

The fashion issue

Christopher Kane
opens up

Sam Rollinson
strikes a pose

& Lisa Armstrong
is on the loose
in Bicester



My love affair with the Bicester Village experience began with a blazing row. 'It's only 90 minutes from New York,' the PR assured me in 1994. Three and a half hours later, when the signs to Canada loomed, the awful truth sank in: the driver couldn't read maps (this was pre-satnavs). Once the PR's breathing resumed, he turned such an interesting shade of mottle, I thought he was going to take the driver out. When we finally arrived, slightly shell-shocked all three of us, the sight of all those identical Donna Karan dresses drooping on their wire hangers was so dispiriting that we only stayed 20 minutes.

The Bicester offering has evolved since then. For one thing, you don't have to schlep to Canada. You can hop on a train at Marylebone in central London and jump out 47 minutes later at Bicester's very own train station – possibly the first in the Western world to resemble Ralph Lauren's drawing room. (I know, I've been to both.) For another, on the whole it is emphatically not about piling it high. Or on wire hangers. The best stores at Bicester offer frugal rather than bastardised versions of their flagship shopping experience – and last season's collections. So while you're greeted with a white cube rather than the bespoke marble flooring and customised hush of Mount Street at the Bicester Céline branch, you also find impeccably constructed pea coats, navy trousers and Trapeze and Trio bags – at 60 per cent off.

In fact, when the full-price Céline collection is on one of its intermittent trips to Planet Weird, the Bicester branch will, in all likelihood, still have the classics. It also has attentive staff, as it should. Even with 60 per cent off, you're looking at around £1,000 for one of those pea coats, but they should last a lifetime. All the more reason to make considered rather than rash purchases. Once you've courted Céline's staff,

BICESTER MON AMOUR

Lisa Armstrong has a confession to make: despite ruling the fashion pack on the front row, she is a secret Bicester devotee. Welcome to outlet shopping à la mode



How to nab a high-fashion bargain

Befriend the shop assistants and they'll delve into the back room for hidden treasure

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Use the Valet Parking and the VIP room

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Visit in June for summer staples and in October for coats

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Stick to the expensive end of the spectrum: MaxMara, Marni, Céline, Chloé, Valentino

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Look for classic shapes not the season's 'key piece'

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Before you buy, walk away, take a few deep breaths and think about whether you really need it. Sometimes it's OK to go away empty-handed

they will delve into the back room for items that never seem to make it anywhere as obvious as the shop floor, and they will put you on the mailing list. Just like shopping in Mayfair, then.

But sometimes better: because Bicester offers a Hands-free Shopping service. Leave each purchase bagged up in the shop and at the end of your trip it somehow appears all in one place. For a few extra pounds you can do Valet Parking (which I strongly recommend not just because it makes you feel like you're on Rodeo Drive but because to park in the normal Bicester car park is to enter the first circle of hell). There is also a VIP room where you can flop on a sofa and mainline tea or champagne (without, to my knowledge, being remotely VIP).

Then there's Valentino, where you can sometimes find catwalk samples. Some of them never went into production so potentially you're buying a one-off evening or wedding dress for under £2,000. If you happen to be in the market for a one-off evening or wedding dress, happy days.

God, I'm sounding like a PR. But there are many fashion journalists and stylists who secretly do all their major shopping at Bicester. Waiting a season to get hold of that dream transformative piece is almost always beneficial, partly because you sometimes realise it's not your dream piece after all. Also, seeing items out of their normal glossy context – without the distractions of deep-pile eau-de-Nil carpets or the siren drumbeat of this season's advertising campaigns – focuses the mind on quality. If it looks good in an outlet, chances are it is good.

Among my other favourite Bicester destinations is Chloé: small, intimate and with a smattering of the house's key pieces.

I don't bother with the cheaper end. I want investments that are going to last for years. I shop strategically: in around October for coats; in June for special summer staples. MaxMara, which hasn't mastered the art of presentation (dark, cramped), is a good destination. So is Marni, where the aesthetic never really changes. Spring/summer 2015 or winter 2014 – it doesn't really matter, unless you're looking for This Season's Key Piece. If you have any style sense, you won't be. These days the SKP is hopelessly overexposed on social media before it ever makes it into the store.

I like the proximity of everything – it's one long street – the sense that you're here to do business, because while it's under an hour from the capital, it still requires at least half a day's commitment to retail. I've even grown fond of the ersatz New England clapboard store fronts and flagstones. The place is so relentlessly upbeat and inclusive – unlike the flagship stores. Most of all, I like the lessons it teaches, not only about the often transient nature of desire but the power of refusal (sometimes you may have to leave empty-handed).

And let's face it, I'm hooked on



Outlets abroad

Woodbury Common, New York Brands from Salvatore Ferragamo to Versace sit cheek to cheek in clapboard arcades named after suitably aspirational American holiday destinations: the Hamptons, Saratoga... Local names take up the most floor space, including Barneys, Coach, Polo Ralph Lauren and Kate Spade.

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Kildare Village, Dublin This is expanding fast, with Armani, Belstaff and Aquascutum joining favourites such as Anya Hindmarch, Mulberry and Gucci. There are even kennels so your pooch can relax while you rifle through the rails.

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Fidenza Village, Milan A truly cosmopolitan offering, with Euro names that aren't always easy to find in the UK – Dirk Bikkembergs, Maliparmi, Les Copains, Facis – and, unsurprisingly, a strong focus on menswear.



the discount. Unless it's absolutely unavoidable – one needs a hit of Nowness every so often – I have an aversion to paying full retail price for any clothing. I blame my first job in fashion writing, which was Elle in the late 1980s. This was the era of the invitation-only sample sale, where fashion editors, socialites and minor celebrities amassed their fabulous wardrobes. Provided you were a sample size, ie could fit into the same garments as the catwalk models, you could snap yourself a rare prized piece for roughly 80 per cent less than it would cost in the shops. Assuming it ever made it there.

Frequently it didn't, because the retailers were too timid or the designer went bust before the collection went into production.

Sample sales were fast, furious and potentially friendship-killing. Play your cards right and you could end up with fabulous collectors' items. Get distracted by 25 fashion editors fighting over the same bubblegum-pink Chanel jacket and you could sabotage your style with wardrobe blockers.

The secret, as with all bargain-stalking, is to take deep breaths and walk away for a few moments of rational questioning. Where will you wear it? What with? Do you need eight more items to make it work? Through years of experience, I discovered that even the super-wealthy and the famous love a bargain. That if it requires taking apart and reassembling, it's staying on the rail. That it won't dye beautifully. Above all, I began to value non-possession. You can love and appreciate something without having to own it. Didn't nab that perfect MaxMara camel coat? Think laterally and work around that hole.

What sample sales ultimately taught me was to avoid sample sales. The panic-induced indiscriminate buying created more sartorial problems for me than they ever solved.

These days I never go to them. Unlike many of my peers, I don't shop at online discount stores either. Tempting as the booty looks, these sites seem to me to be more about spotting some buy-it-now-or-lose-it fabulousity than methodical list-making. One day, when I have more time, I'll patrol them regularly. For now, I prefer my once or twice a season Bicester ritual: make lists, try on, drink tea. bicester-village.com

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From top Dressed head-to-toe in Bicester finds; the outlets are set out like a street, with high-end brands housed unintimidatingly in clapboard-fronted shops