

Life's little luxuries

Luxury goods are usually ones that are rare, exotic and expensive. People are buying more and more luxury goods worldwide, but was luxury in the past the same as now? And who will buy luxury goods in the future?

In ancient Greece the typical diet was fruit and cereals. For most people meat was a luxury and they could only eat it at religious celebrations, where it was a gift for the Gods. Fish was also a luxury and everyone knew the price of different types, so people could show how rich they were by the type of fish they bought. In 5th century Greece, eating a lot of fish or expensive fish meant that a person couldn't control their desires. Athenians believed if you were out of control in one way, you were out of control in every way, so 'fish lover' became an insult.

In 17th century Holland, tulips became the most important luxury. At that time, most flowers were not very colourful, but tulips were. One particular tulip, 'Semper Augustus', was extremely beautiful and colourful. One tulip-lover in Amsterdam offered 3,000 guilders for one tulip bulb, which was about the yearly income of a rich merchant and about twice the money Rembrandt received for one of his paintings. The price of a tulip bulb went up and up and in 1633, someone sold a farmhouse for three rare tulip bulbs!

After World War Two in Europe, the middle classes wanted luxury goods, but they couldn't afford large items, so smaller things like handbags, scarves, wallets and purses became luxury items and this is still true. For example, 90% of women in Japan have a designer handbag. Now, people also want rare experiences as a kind of luxury. For example, one man paid to close the Sydney Harbour bridge in Australia so that he could climb up and propose to his girlfriend.

The luxury goods market is growing and is expected to be about £164 billion by the end of 2011. Now Chinese people buy 12% of luxury goods worldwide and some economists say that in 2020 they will probably buy 44% of all luxury goods, which means they will buy more luxury products than the whole world buys now.

Luxury means different things for different people and at different times in history. Now, my idea of luxury is sitting in the garden with a good book and a cold drink. What is yours?

1 In which country is/was the following a luxury?

- 1 A flower _____
- 2 Rare experiences _____
- 3 Meat _____
- 4 Designer handbags _____
- 5 Fish _____

2 Read the article and decide if the sentences are true (T) or false (F). Circle the correct statements and correct those that are false.

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 1 What people think is a luxury changes over time. | T/F |
| 2 Meat was a luxury for everyone in ancient Greece. | T/F |
| 3 'Fish lover' was a nice way to say that people liked fish a lot. | T/F |
| 4 'Semper Augustus' was a very colourful tulip. | T/F |
| 5 Some people paid a very large sum of money to buy tulip bulbs. | T/F |
| 6 People don't want small luxury goods now. | T/F |
| 7 In the future, people in Europe will probably buy the most luxury goods. | T/F |

3 Sometimes a word refers back to something earlier in the text. What do the following underlined words refer to in the text?

- 1 They could only eat it at religious celebrations, where it was a gift for the Gods.
- 2 Everyone knew the price of different types.
- 3 At that time, most flowers were not very colourful.
- 4 ... which was about the yearly income of a rich merchant.
- 5 Now Chinese people buy 12% of luxury goods and in the future they will probably buy 44% of all luxury goods, which means they will buy more luxury products than the whole world buys now.

4 Use the words from the box to complete the sentences about the text.

afford income insult rare propose types typical

- 1 In ancient Greece the _____ diet was fruit and cereals.
- 2 Everyone knew the price of different _____ of fish.
- 3 One tulip lover offered 3,000 Guilders for a tulip bulb, which was about the yearly _____ of a rich merchant .
- 4 'Fish lover' became an _____ .
- 5 The middle classes wanted luxury goods, but they couldn't _____ large items.
- 6 One man climbed up Sydney Harbour bridge to _____ to his girlfriend.
- 7 Now, people also want _____ experiences as a kind of luxury.

5 Now complete the sentences below using words from exercise 4 above.

- 1 I couldn't _____ to buy a bicycle when I was young. It was too expensive.
- 2 A _____ breakfast in England is cereal with milk.
- 3 I like lots of different _____ of music.
- 4 The yearly _____ for a teacher is less than for a company director.
- 5 In some countries it is _____ for people to call their parents by their first name.
- 6 In some countries it is an _____ to call a teacher by their first name.
- 7 In some countries when men _____ to women, they give the woman a ring.

6 Now rewrite the sentences in exercise 5 so that they are true for you / your country.

7 Discuss these questions with your partner(s).

- What did you find interesting or surprising about luxury in the text?
- What were typical luxuries in your country in the past?
- What are typical luxuries in your country now?
- What is your idea of luxury?

Glossary

- afford** (*verb*) – if you can afford something, you have enough money to buy it
bulb (*noun*) – the part of a plant that is shaped like an onion, from which the flower grows
century (*noun*) – a period of hundred years
cereals (*noun*) – grains like wheat, oats or corn
crisis (*noun*) - a very difficult or dangerous situation
exotic (*adj*) – Interesting or exciting because it's unusual or unfamiliar
desire (*noun*) – a strong feeling of wanting to have or do something
farmhouse (*noun*) – the house on a farm where the farmer lives
insult (*noun*) – something you say that shows you don't respect someone
luxury (*noun*) – something expensive that you enjoy but do not really need
merchant (*noun*) – an old word for someone who buys and sells things
rare (*adj*) – not often seen or found
propose (*verb*) – to ask someone to marry you
tulip (*noun*) – a colourful flower shaped like a cup that grows on a long stem in spring