

Little-Known Markets That Could Make You Rich: Secrets of the Silk Road Trader



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An International Living report

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Cover photo: @iStockPhoto.com/tolgakolcak

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Introduction

Global trade has been described as the hot new enterprise of the 21st century. In reality, it's not a new industry at all. Not when you think about the ancient caravans of the desert and camels bearing cargoes of salt, silk, and exotic spices. Or the Phoenicians, who exported their precious purple dye all across the Roman Empire. Or Captain Bligh and his South Seas breadfruits... Sir Walter Raleigh and tobacco. When it comes to trade, the world actually went global a long, long time ago.

The most famous example of global trading started over 2,000 years ago. It spanned continents, introduced the East to the West and allowed a whole new way of life which had a major impact on our world today. It was, of course, the Silk Road.

The Silk Road is an extensive interconnected network of trade routes across the Asian continent connecting East, South, and Western Asia with the Mediterranean world, including North Africa and Europe.

It originated in the second century BC as a defense mechanism by China's Han Dynasty. They extended their military defenses further into Central Asia from 135 to 90 BC in order to protect trade caravans which were attacked by Central Asian tribes. Chan Ch'ien, the first known Chinese traveler to make contact with the Central Asian tribes, later came up with the idea to expand the silk trade to include these lesser tribes and therefore forge alliances with these Central Asian nomads. Because of this idea, the Silk Road was born.

Extending over 5,000 miles the Silk Routes (commonly known as the "Silk Road") were not only conduits for silk, but also for many other products, especially luxuries such as silk, satins, and other fine fabrics, musk and other perfumes, spices, medicines, jewels, glassware and even rhubarb. The route spanned China, Central Asia, Northern India, and the Parthian and Roman Empires and included the modern-day countries of Turkey, Russia, Iraq, Iran, Japan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Greece, and Italy. The Chinese would trade their silk with the Indians for precious stones and metals such as jade, gold, and silver, and the Indians would trade the silk with the Roman Empire.

The Silk Road Markets

China

The best place to get pearl earrings for less than \$2

Hongqiao Flea Market, (the northern gate of the Temple of Heaven, Chongwen district, Beijing), is a multi-story market full of noisy vendors and often fanatical customers. Restaurateurs can buy live crab from vendors on the basement floor; the ground floor caters to electronics buyers; purses are well-represented on the second floor; and the third floor deals in everything—shoes, jewelry, jade, teapots, as well as a rather remarkable pearl market.

But Hongqiao is best known for its pearls...giving it the nickname The Pearl Market. With three stories of pearls you can find freshwater, seawater, black, pink, and white pearls for a variety of quality and price. You can get a pair of pearl earrings here for as little as 15 yuan (that's about \$2). Fanghua Pearls (No. 4318), on the fourth floor, displays quality necklaces and earrings, with photos of Barbara Bush and Margaret Thatcher shopping there to prove it. Fanghua has a second store devoted to fine jade and precious stones.

Beijing's best place for everything...including the kitchen sink!

Affectionately referred to as the “dirt market”, the Panjiayuan Flea Market, Third Ring Road, Chaoyang District was so called because in the beginning peasants would cart in objects they supposedly unearthed themselves, squat in the market's open field and hawk their wares—no licenses, no stalls, no facilities (some say it was the place where wealthy families who had fallen upon hard times came under the cover of darkness in order to exchange their belongings for a few yuan).

The peasants are gone now, and the market grounds are no longer just an open field, in fact it got a makeover recently, but there are still plenty of merchants selling everything from antiques to paintings and a great deal of the boisterous atmosphere remains. With over 3,000 stalls the market is

Forbidden markets off the Silk Road

England

Petticoat Lane—Noisy, vibrant, and lots of fun

A particular vendor at the Petticoat Lane Flea Market, (Aldgate or Aldgate East tube, Middlesex Street, London; Sundays only), has been known to display a sign advertising his business as “the only stall in London licensed by Scotland Yard to sell stolen goods.” Whether this is a dose of cockney humor or not, it sets the tone for this jovial place, as much street fair as flea market.

The market is named after the petticoats and lace once sold there by the Huguenots who came to London from France. The street was renamed Middlesex Street in 1830 by the Victorians who wanted to avoid references to women’s underwear, but the original name had stuck. The market was always unpopular with the London authorities, being largely unregulated and in some senses, illegal. As recently as the 1930s, police cars and fire engines were driven down The Lane, with alarm bells ringing, to disrupt the market. The rights of the market were only finally protected by Act of Parliament in 1936.

“The Lane” was always renowned for the “patter” and showmanship of the market traders. Some, selling crockery, would pile an entire setting onto a large plate, and then send the lot, high into the air, catching the construction on its way down. This was to demonstrate the skill of the vendor, and the robustness of the porcelain.

This place is noisy, vibrant, and a good deal of fun. Prepare for a good-natured haggle as you eye antiques, jewelry, factory seconds, bric-a-brac, and the like. Petticoat Lane specializes in cheap clothes, shoes, and leather jackets. Even if you come home empty-handed, you’ll have had a great day out. Open Sundays, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

sculptural figure of Sharon Stone, out for a day on the town with her Yankee friends, or other stars looking for inspiration to decorate their home in California or their loft in New York.”

If collections of saucy corsets and underwear is more your thing, then don’t miss the Dauphine Market. Its 6,000 square meters of floor space holds around 180 antiques and bric-a-brac merchants. Here you can also find a Renaissance period dresser, rare texts from the Torah, not to mention thousands of rare books, 18th century gilt wood pieces or inspired decorative pieces from the 1930s and 1940s, and vintage or industrial art.

Covering 7 hectares, this is the largest antiques flea market in the world. Between 120,000 and 150,000 visitors from the world over come here every weekend. It’s best to pace yourself here—take frequent breaks at the numerous hole-in-the-wall cafés in the area.

Also part of the Paris Saint-Ouen Flea Market and perhaps the most authentic of Paris’ flea markets, Le Jules Vallès, 7 rue Jules Vallès, has the feel of a grandma’s attic. A somewhat haphazard array of dusty collectibles fills these two covered aisles: military uniforms, antique weapons, posters, books, bronze statues, china dolls, as well as fascinating memorabilia. The market contains 120 stands and is open very early on Thursday and Friday mornings, but is for trade professionals. The general public can come along though and watch the dealers in action.

Jules Vallès has retained a traditional spirit. The market, with its no-frills stands, is entirely without pretension, looking more like attic space than anything else. Recently, the market got a lick of paint but the style has remained unaffected.

Portugal

Lisbon’s best place to steal from thieves

The Feira da Ladra, Campo de Santa Clara, Alfama, translates as Market of Female Thieves. Some 300 years ago, female thieves known as *sovaqueiras*, concealed illegal goods and sold them at a market in Lisbon’s Rossio Square. While the present day market is on the up-and-up, you can still find a real steal here, particularly when it comes to bronze, copper, and gold items. This market is jam-packed with antiques, rugs, new and used clothes, vintage tiles (these are great), riding spurs, pottery, as well as a lot of rather useless junk. It’s also a great place to pick up hand-crocheted doilies, embroidered napkins, even large tablecloths.

This open-air street market is a great place to experience the hustle, bustle and haggling of the day’s trading. It is often said that to get the best bargains you need to get there early, but many people simply go down to browse through the bric-a-brac on show at many of the stalls. Check out

How to Get Rich as a Silk Trader

We here at *International Living* have our very own Silk Road trader. Her name is Steenie Harvey. She recently went to Anatolia in Asian Turkey to explore some trading routes of her own.

She found everything for sale in its bazaars—from hand-knotted rugs and regional kilims to mother-of-pearl tables and mirrors, traditional copperware, ceramics, and spices. It's a shoppers paradise...and best of all, you can make money by selling the items you buy here back home.

Made in Turkey—Import-export opportunities that can triple your money back home

“The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold...his cohorts gleaming in purple and gold.”

No sheen of spears, thankfully. However, this baggy-trousered trader has gold teeth and wears a lavender headscarf the size of a tablecloth. Is he descended from Assyrians?

I'm wearing a lavender tablecloth, too. Embroidered with silver threadwork and sequins, mine cost \$4. Maybe locals buy cheaper, but the haggling did start at \$6.40. These cotton scarves are trademark headgear for Sanliurfa's men and women. The reputed birthplace of biblical Abraham, Sanliurfa lies in Turkey's southeast, in what was once upper Mesopotamia.

I'd donned the scarf/shawl to investigate Balikli Gol, Sanliurfa's mosque-dotted lakeside gardens. In Islamic belief, Assyria's King Nemrut threw Abraham into a fire here. Through divine intervention, the fire turned into water, the firewood into fish. The lake waters are thick with carp, fattened by pilgrims. Look, but don't touch. Apparently fish molestation results in blindness.

I exchange a *merhaba*—hello—with the trader. He offers a sample of his wares: a hand-rolled cigarette from a sack of tobacco. At \$18.60 for three kilos (just over 6 pounds) it's tempting, but importing tobacco is illegal...

Recently I left Europe behind and headed into Anatolia: Asian Turkey. Before me lay the Silk Road...the sun-baked lands of Allah...the forgotten kingdoms of the Hittites and Assyrians. Few import-export trails are more rewarding. Or exotically unpredictable. Anatolia's southeastern borderlands snuggle up against Syria, Iraq, and Iran. No mass tourism here, that's for sure.

Well before Marco Polo's journeys, caravans of precious goods traveled the Silk Road. Linking China to Europe, this wasn't a single road, but a network of routes. Most passed through Asia Minor and what is present-day Turkey.

During Ottoman Empire rule, *caravanserais* were built. These secure trading courtyards had stabling for camels and mules and accommodation for merchants. There was generally a mosque, a *hamam* (Turkish bath), and a *bedestan* (covered hall), where goods were securely stored.

Old *caravanserais* often became a town's Kapali Carsi, a Grand Bazaar-style market. Down narrow passages, men pound copper cauldrons; animal hides await skinning; artisans inlay wood with mother of pearl. Everywhere smells of spices and sizzling kebabs. Booths yield saddles and saddle blankets...gleaming copperware...blocks of dusky green olive oil soap...air-dried beef sausages... cheap shoes and clothing...waterfalls of sequined and embroidered fabrics.

Similar wares are grouped together. Knives here, carpets there, textiles and leather farther on. You come across calligraphers adorning marbled paper. Script work can be artistically decorated with a perfect pink tulip; sometimes an arabesque of Arabic gets hidden inside the stylized shape of a bird.

Scepters and fur-trimmed capes? Some vendors have what appear to be sultan costumes for boys. But they're not—they're circumcision ceremony outfits. It's usually done between the ages of 6 and 10, depending when families can afford the expense. I got some odd looks when asking, but the cheapest quote for the full regalia was \$120.

Guidebook advice to “never start talking prices unless you intend to buy” is nonsense. How else can you make comparisons?

The carpet town of Kayseri

Anatolia's crown jewels are hand-knotted rugs and regional kilims—flatweave wool-on-wool or wool-on-cotton rugs. Motifs are symbolic. A ram's horn, for example, denotes fertility, heroism, and power.

So I flew from Istanbul to Kayseri, a carpet production center. On a Silk Road junction, the city connected central Anatolia to Iran and Turkmenistan. Known in Roman times as Caesarea, it's within day-trip distance of Cappadocia's fairy chimneys and early Christian underground cities.

Pans, samovars, cauldron-sized pots. Handmade copper work has been sold in its bazaar for centuries. You'll see both traditional copperware and copper plated with tin or nickel silver. Most items used for edibles are tinned inside. Copper by itself is poisonous.

Here are some prices: Hand-engraved sugar bowls: \$8. (Buy-it-now eBay (www.ebay.com) price is \$24.99.) Cezves—Turkish coffee pots plated with tin on the inside—cost from \$4.50 to \$7, depending on size. You'll buy these in the States for \$22 for the smallest size.

Coffee sets comprising six copper cups with ceramic inserts, sugar bowl, and tray cost from \$40 to \$63. The more expensive are hand-engraved with motifs, not stamped. The price on www.turkishcoffeeworld.com is \$235. Tinned copper trays engraved with symbols such as fish and pomegranates cost from \$8 to \$16. That's without any serious bargaining.

Another eye-catcher is *sedef*, mother-of-pearl inlay. It's used to decorate items such as mirrors, letter racks, cigarette cases, walking sticks, and boxes. Haggle and you'll get small walnut-wood jewelry boxes for \$8. I've seen these on only one U.S. website—for \$69.99. You can buy pearly coffee tables, too. In an Istanbul fixed-price handicraft store, a 2-foot by 18-foot inlaid table was \$838. Similar Gaziantep tables are \$228; ones with fewer inlays are \$186. Initial prices for miniature tables (12 feet by 18 feet) are \$84 to \$127.

Sanliurfa's sumak hunt

Reverberating with ethereal calls to prayer, the City of Prophets isn't only associated with Abraham. Job (Eyup to Muslims) also reputedly suffered his torments in sweltering Sanliurfa. By sweltering, I mean 118° F in high summer.

But forget the heat. The best-priced kilims and sumaks (Persian-style embroidered kilims) I found anywhere were in its bazaar. An ancient *caravanserai*, it was built during Suleiman the Magnificent's reign. Often made by Iranian refugees, most Turkish sumaks are from the Lake Van and Mount Ararat localities, where believers think Noah's Ark landed. Defying Islamic tradition, some depict stylized animals and birds.

With Abdullah Fidan of Yore Kilm, I bargained down a Noah's Ark-themed silk-and-wool sumak to \$160. Starting negotiations were \$200. I passed it up, expecting to do better farther east. I didn't.

A few booths away, more haggling with Sarac Ticaret of El Isi Hali. I wore him down to \$73 for a 4-foot-2-inch by 2-foot-5-inch Persian wool sumak. It had started at \$121. I bought that one, but I'm still smarting over not snapping up three wool kilims from Adiyaman and Lake Van. They were only \$28.50 apiece.

