

# Paying on the road in Southeast Asia

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Produced by Research & Intelligence  
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# Paying in Southeast Asia

## Introduction

The prospects are generally encouraging for international travel to Southeast Asia. In the five years before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of visitors to the region had grown on average by 4.2% per year. *Tourism Economics* believes this figure will almost double to 8.3% over the next five years.

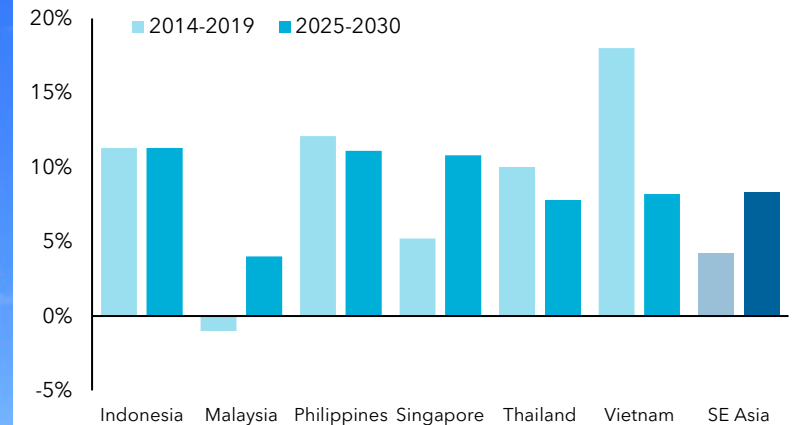
Among the region's major markets, Malaysia and Singapore may expect much-improved growth in arrivals through 2030 (Fig.1 ). Both Indonesia and the Philippines should match their pre-pandemic performance, with strong growth set to continue, averaging above 10% annually. And while Thailand should see its pace of expansion moderate, arrivals are still forecast to grow by 8% per year. Even Vietnam, where growth is expected to slow rapidly, should still see arrivals average 8% growth.

Arrivals from Asian markets outside Southeast Asia dominate demand for travel to these six countries, but their future growth is expected to slow from 13% pre-pandemic to less than 10% through 2030. The region is attracting increased interest from European travelers, whose growth should accelerate from 3% to 7%, while growth in North American arrivals should remain strong at around 9%. This will add up to a potential influx of travelers unfamiliar with payment norms in Asian countries.

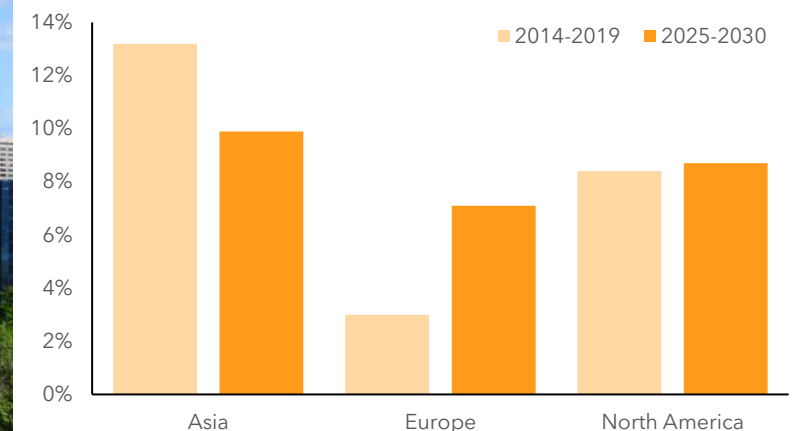
In this second in a series of reports, we explore how travelers can expect to pay for things when taking a business trip to Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand or Vietnam. If you're a travel manager with staff traveling to Southeast Asia, [share this report](#) to help them prepare for paying for common expenses while on the road. While we can't guide you through every eventuality, we can help your travelers prepare for paying their way in what might be a completely unfamiliar destination.



**Figure 1: Average annual growth in arrivals**



**Figure 2: Average annual growth in arrivals by origin**



# How to pay in Indonesia

INDONESIA

## What to know before you go

Indonesia's **currency** is the rupiah (Rp). One U.S. dollar is worth around Rp16,000, one euro Rp18,000 and one U.K. pound Rp21,000.

**You can't rely on cards for all your payment needs.** Many smaller restaurants and shops, especially those outside the capital city Jakarta and tourist areas, only accept cash and perhaps QR code-based mobile payments.

Make sure you have **small denomination** banknotes on you, as merchants won't always be able to change higher value notes.

## Card and digital payments: Use contactless if you can

Any merchant that accepts cards will accept Visa and Mastercard. **Other cards are less likely to be accepted** in Indonesia. Smaller merchants don't usually accept card payment. If they do, they may impose an arbitrary **3% surcharge** to cover the card provider's merchant fees.

Contactless card payment is common and is recommended as a way of reducing the risk of fraud. However, the **contactless payment limit is just Rp1 million (US\$60)**. Payments over that amount need to be authenticated and completed by entering your personal identification number (PIN).



**Apple Pay and Google Pay are not yet accepted** in Indonesia. Instead, Indonesians pay via QR codes with their phones, even in many smaller restaurants and shops that don't accept cards. Customers scan a QR code provided by the merchant, which conforms to a standard called QRIS (Quick Response Code Indonesian Standard).

QR code payment can be made through a variety of mobile banking and e-wallet apps, such as GoPay, ShopeePay and OVO. In some cases, balances can be topped up either from credit cards or by cash payments at convenience stores. But QR code payment will work best for holders of Indonesian bank accounts. Foreign business visitors may be better sticking with cash or card payment instead.

### Avoiding visa fraud

Many nationalities require a visa to visit Indonesia and it's possible to obtain one on arrival. If choosing instead to buy the visa pre-trip, it's best to arrange this through your company's travel management company (TMC) or a specialist passport and visa service.

Travelers buying visas themselves should do so only through the official Indonesian government website <https://www.imigrasi.go.id/>. Other websites offering this service may deliver the wrong visa or none at all. They may even steal a victim's personal or card details.

### Card payment fraud

Before paying by card, make sure the correct amount is displayed on the card machine. It's easy to get confused by long numbers when a restaurant meal can cost millions of rupiah.

Make a contactless payment if the bill is below the contactless limit of Rp1 million. If you have to confirm the transaction with your PIN, make sure no one can see you inputting it, and don't let anyone take your card out of sight under any circumstance.

### ATM fraud

Withdraw money only from ATMs (cash machines) in reputable locations, such as banks.

Before using the ATM, check no skimming devices have been attached to the front of the slot where you insert your card. If anything looks or feels wrong, trust your instincts: Walk away and find another ATM.

## Cash: Bring good-quality banknotes

The rupiah is the only legally accepted currency in Indonesia. Banknotes are issued in denominations from Rp1,000 (US\$0.06) up to Rp100,000 (US\$6). Travelers can usually buy rupiah from large bureau de change chains before leaving their own countries. They can bring into Indonesia up to Rp100 million (US\$60,000) or equivalent in other currencies without needing to make a customs declaration.

If buying your rupiah in Indonesia, it's best to **head to a bank or registered money changer**, who should display official signage. Bring banknotes in a **good condition**: Money changers may refuse to accept them if they're folded or damaged.

You'll also find plenty of ATMs in Indonesian cities and tourist areas. These will typically dispense Rp50,000 (US\$3) or Rp100,000 notes. But be warned: **Some cash machines dispense money BEFORE returning your card**.

"When buying rupiah, ask for some small-denomination banknotes, as you'll need these for tips and low-value transactions."



Agustinus Pake Seko, President Director,  
BCD Travel Indonesia

## Ground transportation: Go for Gojek or Grab

Through your TMC, you can arrange to hire a car with a driver if you intend to travel outside Jakarta to other destinations on the island of Java.

Inside Jakarta and other large cities, foreign business visitors rarely use public transportation. Instead, they'll normally choose taxis or ride-hailing through apps Gojek and Grab. Foreigners should find both straightforward to download and arrange payment. Gojek and Grab drivers usually accept payment via the app or by card or cash.



It's easy to flag down a taxi in the street and rides are inexpensive. **Negotiate the fare in advance**, especially as some taxis don't have meters.

Many taxi drivers in Jakarta accept card payment but have some cash on you just in case. Once again, make sure you have some smaller banknotes (Rp5,000 and Rp10,000) in case the driver cannot change a larger bill. It's customary in Indonesia to **round up the fare** to the nearest Rp5,000 or Rp10,000.

## Accommodation: Cash-only for guest houses

International chain hotels accept cards, but guest houses, which are often the only accommodation option available outside the biggest cities, are likely to be cash-only.

## Dining out: Carry cash, just in case

Larger restaurants should accept card payment, although **tips (usually 5-10%) should be paid in cash**. Smaller establishments often accept QRIS e-payments, but since these are difficult for foreigners to use, it's simpler to pay by cash.

### Paying to dine Indonesian-style

If you want to dine Indonesian-style, you should visit a *warung*. These family-run establishments, which can be cafes or roadside shacks, have a reputation for serving excellent, inexpensive food and are an important part of local communities.

You will need cash in small denominations to pay for your meal.

## Shopping: Keep your receipts

Larger shops in Jakarta and in tourist locations often accept cards. Everywhere else, you'll find cash is most likely the way to pay. Receipts are easy to obtain from shopkeepers (and in eating places). Keep hold of them, so you can reclaim VAT on departure. Indonesia's VAT rate is 11%. Refunds are only given on purchases of Rp50,000 or more, and only if the total value for all invoices on which VAT is being reclaimed amounts to at least Rp500,000. **Not all retailers participate in the VAT refund scheme** for foreign visitors. Those that do usually display a "VAT Refund for Tourist" logo. Make sure you ask for a valid tax invoice. Refunds can be obtained from the DGT (Directorate General of Taxes) office at the airport. You will need to show your passport, boarding pass, invoices and the items you purchased.

# How to pay in Malaysia

MALAYSIA

## What to know before you go

The **local currency** in Malaysia is the ringgit (MYR). One U.S. dollar will usually buy you around MYR4.3; one euro is worth MYR4.8 and one U.K pound MYR5.7.

**Card acceptance varies significantly** depending on which part of Malaysia you're visiting. **Always carry some ringgit** with you.

While you can buy ringgit before arrival, you will also be able to **change money in Malaysia** at an authorized money changer.

There are good reasons to **download the Grab app** before arriving in Malaysia.

## Card, cash or Grab?

It's wisest to be prepared to pay with both a card and cash, with Grab on-hand as a useful back-up.

In **Kuala Lumpur**, most places will accept cards, but not all, so you'll need some cash just in case. In **Johor Bahru**, the Malaysian city immediately opposite Singapore, card payment dominates, (including Touch 'n Go Wallet Pay and Alipay QR codes) and some shops or restaurants even refuse to accept cash. **Everywhere else**, especially in rural areas, and particularly in East Malaysia (Borneo), payments are more likely to be cash only.

## Cards: Stay safe

Mastercard and Visa are widely accepted, but American Express much less so. Contactless payment can be made with either a plastic card or mobile device. ApplePay, Touch 'n Go Wallet and Alipay are popular for mobile payment. **For amounts over MYR250 (US\$60)**, however, cardholders are likely to be asked to enter their **PIN** (personal identification number) or even **sign** a credit card slip.

**Card fraud is a risk** in Malaysia. It's safer to tap or insert your card yourself instead of handing it over to someone. And always choose ringgit when the merchant asks you to select the payment currency. This ensures the currency conversion will be at your own bank's rate and not the merchant's.

## Download Grab as a back-up



The digital wallet payment function of super-app Grab is increasingly gaining acceptance throughout Malaysia, even among merchants that don't accept card payments. This is especially the case **outside the country's largest cities**, where you are more likely to be able to pay with Grab than by card.

Downloading the app before coming to Malaysia is simple, and so too is payment. If a merchant accepts Grab, they will display a QR code that you scan with your phone to complete a transaction.

Another super-app popular in Malaysia is Touch 'n Go. It can be used to pay for parking and tolls, and on public transportation, but it's less useful for visiting business travelers.



## Cash: Change money on arrival

There is a US\$10,000 equivalent limit on how much cash you can bring into or take out of Malaysia. But there is **no need to buy ringgit before arriving** in the country. There are plenty of ATMs from which you can withdraw cash, although not all banks accept all cards.

Visitors are also increasingly using pre-paid debit cards like YouTrip, Wise and Revolut, as these link to multi-currency e-wallets allowing conversion into multiple currencies within the app, typically at better rates than you'll find via more traditional channels.

Of course, you can still bring your own currency to Malaysia and change it for ringgit at an **authorized money changer**.

These are typically located in shopping malls. They do not usually charge fees, but you'll need to present your passport to complete the transaction. **Try to avoid changing money at hotels**, as the exchange rate they offer will usually be less favorable.

It's always a good idea to have small denomination notes like the MYR5 or MYR10 on you, as merchants won't always have change for larger notes. Outside Kuala Lumpur, large notes like the MYR100 are not a common sight. If you hand one to a merchant, they're likely to check it isn't counterfeit.

"Make sure you have small denomination notes like the MYR5 or MYR10 with you, in case merchants don't have change for larger notes."

Sharifa Alhabshi, Senior Director,  
Program Management, BCD Travel



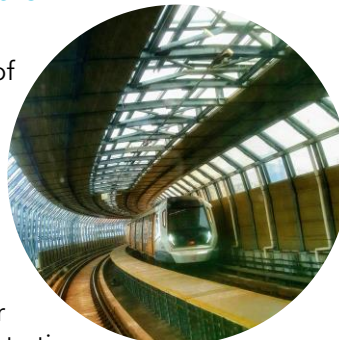
## Ground Transportation: Ride-hailing or the MRT

Generally speaking, foreign business travelers should **steer clear of using public transportation** in Malaysia. It's often hot, crowded and unreliable. The **one exception is the MRT** (Mass Rapid Transit) network in Kuala Lumpur.

Through the Grab app, ride-hailing has become the most popular way of getting around. Grab's ride-hailing services are increasingly available beyond Kuala Lumpur, for example in Melaka and on the island of Langkawi. The price for each ride is fixed. Payment can be made by card or cash.

**Hailing a taxi on the street is not recommended.** Few taxi drivers switch on their meter, so a price needs to be agreed before the ride begins. Drivers sometimes try to add hidden extras, such as a charge for carrying more than one passenger. If you do use a taxi, there is no need to tip.

Self-drive car rental is not recommended for overseas business travelers visiting Malaysia, as driving conditions can be challenging. If you need a car for the day, it's better to hire one with a driver.



### Three ways to get downtown from Kuala Lumpur International airport

You can book a ride with Grab or Klook on arrival at the airport. **Look out for designated ride-hailing pick-up points**, which are separate from the taxi ranks. Book your ride only once you've reached the pick-up point, as drivers aren't allowed to linger.

**Taxis** from the airport are more reliable than elsewhere because they must be metered. However, make sure the driver switches on the meter. You can either queue for a taxi or buy a coupon for your ride from a counter in the airport terminal, choosing between a regular taxi or a limousine.

Finally, there's also a good train service, the **KLIA Ekspres**, taking 28 minutes to KL Sentral Station. It's an excellent option if your hotel is a short taxi ride away from the station. Ask your travel management company to book your hotel transfer from KL Sentral. KLIA Ekspres tickets can be bought at the airport, or you can access the train simply by tapping your payment card at the platform entrance and exit.

**Hotels: Cards are accepted**

Cards are always accepted at the hotels where foreign business travelers usually stay.

**Dining out: You may need cash**

High-end restaurants accept cards and digital wallet payments. But hawker centers (food courts) and *pasar malam* (street food markets) usually only accept cash.

**Shopping: Retailers often prefer cash**

Cards are likely to be accepted in larger shops in Malaysia's big cities. In other locations, retailers are more likely to insist on cash, although they might accept Grab as an alternative – look out for the QR code at the payment point.

In more rural areas, and in independent stores, even if retailers do accept cards, they may **add a surcharge for low value card payments**. On the other hand, it may be possible to negotiate a small discount for cash payment instead.

Prices displayed in shops should include any taxes, such as general sales tax, which is typically 5% or 10%, depending on the type of goods being purchased.



# How to pay in the Philippines

PHILIPPINES

## What to know before you go

The **local currency** is the peso. One U.S. dollar will typically buy you 55-60 pesos, one euro 58-64 pesos and one U.K. pound 70-75 pesos.

Think “**card for the city, cash for the country**.” Cards are widely accepted in the three metro cities, Manila, Cebu and Davao, but anywhere else, you’ll need cash.

**Take plastic** for card payment. Apple Pay and Google Pay aren’t available yet. The QR code-based apps like G Cash, which are popular with locals, aren’t available options for international visitors.

## Cards and digital payments: Plastic first

Visa and Mastercard are accepted wherever cards are accepted. **American Express is accepted more widely** than in most Asian countries. This is thanks to a partnership it has with Banco de Oro (BDO), one of the largest banks in the Philippines. Cards issued by Asian schemes like **JCB, Union Pay and Alipay can also be used** in hotels, most restaurants and even some convenience stores in Manila and Cebu, but rarely anywhere else in the country. Card transactions are generally contactless, but first check what the contactless limit is.

**Apple Pay and Google Pay are not yet available** in the Philippines. Local people pay even in small shops and cafes with their phones using QR codes linked to the apps of financial service providers like G Cash and Maya. However, these services are unavailable or complicated to access for people who normally live outside the Philippines.

## Cash: Use money changers

Travelers can bring **up to 50,000 pesos or US\$10,000** (or equivalent) in foreign currency into the Philippines without needing authorization. The same limits apply for taking money out of the country without authorization.

The only cash currency accepted is the peso. You may get a slightly better exchange rate if you buy your pesos before coming to the Philippines, but carrying large sums of money can be less convenient and safe.

You can also change money at banks, or withdraw cash from ATMs, which you’ll find all over the metro cities. If visiting anywhere else in the country, it’s harder to find money changers, banks or ATMs, so **buy your pesos before heading out from Manila, Cebu or Davao**. You’ll need cash outside the three metros, as payment by card is rarely accepted.

“The best exchange rates are usually at money changers in the main metro cities. It’s not mandatory to show a passport or other photo ID, but it’s worth bringing them, as they might be needed for higher-value transactions.”

Jerome Hassim, Vice President and COO, BCD Travel Philippines



## Where to change your money

Czarina Foreign Exchange is one of the oldest chains operating in the Philippines. It operates multiple branches in Metro Manila. Offering real-time rates, it charges no commission on major currencies.

Sanry’s Money Changer is another popular chain with branches across Metro Manila and one in Cebu.

M Lhuillier Money Changer operates one of the largest money changer networks in the Philippines.



## Ground transportation: Go for Grab

The recommended way to get around the big three cities is **ride-hailing app Grab**. Rides can be paid via the card you store in the Grab app, which foreign visitors can easily download and set up. Grab drivers also accept plastic cards and cash payment. Grab is especially recommended for your transfer from the airport on arrival in the Philippines. Local taxi drivers, who accept cash only and may not issue a receipt, could overcharge for the airport transfer.

If using a local taxi for journeys from your hotel, **ask the hotel the price you should expect to pay**, before taking the ride. If drivers use a meter, they normally round the fare up to the nearest 100 pesos, but tips are not expected.

Another option is to **rent a car with a driver**. Ask your TMC to make a recommendation and book the service for you. Car-with-driver is also the way to travel around the country for journeys where it is not possible to fly.

Public transportation is not generally recommended for foreign business travelers. It can be crowded and noisy, and there are concerns about pickpockets. Bus fares are paid for with cash. If you **use the public transit system in Manila**, pay with cash or buy a stored value smart card called Beep, which you can buy at train stations or online.

## Hotels: Cards are fine

Any hotel of a good standard in the big cities will accept payment by card, as will their restaurants. In the rest of the country, you may need to pay cash.

## Jeepneys - fun, but more for tourists

A form of transport unique to the Philippines is the Jeepney – a repurposed and colorfully decorated ex-U.S. military jeep. Jeepneys are used for journeys of a kilometer or so. They are popular in metro cities because they can travel through streets that are too narrow for buses.

Payment is cash only. Pass your fare to the person next to you and they in turn should pass it along the vehicle to the driver.

While Jeepneys are a memorable experience, they are not advisable for regular travel. They are often crowded, and the windows are left open.



## Dining out and shopping: Cards rule in the metros

Again, **cards are usually accepted even in small restaurants and shops** in the big three metro cities, but you should expect to pay cash for your purchases elsewhere in the country.

Many restaurants add a **10% service charge** to the cost of a meal. Where they haven't done this, tipping is customary but not absolutely necessary. Diners usually tip 50-500 pesos depending on how upmarket the restaurant is.

Prices displayed in shops should include tax.

# How to pay in Singapore

SINGAPORE

## What to know before you go

The **local currency** is the Singapore dollar (S\$). One U.S. dollar is worth around S\$1.30; one euro is worth S\$1.48 and one U.K. pound is worth S\$1.74.

Singapore is now **heavily cashless**. You can pay either with a plastic card or a mobile device almost anywhere. The main exception is likely to be when eating in Singapore's famous hawker centers.

Make sure you've **signed the back** of your credit/debit card. For payments above S\$200, you may be required to provide and validate a signature.

**Download the "super-app" Grab**, which is very useful in Singapore. Its functions not only include ride-hailing, but also a digital payment wallet that's widely accepted even when physical card payment is not.

## Cards and digital payment: Plastic, mobile and QR codes

You'll find that Mastercard and Visa are accepted wherever you can pay by card. However, some shops will not accept American Express, because it charges them higher merchant fees.

Generally, **the limit for contactless card payment is S\$200**. For amounts above this, the transaction itself will remain contactless, but the merchant may also print a confirmation slip that you'll need to sign. Your signature will be checked against the one on the back of your card, so make sure you sign your card before entering Singapore. Alternatively, the merchant might simply ask you to enter your PIN (personal identification number). While this would be a rare occurrence for Singaporeans, it's more commonly asked of foreign visitors.

Card fraud is rare in Singapore, but take the usual precautions, including never allowing your card to be taken out of your sight.

For those preferring to pay by phone or other mobile device, cards stored digitally on **GooglePay and ApplePay are accepted almost everywhere**. Alternatively, many merchants, including food hawkers and other businesses that don't accept cards, will accept a wide range of **payment apps that use a QR code**. Using your phone's camera, simply scan the QR code displayed by the vendor and payment is taken instantly. There are several Singapore-based payment apps you can use. Most are aimed at local consumers and may not be relevant for visiting business travelers, but Grab is a major exception. Some merchants, especially those popular with Chinese residents and travelers, also accept QR-based payment from Chinese giants WeChatPay and Alipay. However, you'll be unable to use QR code payments for public transport.

### Time to grab Grab?



Asia Pacific is certainly the region of the super-app, and one of the most popular currently in use in Singapore is locally-based Grab.

Its many functions include parcel, grocery and food delivery, as well as insurance. But it's perhaps best-known and most useful for visiting business travelers for its ride-hailing service and its digital GrabPay Wallet. Like the WeChatPay and Alipay wallets, users of the GrabPay Wallet can make payments by scanning a merchant's QR code.

Foreign visitors can register easily with Grab. The company also offers Grab for Business, which includes an expense reporting tool.

## Cash: Buy before or after arrival

While some merchants in Singapore have gone completely cashless, many still accept cash as well. Merchants which accept Singapore dollars will likely also accept Brunei dollars, as the two currencies are officially interchangeable. However, be prepared for retailers to decline accepting some of the highest and lowest denominations of the Singaporean currency. Some shops no longer accept the 5-cent coin because they pay bank fees based on the number of coins they deposit. At the other end of the scale, shops may be reluctant to accept S\$1,000 notes because of fears about counterfeiting. If you receive a S\$1,000 note from a reliable source, it's a good idea to **change it at a bank for smaller value notes**.

**Singapore dollars are easy enough to buy before arrival.** The limit for bringing cash into the country or taking it out is quite high: S\$20,000. It's also easy to obtain Singapore dollars once in the country. Money changers are numerous and generally reliable, with little difference between them in respect of the exchange rate offered. Alternatively, travelers may simply choose to withdraw local currency from the nearest ATM.

## Ground transportation: A choice between ride-hailing and the MRT

Uber has been unavailable in Singapore since selling its business in eight southeast Asian countries to **Grab** back in 2018 (in return for a 27.5% stake in Grab). There are other ride-hailing services operating in Singapore, including **Gojek, Ryde, Tada and Zig**. All rely on private cars, except Zig, which has its own fleet of taxis. All five services accept payment through the passenger's card via their respective apps. Most drivers will also accept cash payment.

Most taxis also accept card payment, but it's wise to confirm this before taking the ride if you aren't carrying sufficient cash as well. **Singapore does not have a culture of giving tips**, but drivers will be happy to accept one. All taxis are metered and must provide a receipt if you ask for one. If using a ride-hailing service, you can expect a receipt to be emailed to you.

Singapore's MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) system is **extensive and very convenient**. It's also the best way to transfer from Singapore's Changi Airport to almost anywhere on the island. The MRT may, however, be best avoided during the morning rush, when it can become uncomfortably crowded.

"I strongly recommend business travelers download the MRT app for their journey planning, which also includes the LRT (Light Rail Transit) and buses."



Agnes Heng,  
Director Marketing & Comms,  
Asia Pacific, BCD Travel

Passengers can buy a stored-value MRT card from an MRT office, which includes a S\$5 non-refundable fee. Alternatively, they can simply tap and go with a regular Mastercard or Visa credit or debit card or do the same using mobile card payment, with ApplePay, Google Pay, SamsungPay and Fitbit Pay all accepted for travel.

Business travelers will only need to rent a car if planning to drive from Singapore via the Johor-Singapore Causeway to Malaysia. Some rental companies offer hourly as well as daily rental. Another option is to book a chauffeur-driven car for the day.





### Hotels: Cards are accepted everywhere

Business travelers can safely expect to pay by card for their hotel accommodation wherever they stay.

### Dining out: Take cash if visiting a hawker center

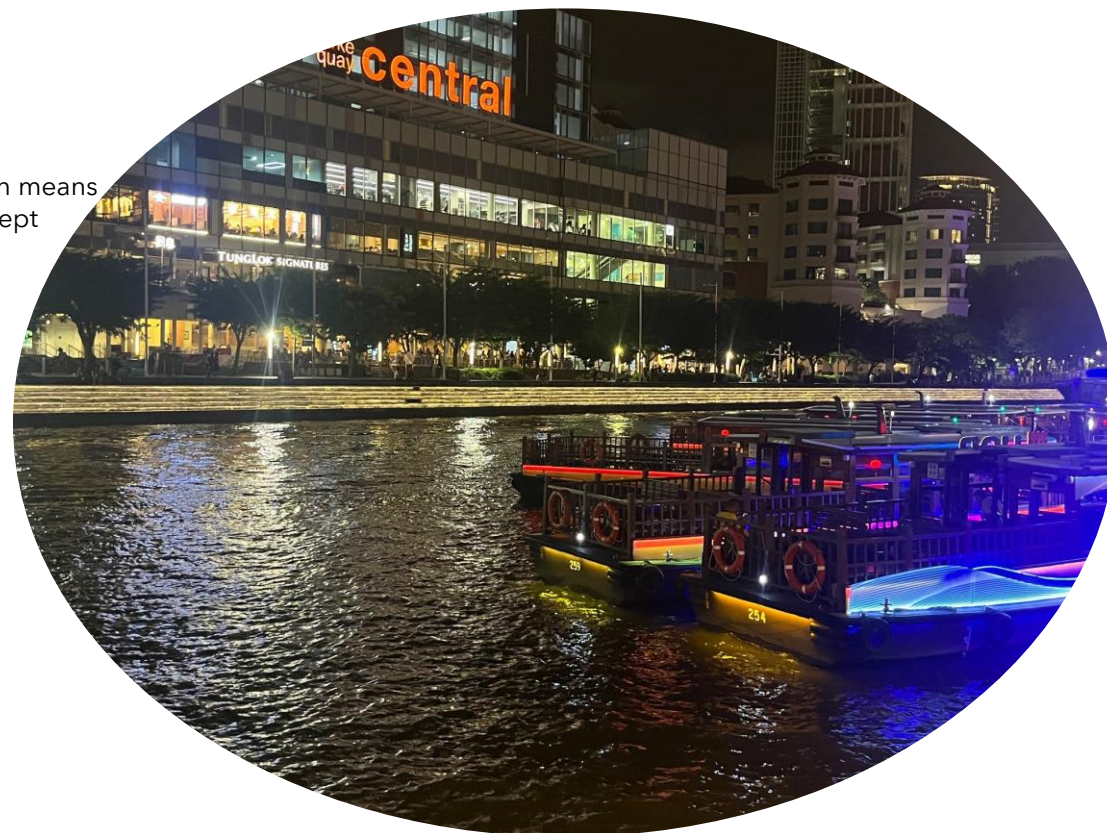
Nearly all restaurants accept card payment. They will **automatically add a 10% service charge**, which means there's no need for further tipping. The stalls in Singapore's famous hawker centers do not always accept cards. While cash is their preference, they're just as likely to accept QR code payment.

### Shopping: Claim a 9% GST refund

Almost all shops in Singapore accept cards. While cashless payments are preferred by retailers, it's always wise to have some cash with you, just in case the card machine fails to process the transaction. As ATMs are widespread, it's easy enough to find somewhere to withdraw cash when you need it.

The price displayed by shops includes a 9% general sales tax for which **visitors can claim a refund** on up to three purchases totaling S\$100 (including GST) or more in a single day.

When making a purchase, visitors will need to show their Singapore electronic visit pass (e-Pass) and passport at the point of sale to make the transaction eligible for the GST refund. You can then apply for the GST refund at a self-help kiosk on departure at Changi airport, where all your eligible transactions will be retrieved automatically. Alternatively, you can use an app called eTRS (provided by Global Blue) at the airport. Either way, when leaving Singapore, you'll need to **leave enough time** to make the refund request and potentially go through a customs inspection.



# How to pay in Thailand

THAILAND

## What to know before you go

The **local currency** is the baht. One U.S. dollar is worth around 35 baht, one euro 40 baht and one U.K. pound 45 baht.

**You will need cash** when visiting Thailand, as it remains the top choice for payment, although card and digital payment acceptance is growing.

## Cards and digital payments: Beware surcharges

Those merchants that accept card payment will always take Mastercard and Visa. **Upmarket hotels, restaurants and shopping malls in Bangkok** are also likely to accept American Express, as well as Asian payment cards from JCB and UnionPay. Outside the Thai capital, if cards are accepted, it's likely to be only Mastercard and Visa.

**Watch out for card fraud and theft.** Your card information may be at risk of "skimming" (captured illegally) when using an ATM or payment terminal, or your card may simply be stolen. Watch out also for some merchants imposing a **surcharge of usually up to 3%** on card transactions to offset the fees they must pay to the card companies. This is not illegal. Before paying, it's worth checking to see if such surcharges apply to the transaction.

Contactless payment is growing in Thailand. Always check the maximum limit before tapping your card on the reader. American Express charge cards, including the Green, Gold or Platinum cards, do not have pre-set spending limits per contactless transaction. Instead, your spending power will be based on multiple factors, such as your spending history, payment record and financial status. For all cards, confirming payment with your PIN (personal identification number) is still more common than in many other Asian countries.

Mobile payment is also increasing. **Although Apple Pay is not yet supported in Thailand, Google Pay has arrived**, but this doesn't mean you'll be able to use it. Check with the merchant first.

## Cash: Look for exchange booths

While the acceptance of card and digital payment is growing, cash remains the number one choice for payment, especially for restaurants, street vendors and local markets. This is particularly true outside Bangkok, where you should always assume that cash is the only way to pay.

If you plan on bringing more than **600,00 baht or US\$20,000** or other foreign currency equivalent into Thailand, then you must declare the amount to customs officers on arrival.

The baht is the only currency approved for use in Thailand. You can buy baht from exchange booths at the airport and in cities and tourist areas. Exchange booths have long opening hours (and are open 24/7 at airports). Two of the best-known chains offering good rates are **DeeMoney and Superrich Thailand**.

**Banks also offer a reasonable exchange rate** and are open 08:30-15:30 Monday to Friday. If you're planning to visit less developed areas of Thailand, including most of the country's north (other than Chiang Mai), banks are likely to be your only money-changing options. It may therefore be better to **buy your baht in Bangkok or at the airport first**.

## QR codes: Great for locals, tricky for visitors

Thai people regularly pay through their phones using QR codes with wallets and apps such as TrueMoney and PromptPay. These very popular services are supported by all the major banks in Thailand.

Using QR-based services is difficult for foreign travelers, however, as they must first obtain a local bank account.

It is possible for foreigners to download a TrueMoney wallet and then load funds into it by paying cash at 7/11 stores. But there is little point in doing this when cash and cards should cover all your payments needs when visiting Thailand

## Ground transportation: Beat the traffic in Bangkok

With traffic congestion famously bad in Bangkok, motorbike taxis have become a popular, fast and cheap option for short journeys of around one mile. Payment is cash only. The driver will usually provide a helmet, which must be worn by the passenger.

### Leave tuk tuks to the tourists

Three-wheeled tuk tuks are a familiar part of Bangkok street life, but they are very much aimed at tourists and are often more expensive than taking a taxi.

If you decide to use one, negotiate the price before the ride starts.



Another good way to avoid the traffic is to take the elevated **BTS Skytrain** (also known as the Bangkok Mass Transit) or the underground **Metropolitan Rapid Transit (MRT)**. Travel on the BTS Skytrain and on the MRT Yellow and Pink lines can be paid for with a **Rabbit Card**, which is a rechargeable smart card similar to London's Oyster Card or Singapore's E-Z Link card. It's more than just a travel card; Rabbit Cards can also be used to buy food, drinks and snacks in shopping malls, reducing the need to have a lot of banknotes or coins on you. Restaurants and some attractions even offer discounts and promotions for Rabbit Card holders.

Rabbit Cards cost 100 baht and you can store a minimum of 100 baht and a maximum of 4,000 baht on them. You can buy a Rabbit Card online on Klook.com in advance of travel and collect it in the arrivals hall at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport. Or you can buy your card from BTS ticket offices. You'll be able to top up your Rabbit Card at all BTS and at some MRT ticket offices, as well as at authorized vendors, including many branches of McDonalds.

As an alternative to a Rabbit Card, a BTS day pass is available for 60 baht (cash only). Cash is also the only option when using station ticket machines for the MRT Blue and Purple lines.

For travelers needing to get around Bangkok by car, the **best option is ride-hailing**. With Uber not operating in Thailand, Grab dominates the market. Payment can be made by card, cash or the card stored on the Grab app, which is easy to download and set up. Alternatively, Bolt is another ride-hailing app that's available in Bangkok and in other major cities.

For inter-city travel within Thailand, **trains** are the comfortable, safe and environmentally friendly choice. Tickets should be booked online using your regular payment card. Make your reservation as far in advance as possible, because seats sell quickly, especially in first class and on sleeper trains.

If no train service is available, the next best option is to hire a **car with a driver**. Book and pay online in advance through your travel management company.

**"We recommend the ride-hailing app Grab Taxi if you are traveling in Bangkok. If you take a metered taxi instead, be prepared to pay cash with small banknotes, as drivers rarely give any change. They may not give receipts either."**

Atcharee Deegudruea, Assistant Operations Manager, BCD Travel Thailand





### Hotels: You may need cash outside Bangkok

Hotels aimed at business travelers will accept card payment. But anyone traveling to Thailand on business, who chooses to add some leisure time to their stay, should expect to **pay cash at smaller hotels and guesthouses**, especially in destinations outside Bangkok.

### Dining out: Be ready with some baht

High-end restaurants accept card payments, but many other eating establishments do not. The more upmarket the restaurant, the more likely it is to apply a 10% service charge.

In other establishments, tipping is not really part of the Thai culture. All the same, it's fine to leave a tip of 20-50 baht for exceptional service.

### Shopping: Keep your receipts

Retail outlets in large shopping malls usually take card payment, but it's likely to be **cash-only everywhere else**.

Shop prices include 7% VAT (value added tax), which can be reclaimed at the airport, as long as you have paper receipts to present.



# How to pay in Vietnam

VIETNAM

## What to know before you go

The **local currency** is the dong (VND). You'll need to keep the calculator function on your mobile handy to deal with multiple zeros: One U.S. dollar will buy 25,000 VND; one euro is worth around 27,000 VND; and one U.K. pound 33,000 VND.

**You will need cash.** It's true that Vietnam is going cashless rapidly in the major cities, But, although cards and digital payment are quickly gaining traction, many smaller shops and dining places only take cash or QR-based mobile payments, which foreign visitors may find hard to use.

It's possible to pay for some services, including hotel stays, before arriving in Vietnam, using **payment link services**, such as OnePay. These are a convenient way for Vietnamese merchants to process card payments. Travelers need only provide their card number to their travel management company, which arranges the payment.

## Cards and digital payment: Be careful with contactless

Expect all merchants that accept payment by card to take Visa and Mastercard. In the major cities Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and perhaps in Da Nang, American Express and JCB cards may also be accepted.

**Watch out for card surcharges.** Many merchants, especially smaller independent shops and restaurants, will add a processing surcharge for card payments. The level of surcharge usually varies according to the card being used. Visa and Mastercard typically attract lower surcharges because they charge lower fees to merchants in the first place.

Contactless payment has become the normal way to pay with plastic. It's helped reduce fraud, because the cardholder now keeps hold of their card. **Payment limits with contactless vary:** Between 1 million VND (about US\$39) or 2 million VND (\$78) is typical, but in some cases, there may be no limit at all.

**Take special care** when making a contactless payment in Vietnam. With VND-denominated prices potentially including many zeros, you could mistakenly accept being overcharged by a factor of ten or even more. It's very easy to tap your card without paying attention. Always check the amount you expect to pay against what's displayed on the card machine before tapping to confirm payment.

Mobile payments via Apple Pay are becoming popular in Vietnam. Google Pay is also available, but with more limited use, as is Samsung Pay.

You'll find that locals are more likely to make mobile payments using QR-based apps like MoMo and Zalopay. While of appeal, this may only be a practical option for business travelers making longer stays in Vietnam.

"When making a contactless payment, always carefully check the amount. With dong prices including many zeros, it's easy to overpay by a factor of ten or even more. Check first, then tap."



Lam Nguyen Nhu An,  
Program Manager,  
BCD Travel Vietnam

## QR-based apps, an option for some



Users scan a uniquely produced QR code with their phone camera to authorize payment from their bank account. However, most of these apps can only be connected to a Vietnamese bank account.

It is possible to connect some QR-based apps to a stored payment card or to fund them by topping up with cash in a convenience store. But there are complexities around verifying foreign customer identities. For anyone on an occasional business trip, cash or card still seem the best payment options.

## Cash: Bring a strong currency to change into Vietnamese dong

Always make sure you have cash on you in case you cannot pay by card.

Travelers can bring up to 15 million VND (US\$581) or US\$5,000 (or the equivalent in another foreign currency) in cash into and out of Vietnam without seeking authorization.

Most visitors bring in **strong currencies like the U.S., Singaporean, Australian or Canadian dollar, or the euro or pound Sterling** and change to the Vietnamese dong on arrival. Non-U.S. citizens, even from other nations with strong currencies, often buy U.S. dollars first and bring them into Vietnam rather than their own currency.

U.S. dollars will be accepted instead of dong in a few places, such as flea markets, as might Thai baht and Chinese yuan, but the exchange rate is likely to be unfavorable. It's much better to exchange your U.S. dollars or other strong currencies at authorized money changers. A sign in their front window will confirm they're approved to change money.

In rural areas, you may only be able to change currency at hotels, and probably at an unfavorable rate. **Stock up on dong in the city** before heading out into Vietnam's hinterland.



## Ground transportation: Arrange a driver or grab a Grab

Most companies arrange cars with drivers for their employees visiting Vietnam. This can be **organized in advance** by your travel management company, with payment by invoice. For international visitors, who don't hire a car-plus-driver in advance, ride-hailing is still a good option. Grab is the main provider in Vietnam, and it's a good idea to download the Grab app before arrival and pay for rides using the payment card stored in the app. Failing that, Grab drivers will also accept cash payment.

Cash is the only way to pay regular taxi drivers. Some will accept QR code-based payments as well, but this is based on direct transfer from a Vietnamese bank account, so it may not be a suitable option for foreign travelers.

### Does your taxi have a meter?

Before the ride starts, check your taxi driver has a meter and, if so, has switched it on. If not, negotiate the fare before accepting the ride.

This is most likely to happen with independent drivers or with those working for the smaller taxi companies. And they may not give you a receipt either.

Tipping is not mandatory, but passengers will often **round up the fare** to the nearest 10,000 VND, equivalent to 40 U.S. cents.

Cash is the only way to pay on buses, which are very cheap but rarely used by business travelers.

Flying is the only realistic way to travel longer distances, e.g., from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi.

## Double-check cash payments

It's a good idea to work out what the equivalent amount would be in your own currency before paying with banknotes. The lowest denomination note, 100 VND, would be worth less than one U.S. cent. The highest, 500,000 VND, is worth around US\$20. It's easy to confuse the different banknotes, which are often similar in color but very different in value.





### Hotels: You may have to pay a card surcharge

Larger hotels and those affiliated to international chains will accept card payment. Smaller hotels usually either **insist on cash or may add a card surcharge** at a level they set themselves to cover their merchant fee. Guesthouses will accept cash only, but this type of accommodation is rarely used by business travelers.

### Dining out: Carry cash

High-end restaurants will generally accept card payment. As they're likely to include a 5% service fee, no tipping is required. When eating out anywhere else, while even the street vendors accept QR code payments, cash will be the only option for foreign visitors. Tips are not expected.

### Shopping: Hold on to your receipts

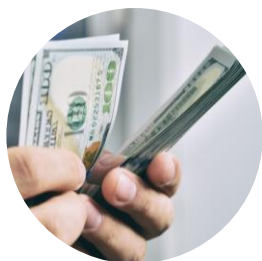
With QR codes not a viable payment option for the vast majority of foreign visitors, expect to pay cash in shops, although some outlets in the biggest cities may accept cards.

Displayed prices include value added tax (VAT), for which the standard rate in Vietnam is 10%. **Ask for and hold on to VAT receipts**, as you'll need these for reclaiming the tax when departing Vietnam.



# Paying in Southeast Asia - At a Glance

This report presents a lot of information about various aspects of payment in these six Southeast Asian countries. In the table below, we've rounded up some of the key takeaways.



## INDONESIA

- Contactless payment can help reduce fraud, but the transaction limits are fairly low.
- If bringing in cash, make sure the banknotes are in a good condition.
- Have small value notes on you for tipping and minor purchases.
- If taking a taxi, agree the fare in advance.

## MALAYSIA

- Card acceptance varies significantly across Malaysia.
- Be prepared to pay by either card or cash, with Grab as a useful backup.
- Make sure you have small denomination notes on you as retailers won't always have change.
- Many shops tend to prefer cash or Grab over card payment.

## PHILIPPINES

- Make sure you have pesos on you before heading outside the major cities.
- When changing money, bring your passport with you.
- Avoid public transportation and hail a Grab instead.

## SINGAPORE

- Singapore is heavily cashless. Card or mobile payment is accepted almost everywhere.
- Grab is not just a ride-hailing app. It's worth having to make QR-based payments.
- The MRT app is also useful for getting around Singapore.

## THAILAND

- You will need cash as it remains the top choice for payment.
- Expect to have to enter your PIN when making card payments.
- Don't be tempted by tuk tuks. Use ride-hailing or public rail services to get around big cities.

## VIETNAM

- Card and digital payment is growing, but you will need cash on you.
- You can only arrive with a small amount of local currency. Bring in a strong currency to exchange for Vietnamese dong.
- Doublecheck how much you're paying, as dong amounts include a lot of zeros.

### Want to know more about payment?

Check out our [Principles of Payment](#) education series to learn more about global payment options and how to best equip your travelers to cover expenses on the road.

[Exploring Payment Options](#) provides information on how to create the ideal payment mix.

[Virtual Payments](#) dives deeper into the newest form of payment available for travel programs.

### Want more ways to ensure payment acceptance in your travel program?

Here are some tips for working with your suppliers:

- Communicate your preferred methods of payment and ensure suppliers are ready to accept them in the markets where your travelers do business
- Understand how foreign transaction fees are managed to reduce unanticipated fees
- Use the power of your program to influence supplier acceptance policies





## Share your thoughts

Do you have any questions or comments regarding this report?  
Please email [Mike Eggleton](mailto:Mike.Eggleton@bcdtravel.com) to share your thoughts.

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