

DREAM HOLIDAY

OK! TAKES YOU ON A RECESSION-INSPIRED SHOPPING SPREE TO THREE OF EUROPE'S MOST IDYLIC SHOPPING VILLAGES...

With the effects of the recession, the art of shopping has become a little more challenging, and finding that incredible bargain all the more rewarding. So when I was approached to test out Chic Outlet Shopping, my heart rate quickened. Shopping to save, rather than spend? What an ingenious idea! Finally we girls have an excuse to shop *and* save in a picturesque outdoor village-like environment, thousands of airmiles away from our disapproving other halves in Dubai!



FIRST STOP: MUNICH

I arrive at the stunning Sofitel Munich Bayerspost after a six-hour flight from Dubai, feeling utterly elated that the rebranded, five-star Sofitel hotels (So By Sofitel) really are as impressive as promised. My room on the top floor of the beautifully refurbished former post office building is gorgeous and I just want to melt into the inviting, crisp white bed. Instead, I'm off to the Spa Lagune on the ground floor for some much needed post-flight therapy. After an hour of pampering and several laps of the pool, I feel like a princess – it's no surprise that the hotel (with Arabic-speaking staff) is also favoured by the Saudi Royal Family.

THE VILLAGES, INGOLSTADT

Just 50 minutes outside of Munich lies a bargain-hunter's paradise. Set in pedestrian-only high streets, with old-world European charm,



the Shopping Villages are safe, pristine and well signposted. The joy of Ingolstadt is its size and relative secrecy. Boris Becker's ex-wife, Barbara Becker, is a regular visitor, as are a few other local Bavarian celebrities, who are often seen popping in and out of the 90 luxury boutiques, which include Filippa K, Stefanel and German brands like Strenesse and the Munich-based designer Hannes Roether, who favours the use of dyed linen – perfect for the Dubai summer heat. Having thought my 90 Euros would barely see me into the first Village, I am surprised to find myself leaving with two items at just 30 Euros each. Thankfully there are restaurants and cafés interspersed with the boutiques, offering shoppers a moment to reflect on how badly they want that last pair of Jimmy Choos!

SECOND STOP: IRELAND

The lush, green countryside of Ireland made a pleasant change to the streets of Munich, and the local Dublin humour was welcomed after the slightly more reserved Bavarians. *OK!* stayed in the luxurious confines of the modern, townhouse-style Fitzwilliam Hotel and enjoyed the glamour of the exclusive K Club, set in the surrounds of its own golf course in Kildare County, where the likes of Robbie Williams, Liam Neeson and Tiger Woods have stayed.

KILDARE VILLAGE

Feeling fully rejuvenated, I emerged from my luxurious hotel haven with credit card in hand. Kildare Outlet Village is situated just an hour's drive from Dublin city centre. The white and blue wooden-slatted buildings reminded me of an old-English seaside village, and their contrast to the gargantuan malls of Dubai was a delight. I quickly snapped up a beautiful LK Bennett classic mac at 60% off. Kildare is smaller than Ingolstadt, with only 55 designer boutiques, but perhaps due to my ignorance of German designer brands, I found it easier to navigate my way around, and was delighted with the 'Style Gallery', in which a relatively new, local designer is housed on a temporary basis. Irish designer Deborah Veale had just finished setting up her stock when we arrived and had a number of glam outfits



perfect for big race days, like the forthcoming Irish Derby at the nearby Curragh. This Village, with a lovely Italian restaurant, L'Officina, on site, is also a popular destination with the British singer Michelle Heaton, the Crown Prince of Qatar and Ronan Keating, who shops there with his whole family.



THIRD STOP: LONDON

The Sofitel in St James is situated in the heart of Piccadilly, and *OK!* was warmly welcomed by the management team, headed by general manager Denis Dupart. It was a rare treat to stay within a stone's throw of New Bond Street and Selfridges, not to mention the Queen of England's preferred grocer's and the best place in London to buy chocolate – Fortnum and Mason. It's hardly surprising, that the Queen is a local resident of the area, just across St James's Park – a few minutes walk from the hotel. I still had the last Chic Outlet Shopping Village left to visit, and I had been warned. The flagship Village (which is about an hour away from central London) with 120 luxury boutiques, remained ahead of me and I was ready!

FINAL DESTINATION: BICESTER

I could feel the tension in the car as we drew up to the Village. The Bicester Village signs are enormous and people were everywhere. I was handed a map of the Village with a full list of boutiques: Dior, Diane von Furstenberg, DKNY and Diesel all leapt off the page at me, as I realised excitedly, I was only in the 'D' section. We were temporarily dragged away from the shops into the cool yet bustling environment of Carluccio's restaurant. Espressos were ordered as we politely listened to the latest gossip from the Village. Elizabeth Hurley had just been in to set up her temporary beachwear boutique, and was extremely business-like and friendly. Karl Lagerfeld has recently set up here, as has Valentino. Interestingly, Alexander McQueen,

Matthew Williamson, Temperley London, and Theory are all unique to Bicester, while in terms of celebrity visitors, Yasmin Le Bon, Victoria Beckham, Jemma Kidd do their shopping here, as well as members of the British Royal family.

Finally, we were set free into the luxury boutique haven that is Bicester. I realised I didn't know where to start and began to panic, knowing my indecision would set me back in shopping hours. I decided the best method would be to work through the boutiques in order and headed off into Tod's right in front of me, where I immediately stumbled across a beautiful pair of high-heeled strappy shoes in tan, my size and reduced by 70%. I knew at once, as only a woman does, that I

recovery for both myself and my credit cards, I am now gearing myself up for a second trip to the Shopping Villages for some even better bargains. I quite fancy Paris, Milan and perhaps a trip down to Barcelona... **OK!**

HOW TO GET THERE?

From Dubai, fly with Emirates Airlines direct to Munich in six and a half hours and to London in seven and a half hours.
www.emirates.com

Once in Munich, fly Aer Lingus to Dublin in two and a half hours. From there London is just an hour away.
www.aerlingus.com

CHECK OUT

The Chic Outlet Shopping Villages
www.chicoutletshopping.com

PLACES TO STAY

All hotels offer transfers to local Chic Outlet Shopping Villages and hotel rates are subject to availability.

Sofitel Munich Bayerspost

Bayerstrasse 12, 80335 Munchen, Germany
Tel: +49 (0) 89 599 48 0
www.sofitel.com

The Fitzwilliam Hotel

St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland
Tel: +353 1 478 7000
www.fitzwilliamhotel.com

The Kildare Hotel, Spa & Country Club

Straffan, Co. Kildare, Ireland
Tel: +353 1 601 7200
www.kclub.com

Sofitel London St James

6 Waterloo Place, London, SW1Y 4AN, UK
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7747 2200
www.sofitelstjames.com



had to have them!

Rounding off an extremely successful shopping trip, I felt as though Bicester was like the most devilishly good chocolate dessert at the end of a truly sumptuous meal – very naughty, but something you've just got to do. Thank goodness for Bicester's Samsonite store and Emirates Airline's generous 30kg limit on our return journey.

RETREAT

Exhausted and laden with bags, we returned to the safe haven of the Sofitel St James and to the pink luxury of the Rose Lounge, where we relaxed with a traditional English tea of Earl Grey and scones. After a week's

