

SHOPPING

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SHOPPING

Despite the bitter bite of the economic crisis, shopping remains a big part of many Londoners' lives. And while 'It bags' (read: Prada beauties with a £1000-plus price tag) are no longer publicly touted as objects of desire and ethical shopping is becoming a more acceptable way to spend (lots of) cash, at the time of writing most of the city's 30,000 shops – both chain and independent – are still going strong, or at least, not so infirm. True, some independent (and indeed chain) businesses have folded under financial pressure, but London is still a shrine to shopping and its massive variety – from the clever high-street fashion of Topshop (p220) to the luxurious delights of Harrods (p224), and the cutting-edge clothes from young designers at Spitalfields Market (p227) to the antiques of Portobello (p226) – are still here for the willing visitor and resident to enjoy.

London's main shopping attractions are its sheer variety and number of shopping opportunities. The big-name emporiums, such as Selfridges, Harvey Nichols, Hamleys, Fortnum & Mason and Liberty, are both sightseeing attractions in their own right and temples to shopping devotees; the side-street boutiques – the capital's true delights – also sell just about anything, from clothes to old-style British homewares. Despite the fact that High-Street chains are progressively taking over more and more of the city, funky street-wear outlets in places such as Hoxton, Brick Lane and Spitalfields continue to thrive, and Londoners are increasingly returning to the charm of individual design and decor. For those on a budget, charity shops, especially in the posher areas, are becoming more and more popular as shopping options, especially since big spending is increasingly frowned upon as unemployment figures soar.

If you're in the market for something a little more exclusive and expensive, New Bond St and surrounds is laden with designer shops, and a whole host of hot British designers, such as Stella McCartney and Matthew Williamson, maintain lavish outlets where admiring the setting is an integral part of the experience. You'll probably be familiar with classic British brands such as Burberry, Mulberry and Pringle, which have radically reinvented themselves and become part of high fashion.

But perhaps fashion is not your obsession? Worry not, the British capital has just about anything on sale, from handmade umbrellas to technology or exotic foodstuffs.

The fact that, at the time of writing, the pound is at an all-time low makes the once unimaginable possible: London is something of a bargain, especially for those spending the Euro.

OPENING HOURS

The good news is that you can go shopping every day of the week. The bad news is that this is not universally true throughout the city.

Generally, shops open from 9am or 10am to about 6pm or 6.30pm Monday to Saturday, at least. Shops in the West End (Oxford St, Soho and Covent Garden) open late (to 9pm) on Thursday; those in Chelsea, Knightsbridge and Kensington open late on Wednesday.

In the West End and in Chelsea, Knightsbridge and Kensington, many shops are also open on Sunday, typically from noon to 6pm but sometimes 10am to 4pm. Sunday trading is also common in Greenwich and Hampstead and along Edgware and Tottenham Court Rds.

Because the Square Mile, or the City of London, does most of its business during the week, most shops in this area open only Monday to Friday. Additionally, smaller designer

stores tend to keep hours to suit their owners, opening later in the morning and often closing on a Monday or Tuesday to stay open on weekends. It's a good idea to ring ahead, as these places often have last-minute changes.

If there's a major market on a certain day – say, Columbia Road Flower Market on a Sunday morning – it's a good bet that neighbouring stores will fling their doors open too.

THE WEST END

We're not sure the West End's shopping needs introducing. This is the very area where you can spend your monthly salary on a pair of shoes or a handbag. Oxford St is heaven or hell, depending on your shopping stamina: it is *the* quintessential high street and brimming with an ocean of people most of the day. It can be a nightmare to tackle, so if you want to shop here, focus on what you want – you