

A Shopper's paradise

The British and the Japanese share an abiding passion – shopping! And whether you are hunting for high or low fashion, the UK is fast developing into a clothes shopper's paradise with an ever growing selection of upmarket boutiques and imposing department stores, jostling for space with quirky specialist outlets and inspiring street markets.

The capital leads the way with its world class array of shopping outlets led by the justly famous Selfridges department store (website) that recently eclipsed its rivals, Harvey Nichols and Harrods to claim the best department store in London award in Time Out magazine. Known to Japanese shoppers as the Isetan of London, Selfridges is 99 years old but is constantly reinventing itself with innovative window displays that are an attraction in themselves. The idea of shopping for pleasure was introduced to the UK by the store's founder Sir Gordon Selfridge and a visit to this vast emporium still feels like a day out. Other notables in the 'all under one roof' category include the stylish and recently lavishly refurbished Harvey Nichols and the ever popular Liberty which has just reinvigorated itself with a shockingly contemporary look.

London, however, no longer has a monopoly on shopping treasures and the rest of the UK has much to offer the keen follower of fashion. Manchester prides itself on being the style capital of the UK and its Afflecks Palace is home to a fine collection of upmarket and contemporary boutiques. If you believe size is important you ought to drop into the Metro centre in Newcastle which is the largest shopping centre in Europe. Edinburgh's magnificent Princes Street boasts Jenners 'the Harrods of the North' while Glasgow probably wins out in the battle with its deadly rival with the beautiful Princes Square shopping centre and the stylish Italian centre.

Wherever you are in the UK though, you should never be too far from the a branch of the ever popular British institution Marks and Spencer's which has recently fought hard to shed its rather dowdy and traditional image by employing young up and coming designers and bringing in the likes of David Beckham to advertise its menswear. Pop into 'Marks' then for stylish and affordable clothes and you can pick up some delicious chocolate muffins at the same time.

But if the British and the Japanese share a delight in shopping for clothes we are also alike in having an aversion to pushy sales assistants. The British indeed are credited with inventing the fixed price in order to spare ourselves the embarrassment of haggling. And since shopping for clothes in a foreign country can be an intimidating process it's good to know that a few simple phrases can make interaction with sales staff that much easier. 'I'm just looking' or "I'm just browsing' will usually keep over attentive sales staff at bay. 'Could I try this on (for size)?', 'Have you got this in (bigger/smaller) size?' and 'Do you have this in (yellow)?' are useful questions. If you decide purchase an item you can say 'I'll take it' while the opposite is 'I'll leave it' while 'I'll think about it' is a polite way to escape from the shop without feeling you have to repay the assistant's kindness by buying some ghastly item that looked fine on the hanger but.....

All in all then there is something for everyone in Britain's boutiques and department stores and with the summer sales due to start in just a few weeks time it's the ideal time to spoil yourself with a new outfit for the summer. Happy shopping!