



SHOPS THAT *bear soul*

There's something exceptionally old-world about small specialty stores that makes them worth travelling for.

Words by Richard Asher.

A few months ago, my writing stuck in a lean patch, a sign in a small-town English shop window caught my eye. "Part-time help wanted. Apply within." It was handwritten, on one of those old-school library catalogue cards younger readers won't recall. I glanced beyond the sign, into the window display. I saw bears. Dozens and dozens of bears. In time I would learn that this was one of the world's leading teddy bear shops, but for now, intrigued, I pushed open the door to apply within.

A dim room with low, warped ceilings greeted me. This was a truly ancient building, no doubt someone's house once upon a time. Now, though, it was a loving home to literally hundreds of meticulously arranged teddy bears. Most of them were staring up at me with their heads cocked to one side, with that look you've seen down at the dog pound.

Somewhere beyond this hodgepodge display of black-eyed ursine taxidermy, I sensed a human presence. The wooden desk, flanked by a column straining to hold the ceiling in place, was tucked away at the very back of the room. A friendly lady ushered me up the creaky staircase to meet the proprietor, whom we'll call Mr Powell. The next day, when I got the call to say the job was mine, I felt far more excited than I should have done for retail work. But it tickled me that I could now legitimately claim 'I work in a teddy bear shop'. It would make people double-take in a way that 'I work at Coles' never would.

The experience did not disappoint. Mr Powell was as detached, gruff and set-in-his-ways an Englishman as you could hope to find. He abhorred mobile phones and banned staff from using them. But he was passionate about bears, and something of a celebrity in the curious world of teddy collectors. One of my co-workers put it best with a wry whisper on my first day: 'Sometimes it feels like we're doing social work in here...'

Some days we'd only have one customer, but those that did come had all the time in the world. It was standard procedure to make tea for the regulars, of which the shop kept a comprehensive database, all in hardcopy. Names, addresses and purchasing history – written out by hand on those same catalogue cards. They needed that information for sending out Christmas cards, naturally.

If the place ever went up in flames – and the shop, filled with wood and wool, was a fire hazard if ever I saw one – then Mr Powell would lose decades worth of customer >>

Nomad

records, not to mention hundreds of collectable bears worth, in some cases, thousands of pounds. And the precious Alfonzo would go too: this irreplaceable display teddy once belonged to a Russian princess, and is so famous that Mr Powell has declined offers of over a quarter-of-a-million pounds for him. It was a relief to learn that the shop was comprehensively insured.

But I loved working there. After so many years of computers in offices, the novelty of writing out the library cards by hand never wore off. I revelled in the challenge of finding stock in the attic, around which no app could guide you. I enjoyed learning the finer points of teddy-selling, like the colour-coded ear button that tells you whether a Steiff is limited-edition or not.

My colleagues were lovely, but reserved and impeccably English. Lunch hours were treated with a sanctity long forgotten by the corporate machine. And you finished at five: not before, not after. The 'till' was quite literally a wooden drawer with a few notes and coins in it. My own wage packet was exactly that: a cheque in an envelope, written out by hand in Mr Powell's swooping cursive. No written contract, no overtime clauses, no HR departments. A gentleman's agreement. Why does it need to be any more complex than that? I concluded that I rather liked working for a shop with this much character. As a South African in England, it was as much a travel experience as a job.

It got me thinking about independent shops and what they offer the tourist who cares about the sensation of actually having gone somewhere unique. You know that feeling when you land somewhere you thought was exotic, and the first thing you



It's an increasingly familiar feeling to land somewhere you thought was exotic, and the first thing you see is Maccas.

see is Maccas? It's an increasingly familiar one for travellers, as multinationals do their best to morph all the planet's shopping streets into facsimiles of each other. It's hard not to envy Marco Polo at times like this.

But salvation remains in the form of the little one-of-a-kind shops, markets and food outlets of the world. Not only do the quirky junk stores of Amsterdam, for example, offer an off-trail experience that goes beyond museums and eating, they also afford you a chance to meet a true local character. That shopkeeper will probably be half-mad, and happy to spin you a yarn about his wares – hopefully one that doesn't start life in yet another Bangladeshi sweatshop.

We may no longer be able to discover the world in quite the sense that Polo did, but when we stumble across a retail oddity we get a hint of what he might have felt. I'm thinking of my 2am feed at Reykjavík's revered harbourside hot dog stand in Iceland,

or ferreting around the incredible Jurby Junk warehouse on the Isle of Man, famous for its musty smells as much as for the grumpy lady who runs it. Asian markets, too, take us back to his time, especially ones as far-fetched as the Bird Market in Hong Kong. Or the Goldfish Market, come to think of it. Then there's that independent shop in Oxford that pretty much only sells pens. Even stumbling across the didgeridoo specialist just outside the station in Fremantle gave me a bit of a lift as a wandering visitor to WA.

There's a place for these independents that represent a pilgrimage – like Blackwell's bookstore in Oxford, with its record-breaking basement wonderland. Or Hamleys in London. Or the Tintin shop in Brussels, whence the cartoon character came.

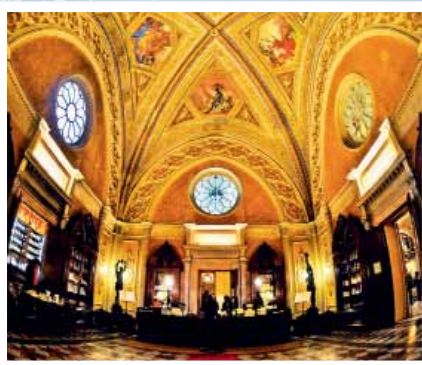
Even chains can be good fun for visitors – as long as they're local. Here I think of my overwhelming need to dine at a Hog's Breath Café during my time in Australia. There was just something so suburban-Aussie about the name. And you haven't been to South Africa until you've dined at a Spur – a national institution even if the theme is Yank.

Likewise, the dime-a-dozen convenience stores of Japan, like Lawson or FamilyMart, become more than just places to pick up cheap sushi boxes. I look forward to the cry of "irashaimase" as I walk in, but more than that, I love trying to figure out what everything is. Choosing a mystery Japanese drink is a daily travel adventure ritual.

My teddy bear shop is a case in point too. People fly from as far afield as Japan to visit it. Nobody will ever do that for a Kmart. We need to glorify shops that make people want to get on planes. Because the world will be a much poorer place without them. >>

UNIQUE SHOPPING EXPERIENCES AROUND THE WORLD

Here, our favourite places to spend time (not just money)



Italy

Officina Profumo Farmaceutica di Santa Maria Novella

Via della Scala 16, Florence;
smnovella.it

One of the oldest pharmacies in the world, it opened in 1612 and to this day still produces cosmetics, soaps and eau de cologne made with recipes first developed by Franciscan monks in the 11th century.

Fratelli Vigano

Via Marco Minghetti 8, Rome

This cappelleria dates back to 1870 and stocks all manner of hats, from Panamas to deer stalkers to berets in its charmingly jumbled historic store-front.



France

Merci

111 boulevard Beaumarchais, Paris;
merci-merci.com

This temple of fashion and design is located in the buzzing Haut-Marais and is founded on the ethos of giving back: profits generated fund the Merci endowment fund, which finances human development projects in south-west Madagascar, especially in education.



Deyrolle

46 rue du Bac, Paris; www.deyrolle.com

A true curiosity shop, Deyrolle has specialised in taxidermy and museum-worthy collections of insects, birds and butterflies since 1831. You're probably not going to buy a stuffed tiger to take home with you, but this really is one of those stores you just have to experience.

Shakespeare & Co.

37 rue de la Bûcherie, Paris;
shakespeareandcompany.com

Its original namesake was closed down during the German occupation in World War II, but its modern incarnation is still the benchmark for all other indie bookshops because of its passion for championing writers and the written word.

India

Gem Palace

M.I Road, Jaipur; gempalacejaipur.com

This world-famous emporium, established in 1852, is a candy store of precious gems and jewellery, from antiques of the golden age of the maharajas to modern designs studded with lozenge-sized stones.



United States



ABC Carpet & Home

888 and 881 Broadway, New York City;
abchome.com

A New York institution, all the chicest people pop down to ABC to buy gorgeous things for their lofts and uptown apartments. The stock is extensive with lots of sustainable and eco-conscious credentials.

C.O. Bigelow Apothecaries

414 Sixth Avenue, New York;
bigelowchemist.com

Founded in 1838 (becoming C.O. Bigelow in 1880) as an apothecary dispensing all manner of remedies, prescriptions and beauty products, everyone from Eleanor Roosevelt to Calvin Klein has frequented the counter here, which has been in its current location since 1902.



American Girl

americangirl.com

With stores across America (and two in Canada), this doll emporium is a kiddy and tween paradise of all-American dolls, accessories and books which are delightfully age-appropriate and aim to quietly inform and empower modern girls.

ABC Store

abcstores.com

It seems like there's an ABC on every corner when you visit Hawaii (they also have outlets in Las Vegas, Guam and Saipan), filled to the brim with wonderfully kitsch souvenirs, groceries, and enough Hawaiian Host chocolates to satiate the most rampant craving.

United Kingdom

James Smith & Sons

Hazelwood House, 53 New Oxford Street, London; james-smith.co.uk

This family-owned store opened in 1830 and specialises in handcrafted umbrellas and walking sticks – just umbrellas and walking sticks! The delightful shop itself is Grade II-listed and an attraction in its own right.



Liberty London

Regent Street, London; liberty.co.uk

Established in 1875 and situated in its distinctive mock Tudor building since the 1920s, Liberty London has long been shorthand for aesthetics and quality – Oscar Wilde said "Liberty is the chosen resort of the artistic shopper". We definitely want to be one of them!

Japan

Katayama Bunzaburo

221 Hashibenkeicho Takoyakusidori Karasuma Nishiiru Nakagyoku Kyoto; bunzaburo.com

This traditional shibori tie-dye business, started in Kyoto in 1915, celebrates the distinctive indigo dyed fabric technique passed down from generation to generation. The third-generation proprietor is adapting the time-honoured technique for a modern audience.



Loft Shibuya

21-1 Udagawa-cho, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

Spread over seven floors, the chain store offers everything from furniture to cosmetics to stationery to household goods, all of which is typical top-notch Japanese design. ➔