

Lucia love: the beauty and bargains of outlet shopping

They are a US concept that attracts snobby prejudices, but shopping villages make economic sense. It's easy to be seduced



Lucia van der Post

If you're as desperate for good news as most of us, then this is something for you. Talk to the older generation about "the war" and although they haven't forgotten the horrors, they come over all nostalgic about the good things - the sense of comradeship, the unity of purpose, the clothes coupons that did away with swanky dressing. A friend who fell in love with a Czech when the Iron Curtain was still in place spoke lyrically of how "in Prague" people didn't talk about handbags or house prices - instead music and philosophy, literature and art were the issues of the day.

And on a much more mundane level, turning to our own times, I shall not regret the demise of the must-have bag or the daffily priced shoe. But as I'm as easily seduced by something beautiful as the next person, this week I've been investigating outlet shopping. It's an American concept that for many on this side of the Atlantic comes wrapped in snobby prejudices about mall culture, but think about it and it makes a lot of economic sense. **I became a convert 15 years ago when Scott Malkin, of Value Retail - who was just about to open Bicester Village, Oxfordshire, the first of his pan-European group of nine outlet villages - took me to see the daddy of them all: Woodbury Common in upstate New York. I still own the cream silk trousers, the Joan & David jacket and shoes I bought then.**

Malkin's mission was to create a shopping village - not, he insists, a shopping centre - in which, because of the charm and the high standards of the whole environment, you would scarcely be aware that prices were discounted.

The first thing you need to know is that contractually all the prices have to be at least 30 per cent less than in the high street and secondly everything on sale is at least a year old (last year's winter collections are arriving in the outlet shops now). But as many of us are still

happily wearing things we bought far more than a year ago (to wit, my cream silk trousers and Joan & David jacket) it seems a good exchange to me.

I consulted one of my chicest friends, who always looks a dream and who, as her husband isn't in hedge funds, likes a bargain. She owns rafts of Tod's shoes that she found there as well as any number of designer garments that she could never otherwise have afforded.

Another friend went there two months ago just to check it out ("I didn't intend to buy anything") and came away with a MaxMara suit (about £300, reduced from £800), a Celine dress (about £200, origin-ally about £600), a Fendi handbag, a bag and a top from Dior and some shoes by Tod's. "I spent a lot but then I won't go shopping now for months," she said.

Coming soon are Alexander McQueen, Dolce & Gabbana and Matthew Williamson. Alice Temperley has just arrived but there are also good middle brands such as Mulberry and Gerard Darel, Nicole Farhi and the French cashmere company Zadig & Voltaire. This week you could pick up a darling Anya Hindmarch clutch for £115 (was £230), patent boots by Versace (£226, down from £550) or a handbag for £361 (down from £605), an evening coat by Roberto Cavalli (£399, down from £669) and lots, lots more.

Others make a point of going just before Christmas to stock up on presents - from books, candles from Kenneth Turner and The White Company, to wallets and small leather goods from Smythson, lotions and potions from L'Occitane. As someone with godchildren and grandchildren to think about, it's only by shopping somewhere such as Bicester that I can contemplate presents from the posh labels: Bonpoint, Petit Bateau, Ralph Lauren children's wear. And let's not forget the men. Look out for Ermenegildo Zegna, Dunhill and Oswald Boateng. Fans tell me that the way to shop there is to drop in regularly because stock changes fast or, if you're of the leisured classes, take a day out and lunch at Carluccio's or Villandry (which is about to arrive).

Though Bicester is generally acknowledged to be the most upmarket (it does business worth some £1,000 per square ft compared with the outlet industry average of just under £300), there are 45 outlets altogether in the country. Others that come with a good reputation are Clark's Village in Somerset, Cheshire Oaks in Cheshire, Gunwharf Quays in Portsmouth and there is already considerable excitement at the opening next year of Gloucester Quays near Gloucester.

Meanwhile, if you're going abroad don't forget the wonderful Italian outlet centres (www.italianfactoryoutlets.com) and a little bird tells me that last Saturday, Value Retail's La Vallée Village, just outside Paris and easily reached on the RER, was buzzing with chic Parisians picking up last year's Christian Lacroix for €200 and €300 which, a mere nine months ago, were selling for €3,000 and €4,000.

Check out Europe's outlet shopping villages at: www.valueretail.com

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