

India Shopping & Bargaining Guide

What's negotiable and what isn't, how to bargain without the awkwardness, and the regional specialties worth bringing home.

WHY THIS GUIDE

Bargaining in India can feel intimidating to first-timers — too aggressive and it's uncomfortable, too passive and you overpay significantly. The bigger confusion is usually knowing which shops expect it at all. This guide separates fixed-price retail from negotiable markets, and gives you a workable approach for the latter.

WHAT'S FIXED-PRICE VS NEGOTIABLE

Mixing these up is the most common shopping mistake.

- Government emporiums, branded stores, malls, and most shops with printed price tags are fixed-price — bargaining there is unnecessary and can come across oddly
- Open-air markets, bazaars, street stalls, and most souvenir sellers near tourist sites expect negotiation
- Auto-rickshaw and unmetered taxi fares are effectively negotiable unless you're using a metered or app-based ride
- Hotels and houseboats sometimes have flexibility on rate in low season, though this is a quieter negotiation, not market-style haggling
- Handicraft cooperatives and artisan-direct shops often have fixed, fair-trade pricing — read signage before assuming you should haggle

HOW TO BARGAIN WELL

Good bargaining in India is unhurried and good-natured, not combative.

- Start by asking the price, then counter at roughly half to two-thirds of the first quote as an opening move — adjust as you get a feel for the seller and item
- Stay friendly and smile — bargaining is a social exchange in most markets, not a confrontation
- Walking away (politely) is a legitimate tactic — sellers will sometimes call you back with a better price
- Buying multiple items from one seller usually gets you a better combined rate than buying single items from several
- Know roughly what you're willing to pay before you start, and stop once you're there rather than chasing the lowest possible number
- Comparing prices at two or three stalls before committing gives you a real sense of the going rate

Bargaining norms vary by region and by how touristed a market is — watch how locals negotiate nearby for a sense of fair local pricing.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR, BY REGION

Each region has specialties worth seeking out specifically.

- Rajasthan: block-printed textiles, mojari leather shoes, blue pottery, miniature paintings
- Kerala: spices, Ayurvedic oils, coir products, kathakali masks
- Agra & Uttar Pradesh: marble inlay work (look for genuine pietra dura craftsmanship, not painted imitations), leather goods
- Varanasi: Banarasi silk sarees and stoles
- Kashmir & the Himalayas: pashmina shawls, walnut wood carving, hand-knotted carpets
- Goa: cashews, feni, beachwear, flea-market finds

For silk, pashmina, and gemstones, buy only from reputable sellers — these categories have a high rate of misrepresented or synthetic substitutes sold to tourists.