Mudmee Fabric: A Cultural Treasure of Thailand

Description

This fabric tutorial is about mudmee weaving in Thailand. It’s fundamental that you first understand that “mudmee” refers to a style of weaving and not the thread or yarn composition of the fabric. Thai mudmee fabric can be silk, cotton or even river reeds woven together.

Let’s get started.
Modern Thai mudmee apparel in both silk and cotton.

Introduction

I have made Thai fisherman pants, assorted Siamese apparel and of course Thai pillows from mudmee fabric, both cotton and silk. The best way to understand this fabric is to see it...lots of it. And so, in this tutorial I have included many mudmee fashion photos of Thai apparel and pillows.

Mudmee is not a “historical” fabric, relegated only to museums, private collections or worn by a few elderly village women for an important occasion. Mudmee fabric is used by contemporary fashion designers around the world for their finest creations. Mudmee silk is considered by many to be the finest Thai silk woven. And both village and urban Thai women, young and old, proudly wear this fabric every day.

What is Mudmee?
Mudmee is a technique of hand weaving fabric on old wooden looms. Mudmee weaving is also known as *ikat* weaving throughout the world, but in Thailand, the technique is referred to as mudmee weaving.

Mudmee is a weaving method used to create a hand-woven fabric with a pattern or design. There is no such thing as solid color mudmee fabric.

Standard woven fabric patterns (we’re excluding patterns that are printed onto a fabric after weaving) are created by using different colors on both the horizontal (weft yarns) and vertical (warp yarns).
threads on a loom. The weaver can then create a desired fabric pattern from the multi-colored threads that her loom has been strung with. (This applies to mechanical looms also.) That is standard pattern weaving.

Mudmee weaving creates a fabric pattern in a wholly different way. Mudmee weaving creates a pattern with only a single thread (almost always a horizontal weft yarn). But how can that be, you wonder? How can a single, thin, tiny thread provide the complex patterns that I see with mudmee fabric?
Mudmee threads (yarns) can be thought of as fabric DNA.

Mudmee yarn (for simplicity I’m using the terms “yarn” and “thread” interchangeably even though in reality they are not the same.) prior to weaving is repeatedly dyed different colors, depending on how many colors are desired for the pattern.

The exact areas of a thread that are to be dyed a certain color, are controlled by a tie-dying method. These ties prevent the dye from affecting the thread underneath them, just like simply tie-dying does.

By this method, a skilled mudmee artisan (often not the weaver) can create dyed patterns for a single weft thread (horizontal thread). The pattern is then revealed as the vertical and horizontal threads (the weft & warp) are woven together.

Mudmee threads are not tied and dyed individually. Mudmee patterns are almost always patterns that repeat themselves across a bolt of fabric. Therefore, the mudmee thread is carefully looped across a surface or board that is proportional to the desired width of the fabric. The pattern maker then will tie together a group of threads at precise intervals to create and replicate the desired mudmee pattern.
My company, House of Thailand, made these silk mudmee pillows.

Mudmee Fabric: A Living History

The word “mudmee” is often translated to mean “tie-dyed” or “tied threads” and its origin comes from Isaan, which is Northeast Thailand. Isaan is where mudmee weaving was first developed and practiced in Thailand and where today, you’ll find the finest mudmee fabrics. You can purchase mudmee fabric anywhere in Thailand, but be assured, if it’s authentic mudmee, it was produced and woven in Isaan.
Mudmee weaving is the oldest form of pattern weaving in Thailand and dates back approximately 3,000 years when sericulture (silk production) was first introduced to this area. The women of ancient Siam, Sukothai, Ayuttaya, and Angor Wat and its satellite towns scattered across Isaan wore mudmee sarongs that are similar in both technique, color and pattern to contemporary mudmee.

Ancient mudmee fabrics used natural dyes to create their colorful patterns. You can still purchase mudmee that uses natural dyes, although these fabrics are far more expensive than ones that use commercial dyes. The problem with natural dyes is that you can’t wash or clean the mudmee without severely washing away the color, and therefore ruining your exquisite fabric.
Mudmee: Ancient Fabric – Modern Fashion

Nothing demonstrates a direct link to the past greater than a young woman wearing a contemporary mudmee outfit. Whether it’s fisherman pants, a sarong, a business suit with mudmee trim, or a scarf, mudmee couture while 3,000 years old, often acts as if it’s the latest fashion trend.
There are hundreds, if not thousands of mudmee fabric designs. In the past, each weaving village in Isaan would have their own patterns unique to a specific village. To some extent, you can still identify where a bolt of mudmee fabric was woven based on its pattern, but that has changed quite a bit over the last few years.

Now-a-days, village weavers are well aware of what other villages are producing and may incorporate patterns not from their own village. And as with any business, the mudmee artisans will produce patterns which sell best, even though other villages may have first produced a version of the pattern.

Mudmee patterns are also contemporary and always evolving. You can walk into many fabric shops in Isaan and order a specific Mudmee pattern. Or you can also sit down with a mudmee artisan, and design a new pattern for yourself.

Mudmee fabric can be either silk or cotton. Many will say that only silk is used to produce mudmee fabric, but of course this wrong. Most fabric shops through out The Kingdom will offer you a selection of
mudmee fabric in both silk or cotton.

Where to Find Mudmee Fabric and Prices

You'll find mudmee fabric for sale in Bangkok, Chiang Mai and of course all the cities, towns and villages in Isaan (Northeast Thailand). In Isaan, I recommend Chonobot and Surin as having beautiful Mudmee fabrics. (I wrote an entire tutorial on Thai silk where I discuss in more detail where to shop for silk, especially in Isaan.)

Be very wary of buying any fabric, let alone mudmee at a street fair or night bazaar. Quality and authentic Thai fabrics, especially Thai silk, are not sold at street fairs. There are many frauds and counterfeits waiting for you at tourist markets.

Prices will vary widely depending on the quality of the mudmee weave; silk or cotton; natural dyes or commercial dyes; and of course where you purchased the fabric. Bangkok will be the most expensive, while Chonobot and Surin will have very good prices.
Quality mudmee weave is determined by the clarity of the pattern as well as the quality of the weave. The above mudmee silk example shows very good clarity of pattern and superb weaving skills.

Good quality mudmee silk will cost between $100-$300 (US) for approximately 2 meters. Good quality mudmee cotton will cost much less and you can find good sarong bolts (1.5 meters) in Bangkok for $30-$50.

The price really depends on the quality, color and intricacies of the weave. Of course, the more colors, the more expensive. Two color mudmee is always cheaper than five color mudmee.

The finest quality mudmee silks will cost $1000 (US) and more. Natural dyes are always the most expensive because of the knowledge and skill needed to produce it. The finest mudmee silks will also use the best silk threads. (I wrote a tutorial about Thai sericulture and the different quality grades of Thai silk entitled: Thai Sericulture: Making Thai Silk.)

Bargains do not exist in the Thai silk markets, especially for mudmee. The weaver, the village
collective, the fabric shop owner, the dressmaker, all know the value of quality mudmee silk. Let’s get real-they’re not going to sell it to you at a tourist market for $20 for a 2 meter bolt.

Final Thoughts

Shopping for mudmee fabric is a great way to experience a part of “Old Thailand” I call my fabric purchasing trips a “fabric safari” and the journey is always as rewarding as the finding of beautiful mudmee fabric.

So whether you’re shopping Bangkok for the hippest mudmee couture or travelling to an isolated village in Isaan, happy Mudmee hunting!

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