

Import-Export Opportunities in Thailand



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An International Living Import-Export report

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Opportunities in Thailand

Deep in the heart of Southeast Asia, Thailand is a goldmine for shoppers. It has gained worldwide renown for its alluring silks, cottons, and other hand-woven fabrics; its woodcarvings, furniture, lacquer-ware, ceramics, metal-ware, gems, and jewelry. The wealth of beautifully handcrafted goods reflects an array of traditional artisan skills dating back centuries.

Back when Thailand was known as the Kingdom of Siam, each of its 76 provinces specialized in producing one particular type of product. For example, the Chiang Mai province was noted for its lacquer-ware, Sukothai-Si Satchanalai for the classic green-lustered opaque pottery known as celadon, and the southern city of Nakhon Si Thammarat for nielloware. (Nielloware is engraved silver inlaid with niello—an alloy of lead, silver, copper, and sulfur.) Although there's still some degree of specialization, you'll find countless regional products in the two major shopping cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

A few shops in Bangkok and elsewhere have fixed prices. However, at most other shops—and also at markets—bargaining is expected. Even some department stores offer discounts on expensive items like jewelry and fine furniture. A lot will depend on your own haggling skills—and also the shopkeeper's mood. A discount of 10% to 20% on the initial asking price is almost expected.

When bargaining for gems, antiques, or handicrafts, much bigger discounts can be expected. The higher the price, the more you should bargain. And bargain mercilessly. The trick to successful bargaining is knowing beforehand the prevailing price for any item you're interested in.

Providing you have the time, visit several market areas and shops selling the sort of items you want before coming to any final decision. It's only once you have a rough idea of the value of certain goods that you can judge whether the final price is fair—or if you're being overcharged.

Thais are a polite people. They appreciate good manners and a sense of humor, but tend to be put off by loud voices and a loss of temper. When bargaining, don't get nasty. Vendors see it as sport—a friendly sport—and it's as well that you develop this attitude, too. Certainly in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and the main coastal tourist resorts, most shops are experienced at shipping abroad and can handle all the documents such as insurance, customs, and the necessary permits. The Central Post Office also offers a parcel-wrapping service for those who want to make small shipments themselves. For larger items or bulk shipments, there are several Bangkok companies who specialize in such matters.



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In Thailand's markets you can find everything from traditional puppets to brightly-colored coin purses

Bangkok bargains

Thailand's capital, Bangkok, isn't just one of Southeast Asia's great shopping cities—it's also one of the world's best. You're going to find a wide choice of areas in which to pursue your search for bargain merchandise.

Take clothing which is cheap—and we mean really cheap. Good quality cotton shirts for men can be picked up for less than \$2.50. Many tailors do \$199 package deals: two suits (cashmere, gabardine, merino, or mohair wool), two shirts, one summer suit (linen, cotton, or light wool), two silk ties, one silk kimono, and two leather belts. For the same price, they also do deals for ladies: a package might include three suits, two blouses, one dress (silk, wool, viscose), one silk kimono, and two silk scarves. These are tourist prices, but it gives a good indication of how far dollars stretch.

Open at 6 a.m., and with 700 or so outlets all under one roof, Bo Bae Tower (*website: www.bobaetower.com*) on Damrongrak Road is one of the main wholesale outlets for garments, mostly Western-style clothes.

Pratunam Market, on the corner of Petchburi Road and Rajaprarop Road, is Bangkok’s largest outdoor clothing market. It’s said that garment prices here are as low as they get in Bangkok. It’s not just bolts of cloth and silk—you’ll also find bargain-priced T-shirts, jeans, ready-to-wear fashion clothing, shoes, calculators, jewelry, handicrafts, and fake designer watches. Ordinary Thai shoppers buy here, as do wholesalers and exporters—both foreign and local. Outside the market area, particularly around the Indra Hotel, there are dozens more shops and offices. Many belong to export companies, who specialize in fabrics.



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If you’re looking for good-quality, low-cost Thai silk, head to Bangkok’s Pahurat Market

But perhaps the most famous clothing market in Bangkok is Pahurat Market, on the edge of the city’s Chinatown. Known as Little India, this is where to come to buy silk and other fabrics wholesale. Traders are mostly Indian or Thai-Indian. Although every market boasts that it has the lowest prices for many items, few dispute that you’ll find silk any cheaper. If you bargain hard, you can get good quality silk for 250 baht (\$8) per meter; elsewhere it usually sells for upward of around \$10 per meter. Again, more than just fabric is sold here. For example, you’ll find intricate feather masks for under \$4 and more haberdashery than you imagined existed.

Before setting off to Thailand, you can get a starting point for what you should be paying by checking out prices of some online silk and handicraft stores in Thailand. Ask for a wholesale price list to get an idea. With any luck, you should be able to haggle down market traders to a lower price.

15,000-plus stalls: Chatuchak, Bangkok's biggest market

For full frontal shopping frenzy, try the mega-sized Chatuchak Weekend Market (*website: <http://chatuchak.org>*) with its 15,000 plus stalls. (No matter how expert a shopper you are, and even if you pick up a map, don't expect to get around them all in a couple of hours...there's far too much to distract you.) Although there are plenty of tourist items here, it's more of a proper general market and attracts locals in their thousands.

There are tumbling puppy dogs (some getting a shampoo and blow-dry) next to stalls selling ladies underwear...chickens in cages beside an outlet for pots and pans...school uniforms and parakeets...handmade paper and what are undoubtedly not genuine Lacoste shirts...henna tattoo artists and strings of lights cunningly designed as feathers...herbal remedies and wicker ware...silk tablecloths, and a zillion more things besides.



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These colorful beads are just one of the many items you'll find at the Chatuchak Weekend Market...perfect for suitcase importing

You'll really have to go and see Chatuchak's madness for yourself to believe it. To avoid the traffic chaos, the easiest way to get there is on the Sky Train to Mo Chit station at the end of the line. You can jump on at central Bangkok Skytrain stations such as Asok or Nana. Once you're at Mo Chit, just follow the crowds, but note the market is only held on Saturdays and Sundays.

Chiang Mai

An hour's flight north of Bangkok, Chiang Mai is Thailand's second largest city. Dubbed "the Rose of the North," it's one of the country's most culturally rewarding regions. Beyond the city and its 300 gilded wats (temples), Chiang Mai province is a mosaic of whitewater rafting rivers, jungly mountains, and hill-tribe villages. This is the old kingdom of Lanna, a land of gabled teakwood houses, elephant work camps, and a million rice-fields.

Shopping distractions are endless. With artisan traditions going back centuries, Chiang Mai is Thailand's arts and crafts center. Major drawcards are hand-loomed fabrics, teak furniture, silversmithing and metalwork, woodcarving, lacquer-ware, paper-making, and ceramics. It's also good for hunting down genuine and replica antiques.

The city attracts scores of wholesale buyers—prices here are generally cheaper than elsewhere in Thailand. On average, wholesale discounts are 20% to 50% lower than retail. But even retail prices are substantially below what similar items cost back home. The message is: bring empty suitcases.

Bazaar browsings

Spend at least one night browsing Chiang Mai's Night Bazaar. Open from around 5.30 p.m. to 11 p.m. (some stalls trade until midnight), it spreads the whole length of Chang Klan Road.

So much to buy! Bolts of hand-loomed silk shimmer in all the colors of sunset—palest pink through egg-yolk yellow to hell-fire orange. On other stalls, silk and cotton table runners resemble a peacock's tail or a lavender garden. There are handmade bags and purses for \$4 to \$5, woodcarvings and hemp dragons, weird-looking insects and butterflies forever encased behind glass.

Tubular silk/cotton skirts and rip-off designer T-shirts abound in their thousands; ankle-length cotton drawstring pants in swirly colors sell at \$15 for three. Hundreds of twinkling lights draw you to lantern stalls. Complete with bulbs, switches, and plugs, bamboo lanterns of various sizes cost between \$2.60 and \$5.20. And they do work at home...

Although the Night Bazaar is fairly touristy, there are as many Thai and Asian tourists milling around as Westerners. You'll see young Buddhist monks in saffron robes (often clustered around

cell-phone accessory stalls!); wrinkled Akha grannies selling trayfuls of beads, opium pipes, and other hill-tribe regalia. Akha women are easily recognized—they wear spangled head-dresses of silver balls and coins. Plus they usually have blackened teeth from a lifetime of chewing betel nuts.



© Dreamstime/Michelle Liaw

Chang Mai's Night Bazaar is a chance to try out your haggling skills...they have it down to a fine art here

Whatever catches your eye, be prepared to haggle vigorously—never agree to the first price quoted. It depends on the item and stall-holder. Secondly, don't kid yourself that everything is the real deal. Rolex watches are obvious fakes, but shirts, kimonos, and other garments labeled "Genuine Thai Silk" may actually be synthetic.

Certainly on market stalls, silk items aren't always what they appear. You'll not get a real silk shirt for \$5. Depending on the ply and design, genuine Thai silk of top-quality here usually costs upwards of \$15 per meter.

What else can I get for my dollars?

Silver and aluminum picks

A solid silver purse for \$275? An Aladdin's cave of bangles, earrings, pendants, and rings, Lanna Silver's handmade silverware is all 92.5% pure. They've won medals from various organizations including Thailand's Ministry of Industry. Earrings start at \$5, necklets from \$6, Thai flower or elephant design bracelets from \$10. Buy 10 to 49 pieces of each design, and you'll get a 30% discount. Fifty to 99 pieces attracts 40% discount; over 100 pieces, 50%. Contact Lanna Silver; website: www.lannasilvercm.com.

For more information, contact HQ PaperMaker, 3/31 Samlan Road, Tambon Prasing, Amphur Muang, Chiang Mai 50200 Thailand; tel. +66 5381-4717/8; fax +66 5381-4719; website: www.hqpapermaker.com.

Follow the elephant trail

Hong is only 8 years old, but her paintings sell for upward of \$90. Her artistic endeavors work up quite an appetite—each day he gets through almost 500 pounds of food. Hong’s other amazing ability is as a paper-maker—she produces up to 115 sheets daily.

As Hong is an elephant, she obviously doesn’t get involved in the actual paper-making process—only the production line’s first stage. In case you didn’t know, elephant dung is simply fiber. The animals don’t digest much, and around 50% whizzes straight out the other end.

The Thai Elephant Conservation Center has been selling elephant paintings for a while. *Rainbow Tadpoles...Spring Blooms...Comet Storm*. Packed in an elephant dung tube, each painting comes with a picture of “the artist in action.”

When I visited, prices were mostly \$80 to \$100. Could be some great profits here...look around the web at some “non-profit” U.S. organizations, and you’ll see they’re charging \$350 and upward for elephant art.

To boost much-needed funds, the Institute has set up a paper-making factory. Prices for 22” x 31” sheets of elephant dung paper are currently 15 to 20 baht (\$0.48 to \$0.64). Phonebooks and photo albums go from approximately \$4.80 to \$8. But don’t come just for paper and paper products. It’s a great place to see an elephant training show, watch elephants bathe and even ride an elephant. If you get hot and sticky, buy an elephant dung fan. Complete with its own elephant hospital, the Institute is around an hour’s drive from Chiang Mai towards Lampang.

For more details, contact the **National Elephant Institute**, *Lampang-Chiangmai Highway, Hang Chat, Lampang*; tel. +66 5424-7876; e-mail: info@thailandelephant.org

More about Thailand...

Picture yourself wandering through gilded temples...exploring Bangkok’s hidden canals by long-tail boat...riding an elephant down jungle trails...meeting Hmong hill-tribe villagers and treasure-hunting for hand-loomed silk, teakwood carvings and exotic curios—all at a fraction of the price you’d pay back home.

Now let's spin the kaleidoscope to white sand beaches, swaying coconut palms and an evening chorus of cicadas. Rising from jade and turquoise waters are scenes from an oriental fairy-tale: a myriad islands girdled by coral gardens...bizarre limestone outcrops smothered in spinach-green vegetation...incredible sunsets with a slow-burning sun dipping into the sea like a giant red lantern.

The country has a lot of options. Some foreign retirees choose to live in the hubbub atmosphere of Bangkok. Some live in the north of Thailand where life is quiet, peaceful, and very inexpensive. Others choose the south for its beautiful beaches.

Although Thailand is a low wage economy, we'd hesitate to call it a true Third-World country. Unless you insist on living in some really remote patch among the rice fields, there's no reason to abandon good dental care, large supermarkets, or reliable Internet access. Whether it's CNN News or shelves stacked with Pepsi-Cola, you need rarely be far from home comforts.

Climate and landscape

Thailand's climate is diverse and ruled by monsoons. Northern Thailand experiences a rainy season, which can last from July into November. From then until February it is fairly dry, but a good deal cooler. March until June is the hot season, when daytime temperatures can easily reach 104° F (40° C). During the cool season, night time temperatures rarely fall below 55° F (13° C).

The southern half of the country has only two seasons, wet and dry. The wet season can last from July until October/November, with the rest of the year being dry and cooler. Temperatures in the south don't vary that much throughout the year.

Cost of living

There are many places where you can dine well and still leave the table with change from \$5. In fact, go north, and you'll also find that 20 baht noodle stalls still exist—that's just 60 cents! Outside of Bangkok, you can rent homes for less than \$400 a month (sometimes a lot less). It's still possible to purchase a studio condo in a seaside town for less than \$25,000. A full check-up in a modern hospital by an American-trained doctor will cost you less than \$40.

Health care

Most expats we have spoken to have been impressed with the quality, standard, and cost of the medical care they experience. In Bangkok and Chiang Mai's private hospitals, you can expect a quality equal to standards in the U.S. There are also some very good private facilities in Hua Hin,

Udon Thani, Phuket, Pattaya, and Koh Samui where most primary and secondary medical care problems can be dealt with.

There are also public hospitals in the largest cities. While these are considered to be perfectly adequate in emergencies, and technologically well equipped, they tend to be overcrowded, underfunded, and poorly staffed after hours.

Of course, you don't have to use public health facilities. Like most Westerners and many Thais, you can avail of the private medical service, which caters for those covered by private medical insurance.

Our favorite locations in Thailand

Chiang Mai



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Thailand's second largest city, Chiang Mai is dubbed "the Rose of the North", and it's one of the country's most culturally rewarding regions. All golden *wats* (temples), teakwood houses, dragon sculptures, and intriguing alleyways, this is traditional Thailand. It was founded in 1296, but there's a modern city outside the historic core offering plenty of opportunities to buy a condo home.

Best known for its mammoth Night Bazaar, the city attracts scores of wholesale buyers—prices here are generally cheaper than elsewhere in Thailand. On average, wholesale discounts are 20% to 50% lower than retail. But even retail prices are substantially below what similar items cost back home.

Phuket



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A tropical island of around 300,000 people just 8 degrees north of the equator, Phuket isn't just a sophisticated vacation paradise. It's also a favorite with expats—around 8,000 live here permanently. The main island is circled by 32 smaller islands rich in caves, cliffs, lagoons, and seabirds. The seascapes are surreal. Rising from waters that gleam jade, emerald, and deep turquoise are countless limestone pillars and bizarre outcrops smothered in jungle vegetation.

Phuket isn't the cheapest place to buy in Thailand, but it is one of the loveliest—beautiful white sand beaches, crystal seas, laid-back living, excellent health care, an international school, big supermarkets, just about every kind of restaurant you can imagine.