

Surviving Silk Street

Fo-lay, Fo-lex and Fo-akley
A Primer for Shopping in Beijing

by Cynthia Abatt (photos of China on my website at cydabatt.com)

In addition to the Pearl Market, Silk Street is one of Beijing's more popular shopping destinations for tourists. While it's true there are good bargains to be had on jewelry, textiles, toys and trinkets, **buyer be careful** cannot be emphasized enough. Here are a few tips for getting the most out of your shopping experience.

* Silk Street has five floors jam-packed with goods. As a general rule, and specifically for jewelry, the quality of the items raises with the level of the escalator. The merchandise is generally grouped into categories on the various floors; the good quality knock-off purses are near each other, as are the good quality knock-off (and sometimes real) silk Polo shirts, etc..

* Have a laminated currency converter card in your pocket for handy reference. The yuan (pronounced you-**wan** and also referred to as Renminbi) is relatively stable at 6.82 for one US dollar, so this card can be prepared ahead of time. It's easy to get caught up in the frenzy and loose sight of how much you are actually paying for an item.

* Spend some time before you go thinking about what you might like to shop for.

Although it's difficult to know exactly what you'll want until you get there, have an idea if you want to buy higher end items (the 5th floor) or as many Coach knock-offs, YSL shirts and silk robes as you can carry. Pearls are consistently a good value, at between 50 and 60 USD for a 16" rope, but buy them at someplace like Katherine's Pearls and Jewelry on the fifth floor - she is popular with the airline crews and has a reputation for fair dealing.

Silk Street is conveniently located in downtown Beijing, taxis are an economical way to travel and it's also near a Metro (subway) station. If you want to do serious shopping, plan for part of two or more days, go get the feel of the landscape and buy only a few items the first day. When I wasn't sure how much I should pay for an item, I watched the native Chinese conduct their transactions, and asked afterward how much someone paid for something I liked. The tax and duty-free limit coming into the US is \$1,000. worth of goods per person; this is sort of on the honor system. Additionally, nobody on the lower floors

bothers with receipts, although you might be able to ask for one if needed.

* Do your price research, decide ahead of time how much you are willing to pay for an item, then cut that price in half and start bargaining. Drive the hardest bargain you can and remember that the vendor is not going to lose money on you, even though you'll hear that phrase a lot. They will flat out say "no" if they don't like your price, and the only true test of price is to walk away. The vendor will either let you go if your price is way too low (not to worry, the same item will likely be offered in the next booth, and then you'll know how much to pay) or, more often, they'll grab you by the arm and offer a higher price for you to negotiate from. If they are still smiling when you leave, or offer you more goods to buy after that transaction is completed, you've paid too much.

* With the possible exception of the fifth floor, none of it is jade. Some vendors will call the green items "jadite" and, since shoppers are getting accustomed to knowing the sound of jade, some are made of glass.

* Don't accept any item you haven't actually put your hands on and inspected. Often the vendors will reach under the table to give you a packaged item "identical" to the one you want. Open this package to make sure the fabric/material and construction are what you are expecting.

* On a similar note, watch the bait and switch. I made my hardest bargain on a collection of cashmere and pashmina items, only to discover back at the hotel that two of the cashmere shawls I selected had been switched for worthless pieces of polyester in the same colors. Pick out your items, have them bagged, keep your hand/eye on the bag and start negotiating. It helps to have two people here. Going in a pack levels the playing field.

* Prices are wildly inflated, especially to westerners. I picked out some small lined, decorated drawstring bags that I thought would be cute as holiday gift bags. The price started at 100 yuan for one (about \$12., absurd, of course), and ended up at 10 bags for 50 yuan. I'm sure he made a profit at that, as he offered me more items.

* If you get mentally fatigued and just want to walk around and look at items in a more solitary fashion, keep your head down, don't make eye contact with the merchants and don't touch an item, or touch it

and ignore the salesperson and walk on. Although it seems counter-intuitive and even rude, don't reply to anyone soliciting your attention, don't acknowledge their existence. Even a polite "no thank you" is enough to engage the sales people, who have no qualms about putting their hands on you or even blocking your exit. You may have to play a game of "chicken" if they think you have money to spend. You must keep walking.

* Keep your spending money in a couple of different places, preferably in two or more pockets and separated into smaller and larger bills. I had one saleswoman reach into my front pants pocket when she didn't like the deal I offered but didn't want to let me go.

* Purchase what you are willing to pay cash for (except the 5th floor) and think twice before using a credit card. While you can dispute a charge if you do get bait and switched, it seems like a lot of exposure, given the climate. And to the vendor you'll have no excuse for not paying more for an item.