

# Other Destinations Where You Can Find Import-Export Bargains



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**An International Living Import-Export report**

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**Y**ou've heard about some of our favorite Import-Export destinations already, but there are so many more out there. Countries all around the globe offer opportunities for Import-Export business ideas. Over the years we have heard from many *International Living* readers who have set up their own businesses all over the world. Here, we'll share some of those stories...perhaps they will give you some inspiration for your Import-Export business.

## Export profits from Colombia—and they're legal

Certain Colombian substances deliver mega-profits...and they don't involve having a drug dealer in your rolodex. We asked Bogota-based Gary Tripp how he got into exporting leather and lambskin jackets to the States.

Most of Gary's business is through his company Andes Leathers. Before starting the business in Colombia, Gary admits he made mistakes. Around four years ago, he initially moved to Cuenca in Ecuador, where the leather shops caught his eye.

*"I had strong design ideas; my business partner Charlie was a web master and marketing man. And so our company was started. Well, sort of.."*

*"As neither of us spoke much Spanish, a huge obstacle was trying to persuade craftspeople to make what we wanted—not what they wanted to sell us."*

If you plan to run a similar business from a Spanish-speaking country, learn the language basics. But Spanish wasn't Gary's only *problemo*. Under-capitalized, he was trying to run before he could walk.

*“Heard of boot-strap operations? Forget the boots, we barely had a strap. We were using imported lambskin from our tannery’s partners in Madrid, and they were pushing us to secure large orders from Stateside companies. It wasn’t going to happen. We didn’t have the capital or contacts to make it a reality.*

*“This is where the story should end, except that I live by a couple of sayings:*

*“1. Don’t fix the blame, fix the problem.*

*“2. Failure is not an option.*

*“As luck would have it, I attended a leather expo in Bogota, Colombia. Having almost two years of experience in what NOT to do, I was better able to utilize my time and communicate what I needed. (By now, I had worked my way up to Spanglish and could say hello at least eight different ways.)*

*“I made enough contacts to jumpstart the business in Colombia. One was Oscar and his company, Gem Leathers. He designs wallets for men and women, plus a limited line of bags for guys.*

*“I give Oscar pointers on marketing in the U.S. and he continues to point me in the right direction here. Charlie has also developed a biz-to-biz wholesale site. We now work with several boutiques in the States and private-label customers.”*

Once you know the tricks of the trade, you can make good money.

## **It all began with Moon Goons: Wayne’s African story**

*“My business career started when I was six years old when I mowed the lawn for a neighbor with a push lawnmower. I made 25 cents which I thought was pretty big money! But when I was in Junior High School, in 1969, I discovered a small wholesale house where you could buy trinket items really cheap by the dozen. I invested about \$1.20 or so to buy a dozen Moon Goons: little plastic dolls that were covered with fur and had really cute hats. I took the dolls to school, gave them to two of the most popular girls in the school for free, but with one stipulation: They had to show them to their friends and at least pretend to really like them.*

*“A fad was born. Soon everyone in the school had to have not one...not two... but as many different Moon Goons as they could afford. You see, they came in lots of different colors and styles; and lots of kids wanted to have them all. Every day after school, I would ride the bus downtown to buy a gross or two of Moon Goons. This lasted until the school authorities put the kibosh on things—but not before I had netted over \$200.”*

Wayne's career moved into carpet cleaning...tax accountancy...sales...real estate. Making "more money than I needed," he eventually started looking for something more satisfying. Which is how Africa Imports ([website: www.africainports.com](http://www.africainports.com)) came about.

*"The purpose of Africa Imports is basically twofold. The business goal is to serve our customers with the largest selection in the world of African and African-inspired goods at low prices, and with a higher level of customer service than anyone else in our market.*

*"An additional goal—and the real purpose behind the founding of this business—is to help provide a means of support for people in some of the most economically-disadvantaged regions of the world.*

*"Although there are many other ways to make money, there are not as many effective ways to help people in Third-World areas support themselves. Africa Imports provides a crucial link between artisans and other working people in Africa, and people in the United States who love and appreciate their work.*

*"The areas of Africa where many of these products are made are among the poorest in the world. Whenever a person decides to own one of these products, it's helping to give basic necessities to African people in need. Even though it may not always seem like a lot of money to us, it can be enough for some people to buy food, clothing, or medical care with."*

For the first year, the business was operated by Wayne, his family, and by one office person. Most of this time was spent gaining an understanding of the market for African goods, and developing an initial business plan and strategy for marketing African goods in the United States. Wayne traveled throughout the United States and Africa, visiting African stores, exhibiting goods in trade shows, establishing supply sources, and building a base of customers.

Now Wayne employs 15 people and leases 15,500 square feet of office and warehouse space in South Hackensack, New Jersey. He also has about 100 people from Africa who travel back and forth, sending new products to the United States every month by both containers and air shipments. For the most part, each product is individually handmade.

If you're thinking of importing from Africa yourself, you may be wondering if there are likely to be any problems with U.S. Customs. We asked Wayne if his people have experienced any.

*"There are unusual situations that come up," he says, "but fewer than in importing from many other areas. Most of the countries that we bring goods from are considered economically disadvantaged. Therefore there is no Customs requirement for most products from these countries."*

## After the Tsunami: Why I started a business in Indonesia by Roy Van Broekhuizen

After the tsunami hit Indonesia in 2004, many of the survivors had no homes, food, or jobs. I couldn't stand by and watch this suffering continue, so I sat down to devise a business plan to try to ease the situation. I didn't realize that this would create a million-dollar business that would not only help people rebuild their lives, but also allow us to travel the world at our leisure.

My wife Louise and I came up with the idea of employing the local artisans in the small villages to make one-of-a-kind embroidered handbags that incorporated native patterns passed down from generation to generation, which Louise would bring back to the States and sell to her friends.

Louise remained in the States while I was stuck in some different projects in Indonesia. Every trip home, I would bring back some boxes; the first time two large boxes, then five, then 11, until in August 2006 we both realized that the demand had grown so much that we had to bring them in another way. That's when Laga Designs International, Inc. officially launched and began growing at a rapid pace.

Early in 2007, *The Orange County Register*, the largest newspaper in Orange County, Calif., where we live, called and said they would like to do a story on us, which we agreed to. A few weeks later, the story appeared. The phone started ringing at 6 a.m. at our condo office and I awoke to an inbox of more than 921 and \$3,000 worth of Internet sales. One of the hundreds of answering machine messages was that the newspaper put their story on the full first page and last page of the business section.

There was so much response that Louise ended up going to Indonesia by herself, and I stayed in the office filling orders and running the office. Needless to say, it was crazy, chaotic, frantic, and, at the same time, it was fun. There are bags all over the place, in the garage, living room, family room; out of three bedrooms, two are used for the office, which now includes one full-time assistant, one part-time assistant, and five volunteers.

In August 2007 we brought our first 40-foot container from Indonesia to Orange County. All the bags are being stored in the parking lot behind a building that is leased by a friend, who is not charging us for the space.

With the factories half a world away, filling orders quickly can present challenges. We started our own factory and training center two years ago with 12 young women, mostly in their 20s, who have lost family members and friends.

Today we are proud to employ 150 staff, mostly women, and co-op with three other factories to meet the demand. To see those women now, how they are so empowered, gives us all hope. We do our little part to help people and make someone else happy and smile, and it makes us realize how blessed and fortunate we are.

For more information about Laga Designs International, see the website [www.laga-handbags.com](http://www.laga-handbags.com).

## Patterns for success in Mexico: Susanna's story

For a number of years, Susanna has been working with a team of Zapotec Indian weavers in a remote village in the mountains of Oaxaca. They make “the Line of the Spirit,” a unique collection of high-quality designer rugs and wall hangings. These rugs and hangings have been featured in *Architectural Digest*, *Hali* magazine in England, *Log Cabin Homes*, and numerous design magazines. Collectors include Sting, Paul Simon, and Diana Ross.

Did you ever imagine you could eventually be selling to celebrities? Susanna kindly offered to share how it all came about.

*“In the early part of 1993, after selling our home in suburban Long Island, N.Y., my husband and I set out with our children, all packed in a camper, for the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. I had just completed a two-year project at the State University of New York (SUNY), where I had interviewed people who had explored alternative lifestyles. Now I, with my family, was embarking on a search of our own.*

*“Expecting to have lots of time on the beach, I was preparing to write an article for publication. However, as with many expectations, life intervened with a different scenario. After a journey of five months, I eventually ended up in a small town of Taos in the mountains of northern New Mexico. A unique, tri-cultural community, there was—and still is—an emphasis on art in all its forms, with an extremely creative expression in the Hispanic, Native American, and Anglo people of this community.*

*“My own life changed with a divorce and subsequent relationship with someone who shared my feeling of strong connection with Mexico. We knew that we would like to have Mexico be part of our lives. Perhaps it was our connection with Mexico that made living in rural New Mexico, where Spanish was often the first language, so comfortable. It was also a realization of living alternatively, since the lifestyle of many people was close to the land, often without water and with limited electricity.*

*“Without a clear idea of what we would do or find, my partner and I made several trips to Mexico, where we discovered various centers where artisans practiced their crafts. The following year we were invited to open a shop in a large space that housed an ice-cream parlor, right on the town square (zocalo). We created a bit of Mexico, making our small space quaint and reminiscent of stalls in Mexico. Our financing was extremely limited and, with our small stake, we bought a used station wagon, drove down to Mexico again and purchased what we could. We lived simply and inexpensively, saving whatever we could for purchases.*

*“After only six weeks of opening, our original inventory—which covered a range of Mexican crafts—was noticeably depleted. It became apparent that another buying trip was necessary. By the end of six months, we were pretty well sold out, but were able to finance another buying trip, which was also part of our lifestyle. Our command of the Spanish language was limited, but we tried to speak Spanish only in all of our dealings.*

*“Within two years of our venture of buying and selling, the space we had was taken over by the existing business which had also expanded—and we were forced to find another one. Fortunately, we found a small but charming shop in a 200-year-old Spanish-style building with a traditional courtyard, which we proceeded to fix up. Baskets and pots of flowers in the summer and fall added to the rugs and pillows we hung outside, making it an inviting sight for passing tourists. In this new location, we focused almost entirely on weavings.*

*“We had found a small weaving village outside of Oaxaca, Mexico, where we had done some limited purchasing with the small amount of money we had available, but now we knew that this village would provide us with what we wanted to represent, for we had an immediate connection with the people as well as with an extremely high quality of handloomed wool weavings. At this time, they had virtually no representation in the United States or Europe.*

*“Once we started more serious buying, we realized that we had to have a Customs broker, for it became apparent that we now had a business, and having a Customs broker was part of that. Although I had small children, I worked together with my partner seven days a week for many years. It was a great sacrifice for them as well as for me.*

*“As the years went by, our collection became larger and when the part of the building that also opened onto our courtyard became available, we were able to take advantage of a much needed expansion. Now, we could really display our weavings.*





