Bicester Village returns with virtual queues, welcome-back posies and the trading of pleasantries

From QR code systems to supplied masks and hand sanitiser everywhere. This is the future of Bicester Village for the foreseeable future.

By **Lisa Armstrong,** HEAD OF FASHION
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The Telegraph's Lisa Armstrong at Bicester Village | CREDIT: Geoff Pugh

At 8.30am the top team at Bicester Village, Britain's most famous designer outlet, based in Oxfordshire, decided to open an hour earlier than planned when it became clear customers were returning to the designer outlet in droves. I arrived at 9.30. The closest car park was half full, which seemed an encouraging sign, back when retailers still weren't sure whether anyone would turn up. By ten, it was full and there were queues of cars waiting to enter.

So far, so normal – pre-lockdown, Bicester was often busy on a Monday. With its cobbled streets, clapboard store fronts and famous restaurant outpost – the Wolseley has an eatery here - it's a destination in its own right, the second favourite British tourist attraction for Chinese tourists after Windsor Castle.

Nothing was normal really, though. Temperatures were discreetly taken of every customer who entered the village. If there were few Chinese clients, who normally account for 25 per cent of customers (and an even higher proportion of revenue), there were plenty of Brits.

John, 43, a recycling entrepreuneur and his partner Paris, had come from Staffordshire, and already bought clothes in Karl Lagerfeld. "We never really stopped shopping, to be honest, " says John, who kept working throughout lockdown. "We moved house in the middle of lockdown so we had a lot to buy".

QR code queuing systems set in place at Bicester Village | CREDIT: Geoff Pugh

Janice, 34, a senior school geography teacher from South London also continued teaching online as well as taking care of her two small sons, and made the 90-minute journey to Bicester with them and her husband. "It's a day out and it feels like a treat," she says. "Plus I feel as though I saved money during lockdown because we couldn't go anywhere".

About 30 per cent of customers wore masks and outside every store there were two-metre distancing discs. Bicester also has a team of 'Zone Captains' to politely remind customers to observe the rules. They must have been extremely busy. It surprised me how much people seemed to have dropped their covid guard and makes the rigid two metre rule for restaurants and pubs seem all the more unfair.

If you're going to shop in a crowd, Bicester is the place to do it. It's outside, there's plenty of seating, welcome-back posies of flowers dangled from stalls and while the restaurants were closed, there are chic vans selling street food.

The queues outside Bicester Village as they opened to the public. | CREDIT: Geoff Pugh

The notion of spending to save was a popular theme. Patsy, a 65 year old retiree who'd already nabbed a bag in Mulberry, made the early morning trek from Kent, lured by the discounts – anything from 33 – 60 per cent and planned to stay a few more hours. She'd never been to Bicester before but said she'd be returning soon.

That's the real test for the economy – and whether today's enthusiastic uptake continues. Everyone seemed happy to be out and about, and seemed to regard the queues as a novel experience in human contact. At times, not everyone remembered the social distancing etiquette . "That annoys me," said 23-year-old Zoe Carr, who works in car sales. But not enough for her to leave. She sat on a bench with her friend Rebecca taking stock of their new underwear purchases from Calvin Klein. "Shopping online is all very well, but it's not the same, and returns can be annoying," she agreed.

I saw a number of wealthy Middle Eastern customers, who spent lockdown at their homes in London, including a high spending group in Bicester's VIP reception suite, which could have been tailor-made for socially distancing pandemics with its airy seating areas. Think open French windows, capacious sofas, huge tables adorned with large urns of English garden flowers discreetly dividing areas – and smartly dressed staff carrying trays of tea and coffee, which under the new protocol, customers must help themselves too.

The Cafe Wolseley open for takeaway only | CREDIT: Geoff Pugh

Outside, it was more crowded. All the stores, except a handful of new ones not yet ready, were open. From Dior, Valentino and Gucci to Lululemon and Le Creuset , they're all tightly controlling the number of customers allowed in at any one time. Some supply masks to those who want. All have sanitiser. Most changing rooms aren't open, but even being able to hold up a real garment against your body feels an advance on internet buying.

A small shop such as Rupert Sanderson will only welcome two at a time. The much larger, two-storey Gucci has capacity for 24. This makes it both the best of times to shop – once you're inside a shop, it's retail heaven – and more challenging, as some of the queues grew longer and longer. No one I spoke to seemed to mind too much.

In any case, Bicester had been preparing what it hopes is a secret weapon – a "walk-in" app that allows customers to register with their favourite stores and book a place in the queue without having to wait aside. The app then contacts them when they're near the top of the list.

Customers, many of whom had clearly dressed up for their big day out, didn't seem to mind the wait, happy to sit on a bench, soak up the sunshine and plot their next bargain.

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