoid haggling aggressively over minor amounts.

The "Save Face" Rule of Negotiation

Khmer culture is deeply rooted in avoiding public confrontation. Raising your voice, looking irritated, or showing aggression will cause the seller to "lose face" and will shut down the negotiation. Always bargain with a warm smile and a calm voice. If the price is too high, say "Tlay nah!" (Too expensive!) with a laugh, and ask: "Choh tlay ban te?" (Can you lower the price?). If they cannot meet your price, say "Arkun" (Thank you) and walk away politely.



KNOW WHEN NOT TO BARGAIN

- **Food Stalls & Eateries:** Do not negotiate the price of meals or street food, prices are already very low and margins are slim.
- **Social Enterprise Shops:** Never bargain at training restaurants (like Spoons, Haven, or Friends) or fair-trade cooperatives (such as Artisans Angkor). These organizations pay fair wages to workers and reinvest profits into helping vulnerable youth.
- **Elderly or Rural Vendors:** Do not bargain with poor elderly sellers or farmers selling fresh local fruit. Pay their asking price directly.

4. ESSENTIAL VOCABULARY FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVELERS

Greetings & Politeness

Khmer culture uses polite particles at the end of sentences to show respect: "Chas" (used by women) and "Bât" (used by men).

English	Khmer	Pronunciation
Hello	Sua s'dei	<i>Sua-s'day</i>
Thank you	Arkun	<i>Ah-koon</i>
Excuse me / Sorry	Som toh	<i>Som-toh</i>
Goodbye	Lea heuy	<i>Lee-ah hoy</i>
Yes (for women / men)	Chas / Bât	<i>Chahs / Baht</i>
No, thank you (Polite refusal)	Ot te, arkun	<i>Oht-tay, ah-koon</i>

Sustainable Communication

Use these phrases to refuse single-use plastics at street markets and restaurants.

English	Khmer	Pronunciation
No plastic bag, please.	Ot yor thong plastic te	<i>Oht yor thong plahs-teek tay</i>
No straw, please.	(to confirm with local guide)	—
No wet wipes, please.	(to confirm with local guide)	—
Please refill my bottle.	Som chort teuk	<i>Som chort teuk</i>

Dining & Market Basics

Useful phrases for eco-conscious travelers and vegetarians.

English	Khmer	Pronunciation
I am vegetarian	Khnhom niam buas	<i>Knyom nee-um boo-as</i>
No meat, please	Ot yor sach te	<i>Oht yor sahch tay</i>
Not spicy, please	Ot hal te	<i>Oht hahl tay</i>
How much is this?	Tlay bon man?	<i>Tlay bohn-mahn?</i>
Delicious!	Chhngan!	<i>Ch-ngahn!</i>

 Emergency Basics

Keep these phrases in mind for safety.

English	Khmer	Pronunciation
Help!	Chuoy phong!	<i>Chu-oy phong!</i>
Hospital	Muntea pyeabal	<i>Moon-tee-ah pyee-ah-bahl</i>
Doctor	Krou pet	<i>Kroo pet</i>