



# DEAL OR NO DEAL

For some it's a battle of wits. For others, it's pure torture. No matter how you look at it, bargaining in Vietnam is a way of life, and Ben Thanh Market is the perfect place to hone your negotiating skills. Words by James Pham



**F**or the uninitiated, a walk down the narrow aisles of Ben Thanh Market becomes a gauntlet of grabby hands and some variation of "You buy?" called out in dozens of languages. Some relish the challenge. For others, it's a turnoff.

Matt and Jennifer, first-time visitors to Vietnam from the UK, explain the sensation this way. "We're not from a bargaining culture. For us, it's not a matter of 'if' you're going to get ripped off, but simply of 'by how much'. The key is you just have to have a sense of humour about it. Embrace it and try to get to know each other. It's not all bad. There was once this gorgeous Kashmiri silk rug in Nepal which [we] got for half the asking price, but only after three days of hard negotiating."

Heather, visiting from China, says, "I think the sellers in Vietnam are less aggressive than in China. At least there's some back and forth. In China, they'll turn their back and act like they're mad at you."

John, a foreign resident living in Vietnam, adds, "As a single foreign man, I have the sinking feeling I'm being overcharged for everything, from produce to clothing."

A cluster of girls whose side-by-side stalls sell almost identical t-shirts and polos on the periphery of the market provide insight from the seller's point of view.

"It's not true that we charge different prices for men and women, or even for foreigners," says one. "People nowadays are master bargainers. They often want us to sell something for less than we paid for it ourselves. But our margins are slim, maybe 10 to 15 percent only."

"Tourists have guidebooks and get advice from their hotels so they know to bargain," explains Uyen, who has owned her eclectic souvenir shop near the food area for more than a dozen years. "Sometimes friends and relatives of *Viet Kieu* will tag along and bargain even harder. But last month, market management implemented a policy forcing all sellers to wear ID badges and for prices to be clearly marked. So, now there's very little room for bargaining. Instead, sometimes I'll throw in a small gift. Years ago, a foreigner told me, 'Eat a little and you'll eat all the time. Eat a lot and you'll only eat once in a while'. I've tried to remember that."

## GRABBY HANDS

While success or failure in bargaining can hinge on tiny amounts of money, there is a certain etiquette to the art of the deal. What's grabby to those from cultures not used to physical contact may be an attempt at hospitality for others. "Tourists should try to understand Vietnamese culture. Sometimes a touch is our way of being friendly," says Thu, one of the t-shirt selling girls.

Uyen adds another pet peeve. "Often Chinese tour groups will agree to a price and wait for me to wrap up the goods," she says. "Then they'll ask for a discount or else they won't buy." Another one of the

polo girls sighs as an Indonesian couple sort through a pile of shirts only to leave when they hear the asking price. "I hate it when people ask prices and then walk away. I'd rather they at least counter-offer so that we could have a discussion. Otherwise, it's unlucky."

Luck (or superstition) seems to play an integral role in the life of a seller.

"If the first person who comes to your stall buys something for a fair price, that means you're going to have a good selling day," another polo girl chimes in. For those seeking divine assistance, a visit to the hidden market god is in order. Squeezed away through a dark, unmarked doorway near the South Gate and up two flights of rickety metal stairs is a room dedicated to the market gods, including the God of Money, the God of the Soil, and a surprisingly small, almost simian-like god, unique to Ben Thanh Market.

"Sellers can come and pray for good luck or to burn incense," says Tuan, one of the unofficial caretakers. "Some people leave flowers and fruit. Others eat the fruit. People can come and go. The sellers requested that this room remain unchanged throughout all the renovations of the market."

## THE SCAM GAME

As with any place frequented by tourists, scams abound. Reports of taxis fleecing visitors to the tune of ten times or more the meter rate for short trips are common. Uyen shares some others. "There used to be touts standing outside the market, intercepting large groups, pretending to be helpful locals. They'd bargain for the tourists, jacking up our price and keeping the difference. But luckily, the authorities have caught on and have prevented them from entering the market. Another scam is the food scam. With products, you can give back items that are too expensive. But sometimes, the sellers will wait until after you've eaten to demand a high price."

Xuan, a Vietnamese housewife shares some of her own tips. "If visiting a stall for the first time, never let the seller choose produce for you. Also, a 500ml bottle of water weighs half a kilo. I always bring one with me to check the scales."

The polo girls throw in another. "Shop early in the morning or as the market is closing. Sellers will usually want a fast sale so will give good prices. And try to deal with the owner, not the workers. If we offer prices that are too low, our boss gets mad."

John adds: "When I first got to Vietnam, I had a Vietnamese friend take me around Ben Thanh to introduce me to people she bought from. After that, they always gave me fair prices."

While bargaining is a sport for some and a livelihood for others, the truism remains: a good shopper is an informed shopper. So feel free to jump into the fray with a smile and a 500ml bottle of water. 