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All aboard the Bicester express

It attracts 6.3 million shoppers a year, is believed to be second only to Buckingham Palace for Chinese tourists and this month gets its own train station. Bicester Village is no ordinary outlet mall... *Writer: Melanie Rickey*

One night this summer, I quizzed two 20-something fashionistas bedecked in fabulous Céline and Prada about how on earth they could afford such high-ticket items on starter salaries.

'We never pay full price,' Hannah Lamb, a fashion researcher, told me. 'For me and my friends, it's a sport. We follow the clothes from the catwalk to full-price websites and stores. When they get placed with outlets, we pounce. We don't care about having it first, we care about having it at the right price.'

Considering that the price of luxury fashion has grown at twice the rate of inflation over the last decade, these girls are a whip-smart product of their time. And the fact that today, bragging rights are more about price than speedy acquisition is also why Bicester Village, the only outlet in Britain blessed with the luxury titans Prada, Céline, Balenciaga and Saint Laurent Paris, attracts a massive 6.3 million people a year.

A lot of them are tourists. The Chinese especially love a day out at Bicester to stock up on Burberry, Prada and Gucci: it is now thought to be the number two UK destination

for tourists from China – after a visit to Buckingham Palace. Three in four Chinese visitors travel to Bicester aided by Mandarin signs that have been installed at London's Marylebone station; others travel by tour buses, of which nearly 10,000 arrived in 2014. And an estimated 2.5 million Brits a year, among them the thrifty Duchess of Cambridge, also come here to invest in their designer goodies.

Bicester Village, opened in 1995, was the first of luxury outlet specialists Value Retail's 10 international destinations – its next is opening near Shanghai in 2016. And no wonder: Bicester is a hugely successful business model, with double-digit growth in gross sales each year since it opened.

While I knew about it, I had been just once, for a press launch, three years ago. Why? Utter laziness. Bicester is halfway between London and Birmingham, a few miles off the M40, and a bit of a faff to get to. Trains from Marylebone or Birmingham New Street stations go as far as Bicester North, which is still a further bus ride away from the bargains.

The faff in question, however, will soon evaporate in eight days' time when, on 26 October, Chiltern



Railways unveils a new station, Bicester Village. Sitting, effectively, in the mall's car park, it is on a new £130m line that speeds from Marylebone to Bicester in 46 minutes, and then loops back down to Oxford Parkway – so no more need for that bus. It's the first new railway line built to link London to another British city for 100 years, and the project is part of a grander Government scheme to reopen an east-west train link between Oxford and Cambridge. Not to mention an educated punt on the growing popularity of Bicester's business model.

A few years ago, the fashion consultant Yasmin Sewell was asked to curate the British Designers Collective at Bicester, and she is now a convert. 'It works because it's very multicultural,' she says. 'Tourists come to the UK and luxury shopping at Bicester is near the top of their list of things to do. They really want to shop! From a retail





From left **Shoppers** come to Bicester with specific buys in mind; the station will link the outlet village directly to London and Oxford



‘The helicopter that lands belongs to a billionaire who has dropped in to pick up a wardrobe full of Dior’

point of view, it’s as fun as going to Selfridges, if not a bit better, because of the potential to find a great designer piece at a good price.’

On the day of my second-ever Bicester trip just a few weeks ago, the shopping clichés are there in spades. Within an hour, I see two glamorous young Chinese women loaded with Gucci bags, four Sikh men toting bright-orange Superdry bags, the new Farnshop restaurant opened by Soho House, an unexciting building site that will soon be a train station and finally, and most incongruously, a roaring helicopter landing on a nearby field. Turns out the helicopter is owned by an Indian billionaire who has dropped in to pick up a wardrobe full of Dior and Burberry menswear. It may seem surprising that a billionaire would come to an outlet mall, but then the term ‘outlet’ does not equate to cheap

at Bicester. Far from it.

At Saint Laurent Paris, the price tag of a beautiful forest-green leather bag shows £850, down from £1,270. The brand’s famous Tribute sandals cost £440, reduced from £765. At Prada, beautiful catwalk pieces are displayed like glittering prizes in a sea of generically lovely products: red block heels at £310 (reduced from £610) have a queue of three pretty young Chinese girls waiting to try them on. It’s good to see the ‘savings’ on the ticket, but these items are still not exactly cheap.

In the menswear department upstairs at Burberry, a young Chinese man is trying on a shearling coat, half its original price of £3,495. Downstairs in the huge store, rack upon rack of identical padded winter coats and trench coats in the designer’s signature beige-and-black gabardine are lined up as far as the eye can see.

Here, things get a little confusing. The tag on a black wool pea coat at Burberry's Bicester Village outlet store shows one price: £625. Where is the 'before' price then? I'm here to save money, after all. Turns out this piece is an 'outlet special', created as a generic Burberry piece to the same standard of quality as a Burberry Prorsum item.

These 'outlet specials' are all over Bicester Village's 130-plus boutiques, and are what makes the place so successful. The luxury brands supply the everyday classic designer products Bicester customers want, and in-house teams of merchandisers work closely with the brands to make sure the right thing comes at the right time, based on customer data. The close partnership with brands is the secret of their success, and that's what keeps people coming back. That and the catwalk specials scattered like glitter.

Desirée Bollier is the glamorous Chief Executive of Value Retail Management – and the kind of woman who sits on the board of directors at The Royal Academy and is on nodding terms with Ai Weiwei. She says that billionaires started shopping at Bicester about five years ago.

'Oh yes, the high-net-worth individuals know we have the brands and that we will take care of them. So for them, it becomes about ease. Our customers have definitely moved on from saying, "Oh, it's an outlet," to knowing it is a destination.' Unsurprisingly, Bollier pitches Bicester to the kind of jet-setter whose natural habitat is Bond Street, or a private plane. 'She is international, she travels. She does not just want the latest – she is obsessed with quality and is very demanding. If we can serve her, we can serve anyone.'

With that, Bollier tells me her latest fashion win. While Bicester's stock is usually a year or more old, this month its Marni store will get the s/s 2015 collection – stock that only left the full-price rails in August. Next on her agenda is to entice Chanel, Vuitton and Hermès, the three brands that famously never sell in outlets, to succumb. If she does, I predict a riot...



The celebrity fans

From left: Stella McCartney, Erin O'Connor, Laura Bailey, the Duchess of Cambridge, Kate Moss and Claudia Schiffer



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