

Exporting cotton bathrobes and dressing gowns to Europe

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Europe sources most of its imports of bathrobes and dressing gowns from developing countries. Italy and the United Kingdom have especially strong markets for developing country suppliers. The middle to high-end segments offer you the most opportunities. Focus on design and quality to appeal to these consumers. Using sustainable fabrics can give you a competitive advantage. Hotel and spa contract business can be relevant too, especially in combination with co-creation efforts.

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1. Product description

Bathrobes and dressing gowns are used right after bathing or at the sauna, serving both as a towel and garment. At any other time, they can be used as an informal garment/loungewear in the home. They are typically made of towelling or other absorbent textile materials, usually cotton.

This study uses the following codes to indicate trade in cotton bathrobes and dressing gowns:

Table 1: Product codes

Harmonised System (HS)	Prodcom	Description
6207 91 00	14142240	Men's or boys' singlets and other vests, bathrobes, dressing gowns and similar articles made of cotton (excluding knitted or crocheted, underpants, nightshirts and pyjamas)

6208 91 00	14142460	Women's or girls' singlets and other vests, briefs, panties, negligees, bathrobes and dressing gowns, housecoats and similar articles made of cotton (excluding knitted or crocheted, slips, petticoats, nightdresses and pyjamas, brassieres, girdles, corsets and similar articles)
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Quality

Functionality

For actual bathrobes, it is essential that the material absorbs properly. However, when the garment is meant to be worn around the house (dressing gown) softness and comfort are more important.

Material

Bathrobes and dressing gowns are typically made of towelling or other absorbent textile materials, usually cotton. Other materials include silk or wool. Synthetic fibres are generally only used in the low-end segment. The weaving method is important, because it determines the appearance and the absorbency of the robe.

Common weaving methods are:

- Terry: usually woven (sometimes knitted) in cotton with uncut loops on both sides. The longer and denser the loops, the more absorbent the robes are. 100% terry cotton bathrobes and dressing gowns are considered the best due to their absorbency.
- Flannel: soft woven fabric, usually cotton (or wool).
- Velour: fabric with cut loops, used to make bathrobes and dressing gowns softer and give them a more luxurious look. However, terry is often used on the inside because it is more water-absorbent.
- Waffle: used mostly to make a more lightweight bathrobe, and gives the product a grid-like appearance. 'Pique' is a type of waffle weave in cotton, silk or other fibres.

High-end dressing gowns can also be woven of silk or blends of silk and wool. Fine knitwork is a possibility as well.

Durability

Another important determinant of quality is durability, as these products need regular washing. The fabric should be washable (at 30 °C or higher) without shrinking or fading.

Size

Common standard sizes (in cm) for bathrobes and dressing gowns in Europe are:

Table 2: Standard bathrobe and dressing gown sizes in cm

	Men	Women		
	Chest	Chest	Waist	Hips
S	94	81/86	64/69	89/94
M	97/102	87/96	70/79	95/104

L	104/109	97/106	70/79	105/114
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Design

Design aspects to take into account are length, weight and whether or not to add a hood. The construction, weave, or knit of the fabric can also be part of the design. Value addition through the use of special materials and techniques (such as embroidery) is a design aspect as well.

Labelling

External packaging labels for bathrobes and dressing gowns should include: 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 bathrobes and dressing gowns is: composition, size, origin and care labelling. For more information, refer to the chapter on buyer requirements.

Packaging

You should pack bathrobes and dressing gowns according to the importer's instructions. Packaging usually consists of plastic wrapping to protect the fabric from water, solar radiation and staining. It 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.

Bathrobes and dressing gowns are usually displayed and sold hanging. Any consumer packaging must be simple in design, but functional: it needs to protect against water and staining.

2. Which European markets offer opportunities for exporters of bathrobes and dressing gowns?

European imports of bathrobes and dressing gowns are fluctuating slightly. Developing countries are Europe's leading bathrobe and dressing gown suppliers. Europe's main importers of bathrobes and dressing gowns are Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom. Especially Italy and the United Kingdom are interesting focus countries, with a strong market for developing countries.

(!) No specific trade data are available for bathrobes and dressing gowns in general. These statistics cover men's or boys' singlets and other vests, bathrobes, dressing gowns and similar articles made of cotton, as well as women's or girls' singlets and other vests, briefs, panties, negligees, bathrobes and dressing gowns, housecoats and similar articles made of cotton. For readability, the term 'bathrobes and dressing gowns' has been used in the text.

Where is consumer demand located?

- European demand for bathrobes and dressing gowns fluctuated around €245 million between 2012 and 2016.
- Demand is highest in Italy at €65 million, followed by Germany (€31 million) and the United Kingdom (€27 million).

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

- Europe's demand for bathrobes and dressing gowns is considerably higher than its production. This drives the need for imports, making Europe an interesting market.
- European bathrobe and dressing gown production declined between 2012 and 2016. With an average annual decline of -5.4%, it reached €124 million in 2016.
- Italy is responsible for €38 million worth of bathrobes and dressing gowns, followed by Romania with €19 million.

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

- After recovering from a dip in 2012, European imports of bathrobes and dressing gowns are fluctuating slightly between €230 million and €240 million. This corresponds to an average annual growth rate of 2.4% between 2012 and 2016.
- In the coming years, European imports are expected to continue this pattern.
- Developing countries are Europe's main source of bathrobe and dressing gown imports, supplying around 60%. This amounted to €134 million in 2016. This share is also predicted to stay stable in the coming years.
- In reality, many of the bathrobe and dressing gown exports from Western European countries are re-exports of products manufactured in developing countries.
- Germany is Europe's leading importer of bathrobes and dressing gowns, with €48 million in 2016. Italy (€35 million), the United Kingdom (€29 million) and France (€27 million) follow. Together, this is more than half of Europe's total imports.
- Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom are leading when it comes to imports from developing countries, with €23-26 million each. For Italy and the United Kingdom, this is around $\frac{3}{4}$ of their total imports!
- The strong performance of developing country suppliers in Italy and the United Kingdom is evidenced further by strong increases between 2012 and 2016. These countries upped their imports from developing countries with €5.2 million and €8.3 million respectively.
- Turkey is Europe's main source of bathrobe and dressing gown imports, with 28% in 2016. Pakistan and China follow with 12% and 10% respectively. Other leading developing country suppliers are India (3.5%) and Bangladesh (2.5%).

Tips:

- Study your options in Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom. Their large imports from developing countries make Italy and the United Kingdom especially interesting markets.
- The upcoming [Brexit](#) (the United Kingdom 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 the developments.
- Compare your products and company to the strong competition from Turkey, Pakistan and China, as well as India and Bangladesh. You can use [ITC Trademap](#) to find exporters per country. You can compare on market segment, price, quality and target countries.

What role do exports play in supplying European demand?

- European bathrobe and dressing gown exports consist mainly of trade within Europe and with developed countries.
- The Netherlands is Europe's leading bathrobe and dressing gown exporter with €31 million, followed by Germany with €18 million. This illustrates these countries' role within Europe as important trade hubs.
- Portugal also exports €16 million worth of bathrobes and dressing gowns.

What is the effect of real private consumption expenditure on European demand?

- 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 home textile 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 bathrobes and dressing gowns?

Wellness and 'cocooning'

Wellness and cocooning is increasingly popular among European consumers. This is leading to a growing interest in spa and wellness products, as well as home and loungewear. People are looking for comfort and cosiness to relax at home or 'cocoon'. Bathrobes and dressing gowns add to this experience.

This trend mainly applies to the higher market segments, where people can afford luxury and spa products. This is a growing niche market in the apparel sector. The contract market could also be an interesting target market. Especially in the higher market segments, people increasingly visit spa and wellness centres and make use of these facilities during their stays in hotels. De-stressing is the most important reason for people to visit these resorts.

Tips:

- To benefit from the spa and wellness trend, focus on the middle-high market segment.
- Consider innovative ways to add value to your product. Examples are innovative fabrics, quality fabrics (terry cotton, honeycomb or waffle weaves, blends with silk and/or cashmere), special designs, finishing and silhouette, certification, and the opportunity for consumers (and buyers) to customise their product.
- Consider working together with producers of complementary spa and wellness products to create a more coherent collection.
- Watch trends in the apparel market in general, because your products have to match general fashion trends. For a detailed overview of fashion trends, including mood boards, materials and colour cards, see our study on [trends in the European apparel market](#) and the latest [fashion forecast](#).
- Consider targeting the contract market. This market places stricter demands on quality, especially durability, and may demand higher volumes. Contract market buyers increasingly visit the same trade fairs as those on the regular home textiles market.

Social and environmental sustainability

Because bathrobes come into direct contact with people's skin, consumers consider the softness of the material and the sustainability of the product to be particularly important. Having their bathrobe made of organic cotton gives consumers a feeling of health and wellness. Most consumers also report that organic cotton actually feels softer than conventional cotton.

Back to nature is another important theme in the bathrobe and wellness market. Natural fibre bathrobes and dressing gowns match this trend and should be promoted.

Social and environmental responsibility is an increasingly important aspect of the mid-high to high-end market segment. Using and promoting natural materials or recycled fibres is a key way to meet this demand, as well as obtaining certification and operating in a transparent way.

Tips:

- Promote the use of natural materials, like cotton, silk, wool or even cashmere, so that buyers are aware of this. You can also use organic cotton or other certification to further enhance your product.
- Consider developing a CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) policy to show your buyer that you are working on the improvement of social and environmental conditions, and that you are transparent about this.
- In cotton textile processing, the use of chemicals, water and energy is highest for the dyeing and finishing of the product. Look into possibilities to reduce your impact, like using natural dyes or dyes with a higher fixation rate, using less salt, and using machines that use less water for processing.

Co-creation and contract business

With the increasing interest in wellness, spas have grown in number. Together with hotels, spas are an interesting target market for customised developments (colours, logos, etc.).

Tips:

- Consider targeting the spa and hotel market by offering your services in customised developments directly.
- Consider investing in product development or a partnership with a European producer. Co-creation can increase your opportunities on the market.

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

4. What requirements should bathrobes and dressing gowns comply with to be allowed on the European market?

What legal and non-legal requirements must your product comply with?

General product safety

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

Tips:

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

Flammability

The [Netherlands](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) have national legislation regarding the flammability of sleepwear, including bathrobes and dressing gowns. In Ireland, the British legislation applies.

Tip:

- The UK Fashion and Textile Association provides information about the [Dutch legislation in English](#).

Children's clothing

There is a specific standard regarding the [safety of children's clothing](#) intended for children up to the age of 14. It specifically regulates the use of cords and drawstrings. Customs authorities often reject clothes due to risk of suffocation, strangulation and injuries. This applies especially to clothes for children up to 7 years old.

Tip:

- For children's bathrobes, do not use cords in the neck areas or with long free ends that can become traps, nor parts (such as buttons) that children can easily remove and swallow.

Restricted chemicals: REACH

The [REACH](#) regulation lists restricted chemicals in products that are marketed in Europe. For example, REACH restricts the use of azodyes 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](#). Among other things, it 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 that 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. You can do this, for instance, with a self-assessment like the [BSCI Self-Assessment for Producers](#), or a code of conduct such as the [BSCI Code of Conduct](#) and 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 bathrobes and dressing gowns is labour-intensive, 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 >70% organic fibres.

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

The [EU Ecolabel](#) for textiles focuses 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.

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

5. What competition do you face on the European bathrobes and dressing gowns market?

The competition for bathrobes and dressing gowns does not differ significantly from the sector in general. Refer to our [10 tips for doing business with European buyers](#).

6. Through what channels can you put bathrobes and dressing gowns on the European market?

The segments for bathrobes and dressing gowns do not differ significantly from the sector in general.

However, the market channels for bathrobes and dressing gowns do deviate from those for home textiles.

Market channels

Figure 6: Trade channels for bathrobes and dressing gowns in Europe

Compared to home textiles in general, agents, brokers and buying houses play a more important role in the trade of bathrobes and dressing gowns from developing countries. However, direct selling to retailers will also become increasingly important for this market.

In addition, bathrobes and dressing gowns are sold in clothing and bodywear shops rather than by Do-It-Yourself and interior specialists. As with home textiles, competition and rivalry is extremely high in this market, making it a challenge for you to look for value addition. A good way to add value is offering pre-production services like sourcing raw materials, collection proposals, forwarding advantages and capacity bookings.

Tips:

- To add value, you should offer finished product sourcing under Free On Board (FOB) terms instead of working on a basis of Cut-Make-Trim purchasing.
- For more information about trading directly with smaller retailers, see our special study about [alternative distribution channels](#).

E-commerce

E-commerce in home textiles 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 textile items. To supply e-commerce 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

These 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

Tips:

- Always have good samples ready (neat, well-finished, and properly labelled), especially when you are going to visit potential clients or trade fairs. These samples need to be representative of your product's quality and must showcase your skills to buyers.
- Also have an eye-catcher at your trade fair stand.

Market segments

In the low-end segment, simple and inexpensive bathrobes are common. The middle segment puts more emphasis on design, material and finish, while prices are still reasonable. In the high-end segment, designer quality is common and private labels are the standard.

Products from India, Pakistan and China generally dominate the low-end market. Competing with this type of cheap mass-production is almost impossible.

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.

7. What are the end-market prices for bathrobes and dressing gowns?

Table 2 gives an overview of the indicative prices of bathrobes and dressing gowns in the low, middle and high market segments.

Table 2: Indicative consumer prices of bathrobes and dressing gowns

	Middle-low end	Middle-high end	High-end
Bathrobes and dressing gowns	€20-€35	€35-€125	€125 onwards

The European consumer price of your bathrobes and dressing gowns is around 4-6.5 times your selling price (or even more if you cater to the high-end segment). Shipping, import and handling add 15-20%. Wholesalers account for a further 50-90% mark-up. 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 have 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 bathrobes and dressing gowns must match what is expected in your chosen target segment. To determine your price, study consumer prices in your target segment and adjust your price accordingly.
- Understand your segment. Offer a correct marketing mix to meet consumer expectations. Adapt your business model to your position on the market.

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