

Exporting blankets and throws of natural fibres to Europe

The European market for natural fibre blankets and throws is growing strongly. A lot of imports originate from developing countries, which offers you interesting opportunities. The mid and high-end segments have the most potential. To supply these segments you need to add value via product design and craftsmanship. Using sustainable fabrics can also give you a competitive advantage. Their mainly decorative purpose makes throws more sensitive to fashion trends.

Contents of this page

1. [Product description](#)
2. [Which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of natural fibre blankets and throws?](#)
3. [What trends offer opportunities on the European market for natural fibre blankets and throws?](#)
4. [With which requirements must natural fibre blankets and throws comply to be allowed on the European market?](#)
5. [What competition do you face on the European natural fibre blankets and throws market?](#)
6. [Which channels can you use to put natural fibre blankets and throws on the European market?](#)
7. [What are the end-market prices for natural fibre blankets and throws?](#)

1. Product description

A blanket is a piece of cloth designed to provide warmth to the user, in particular while sleeping. This type of bedding is also used for decorative purposes.

Blankets are divided into three categories, depending on their construction, thickness and material:

- traditional blanket – predominantly made of wool for warmth
- throw – smaller blankets, also used for warmth and accessorising outside of the bedroom
- quilt – a type of blanket, stitched together from pieces of cloth with a pattern called quilting.

This study focuses on natural fibre blankets and throws, with the following codes to indicate trade:

Table 1: Product codes

Harmonised System (HS)	Prodcom	Description
6301 20	13 92 11 30	Blankets and travelling rugs, of wool or of fine animal hair
6301 30	13 92 11 90	Blankets and travelling rugs, of cotton
6301 90		Blankets and travelling rugs, of other (non-synthetic) materials

Quality

Functionality

Blankets are commonly used as a covering to provide warmth. They can also be used, for example, to spread on

the ground for picnics or as a decorative article on a bed or a couch. Throws serve mainly as decoration on a couch or sofa, but also offer the warmth of a blanket. As an easy and inexpensive way to add style to any interior, throws have become popular accessories. They can be combined with matching cushions or cushion covers to provide the possibility of selling sets.

Material

Traditionally, blankets are made of wool because of its warmth and its ability to absorb moisture. Natural fibre blankets and throws consist of cotton, wool, linen or silk. High-end blankets and throws can also be made of natural fibres like (kid) mohair, alpaca or cashmere. They can also be made of blended yarns or mixed fabrics. Alternative fibres like bamboo, jute and hemp are less common.

Most blankets and throws in the European market are woven. Other production methods include knitting and crocheting.

Size

Blanket sizes vary depending on bed dimensions. To match European bed measurements, blankets generally come in the following sizes:

- 150 x 210 cm (single bed)
- 200 x 200 cm (double bed)
- 240 x 220 cm (king bed)
- 260 x 220 cm (super king bed)

Other sizes are also available, depending on the target country. Ask your European buyer what specific sizes they may be looking for in the early stages of collaboration.

Sizes of throws vary widely in the European market. The most common sizes are:

- 90 x 200 cm
- 130 x 180 cm
- 140 x 200 cm
- 160 x 200 cm
- 180 x 140 cm
- 240 x 100 cm
- 220 x 230 cm
- 260 x 220 cm

Design

Blankets vary in thickness, texture and elasticity. They come in a wide variety of colours and patterns, depending on their function. Unlike blankets, throws have a mainly decorative purpose, which makes them more sensitive to fashion trends. Neutral or vibrant colours, striped, checked, plain or decorated with embroidery; throws can match every style.

Labelling

External packaging labels for blankets and throws should include the producer, consignee, composition, size, number of pieces, box identification, total number of boxes, and net and gross weight.

The most important information on the product or packing labels of blankets and throws is composition, size, origin and care labelling. For more information, refer to the chapter on buyer requirements.

Packaging

You should pack blankets and throws according to the importer's instructions. Packaging usually consists of

plastic wrapping to protect the fabric from water, solar radiation and staining. Then the blankets and throws are packed into cartons. These cartons should be easily manageable in terms of size and weight, and ideally fit together on (Euro) pallets. When in doubt, check the dimensions with your buyer.

Blankets and throws are usually displayed unpacked, making attractive consumer packaging less important. In general, consumer packaging needs to be protective but can be simple in design. However, in the mid-high or high-end segments you should provide consumer packaging matching the design, quality and price of the product. Often your buyer will also inform you about the required packaging.

2. Which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of natural fibre blankets and throws?

European imports of natural fibre blankets and throws are growing considerably. Developing countries supply a lot of these imports. Europe's main importers of bedspreads are Germany and the United Kingdom. Their strong market for developing countries imports makes them especially interesting focus countries.

Where is consumer demand?

- European demand for natural fibre blankets and throws increased with an average annual growth rate of 3.4% between 2012 and 2016. In 2016 it reached €140 million.
- Demand is highest in the United Kingdom at €30 million. Germany follows with €17 million, France with €16 million.

What is the role of European production in supplying European demand?

- Europe's demand for natural fibre blankets and throws is higher than its production. This drives the need for imports, making Europe an interesting market.
- European production of natural fibre blankets and throws also increased between 2012 and 2016. With an average annual growth rate of 3.1%, it reached €120 million in 2016.
- Italy is responsible for 19% of European natural fibre blanket and throw production. Lithuania and Portugal follow with 14% and 13% respectively.

Which countries are most interesting in terms of imports from developing countries?

- European imports of natural fibre blankets and throws increased from €150 million in 2012 to €189 million in 2016. This resulted in an average annual growth rate of 6.0%.
- In the coming years, European imports are expected to keep growing moderately.
- Developing countries supply 41% of European imports, amounting to €78 million. This share is predicted to be stable in the coming years.
- In reality, much of the blanket and throw import from western European countries concerns re-exporting products manufactured in developing countries.
- Germany is Europe's leading importer of natural fibre blankets and throws, at €36 million in 2016. The United Kingdom follows at €32 million.
- When it comes to imports from developing countries however, at €23 million the United Kingdom leads Germany. This is almost three quarters of its total natural fibre blanket and throw imports!
- The strong performance of developing country suppliers in the United Kingdom and Germany is further evidenced by strong increases between 2012 and 2016. These countries upped their imports from developing countries by €8.6 million and €3.0 million respectively.
- China dominates European natural fibre blanket and throw imports, with 43% in 2016. Other leading developing country suppliers are India (9.4%), Turkey (5.8) and Pakistan (1.1%).

Tips:

Study your options in Germany and the United Kingdom. Their strong imports from developing countries make them especially interesting markets.

The upcoming [Brexit](#) (Great Britain leaving the European Union) has decreased the value of the British pound. As a result, more British buyers have started importing directly from developing countries, rather than buying from European importers. However, as the situation is still fluid and insecure, you should keep a close watch on developments.

Compare your products and company to the strong competition from China, as well as from India, Turkey and Pakistan. You can use [ITC Trademap](#) to find exporters per country. You can compare on market segment, price, quality and target countries.

- European exports of natural fibre blankets and throws consist mainly of trade within Europe.
- Italy (€25 million) is Europe's leading natural fibre blanket and throw exporter, followed by Germany (€21 million).
- Private consumption expenditure is an important indicator for the European home decoration market. The sector is closely linked to economic conditions. When money is tight, consumers postpone buying non-essential items until they have enough disposable income.
- Between 2017 and 2019, European private consumption expenditure is expected to increase. This means that consumption of decorative products is likely to rise. Especially in emerging markets, consumers will have more money available to spend on decorating the home. Consumers in mature markets already spend a fair amount of money on decoration, so growth in their consumption will be moderate.

3. What trends offer opportunities on the European market for natural fibre blankets and throws?

Sustainable materials

In Europe there is a growing group of conscious consumers. By focusing on sustainably produced and sourced natural fibres you can attract these consumers. Providing an insight into the way in which your materials are sustainable can make for a good story and help in your promotion.

In the high segment there is an even larger variety of sustainably produced natural fibres available such as (kid) mohair, alpaca and cashmere.

Tips:

If you use environmentally friendly raw material, include this in your promotion.

For more information, see our special study on [sustainability](#).

Co-creation

European buyers are increasingly trying to distinguish themselves from their competitors. To do so, they focus on their own image and design. They look for producers they can cooperate with to develop their own products, referred to as "co-creation" or "custom-made" designs. This makes it extra important to showcase your special

skills, production techniques and the variety of raw materials you work with.

Tips:

Make sure your collection showcases the different materials and production techniques you have to offer.

Emphasise the story behind your product in your promotion strategy.

Smaller quantities and shorter lead times

European buyers change their collection at an increasing pace. As a result, they are looking for shorter lead times and lower minimum orders, especially when it concerns higher value items such as blankets and throws. This is a distinct advantage for small to medium sized producers like you, since you are more flexible and can generally supply smaller quantities than bigger producers.

Tip:

If you are flexible in production and can supply smaller quantities, emphasise this in your promotion.

Small range development

More and more buyers (especially in the middle-high segment) are selling concepts to their clients, rather than single products. They do this for marketing and positioning purposes and to push their sales. To benefit from this trend, cushion covers are ideal products to add to your range of blankets and especially throws. These cushion covers could be close to the design of the blanket or throw, but you can also look at designs and materials that are complimentary to the original design.

Tip:

Consider developing a small range of cushion covers in line with the design of your blankets and throws.

For more information, see our study about [trends for Home Decoration & Home Textiles](#).

4. With which requirements must natural fibre blankets and throws comply to be allowed on the European market?

With which legal and non-legal requirements must your product comply?

General product safety

The European Union's [General Product Safety Directive](#) applies to all consumer products, including blankets and throws. It states that all products marketed in Europe must be safe to use.

Tips:

Read more about the [General Product Safety Directive](#).

Use your common sense to ensure normal use of your product does not cause any danger.

The [RAPEX database](#) lists products that the European Union has rejected at the border or withdrawn from the market. Check the database for similar products for an idea of what issues may arise.

Restricted chemicals: REACH

The [REACH](#) regulation lists restricted chemicals in products that are marketed in Europe. For example, REACH restricts the use of azo dyes and certain flame retardants in textile products.

Tips:

The European Chemical Agency provides useful information and tips on REACH. See for instance [REACH Annex XVII](#) for a list of all restricted chemicals. Also check out the [Information on REACH for companies established outside Europe](#) and the [Questions & Answers on REACH](#).

Follow new developments in the field of flame retardants, as new alternatives are being developed. You can do so for instance through the [European Flame Retardants Association](#) (EFRA).

Textile Regulation

According to the European Union's [Textile Regulation](#), textile products should be labelled or marked to indicate their fibre composition. These labels should be durable and tear-resistant, securely attached, easily legible, visible and accessible.

Tip:

For more information, see the [Frequently Asked Questions about the Textile Regulation](#).

Packaging legislation

Europe has specific [packaging and packaging waste legislation](#). It for instance restricts the use of certain heavy metals. Europe also has [requirements for wood packaging materials](#) (WPM) used for transport, such as packing cases, boxes, crates, drums, (box) pallets and dunnage.

Tip:

Read more in the [overview of EU rules on wood packaging material](#).

What additional requirements do buyers often have?

Sustainability

Social and environmental sustainability make your products stand out on the European market. Think of sustainable raw materials and production processes. European buyers increasingly demand the following certification schemes:

- [Business Social Compliance Initiative \(BSCI\)](#): European retailers developed this initiative to improve social conditions in sourcing countries. They expect their suppliers to comply with the BSCI Code of Conduct. To prove compliance, the importer can request an audit of your production process. Once a company has been audited, it is included in a database for all BSCI participants.
- [Ethical Trading Initiative \(ETI\)](#): This initiative is an alliance of companies, trade unions and voluntary organisations. It aims to improve the working lives of people across the globe who make or grow consumer goods.

You can use standards such as [ISO 14001](#) and [SA 8000](#) to read up on sustainable options. However, only niche market buyers demand compliance with such standards.

Tips:

Optimise your sustainability performance. Reading up on the issues included in the initiatives will give you an idea of what to focus on.

Buyers appreciate a good story. If you can show that you value your company's environmental and/or social performance, this may be a competitive advantage. Consider a self-assessment like the [BSCI Self-Assessment for Producers](#), or a code of conduct such as the [BSCI Code of Conduct](#) or the [ETI base code](#).

For more information, see our special study on [Sustainability in the Home Sector](#).

What are the requirements for niche markets?

Fair trade

The concept of fair trade supports fair pricing and improved social conditions for producers and their communities. Especially when the production of your blankets and throws is labour-intensive, for example hand-knotting, fair-trade certification can give you a competitive advantage.

Common fair-trade certifications are from:

- [World Fair Trade Organisation \(WFTO\)](#)
- [Fairtrade International](#)
- [Fair For Life](#).

Tips:

Ask buyers what they are looking for. Especially in the fair-trade sector, you can use the story behind your product for marketing purposes.

Check the [ITC Standards map database](#) for more information on voluntary standards and their requirements, including fair production.

Sustainable textile certification

Across the home sector, sustainability is gaining ground. Although the actual use of certification is still not widespread in home textiles, there is an increasing interest from buyers.

The [Global Organic Textile Standard](#) (GOTS) ensures environmental and social responsibility throughout the production chain. To qualify, textile products must contain over 70% organic fibres.

[OEKO-TEX](#) Standard 100 certification guarantees no hazardous chemicals were used in production.

The [EU Ecolabel](#) for textiles focus on minimising environmental impact at the manufacturing stage.

Tips:

Read more on [GOTS](#), [OEKO-TEX](#) and the [EU Ecolabel](#) in the ITC Standards Map.

Determine which certification programme would be the best fit for you and apply if possible.

Woolmark

[Woolmark](#) certification provides consumers with guaranteed wool fibre content and an assurance of quality. It contains specific standards for several product groups, including blankets and throws.

Tip:

If you supply woollen products, study [how to become a Woolmark licensee](#) and consult the Woolmark specifications for [woven](#) and [knitted](#) blankets and throws.

For more information, see our study about [buyer requirements for Home Decoration & Home Textiles](#).

5. What competition do you face on the European natural fibre blankets and throws market?

The competition for blankets and throws does not differ significantly from the sector in general. See our study about [competition for Home Decoration](#) for a general overview. Also refer to our [10 tips for doing business with European buyers](#).

6. Which channels can you use to put natural fibre blankets and throws on the European market?

The market channels and segments for blankets and throws do not differ significantly from the sector in general. See our study about [market channels and segments for Home Decoration & Home Textiles](#) for a general overview.

Market channels

Blankets and throws can be found in a wide variety of shops, ranging from low-end discounters to high-end boutiques. Both blankets and throws are also sold as accessories in “related” sectors such as garden centres.

The channels through which blankets and throws are put on the market follow the traditional patterns: import via importers and/or wholesalers that supply retailers, and larger retail chains that import themselves. E-commerce is still gaining in importance, and more and more smaller retailers have started buying directly from the supplier.

Tip:

For more information about trading directly with smaller retailers, see our special study about [alternative distribution channels](#).

E-commerce

E-commerce in home decoration is increasing and can help you reach a broader range of customers. Retailers often combine online and offline channels. Consumers research and purchase products online, shopping around and comparing prices on home decoration items. To supply e-commerce retailers you must be able to work with individual packing and labelling, as well as limited minimum orders.

Tips:

See our special study about [E-commerce in Home Decoration & Home Textiles](#) for more information.

Target online business-to-consumer retailers if you can meet the additional requirements.

Trade associations and fairs

The following trade associations and fairs are useful sources for finding trading partners in Europe.

- [Ambiente](#), Frankfurt, February
- [EURATEX](#), European Apparel and Textile Confederation
- [Heimtextil](#), Frankfurt, January
- [Maison et Objet](#), Paris, January and September

Market segments

In the low-end segment, simple and inexpensive blankets and throws are common. This segment is dominated by products made of man-made fibres, such as polyester, acrylic, polyamide (nylon), or blends of these fibres, such as microfibre. Sometimes the man-made fibres are blended with cotton, but there are no blankets or throws available made of 100% natural fibres in the low-end segment. Even in the middle-low segment there is relatively little choice.

The middle segment puts more emphasis on design and finish, while prices are still reasonable. To supply the middle-high segment, you need to offer added value in the materials and/or craftsmanship you use. In the high-end segment, designer quality is common and private labels are the standard.

Products from China and India generally dominate the low-end market. Competing with this type of cheap mass production is almost impossible. And, as discussed, this segment is dominated by products made of man-made fibres. If your production is mechanised (power looms, knitting machines, etc.) you can target the middle-low end.

The middle and high-end markets offer you the most opportunities. To supply these segments you need to pay particular attention to design and quality. Fashion and trends are important, especially for throws. However in the middle-high and high-end segments, there is also a demand for timeless designs that focus on the intrinsic quality of the material and finish

7. What are the end-market prices for natural fibre blankets and throws?

Prices for blankets and throws vary depending on composition, manufacturing technique, size, design and brand.

Table 2 gives an overview of the indicative prices of natural fibre blankets and throws in the low, middle and high market segments. “Indicative” is key here, since prices for blankets and throws vary depending on composition, manufacturing technique, size, design, brand and other ways of value addition.

Table 2: Indicative consumer prices of natural fibre blankets and throws

	Low-mid-end	Mid-end	High-end
Blankets	€35-55	€60-200	€200 or more
Throws	€15-25	€30-120	€125 or more

The European consumer price of your blankets and throws is around 4 to 6½ times your selling price. Shipping, import and handling add 15-20%. Wholesalers account for a further 50-90% markup. Retailers may add another 90-150% to the price. Finally, European VAT percentages range from 18% in Malta to 27% in Sweden.

Your original selling price depends heavily on the availability and cost of raw materials. For example, the average prices of cotton fluctuated considerably in recent years. Occasional increases in the price of raw materials are not directly passed on to the consumer, but do put pressure on exporters, importers and retailers’ margins.

Tips:

The value perception of your product in the chosen segment determines its price. The quality and price of your blankets and throws must match what is expected in your chosen target segment. To determine your price, study consumer prices in your target segment. Adjust your cost accordingly.

Understand your segment. Offer a correct marketing mix to meet consumer expectations and adapt your business model to your position in the market.

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