

The Outlet Option

BY JAN LOOMIS

A new experience for the bargain-oriented shopper



The Citadel Outlet Collection



It used to be that a day of shopping meant putting on your dressier clothes, white gloves, and heels and heading for the department store. Bullocks Wilshire, Robinson's in Beverly Hills, I. Magnin, Neiman Marcus—names that conjure happy hours of browsing through elegant displays of designer clothes, shoes, crystal, china, silver, furniture, housewares, toys and jewelry.

In those days, department stores had sales clerks who would bring you accessories for the perfect outfit, help you find a hat, knew the bridal registry and could

help you find the best gift for the bride and groom. In case you haven't noticed, with the exception of Nordstrom, the era of the full-service, fun-to-shop-in department store has pretty much "gone with the wind." Just like you can't find your white gloves anymore, sales clerks in department stores seem to have lost their ability to be helpful.

The last time I needed a gift from the bridal registry, the clerk waved me towards a computer which eventually produced a printout that related what the lucky bride and groom were expecting.

Actually I was delighted to find a clerk that would wave to me—usually there is no one visible who remotely resembles a salesperson anywhere near a cash register when you want to buy something. Recently, I heard of a person resorting to picking up the telephone on the register desk, dialing an extension, scanning the various desks for the person who picked up the phone and then waving at her to come and help him. It worked, but it seems like a lot of trouble when you are attempting to pay someone for something. Is it any wonder that people are staying away in droves? So what are your alternatives if you don't shop at department stores anymore? Believe it or not, there is another whole world out there.

These days you can put on your tennis shoes and comfortable clothes and trek to an outlet center or a warehouse store. Outlet centers are groups of stores owned by manufacturers that retail the manufacturer's own brand of merchandise. These stores had their origin at the mills on the East Coast. The mills usually had shops where their employees and local residents could buy irregulars, seconds and overstock of merchandise. Twenty years ago a group of abandoned mills in



The Citadel in the City of Commerce introduced Los Angeles to the outlet mall.

Reading, Pennsylvania opened as an outlet mall for area mills and manufacturers. Soon people from all over the country were making special trips to shop there.

The experiment was so successful that outlet malls began springing up all over the country. Usually about 150,000 square feet or bigger, these malls contain stores with such prestigious names as Anne Klein, Ann Taylor, Bass, Mikasa, Perry Ellis, Adolpho II, Capezio, The Gap, Eddie Bauer, Corning/Revere and many, many more. Prices vary but the average savings are about 40 percent off the prices in department stores. The merchandise is

often the current season's fashions. Some manufacturers even produce special products for their outlet stores and test market designs there. Seconds and irregulars are clearly marked so that there won't be any confusion. The malls themselves, which usually have restaurants or food courts, are a pleasant shopping experience.

Often these outlets are located in a tourist area such as Freeport, Maine or Williamsburg, Virginia. They usually are about 35 miles from the nearest department store. Los Angeles was introduced to this phenomenon when the Citadel Outlet Collection opened its doors behind the re-

stored facade of the abandoned Uniroyal plant in the City of Commerce. Developed by Trammell Crow Company, the mall opened to instant popularity in November of 1990 (some 18,000 people came on opening day). Behind the impressive Assyrian facade, the stores front a pleasant open-air courtyard planted with grass and lined with brightly colored walls. Handpainted tiles done by local school children edge the walks. Ann Taylor, Perry Ellis, Adolpho II, Capezio, Corning Revere, The Gap, Eddie Bauer and many, many more name stores are located along the broad, covered sidewalks.

A recent visit found Perry Ellis shoes marked at half-off retail, Carole Little dresses at excellent prices and various Capezio brands at well-off their usual cost. There were Laura Ashley quilts at 50 percent off in Linen World and small Procter-Silex appliances at sharply reduced amounts.

The Cooper Building in the garment district of Los Angeles is also an outlet center and has shops for many local manufacturers such as Baby Guess, Guess?, Silverwoods Outlet, Judy's Outlet and Hathaway.

Lake Elsinore has its own Discount mall, Lake Elsinore Outlet Center. Developed by the McArthur/Glen Group, the mall is a stellar group of designer shops. Slightly farther afield, Factory Merchants Mall has opened in Barstow with 50 shops ranging from Anne Klein to Van Heusen. Desert Hills Factory Stores is located in Cabazon near Palm Springs. The San Diego Factory Outlet Center is across the parking lot at the San Ysidro crossing. (And Tijuana often seems like a large discount store in itself.)

There are still more options available in this brave new world of retailing besides the outlet stores. Price Club began life in San Diego, but it has become a viable option for Angelenos as well. The no-frills warehouse approach allows lower prices on groceries, liquor, paper goods, small appliances, electronics and clothes. The stores are enormous and everyone seems to be having a wonderful time picking up bargains. There is a fee for membership that you will undoubtedly make

up in one trip through the warehouse. Everything is sold in pre-packaged lots—six cans of tomato sauce, a case of beer, etc.—so it helps to know what amounts your family can consume. Merchandise changes constantly so you never know quite what you will find on your rounds of the stacked shelves. Aisles are wide and the staff is friendly and helpful. There is often food sampling going on so that you can taste various products available in the huge freezers or on the shelves. Price Club also has a good selection of office supplies, film and video tape.

Smart & Final has many of the same products and prices. The stores have been remodeled and now feature wide aisles and better organization. There is no membership fee.

If you are shopping for sheets, towels and housewares, Bed, Bath and Beyond has a huge selection and excellent prices. It also carries a full line of small appliances, gifts, glassware, bath furniture and closet organizers. The staff is helpful and knowledgeable.

Shoes can be found at terrific savings at Coast Footwear. Unusual sizes, up-to-date styles and brands for both men and women make this a great place to round out your shoe wardrobe. It is somewhat self-serve, but it is fun to poke around the shelves and the staff is helpful. The shelves often yield hard-to-find narrow sizes and interesting novelty shoes for evening wear. There is an excellent selection of tennis shoes at prices that will not break the budget.

Solana Beach, north of San Diego has developed its own mini-discount center at the corner of Solana Hills and San Rodolfo roads. Several different discount stores share the building including a Designer Labels for Less.

Department stores offer convenience, a large selection of merchandise and many other amenities. But...the thrill of the hunt for the best bargains and the lure of lower costs on name-brand merchandise make the outlet stores and warehouse-type operations attractive alternatives to the traditional shopping trip. The current recession makes them an affordable luxury.

(For outlet addresses, see page 16.)