



## Songkran: A Thailand Moral Controversy

### Description

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A traditional Songkran parade in Lamphun. Water is thrown on a parade of Buddhas and everyone e

Songkran is the world famous water throwing holiday of Thailand. It takes place in mid-April, when the oppressive tropical heat bears down with its greatest ferocity. Above all else, it's the most important Buddhist religious festival in The Kingdom.

Songkran is traditional to Northern Thailand such as Chiang Mai, Nan, Lamphun, Lampang and Chiang Rai where the festival has been celebrated for centuries.

It is not traditional to Bangkok and the southern beach cities. Their Songkran festivals are relatively new, having started only a few decades ago.

## The Basics

Songkran celebrates the beginning of the Buddhist year (2019 AD = 2562 Buddhist Year) and is the most important religious festival in the Kingdom.

It is officially a 3-day festival, although much of the country will shut down for a week or more. Many Bangkokians depart the city and head for their family homes in the provinces. Like Christmas, it's a time to be with family.

The roots of Songkran are found in the ancient Buddhist calendar of the sun transitioning through the Zodiac. Rejuvenation, cleanliness, transformation, even metamorphosis are concepts traditionally associated with this event. You can't help but compare Easter to Songkran.

In rural Thailand, old Siamese traditions hold sway for the most part. Like Christmas or Easter, Songkran is a blend of religious, secular and family traditions.



A Songkran parade in Pasang. Pasang is only 30 kilometers from Chiang Mai and a great place to celebrate Songkran.

## The Cultural Traditions of Songkran

Songkran is a lot like Christmas- old traditions are followed.

An early morning visit to the family Wat where a special Songkran ceremony is held is a common way for Thais to start the holiday. Many wats are decked out in their finest regalia with a full compliment of monks on hand for the service.

Cleaning your house is a tradition (Does “Spring Cleaning” ring a bell???) and is usually done on the first or second day of the festival.

Gift giving is a part of the holiday. (This Songkran, we gave our elderly aunt a new TV.) Gifts are usually given by the entire family to the older members.

Visiting and paying respect to elderly family members is a must. At our house, on the first day of Songkran relatives come over and visit (pay their respects) our aunt who is the oldest in the extended family.

Of course all during the festival, family feasts are enjoyed and Buddhist merit making (doing good deeds) are top activities. Yes, quite a bit of beer and Thai whiskey are consumed, but getting obviously drunk in public is frowned upon.



An early morning Songkran service in Pasang. The local wats are festooned with their finest regalia

## **A Buddha Parade**

The “Parade of Buddhas” (my terminology) is an important tradition. Congregants from local Wats take a revered statute of a Buddha from their Wat and mount it on a pick-up or flat bed truck. These Buddha bearing trucks are paraded down Main Street with a few congregants riding along dressed in traditional Siamese garb. As this Buddha Parade passes by, people throw water on the Buddhas and each other.

## Water Throwing: Getting Wet

On day three, water throwing reaches its zenith. Young Thais will form along a road and throw water on anything coming by. Thais will ride in the bed of pick-ups and water battles take place between them and the youths standing along the roadway.

If you are young *or a farang*, expect to have water thrown on you if you go out onto the streets.

This Songkran, I was throwing water with my wife’s family (I’m currently 65 going on 17) along the side of the rural road the runs past our house. We were definitely giving better than we got in this day-long water fight. I was too busy throwing water to notice that an official Thai fire engine had pulled up across the street and was training its big guns in our direction. The firemen had their nozzle set to a spray, but still let loose with a full drenching volume of water on us, much to their delight. They “got” a farang.

Actually, it’s quite refreshing to get doused with water when the temperature is reaching 100 degrees.



Drink, get wet, have fun. But pleeeez, respect the culture. Songkran is a Buddhist festival.

## Water Throwing Rules

In traditional, rural Siam, you don’t just throw water around willy-nilly! Here’s some basic rules that will help you understand Songkran even better:

1. Don't throw water in people's face. If you do, you may see a Thai get angry in public. (A very rare event)
2. Don't throw water on an elderly person without their consent. If given consent, gently pour water down the nape of their neck and say "sawat bee mai" which means "Happy New Year".
3. Do not get angry if someone unexpectedly throws water on you. If you are walking about in public, and especially at water throwing events, you've given consent to be doused. (There are no spectators to a water throwing.)
4. Do not dress in an inappropriate manner, especially if attending a "Parade of Buddhas". This is a religious event. I wear a baggy swimsuit and t-shirt which is good attire for both men and women.
5. Many Thai teenagers love to throw a bucket of ice water on you for the shock value. And shocking it is! Just smile. As a farang, you should just stick to throwing only cool water.



The "Parade of Buddhas". My favorite event during Songkran.

## Best Places to See Traditional Songkran

Pasang and Lamphun have great, traditional parades and festivities. Best yet, they're only a 1/2 hour drive from Chiang Mai. Lampang, Phrae, and Nan are also great places to see and participate in a traditional Songkran, but it can take 2-4 hours of driving from Chiang Mai to get to these old Northern cities.

Of course the old city of Chiang Rai is also a great place to see old fashioned Siamese Songkran festivals.

Check with the locals or your hotel concierge for the exact date and times as parade times and festivities will change from year to year.

### **“Farang Songkran”: Ignorant Debauchery**

Almost all farangs (White people) think that Songkran is about getting drunk, getting into water fights and cavorting openly with Thai bar girls (aka prostitutes). Just click on the video above and you'll see what I mean.

And if you attend a Songkran event in Bangkok, Pattaya or Patong Beach (Phuket), that's *is* what Songkran is all about. In these places, Songkran has devolved into a drunken bachannal, except they drink beer and Thai whiskey, not Roman wine.

### **Songkran and Bangkok**

**A Cultural Tip!** Songkran is not traditional to Bangkok, Pattaya, Phuket nor most of the country. *Songkran originated as a northern Thai Buddhist festival.* Bangkok, Pattaya and other southern beach cities only started having “Songkran festivals” about 30-40 years ago.

Bringing Songkran to Bangkok and the south was the idea of the Tourism Authority of Thailand. They saw the marketing potential of Songkran for tourism and began to promote it in Bangkok. It was an instant success.

For party-hardy young farang tourists, what could be better than Songkran sans Buddhism.

### **A Growing Controversy**

Over the years as “Farang Songkran” took root and grew, the debauchery could no longer be ignored by ordinary Thais.

About 10 years ago in the Thai media, articles and commentators began to question the morality of what had become of this important Buddhist holiday. The sight of drunken foreigners with scantily clad Thai bar girls publicly “celebrating” Songkran in such a manner was too much for this devout country.

This Songkran controversy grows more intense every year.

### **Thai Resentment & Farang Indifference**

I will give you two scenarios to make crystal clear what much of the Thai resentment concerning

Farang Songkran is all about.

**Scenario 1:** Foreign tourists descend upon the *United States* to “celebrate” both Christmas and Easter by getting drunk in public and openly cavorting with barely clad American prostitutes. In the name of the holiest days of the Christian Calendar, these foreigners carry out their debauchery.

**Scenario 2:** White tourists descend upon Thailand to “celebrate” Songkran by getting drunk in public and openly cavorting with barely clad Thai bar girls. In the name of the holiest day on the Buddhist calendar, these White people carry out their debauchery.

Scenario 2 is a reality. Americans would be outraged if Scenario 1 were even remotely true.

The worst offenders of “Farang Songkran” are the festivals in Bangkok, Pattaya and some of the other beach cities where Songkran traditions are not as deeply rooted as in the North.

The Thai military government has even gotten involved declaring that during Songkran, the police will begin arresting local bar girls whose dress is “too provocative”. Whether this is a mere threat is yet to be seen.

But the unfortunate truth is that the vast amount of tourist dollars coming from “Farang Songkran” will mute any attempt to reign it in.

## Ending Thoughts

Party hardy at Songkran if that’s your style. Make noise. Throw water. Drink beer and Thai whiskey. But respect Thai culture and religion.

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## Author

jeffcgallagher