

When traveling, you can't and you shouldn't try to completely behave as a local, but you should check out the customs and rules of your destination before each trip. This saves you and the locals many uncomfortable moments. The people in Sri Lanka are very friendly and you are always welcome as a traveler, but if you want to make friends, here are some important things to keep in mind.

Sri Lankan etiquette: what to avoid

1 No Selfies in front of Buddha statues

For many travelers, selfies come almost automatically - they naturally want to be part of each captured memory, and share every new sight, landscape, building or event with their friends via social media. BUT please take care when taking pictures of Buddha statues: turning your back to a Buddha statue is a sign of disrespect. Better yet, keep your distance and save (and savor) the moment in your heart and your mind.



Photos - also selfies - are of course ok. Just not in front of Buddha statues.

2 Dress properly on beaches

Sri Lanka has many wonderful beaches perfect for sunbathing. But keep something on! Full nudity or even topless bathing is not a welcome practice and can turn problematic. Back on the streets, or anywhere that is not a bathing place, try to wear more modest clothes: ideally, shoulders and knees should be covered! However, you will find that many young Sri Lankans, especially in larger cities, are already a bit more liberal. It is not that important anymore. But try to adhere to this rule always anyway, and especially when travelling through rural areas.

3 Correct clothes in the temple

When visiting a temple, you should take off your shoes and keep your shoulders and legs covered. In many Buddhist temples, it would be nice if you also can wear white (or at least light-colored) clothes - for example, in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy or in Anuradhapura. You will also see that most locals done their whitest clothes! Many temples can have stricter or additional rules and check at the entrance whether one dresses correctly.



White clothes are the perfect choice when visiting Buddhist temples!

4 No public display of affection

Traveling with a loved partner is wonderful, but not all countries like to see couples kissing in public. Dial back a bit and save it for later: kisses, hugs and other gestures of romantic affection are better left for private moments behind locked doors! Unfortunately, in Sri Lanka homosexuality is still a punishable offense... therefore same-sex couples should for their own good be especially careful and avoid public displays of affection.

5 Greeting properly

In Sri Lanka one traditionally greets with folded hands at about chin height and a slightly bowed head. The Sinhalese greet each other with the word *Ayubowan*, and the Tamils with the word *Vanakkam*. Young men greet each other with the usual western handshake, but women are a bit more reserved still.

6 Legs away from Buddha

While not as rigorous as Thailand or other Buddhist countries, it would be nice if you could avoid putting your legs pointing at a Buddha statue. Whenever sitting in front of a Buddha statue, if possible, sit cross-legged or in a position where your feet don't point towards the statue.

7 Stay polite

Western concepts of privacy are not well understood or appreciated in Sri Lanka. In effect, one is often suddenly asked by complete strangers personal questions like "Where are you going?", "Where do you come from?" or "What's your name?" This may annoy you after a while, but please try to stay polite! A smile and short answers are more than enough.



The people of Sri Lanka are usually polite and curious.

8 Asking before taking a picture

Most people in Sri Lanka like to be photographed. But out of politeness and because you wouldn't want it for yourself, we recommend you to get an OK in advance (especially for close-ups). A bit of body language, facial expressions and a friendly smile are often enough.

9 Keep a right hand or use both hands

Sri Lankans use no cutlery and eat with the right hand (the left one is considered unclean). You do not have to do without cutlery (which is offered almost everywhere), but you should avoid using your left hand when handshaking or handing over things or money. If you want to do it correctly, hand over money and smaller objects with the right hand while touching the right forearm with your left hand.

10 Don't make a big deal of it

The Sri Lankans are very welcoming hosts. If a *faux pas* happens to you, apologize but don't worry, people aren't going to get mad over a candid mistake.

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