

## **Report: June 2007 Purchasing Trip**

With my eyes half open, I look through the airplane window and am struck by the reflection of the morning sun on the golden temple peaks. Bangkok.

Upon arrival we make our way through the heavy traffic to our temporary residence. Numbed by jet lag, everything seems even busier and warmer than it actually is. We stay in our rooms during the morning to relax a bit and freshen up after the long flight. And then, yet another purchasing trip begins...

The paper project White Lotus is the trade name of a farmers' cooperative in which 600 young girls are involved (since 1997). The aim of this cooperation is that girls and women can stay in their own environment and make money instead of in the sex industry. Also, women with AIDS, ostracized by society, can have an income through this project. They make paper sheets in a traditional way from environmentally friendly cultivated mulberry trees. These sheets serve as a basic material for beautiful gift products such as boxes and picture frames.

Armed with the latest trends under our arms, we visit our paper project. Last time, we drove through the villages and met with the people who make the actual products. Due to lack of time, we can't do that this time. Instead, a meeting around a small table in a small office will have to do. We search the dusty showroom hoping to discover something new or to get inspiration. There are always possibilities to come up with, combined with the info we have about the latest trends and colours. Now that we read that notebooks and photo frames are very much "in", we know that we for sure can get some good things going in this project. We start drawing, play with colours, patterns and think of new materials to pimp the products and give them a modern look. Together with the producers, we review which ideas are doable.

In addition to designing new products, we also place orders for familiar products that sell well, such as jewellery-boxes. We need to order these now already so we will have enough in stock for Mother's Day – that's how it goes, one continuously has to think ahead, especially when the products are handmade. Together with the producer, we talk about how things are going. Things are going a bit better as this year; they have received more orders than in the previous year. Still, their hard work is not paying off and they are now busy looking for other products they could produce and sell.

We are very sorry to hear this. The quality of their paper products is very high and cannot be matched. In order to support them, we try to come up with different ideas on how they could get more work (orders). We have for example printed our last newsletter on their paper and hope that that will result in more orders/work for them.

I think that the paper project is one of the most difficult projects we have. The products made are fantastic but difficult to sell due to the enormous market supply. We do as well as we can in order to continue to come up with new ideas and variations and to help the producers with colours and patterns. With this "worry" in the back of our minds, we return to our temporary home. We open the laptops and start working, each of us in an own corner of the room. Gieneke makes the new codes for the newly ordered products and writes the product descriptions. We also write the recommended retail- and purchasing prizes. On the other side of the room, Marieke is working on

new orders and new designs for the two producers we are going to visit the following day. After dinner, we dive behind our laptops again to print the barcodes. And so, the days pass quickly.

During this 'short' three-week long purchasing trip, we have visited 19 of our producers in Northeast and Northern Thailand. We have travelled thousands of kilometres, usually at night, in order to save our precious and valuable day-hours. The duration of our visit varies from an afternoon with a producer to up to four days at a project. We look at the self-made products by the producers and give advice regarding colour, shape etc. But we also design products ourselves, together with the producer, something quite challenging to do in the short period of time we have available. I could write a book about everything we experience and do during a purchasing trip with our producers.

But here, first one day - put on paper- about life during a purchasing trip...



Our new design in cooperation with the producer



Paper and products manufactured in the villages



Printing barcodes at night at the hotel