

# Haggling 101

THE ART OF  
OVERSEAS  
NEGOTIATION



Travel SAFER LLC

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# HAGGLING 101

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**TANZANIA, IN THE BACK OF A SHOP AT THE WOOD CARVER'S PLAZA: I WAS LOOKING AT A CARVED, WOODEN ELEPHANT'S HEAD WHEN I NOTICED THAT THE ALREADY SMALL SPACE (WHICH HAD ONLY ONE EXIT) WAS BECOMING INCREASINGLY FILLED WITH LOCALS WHO WEREN'T SHOPPING - IT WAS TIME TO GET OUT...**



PHOTO CREDIT: SUVAN CHOWDHURY

The shopkeeper asked \$200 for the "ebony" elephant head, but the cans of black shoe polish lying around and the extreme lightness of the piece told me that he had no respect for me. This trick had worked before on some unsuspecting tourist, so I thanked him and walked off. Thirty yards outside the shop, I was attracting other vendors who offered the exact same thing. Finally, the original shop owner offered me \$15 for his fake ebony carving, almost pushing it into my hands as he saw his sale potentially scooped by his neighbors.

I am not out to take advantage of anyone. I will not haggle for a couple dollars.



PHOTO CREDIT: JC LIGHTCAP

## I VIEW HAGGLING AS A SPORT; HOWEVER, I HAVE THREE RULES WHEN IT COMES TO IT:

1. As long as you're happy with what you got, it doesn't matter what you paid, or if you could've gotten it for a few bucks cheaper – no buyer's remorse.
2. Be willing to walk away, unless it's something totally unique that you're willing to pay more for it (see Rule #1).
3. I am not out to take advantage of, or humiliate anyone. I'm not going to haggle over a difference of a couple dollars; in some countries, that could mean dinner for an entire family. Conversely, though, I refuse to let them take advantage of me.

So what's the secret sauce? After years of bartering, I've come up with a set of ground rules and techniques that will help you navigate any medina or artisanal village with the grace of a well-seasoned grifter.

### UNDERSTAND THE CULTURE:

- Superstition. In many countries, the first sale is very important and vendors will give deep discounts to get past that first sale. Go in the early morning and watch vendors take the cash from their first sale and literally touch the rest of their merch with it for good luck.

Getting to know the vendor on the other end of the transaction can pay huge dividends later.



PHOTO CREDIT: JC LIGHTCAP

- Some cultures expect a little banter before actually getting into the sale. Pushing an item in front of them and demanding how much (in English, no less) can be grating. A little basic conversation humanizes you and warms them up before discussing their wares. This also ties into getting to know your salesman, as seen below.

#### GET TO KNOW YOUR SALESMAN:

- This applies especially in the Middle East, but is a good idea anywhere if you're working on a large purchase. Getting to know the vendor on the other end of the transaction can pay huge dividends later. Be aware that if you're talking to a lower-level person, they may not be able to really discount items. Make sure you're chatting with the decision-maker, a method called "qualifying the seller" (actually, salesmen "qualify the buyer", but since we're taking the reins, we are qualifying them). Have a little chat, talk about how much you love their country, ask where the best place to eat is, and, if you're in an artisanal shop, look for articles on the walls or photos of previous generations who may have passed down the art – great fodder for conversation. Ask how to say some basic words in the local language – anything to show interest and gain their favor.

If you're not sure  
how much something  
costs, don't buy it at  
the first shop.



PHOTO CREDIT: JC LIGHTCAP

### KNOW WHAT YOU ARE BUYING:

This, more than anything else, levels the playing field when you're shopping overseas. Can you identify real silver? Can you tell the difference between a single and double-knot on the back of a carpet? Can you distinguish ebony from other woods? Know how much the item normally goes for, what the real thing looks like, and how to spot fakes.

If you're not sure, then don't buy from the first shop. Often, several shops will sell the same thing, which will help you get a baseline before you buy. This will also give you leverage if you leave a shopkeeper to peruse the competition's wares, as he may be more agreeable when you come back. A good shopkeeper will take the time to tell you why his wares are the real deal and the tell-tale signs of a fake.

It pays dividends to know what you're shopping for, and the shopkeepers will recognize that you're not a rube, which oftentimes give way to some interesting conversations. However, in some cities, the only way you will know that you got a fair deal is that the vendor will be unhappy. (Marrakech comes to mind...)

### TIMING IS IMPORTANT:

- Showing up near closing time can make a huge difference, especially when they want to make that last sale of the night.
- Early morning, first sale will play to their superstitions. Many cultures believe that the first sale of the day is good luck and will give a good price in order to make that first

Give your vendor  
a reason to discount  
the item without  
looking weak.



PHOTO CREDIT: WEI PAN

sale. Use this to your advantage and ask what the first sale of the day price is.

- Negotiating in a crowded or busy shop can be more difficult; try and get them during a lull. This also ties into the next tactic: saving face.

#### **SAVING FACE:**

When everybody wins, you win. Don't just take. Give your vendor a reason to discount the item without looking weak.

- Get them alone where you can negotiate without shame – don't let another customer see you getting a good price - it's not good for the vendor's business.
- Ask for the rainy day discount, or the Tuesday discount, or the full moon discount, or the end of day discount, or the... do you see where I'm going with this?
- Ask for the friend price, now that you two are buddy-buddy... (if you take the time to get to know your salesman).
- Was the product made in a neighboring country? Indicate that it would be better if it were local.
- Quantity discount – Buying multiples will almost always result in a reduced individual price (if you need more than one, that is).

Art is said to be the only truly unique souvenir that you can purchase in a foreign country. But if you've ever visited Mont Martre or peered behind the shops of an artisanal village in Tanzania, you'll quickly realize this

Bartering is a social science; the benefit is not always a lower price, often a connection with another person.



PHOTO CREDIT: JC LIGHTCAP

may not be entirely true. My point: Know a bargain and understand when you're being targeted as a tourist. If you can fire off a few words to the vendor in their language, this will drop their guard and identify you as a seasoned traveler who has been here before.

*Before we get into tried and true tactics, let's revisit the three rules of haggling, specifically #3: We're not trying to swindle or humiliate anyone. Bartering is a social science where the benefit is not always a lower price, but often a connection with another person (and maybe a new friend). Remember - negotiation is an art, not/not a con.*

## TACTICS: HOW TO START NEGOTIATING

For many of these tactics to work, you have to express genuine interest in an item. The shopkeep has to know you are on the hook. (But don't forget Rule #2!)

- **The Walk Away:** For this to work, you must have expressed interest in an item, looked at it, played with it, etc., first. After a wee bit of back and forth, thank them, look at the item wistfully, then begin to walk out. I have had vendors walk fifteen yards from their stores to sell me items at 10% of their original asking price.
- **The Empty Pockets/Cash Poor:** This is great for those who do not like confrontation or are not good at negotiating. Store varying amounts of cash among several pockets when headed to the souqs (remembering

Negotiation is  
an art – but  
it's not for  
everyone.



PHOTO CREDIT: JC LIGHTCAP

how much is in each one). When it comes to the negotiation, tell them the amount you're willing to pay, which should correspond with the amount you have in a specific pocket. When they say it's too little, empty said pocket with a "Sorry" look on your face because it's "all" that you have. The shopkeep will assume you have more and continue to negotiate. Reinforce that this is all you have left and you may get your asking price.

*\*Disclaimer: This creates a "take it or leave it" scenario, since you'll look like an ass if you suddenly "find" \$300 in another pocket. Be aware that they will sometimes counter with an offer to accept credit cards.*

- **The Thinker:** Literally look the item over again and again, "debating" in your head and occasionally out loud whether or not you should buy it, especially with larger ticket items like a leather coat or giant hookah. Be prepared to spend at least an hour.

*\*To be fair, the Walk Away can achieve the same in less time.*
- **The Look:** Make a visibly shocked face when you hear the price. Usually this causes a drop in price; if nothing else, this lets the vendor know that you are aware of local prices and are not a rube. Be aware that the vendor may offer counter-justification if the product is hand-made.
- **The Hem and Haw:** A buddy of mine spent an hour just looking at a leather jacket in Paris and let the saleswoman do all the talking. He just stuck to his guns and refused

Beware the pair –  
things come in pairs  
to trigger your need  
for symmetry.



PHOTO CREDIT: FRANK WINKLER

to make a decision. I was annoyed, but he got the jacket for ½ off the tag price. Well done, sir.

- **Good Cop/Bad Cop:** You like it, your friend says it's too much. You look at your friend and back to the shopkeep. You get to remain neutral, the price goes down. This one is good for the shy negotiator.
- **The Spouse Exit:** Coordinate a signal with your significant other or travel buddy. When the price gets to a sticking point, have them give you the look that says, "I'm bored" or, "I've had enough" at which point they walk out of the shop. This creates a sense of urgency with the shopkeep, since they know your time is now severely limited. Give them a shrug and your best offer. If they don't take it, do the Walk Away - you might be surprised at how often they'll come after you.
- **Cash in Hand:** This is a trick straight from the Arab culture; I watched an Egyptian do this and repeated it myself later with great success. When you reach the price you're comfortable paying, take that amount, place it in the hand of the shopkeeper, and ask them to put the item in a bag. Genius.

## TRICKS THEY USE:

- **Beware the Pair:** You'll find things in pairs, often a male/female version of something, which of course triggers your need for symmetry.

If the price is too good to be true...



PHOTO CREDIT: GRATISOGRAPHY

- **“Ebony”**: They’ll use shoe polish to paint normal wood to look like ebony. Ebony is heavy. REALLY heavy. It also doesn’t rub off. If nothing else, look for shoe polish cans lying around the shop.
- **Price Ignorance**: Have an idea of what something should cost locally. Don’t buy the first instance of something as you’ll often see it or something like it again. If you love it and may not have any other chance at it later, refer to Rule #1.
- **Knock-offs**: Watches, sunglasses, purses, you name it. I bought a Tag Heuer knock-off with dials that didn’t work for \$2 on the beach in Senegal. His original asking price? \$200. Details are important - don’t be a rube. If it’s important to you that your item is genuine, double-check for all the normal indicators. If the price is too good to be true, it could be that the item “fell off the back of a truck” and by that, I mean it was “lost during transport” and by THAT, I mean it’s authentic, but was stolen.
- **The Shell Game**: In some countries (Tanzania comes to mind), transporting shells home is illegal. This will not stop the vendor from selling them to you and the security at the airport taking them from you, then delivering them back to the vendor for a cut.
- **The Pushy or Offended Shopkeeper**: The shopkeeper will place the item in your hand or in a bag and say “okay” as if the price was already agreed upon. They will also act offended if you continue to negotiate. Best response here is to leave with a polite thank you. These types are bitter and no longer care to hide their disdain.

Shopping for rugs  
is the pinnacle of  
overseas negotiation.



PHOTO CREDIT: JC LIGHTCAP

**The Guide Angle:** Your guide is getting a commission – he knows all the local shop owners and will take you to the ones he knows who give him a cut. If your guide asks you upfront whether you want to shop or see things, and then actually does what you ask, he or she is among the rare few. If you notice your guide taking you from shop to shop instead of sightseeing, it might be time to have a word with him/her. I have had a few guides jump in the negotiation, which annoyed me at first, but fortunately resulted in a pretty good deal – nothing beats the price you get for being a local.

## RUG SHOPPING

**SHOPPING FOR RUGS IS AN EXPERIENCE AND WHOLLY DIFFERENT THAN DEALING WITH NORMAL TRINKET VENDORS.**

Expect to deal with savvy, professional manipulators. Expect all your concerns to be easily assuaged with multiple options for payment, multiple colors, fabrics, and price points. But also expect a lot of hospitality; being offered tea is not uncommon. I once stumbled upon a rug shop in Istanbul and enjoyed chatting with the shop owner so much that I went back again at the end of the day just to hang out. It was great. The next day, when I saw the hawker (the guy whose job it is to bring people from the main square to the shop), I stopped him and asked where I could get a good haircut. He took me to his cousin's shop, where we had more tea and both got a haircut; I also hung out with him

If you're shopping for rugs, get ready for the long haul – it's going to take a while.

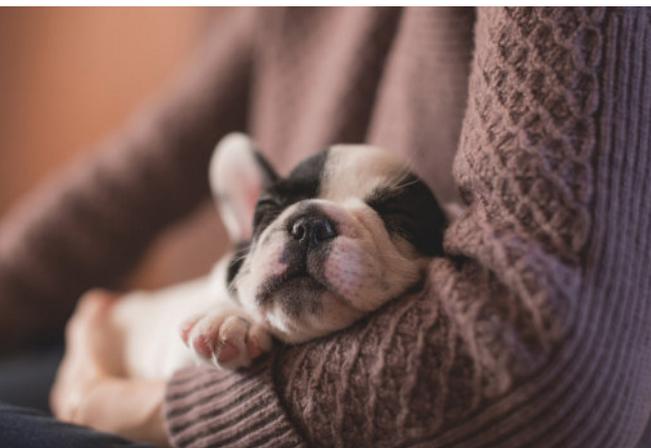


PHOTO CREDIT: FREESTOCKS

again that night! The point is, a rug shopping experience can introduce you to some really good people who appreciate quality art. Treat it right and you can have a great experience that isn't normally on the menu.

That said, there is a strategy when you actually intend to buy a rug, which means there's finesse to playing the game. Here's what to expect and how to enter the negotiations fully prepared.

#### **WHAT TO EXPECT:**

Can I offer you a drink?

Expect to be offered tea or some other hot beverage. This does two things:

1. It invokes reciprocity, meaning you now subconsciously want to give them something in return.
2. It's really hot - so you have to wait until it cools to drink it, which gives the vendor more time to ply his seductive trade.

#### **HOW TO LOOK LIKE A RUG CONNOISSEUR:**

Count the knots before you become wedded to a rug: The more knots, the higher the quality. Knots Per Square Inch (KPSI) is important. Just flipping a rug over, bending it back and forth, and mentally counting will make you look savvy.

A little research  
before you travel will  
pay dividends when  
you arrive.



PHOTO CREDIT: TRANG NGUYEN

**Janus effect:** A hand-sewn rug will have the same pattern front to back. If it does not, it's probably machine-made.

**Carbon copies:** If you can spot the same design on multiple rugs in the shop, odds are they are also machine-made.

**The John Hancock:** A Kurajeh rug will have a signature at the bottom sewn in. It looks terrible on a machine - use this to spot a fake.

#### **GROUND WORK BEFORE YOU START:**

**Know what styles are common in the area you will be shopping:** Moroccan rugs are different than Turkish rugs, which are different than Afghan rugs. However, it's possible that you might find a Persian rug in Turkey since they share a border.

**Know what you're looking at and be able to speak the lingo:** Go into several shops and look at what they have. See what the difference is between a Kurajeh and a fake. If the owner can tell that you're savvy, he'll probably show you the fakes and tell you how to spot the difference.

**Know your fabrics:** Silk, wool, jute, synthetics. If you want to go to the next level, look up the local words for each of these fabrics.

#### **HOW TO PLAY THE GAME:**

In this case, **YOU** have to create the urgency: You leave tomorrow, or you're scheduled

Keep in mind  
craftsmanship as  
you're looking at  
artisanal products.



PHOTO CREDIT: WENGENROAD EXPOSURE

for a tour, and leave immediately after. Say whatever you want to say, but make it clear that this is their only chance to sell you a rug and, more importantly, you're interested. This is where you stick to your guns: Do not waver from the rug you're interested in, and do not volunteer more money.

You ready for the ringer? Get focused on a rug you really like and when they quote you a price – no matter what it is - make the face that says, “Holy sh\*t! HOW much?!?!” Most regular folks would backpedal, but not your sly rug salesman. He will calmly put the ball back in your court and ask, “How much will you give me for the rug?”

This marks the point where negotiations have officially begun; it is also the point where you put the ball back in his court. A simple, “That’s a beautiful rug and I don’t want to insult you” prepares him for a really low price, makes you look like you’re being respectful AND now he has to start ping-ponging you for an offer. After some hesitation and cajoling, finally offer him what you’re willing to pay for the rug.

He will now try to move you to a lower quality, cheaper rug to fit into your price range. Again, do not waiver from the rug you’re interested in.

Now, since you’ve already prefaced that you will not be back and this is your only chance to buy - it’s time to finish it off. Let him know that this is what you have on you, that you have access to no more cash and no credit cards.

Negotiating is like a game of chess; but unlike chess, everyone can win at haggling.



PHOTO CREDIT: SERGEY KLIMKIN

Be aware that he if does not accept, you are walking away without that rug, so make sure you're making a reasonable offer. Refer back to Rule #1 if you're not sure.

## **CONGRATULATIONS YOU ARE NOW A HIGHLY SKILLED NEGOTIATOR!**

However, as we all know, with great power comes great responsibility. This is where you promise to only use your powers for good and to always abide by the Three Rules of Haggling:

1. As long as you're happy with what you got, it doesn't matter what you paid, or if you could've gotten it for a few bucks cheaper – no buyer's remorse.
2. Be willing to walk away - unless it's something totally unique that you're willing to pay more for (see Rule #1).
3. I am not out to take advantage of, or humiliate anyone. I am not going to haggle over a difference of a few dollars; which could mean dinner for an entire family. Conversely, though, I refuse to let them take advantage of me.