

DOS AND DON'TS IN CAMBODIA

Welcome to Cambodia! As you journey through this land of ancient empires, from the majestic temples of Angkor Wat to the tranquil Cardamom Mountains and the vibrant capital of Phnom Penh, your actions shape the destination.

This guide is designed to help you navigate Khmer etiquette, protect historical monuments, support local communities, and minimize your environmental impact.

PHASE 1: BEFORE YOUR TRIP (PREPARATION)

Being a responsible traveler starts before you even leave home. Making smart choices during packing and planning sets the stage for a sustainable journey.

 DO	 DON'T
Pack temple-compliant clothing. Cambodia has a strict dress code for sacred sites. Bring shirts that cover your shoulders/elbows and pants or long skirts that cover your knees.	Rely on buying cheap clothes at temple gates. Many cheap temple pants sold outside are made of thin synthetic materials that tear easily and end up as waste.
Pack a reusable water bottle. Siem Reap and Phnom Penh have active "Refill Not Landfill" stations where you can top up your bottle for free.	Pack heavy or carry excess packaging. Cambodia's waste management systems are still developing. Minimize plastic wrapping on new gear before you pack.
Learn basic Khmer language & gestures. Simple words like Sua s'dei (Hello) and Arkun (Thank you) will bring warm smiles from the locals.	Pack revealing or highly offensive clothing. Respect Cambodia's conservative culture by avoiding crop tops, short shorts, or offensive slogans.
Bring reef-safe sunscreen. If you are visiting coastal areas like Sihanoukville, Kep, or islands like Koh Rong, protect marine life from toxic chemicals.	Forget travel insurance with medical evacuation. Local clinics in remote areas are basic, and emergencies require transport to Phnom Penh or Bangkok.

PHASE 2: DURING YOUR TRIP (ON THE ROAD)

1. Cultural Etiquette & Social Respect

Cambodian (Khmer) culture is gentle, polite, and deeply traditional. Showing respect for local customs will ensure a welcoming and harmonious experience.

 DO	 DON'T
Greet others with the "Sampeah" gesture. Press your palms together at chest level with a slight bow. It is the traditional way to show respect.	Touch a monk or their robes (especially for women). Women must never touch a Buddhist monk or hand items directly to them (place the item on a table instead).
Remove shoes & hats before entering. Always take off your footwear and hats when entering a Buddhist temple (Wat), a local home, or sacred areas.	Point your feet at people or Buddha statues. Feet are considered spiritually unclean. Sit with your legs tucked to the side (pranom) rather than cross-legged.
Respect memorial sites. When visiting the Choeung Ek Killing Fields or Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, dress modestly, speak softly, and maintain quiet respect.	Take inappropriate photos or selfies. Do not smile, pose playfully, or take selfies in front of skull memorials or sacred temple structures.

 DO	 DON'T
Ask permission before taking photos. Always ask local people, especially children, elders, or monks, before taking their photograph.	Lose your temper or raise your voice. In Khmer culture, public anger causes everyone to "lose face." Always remain calm, patient, and polite.

2. Heritage & Ancient Temple Protection

The temples of Angkor are not just tourist attractions; they are active religious sites and fragile historical monuments.

 DO	 DON'T
Stick to designated walking paths. Use the wooden boardwalks and marked stairs to prevent wearing down fragile sandstone steps and paths.	Touch carvings or lean on temple walls. The natural oils and sweat from human hands accelerate the decay and erosion of ancient reliefs.
Respect restricted areas. Obey all signs, barriers, and instructions from temple guards. They are there to protect both you and the monuments.	Sit on loose temple stones or climb ruins. Sitting on ancient structures is highly disrespectful and dangerous. Never take stones as souvenirs.
Observe active worship quietly. Many temples have active shrines. Keep a respectful distance from locals who are praying or offering incense.	Smoke or litter in the temple complex. Angkor Archaeological Park is a smoke-free zone. Always carry your trash back out with you.

3. Economic Responsibility & Community Support

Make sure your travel dollars benefit the local people directly and support sustainable livelihoods.

 DO	 DON'T
Support local social enterprises. Dine at restaurants that train marginalized youth (like Friends-International eateries) and buy from ethical local brands.	Support "Orphanage Tourism." Do not visit or donate to orphanages. Many are unregulated commercial businesses that exploit children.
Buy authentic Cambodian handicrafts. Purchase silk, carvings, and Kampot pepper from registered local shops or traditional market vendors.	Give money or candy to begging children. This keeps them on the streets and out of school. Buy small items from adult vendors instead.
Tip drivers and local guides. Tipping is highly appreciated in Cambodia's low-wage economy and directly helps support extended families.	Purchase historical artifacts. Buying genuine antiquities or historical relics is illegal and deprives Cambodia of its cultural heritage.

4. Environmental Care & Wildlife Protection

Help us preserve Cambodia's ecosystems and protect its domestic and wild animals.

 DO	 DON'T
Visit ethical wildlife sanctuaries. If you want to see elephants, choose ethical projects (like the Mondulkiri Project) where riding is banned.	Ride elephants. Elephant riding causes severe spinal damage and involves cruel training methods. Travel Sense Asia does not support elephant riding.

 DO	 DON'T
Be mindful of water usage. Cambodia experiences severe seasonal water shortages. Keep your showers brief, especially in Siem Reap.	Feed monkeys at temples. Feeding monkeys (like those at Angkor Thom) alters their natural behavior, makes them dependent, and causes them to bite.

PHASE 3: AFTER YOUR TRIP (RETURNING HOME)

Your responsible travel journey doesn't end when you return home. You can continue to advocate for sustainable practices and maintain a positive long-term impact on Cambodia.

 DO	 DON'T
Recommend local micro-businesses. Leave positive online reviews specifically naming local tuk-tuk drivers, community guides, social enterprises, and eco-guesthouses to boost their local visibility. Support verified Khmer NGOs. Continue to advocate for or donate to reputable, transparent organizations (such as Kantha Bopha Children's Hospital or child safety initiatives) rather than unverified online orphanage fundraisers. Be a cultural ambassador. Share your learnings about Cambodia's history, heritage preservation (Angkor Wat), and resilience to help educate future travelers on respectful visitation.	Post photos that compromise local dignity. Avoid sharing photos of local people, especially children in vulnerable settings or rural villagers, on social media without their consent or context. Vent publicly about cultural differences. Avoid posting negative public complaints about slow service, infrastructure, or local customs. Send constructive feedback directly to Travel Sense Asia instead so we can help our partners improve. Support or fund "orphanage tourism." Do not donate online to unverified residential care institutions that profit from tourist visits, as this fuels the exploitation of children.

EMERGENCY CONTACTS (CAMBODIA)

Police: 117
Fire: 118
Ambulance: 119
Tourist Police (Siem Reap): 012 402 424
Tourist Police (Phnom Penh): 012 942 484
Travel Sense Asia 24/7 Hotline:
Email: info@travelsense.asia