

# The Telegraph

## Move over Mayfair – those with money to spend are heading to Oxfordshire

The likes of Bicester Village are now way more appealing than a schlep to a city centre

By Laura Craik 2 March 2023 • 5:48pm

Sunday afternoon in Oxfordshire's Bicester Village and the streets are thronging with women that your mother would call "well turned out" and men she would describe as "marriage material", which is to say they look well dressed, well adjusted and well remunerated for the jobs they do, which could as equally be in plumbing as in finance.

If Britain is in the grips of a cost of living crisis, nobody has told the shoppers at Bicester, whose arms are garlanded with glossy paper bags and whose brows seem unfurrowed by financial woes – though that could equally be the Botox.

It's a world away from the worrying scenes in the capital. Last month, Mulberry closed its flagship store on Bond Street as a result of poor footfall. This week, the New West End Company (which represents retailers on Bond Street, Oxford Street and Regent Street) asked the Government to re-implement the Tax Free for Tourists initiative, which was axed post-Brexit and has seen luxury retailers struggling to compete with rivals in Europe.

Chancellor Jeremy Hunt has shelved plans to bring back the perk, which let tourists claim back their 20 per cent VAT charge – a decision that means Mulberry won't be the last luxury brand to feel the loss of high-spending overseas customers.

Add train strikes, the perplexing proliferation of American Candy stores on Oxford Street,



'If Britain is in the grips of a cost of living crisis, nobody has told the shoppers at Bicester,' says Laura Craik CREDIT: John Lawrence



As the high street continues to struggle, Bicester Village remains packed with shoppers CREDIT: John Lawrence

and our new WFH culture to the mix, and it's little wonder that where well-off shoppers are concerned, the likes of Bicester are now more appealing than a schlep to a city centre. Footballers' wives (Abbey Clancy) and royalty (the Princess of Wales) alike shop here. These are people who drive BMWs, spend half term on the slopes and think McArthur Glenn is a country and western singer.

I have long been fascinated by the psychology of outlet centres, namely because their allure is largely lost on me. Most seem to be full of things you don't really want, but will be persuaded into buying purely because of a discount. Paying 30 per cent less for a turnip doesn't stop it from being a turnip. But I also accept that one woman's turnip might be another woman's tiara. The appeal of Bicester is that the turnips have been judiciously weeded out, leaving mainly tiaras – with up to 70 per cent off their original price.

There is no cut-price Gap, no cheap stationery and no McDonald's: just Gucci, Dior, Prada, Celine, Chloé and other high-end names, with Off-White, Acne and North Face for the teens. Not for nothing did a recent Channel 5 documentary describe Bicester as "Britain's poshest designer outlet". The only sheets available here are by The White Company, and if you want a new saucepan, it's Le Creuset all the way.

That Bicester is defying the gloomy sales figures currently being endured by the rest of the British high street is as fascinating as it is instructive. Figures released by the Centre for Retail Research show that in the UK, almost 50 shops are closing a day, leading to an estimated 150,000 job losses.

While conditions are particularly tough for small, independent traders, that larger chains such as House of Fraser, New Look and TK Maxx have also been affected is of equal concern. More than 17,000 shops closed last year, the highest number since 2017. Nor is the situation



Laura Craik visited Bicester with her daughters, who were both impressed by the wealth on show  
CREDIT: John Lawrence

predicted to improve in 2023, thanks to a perfect storm of rising labour costs, spiralling energy bills and crashing consumer confidence.

To understand why consumer confidence is not in short supply at Bicester is to first understand the unique demographic of its shoppers. These people don't shop in outlet centres because they need to, but because they want to. Bargain hunting is a sport, or maybe a leisure pursuit for those who dislike sport, and would rather spend their weekends buying clothes.

This holds equally true for British customers as those from overseas. The latter have been particularly integral to Bicester's success since it opened in 2004: pre-Covid, it was estimated that as much as 80 per cent of the 350,000 Chinese tourists entering the UK every year visited Bicester, making it almost as popular a destination as Buckingham Palace. It's also popular with wealthy Middle Eastern visitors, who will spend as much on car hire and a driver as they save on what they have bought.

Anyone who has spent time among the super-rich will attest that they love a bargain just as much as their poorer counterparts. But while hefty price reductions are at the heart of Bicester's appeal, of equal importance is the environment in which these bargains are presented.

First, there's the cleanliness: the 157 boutiques ("shops" sounds too prosaic) inhabiting the 350,000-square-foot site are squeaky clean. As are the toilets, their ubiquity a huge draw for anyone too impatient or weak-bladdered to queue.

Next, there is the aesthetic: Bicester is Sylvanian Families for grown-ups, its neat, pastel-coloured shop fronts designed in a style that recalls the architecture of Key West; a vision of England seen through an American lens. Which isn't surprising, given the founder and chief executive of Bicester's parent company, Value Retail, is Scott Malkin, one of the owners of the New York Islanders NHL ice hockey team.

And finally, there is the convenience: parking is plentiful and trains are frequent, with on-board announcements made in myriad languages, including Mandarin, in recognition of the many nationalities who shop there.

Post-Brexit and post-Covid, however, in common with all luxury retailers, Bicester has had to refocus its efforts on attracting domestic guests to make up for the paucity of overseas ones, the wealthiest of whom routinely spent five figures. High spending UK-based customers have been enticed with VIP events, collection previews and pop-ups. One pop-up, Smart Works x Do Good, features preloved and new designer items, with 100 per cent of proceeds going to the Smart Works charity, which helps support unemployed women in need to get back into the job market.



Bicester is 'Sylvanian Families for grown-ups,' says Laura Craik  
CREDIT: John Lawrence

The tactics have worked: in 2022, Bicester's footfall grew by 35 per cent compared with 2021, while its increased focus on the domestic guest resulted in sales growth of 21 per cent on the previous year. While it is no longer possible to track international visitors through tax-free sales in the UK, Bicester estimates that they accounted for 25 per cent of its sales last year. The majority of these international sales were Middle Eastern (32 per cent), Chinese (32 per cent)

and Indian/South East Asian (22 per cent) buyers.

As a low-spending customer from nowhere more exotic than London, I am not typical of Bicester's most assiduously courted type of guest. Which makes it all the more novel to be given a taste of the type of VIP treatment that is on offer. Since my last visit five years ago, it has opened The Apartment, a private room that looks like a giant suite in an upmarket hotel, replete with plump sofas, fancy cushions and coffee tables groaning with pastries.

My daughters, who have never been to Bicester, are impressed. "Are they free?" they ask. A concierge explains that The Apartment hosts up to 80 guests a day and that the invitation-only experience comes with an additional 10 per cent discount on any purchases, the services of a personal shopper, and the option of "hands free" shopping, which allows your purchases to be delivered later. "If you're too rich to carry your own bags, you need help," my elder daughter says, as we set off to explore.

Bicester is as clean and manicured as it ever was, but has grown in size. New store additions include a Ganni, a Stone Island and a Fusalp, while Dior is in the process of moving to bigger premises. I am surprised not to see queues outside Dior, Gucci and Prada: five years ago, those snaked around the block. Get with the programme, grandma. These days, queuing is virtual: you scan a QR code and are notified by text when it's your time to shop. This is politely explained when I try to enter Gucci, and am told there will be a 45 minute wait. That it's virtual at least allows me to carry on shopping in other stores.

Well, window shop, at least. "Everyone's so rich," notes my elder daughter, who is 16. My younger daughter, aged 12, is less impressed. "I prefer Westfield," she says. "At least it has a Superdrug. I can't afford anything here."

We go to Acne, which, along with Vivienne Westwood, is of most interest to the 16-year-old. The 12-year-old picks up a pink scarf with long fringing. "£200 for a knitted squid!" she squeals.



In 2022, Bicester's footfall grew by 35 per cent compared with 2021  
CREDIT: John Lawrence

Next, we go to Off-White, where I'm intrigued to notice a customer paying for a £480 sweater in cash. "Thank you, my bro," he says to the sales assistant, with a cheerful fist bump. In the North Face, two 20-something women are debating the merits of a down jacket.

"Cute, but do I need it? I don't feel like I do," says one.

"Get it anyway," says the other.

We have lunch at the newly opened Ceccoli's, the Italian restaurant chain owned by Soho House, whose presence has increased since my last visit, with a farm shop café and an outpost of Soho Home. We are seated next to two young Italian women with so many shopping bags that their waiter can't get close enough to the table to deliver their beef carpaccio. We order a main course each, with tap water. The food is delicious. The restaurant is packed with people who look half my age, none of whom are containing themselves to one course, or drinking tap water.

After lunch, I tell my daughters I'll give them £15 each to spend. Since this wouldn't buy them a shoelace on a Gucci trainer, they make a beeline for Beauté Prestige International. The eldest buys a Benefit concealer, reduced to £14. The youngest says she doesn't want anything, and looks troubled.

"Why are the VIP shoppers given 10 per cent off when they don't even need it?" she asks.

"As an incentive for them to spend even more," I explain.

She looks puzzled. "Doesn't seem fair."

We browse in Stella McCartney, Marni and Isabel Marant, where prices are reduced by 30-40 per cent, then head back to The Apartment for complimentary coffee and chocolate. On one set of sofas is a Chinese family, laden with bags: two Gucci, two Celine, a Burberry and a Barbour. On another, three blonde girls who may or may not be influencers are photographing each other. "Take another," one says, holding up a Chloé bag.

Watching them, it strikes me that Bicester's genius is to make shopping a social event, like brunch. If you've got money to spend, Bicester is a compelling place to spend it. And if you don't, it's a compelling place to people-watch.