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A Snob's Guide to the World's Flea Markets

Connoisseurs of antique and secondhand markets share their favorite hunting grounds in Paris, Berlin, Bangkok...and Brimfield, Mass.



18-20th century antiques for sale at Biron Market in Marché Aux Puces de Saint Ouen PHOTO: EMMANUEL FRADIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **DYAN MACHAN**

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IN A DISTANT CITY, it's not the churches or museums that call me, it's the flea markets—or, as I call them, urban museums where you get to take stuff home. Among my biggest triumphs: the silver wine coasters I snagged in Madrid; the gold-rimmed wine glasses I found in Belgium and the teak dining room chairs I set upon in Thailand. In Shanghai, however, I lost all credibility. The lightly used Louis Vuitton bags for which I haggled my heart out turned out to be pleather and illegal copies besides. But even when I strike out, I enjoy the hunt, the sifting through heaps of not just things, but stories.

Serious shoppers should keep in mind a few tips from the pros: “If you aren't using a flashlight, you're too late,” noted Nicolas Martin, founder of Fleamarketinsiders.com, a source on markets in 50 countries, who advises serious shoppers to show up brutally early, except in Paris where it matters less. “Fakes and misinformation abound,” warned interior designer Michael Andrew Wilson, of Paris-based Wilson & Associates. Know thy

objet d'art's value. A quick check of 1stDibs.com or an auction house like Sotheby's via a smartphone can guide the hagglers among you to an inoffensive starting bid, "just high enough to keep the conversations going," said Mr. Wilson. And if the price is too low, it really is too good to be true.



Amoeba-shaped chairs at Dauphine Market in Marche Aux Puces de Saint Ouen. PHOTO: EMMANUEL FRADIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Marché aux Puces, St.-Ouen

Paris, France (*Saturday through Monday*)

The venue: Just outside Montmartre, the original "flea" market (*puces* means fleas, though it's best not to think about the derivation) carries the heft of nearly a century of history. Its 1,500 mostly indoor shops, some draped in ivy, make up a mazelike village a half-mile square. Eleven submarkets are organized according to what they sell, be it refined antiques or trendy lighting. The offerings are already highly curated, which means you'll find deals, not steals. But you can browse the *crème de la crème* of antiques here and spot celebrities with their interior designers in tow.

What to buy: A 19th-century copy of a Louis XV cabinet or Aubusson tapestry at Biron market; Georges Jouve ceramics, art deco Murano glass, Herman Miller furniture and table lamps by Gino Sarfatti at Paul Bert market; rare documents at Serpette market; vintage scientific instruments, glassware and toys at Vernaison market; haute fashion of years past at Malik market.

Insider tips: Forget the metro, which necessitates a long, unpleasant walk to the market. Instead, take a cab to one of the entrances on Rue de Rosier. Start at Marché Vernaison, the founding, and most classically hodgepodge, market. Avoid the Chinese dealers selling 18th and 19th century antiques that likely aren't. "A friendly 'bonjour' will save you money," advised Mr. Wilson, as will pointing out an item's flaws, say, a chip in a piece of porcelain or a crack on a wooden table. For reputable shippers of fine art, try Camard or AirSea Packing.



Hermes Birkin bags for sale at Serpette Market in the Marché Aux Puces de Saint Oue PHOTO: EMMANUEL FRADIN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Where to stay: Don't bother lodging near the market, which is at the edge of the city's limits. The relatively close, more centrally located Luxembourg Parc is small and quiet (*from about \$363 a night, en.luxembourg-paris-hotel.com*)

Flohmarkt am Mauerpark and Trödelmarkt Arkonaplatz



Flohmarkt im Mauerpark in Berlin PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Berlin, Germany (*Sunday year-round*)

The venue: Acres of covered outdoor stalls with rows of dusty boxes that invite discovery in a festival-like atmosphere downtown. Two blocks away, the Trödelmarkt Arkonaplatz showcases finer ware and draws a younger crowd (*flohmarktberlin.net*).

What to buy: Furniture and housewares, like 19th-century Michael Thonet bentwood chairs, a midcentury-modern bar cart, or a deer-hoof kitchen carving set; German nutcrackers, '60s and '70s German ceramics, antique linen; preloved musical instruments; trippy East German state-made signage known as "DDR Ostalgie."

Insider tips: Ask a vendor for his or her "schmerzgrenze," which means best price, or literally, pain threshold. Cafés near the market serve Viennese Apfelstrudel and food carts sell lip-smacking currywurst.

Where to stay: Ackselhaus, a stylish inn a short walk from the markets (*from about \$120 a night, ackselhaus.de*).

Talad Rot Fai—Train Night Market



The vending stalls of the new Rod Fai Market Ratchada in Bangkok. The night market offers a mixture of Thai and street food, clothing, music and bars. *PHOTO: ALAMY*

Bangkok, Thailand (*Thursday-Sunday*)

The venue: This former train yard, behind Seacon Square shopping mall, comes alive at 5 p.m., and keeps cooking until midnight. But you can take a cocktail break in one of the cozy bars converted from Volkswagen campers.

What to buy: Household items galore, including cameras, phonographs, metal fans and colorful Bakelite radios; furniture, from art deco pieces to Herman Miller fiberglass side chairs; also, '40s jeep parts, '60s Vespa scooters, vintage bicycles.

Insider tips: Use the main entrance to stroll through the first two sections of food and less expensive whatnots. Bigger-ticket treasures are in the third back section.

Where to stay: The water gardens at the Siam Kempinski, a 25-minute taxi ride away, are a surefire antidote to the madness of the market and Bangkok itself (*from about \$214 a night, kempinski.com/en/bangkok/siam-hotel*).

Brimfield Antique Show

Brimfield, Mass. (*Five days in May, July and Sept.*)

The venue: A two-hour drive from Boston, this ragtag behemoth, with 5,000 mostly open-air vendors covering a half-square-mile of gravel and grass, draws Madison Ave. dealers, top designers and ambitious amateurs who want to freshen up their digs. Vendors are grouped by 21 independent "shows," each of which has its own fields and hours, some charging \$5-10 fees for previewing (*brimfieldshow.org*).



Brimfield Antiques Fair PHOTO: JULIE BIDWELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

What to buy: Furniture—the wide range on offer typically includes Eames loungers (real ones or good Plycraft imitations), Eero Saarinen tulip chairs, Formica tables, rocking chairs, American arts-and-crafts pieces and newly crafted tables made from reclaimed wood and iron. You can also find: Chinese anatomical prints; hydraulic stools; porcelain and

pottery; and assorted automobilia.



Brimfield Antiques Fair is one of the largest outdoor antique fairs' in the country. PHOTO: JULIE BIDWELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Insider tips: The best shows, or vendor groupings, include “Dealer’s Choice,” for its well-curated furniture; “Heart-O-The Mart,” favored for hobnail glassware and grain sacks; and “J&J Auction Acres” for high-end items like Colonial-era cherrywood chests

and framed convex mirrors. Get there early (check the website for hours).

Where to stay: Southbridge Hotel and Conference Center, a converted factory (*from \$119 a night, southbridgehotel.com*) or Laurel Ridge, a B&B in a log cabin (*from \$175 a night, laurelridgebandb.com*). Expect higher rates during market week.

Newark International Antiques & Collectors Fair
Nottinghamshire, U.K. (*two days—Thursday and Friday—every other month*)

The venue: About two hours north of London, Europe's largest flea market hosts 2,500 vendors displaying one-off items over an 84-acre showground, much of it exposed to the elements. Admission is £20, or about \$26 (*iacf.co.uk/newark*).

What to buy: Oversize oriental rugs and opulent bronze and crystal chandeliers from emptied out U.K. estates; industrial '20s lighting; cricket balls and bats; leather steamer trunks; shiny aluminum luggage from the early days of aviation; leather club chairs; Edwards & Roberts Victorian furniture.

Insider tip: The snob factor runs high here. Experienced vendors aren't apt to shave more than 10% to 15% off already low prices.

Where to stay: The Elizabethan-era Saracens Head hotel has character and four-poster beds in Southwell, England (*from about \$130 a night, saracensheadhotel.com*).

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