

SHOPPING WITH STEFANIE

By Stefanie Elkins (updated June 2021)

Shopping in the Middle East is an art form. Even those who are not avid shoppers enjoy the sights, sounds, and even smells of local markets. However, it can be overwhelming for tourists who are not prepared. Foreigners are a magnet for unwanted attention and continuous “special offers.” Even when confronted with the most aggressive vendors, always be polite, don’t believe everything you are told, and if necessary – firmly repeat, “no thank you!” If the attention becomes uncomfortable, simply walk away without saying a word or looking back. In spite of the often intimidating and relentless pursuit of a sale, there is no need to fear as our local guide as well as Bob and I will be there to look out for you and keep you protected from as much hassling as possible.

Bargaining is a part of everyday life in many countries and is actually expected in most cases. The exception to this rule are places with a clearly marked “fixed price” sign or understanding. For example, Yuseph’s shop in Madaba, Jordan has a fixed price policy while other shops on the tourist strip do not. We will guide you as to where bargaining is appropriate and where it is not. In Egypt however, all street vendors rely on bargaining as they are all selling essentially the same items and are vying with each other for the best sell. Here are a few tips that should be helpful:

- Never show too much interest in an item you want to buy and don’t buy the first thing you see or like. All the shops sell similar items so there will be plenty of opportunity to buy that glittery King Tut statue! Walk around and price things mentally but don’t be obvious about it.
- We are there to help you and our local guide will be an invaluable source for giving you advice on what is a fair price. When you decide how much an item is worth to you, then you can express casual interest in buying it. The vendor is then likely to ask you to come into his shop for tea so that you can converse more privately without the hassle of all the other vendors vying for your attention. We will not always have time for this, but the next step would be to ask the price. The vendor will give you the price or ask you how much it is worth to you. Keep your final price in mind and offer below your top dollar.
- Don’t get intimidated if the shopkeeper gets into a huff about your absurd offer or complains about his need to feed his family; no vendor will sell below cost no matter what story they tell you. Remain polite and always smile.
- If you cannot get your price then say thanks but no thanks and walk away. This is often the selling point. I have had numerous shopkeepers race after me when they realize my last offer was my final one. Usually they are good natured about their complaints of you robbing them blind, but I have often been surprised at their praise of me for being a good bargainer! If you are persistent without being obnoxious, you will usually get your price. Remember however, that most prices are going to be reasonable to begin with and that bargaining is part of the experience. Some people enjoy bargaining while others don’t. If you feel the first price given by the vendor is fair, then pay it.
- The final thing to remember: if the vendor agrees to your price then you are obligated to buy the item(s). Don’t play games!



If you find yourself overwhelmed and feeling that one more, “excuse me, where you from?” will send you over the edge, remember to take a breath and realize that acting brusque and offensive will never help the situation and only serve to exacerbate the illusion that all American tourists are loud and obnoxious (let’s face it – some are). These are third world countries with shop keepers trying to make a meager living. Most of them would never dream of intentionally intimidating a tourist.