

SHOPPING

top picks

- Avoca Handweavers (p138)
- Barry Doyle Design Jewellers (p141)
- Bow Boutique (p139)
- Cathach Books (p137)
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SHOPPING

In 2007 Europe's busiest shopping street was Dublin's very own Henry St, which saw an average of 16,000 frothing retail junkies *an hour*, each pram-pushing family and consumer couple playing catch-me-if-you-can with the credit-card companies. That was *before* the global credit crunch.

On the surface, nothing seems to have changed. Dubliners still throng the main shopping streets both north and south of the Liffey, but the numbers have dipped: both footfall (the numbers walking in and out of shops) and retail spend has dropped; according to some sources, by as much as one quarter. A low pound sterling rate and the government's ill-advised decision to bump up value-added tax (VAT) by half a percent to raise much-needed revenue has also hit retailers hard, and in early 2009 it was estimated that €70m of potential business in a six-month period was lost to Northern Ireland, as shoppers flocked north of the border where *everything* became cheaper. In 2010 the government reversed its decision and cut VAT by half a percent, but the city's shop owners are struggling to deal with the new realities of a population cut off from the cheap and easy credit that fuelled its purchasing power for the guts of a decade.

OK, that's the background. Now for the stuff on the shelves. If it's made in Ireland – or pretty much anywhere else – chances are you can find it here. Fashionistas can ogle at the Prada frocks in Brown Thomas, Dublin's most stylish department store, or head to the warren of streets west of Grafton St, where trendy little boutiques share the narrow streets with funky secondhand shops, popular pubs and cute little restaurants. At its heart is Castle Market, where you can really let loose your retail chi.

Men's bespoke tailoring is rather thin on the ground. Designers have tried to instil a sense of classical style in the Dublin male, but the species doesn't seem too interested – any pressed shirt and leather shoe seems to suffice.

Not surprisingly, streetwear is very trendy and the most obvious buyers are the city's younger consumers, who pour into every midrange fashion outlet spread throughout the city centre and pore over the trendy, mass-produced clobber within. They spend their Saturdays, off-days and lunch hours ambling about Grafton St and its side streets on the south side, or Henry St and its surrounds on the far side of the Liffey; and then there's the consumer cathedral in the southern suburb of Dundrum, easily reached by Luas and open aggressively long hours, seven days a week. Stacked with every hot name in the retail black book, it has raised the bar on shopping and turned it into a serious occupation.

At the other end of the fashion spectrum, you'll find all the knit and tweed you want at Avoca Handweavers (p138) or Blarney Woollen Mills (p141). While souvenir hunters can still buy toy sheep, Guinness magnets and shamrock tea towels, a new breed of craft shop offers one-off or limited-edition crafts and art. Traditional Irish products such as crystal and knitwear remain popular choices, and you can increasingly find innovative modern takes on the classics. But steer clear of that mass-produced junk whose joke value isn't worth the hassle of carting it home on the plane: trust us, there's no such thing as a genuine *shillelagh* (Irish fighting stick) for sale anywhere in town.

A good website for shopping tips and designer sales is www.thesavvyshopper.ie.

OPENING HOURS

The majority of the city's shops open 9.30am to 6pm Monday to Saturday. Thursday has late-night shopping, and most places stay open until 7pm or 8pm. With only a handful of exceptions, most shops also open from noon to 6pm on Sunday. Shopping centres keep the same hours with the rather pronounced exception of the Dundrum Town Centre, which opens until 9pm Monday

to Friday and until 7pm on Saturday and Sunday.

DUTY FREE

Non-EU residents can claim VAT (Value Added Tax – a sales tax, 21% of the purchase price) back on their purchases so long as the store operates either the Cashback or Tax-back refund program (they should display a sticker). You'll get a voucher with your