



Confessions of an International Thai Pillow Dealer

Description

default watermark



The pillow makers and I are showing off a Thai triangle pillow.

This blog post is about my personal journey into the world of Thai pillows. I write about how I first got started buying Thai pillows and becoming an international Thai pillow dealer.

I wrote an extensive tutorial about Thai pillows where I discuss their history, where they're made, who makes them, quality, fabrics, kapok and other aspects of Thai pillows entitled: [Thai Pillows: A Buyer's Info Resource](#)

Intro

I never intended to sell Thai pillows. My wife Jenny and I had started a Thai import business selling bedspreads, curtains, tablecloths, and pillowcases made from handwoven Thai fabrics. But nobody was buying.

My wife had mentioned that maybe we should diversify our humble import beginnings with a few Thai triangle pillows. I had seen these strange pillows in a few shops in Pasang and Chiang Mai, but knew little of them. I was dubious people would buy such pillows.

The Roadtrip

So when my wife told me we were going to drive from Chiang Mai to a small village somewhere in Issan (North-Eastern Thailand) to buy some Thai triangle pillows, I was all against it. "That's a 14-hour drive!", I remember saying. I suggested that we just buy a few pillows from the local shops. "No", my wife said, "It's cheaper price and better quality if you buy from this village." This will drive hours out of the way, just to save a few baht and this whole 14-hour drive to an alleged "Pillow Making Village" seemed just another example of such thinking.

default watermark



Roadtrip! Driving from Chiang Mai to the Pillow Making Village near Yasoton will take you far from the crowds of tourists that plague Thailand.

Very early one morning, my wife and I, along with a good friend of hers, left Chiang Mai and started driving to far-off Issan. Our plan was to make Roi Et (a town in Issan) by evening the same day. Three of us in a Volkswagon. My wife's friend had family in Roi Et and they'd take us to this mythical Pillow Making Village.

After an exhausting 14-hour road trip that took us across two mountain ranges, we finally arrived in Roi

Et at about 8 p.m. An Issan dinner was waiting for us at our friend's house. Winter mellow soup, som tom (a raw green papaya dish), rice sausage, roast chicken and sticky rice. Classic Issan cuisine. The next morning we drove down more county roads for another hour and a half to the Pillow Making Village.



Red Ant Eggs



Corn Som Tom

Isaan Cuisine

Issan has its own regional Thai cuisine. Over the years, I have come to love their food. The pillow makers always serve me a plate of red ant eggs when I arrive, which they consider a delicacy. When in Roman Roman!

The Pillow Making Village

It was obvious that we were coming into Thai “pillow country”. As the country roads became country lanes, I could see barns and other out-buildings full of Thai pillowry. This was rice country, but it seemed their harvest was Thai pillows. But soon we came to shop houses that were stuffed full of all kinds of Thai pillows. I fell in love with the Pillow Making Village at first sight.



Pillow makers at work.

For no good reason we stopped at one of the shop houses to look at their pillows. A young women in her early twenties came out and greeted us. This was Muoi who would become the chief pillow maker for House of Thailand. Her family had been making Thai pillows for generations and she was newly charged with running the family business. She showed us many different Thai pillows, mats and mattresses she had. I had no idea of the variety. Big, small, long, fat and not just triangles, but all kinds of different, strange shapes. We spent several hours walking around the village, browsing all kinds of pillowry and learning how it was made.

By day's end, I had bought a big truckload of pillows and mats from Muoi. I still had no idea who would buy them; But I had another more pressing problem I hadn't thought of. How do I transport all these pillows to Chiang Mai from this rural Essan village? After being an International Thai Pillow Dealer for only a couple hours, I was now facing the biggest problem with Thai pillows-shipping. Muoi arranged transport to Chiang Mai via rail freight, but after that, I was on my own.



Main St. in Yasoton. Yasoton is the closest town to the Pillow Making Village. After a long day of pillow driving into Yasoton for some great Thai food Isaan style!

During this first trip to the village, I learned that the pillow makers are really farmers with their rice paddies being a priority. Thai pillows are made under the lazy gaze of cows, water buffaloes, chickens and any other barnyard animal that might be loafing about. In fact Thai pillows are only made when the rice paddies are dry and don't need to be tended. (In the Thai pillow business, the word "pillow" encompasses mats, mattresses and all sizes and shapes of pillows)

I also quickly learned that the world of Thai pillows is a woman's world for the most part. Men scour the countryside for kapok, transport fabric and haul the finished pillowry; but it's the women who design the pillowry, cut and sew the fabric, gather the rice straw and stuff the pillows. Without women there would be no Thai pillows or mats.



Life is quiet in the Pillow Making Village. Almost all the villagers are rice farmers and only make Thai pillows when their rice fields lay fallow.

Later that day, we said our good-byes to Muoi (little did I know that she would make thousands and thousands of pillows and mats for us.) and returned to Roi Et. I celebrated our finding of the Pillow Making Village (I was now taking credit for this long road trip) with a bowl of Issan tofu soup, more sausage and Chang beer (I used to drink back then.) But in the back of my mind I kept wondering just who would want to buy these strange pillows?

Business Realities

We returned to Chiang Mai via the same route, only this time much of the drive was at night. The mountain roads get very dark and lonely at night. I kept hoping to see a wild elephant, but didn't.



This Thai pillow haul has been trucked from the Pillow Making Village to our warehouse in Chiang Mai in a shipping container.

I arranged ocean freight for the pillows back to Los Angeles through a friendly Thai man named Boonsak. He had been a freight forwarder for years in Chiang Mai and had a respectable looking business and staff. Maybe I'm not such a great judge of character because Boonsak overcharged me thousands of dollars for the container. Oh well, live and learn.

But the pillows and mats did arrive about a month later in the Port of Los Angeles. U.S. Customs had a fit. They figured I had to be smuggling some kind of contraband. They x-rayed the cargo and were disappointed not to find a nuclear bomb. They insisted that the entire container be emptied, inspected and searched by a team of Custom's officers. They brought in drug sniffing dogs (probably the first time their dogs ever smelled kapok.), and cut open a few pillows here and there. Nothing. The lead officer studied our cargo manifest intently. I think he was having a hard time comprehending that a Thai pillow could be triangular, square or rectangular. But after holding our pillow cargo for 10-days, I received a call from our Customs' broker that our container had been released and could now be delivered to us.

Jenny and I first went to street fairs to sell the pillows. Nobody was buying. I had large mats priced as low as \$50 and nobody would even look. (Today I sell that same mat for \$160 and can't keep them in stock.) We did this for several months and we sold one triangle pillow for \$20. Things looked bleak.

A Thai friend of ours suggested we open an Ebay store and try selling that way. Selling on the internet had never dawned on me until our friend mentioned it. I went on Ebay and figured out how to start an Ebay store. I got out my old point & shoot camera and took a few photos of the different types of pillows and listed them on Ebay. I was shocked when a week later I sold my first pillow online. And a couple days after that I sold another. And so it went.

We kept trying to sell at street fairs, but nobody was interested. But more and more people were buying the pillows on Ebay. I also put online our bedspreads, tablecloths, pillow cases and stuff, but the only thing that sold were the Thai pillows.

I bought the domain name houseofthailand.com and we started our own website. I always thought that our Ebay store would be our main selling point, but hoped that our own website would sell enough to make it worthwhile. Again, I was completely wrong. Almost immediately our website had sales that surpassed our little Ebay store. People were buying Thai pillows. We quickly sold out.

Alls Well that Ends Well

Little by little, we got much better at importing and selling the pillows and mats. We got much better ocean container rates and Customs stopped searching every load we imported. Muoi also got much better at making the pillows and mats, both in quality and efficiency. I began experimenting with using exotic fabrics like mudmee to make pillows. I experimented with pillow and mat dimensions. Slowly but surely, we started to make a profit on Thai pillows, but it took years.

I always tell people that "I don't sell Thai pillows. I sell Thai culture." Strange that a farang would come to The Kingdom of Siam and export their culture. But that's essentially what my business does. You can't separate Thai culture from Thai pillows.

Category

1. The Thai Fabric Chronicles
2. The Siamese Puzzle Box

Tags

1. Thailand
2. Pillows

Date Created

November 2016

Author

jeffcgallagher