

BELGRAVE ROAD

Where in Europe would you find a street dubbed 'The Golden Mile'. so named as more gold is sold over the counter there than in any other European city? This is not Amsterdam, Zurich, Madrid or Paris, but Leicester, and the gold in question is Indian 22 carat wedding gold.

The official street name is Belgrave Road, until the 70s just another anonymous arterial route taking visitors from the shires into the city centre. The 1920s shops lining this road are featureless and faceless architecturally, uninspiring terraces with shop fronts on the ground floor and two stories of living space above, and the streets leading from the road, interspersed with small industrial units, bear testament to Leicester's almost domestic textile and small-industry heritage. Yet over the last thirty years this road has been transformed into the 'Bond Street' of the British Asian community. This is where thousands of British Asians flock for their wedding gifts and outfits and jewellery.

It's the scents of the street which first draw attention to its difference from the other exhaust-fume-filled city thoroughfares. 'It smells like India,' a friend of mine screeched delightedly as I led her on a memory trip through this place where we had once lived as students - next door to a butchers shop, over the road from a newsagent and drab little boutique. Now the butchers shop is a Sweet Mart, the drab boutique is a sari palace and the newsagent has become an immaculate

Pan House, its pristine interior, divided by a rail bearing the sign 'Queue here for pan', redolent with the scent of betel nut and exotic spices. Here, on Saturday and Sunday nights when the shops remain open until 9 or 10, British Asians buy their evening digestives - betel nut leaves rolled and filled with freshly- grated coconut, coriander seeds, fennel seeds and roasted or fresh betel nuts. It's pick and mix – select your filling and it will be rolled for you.

There are the perfumes of Far Eastern spices wafting from Shiva Shakti Foods on the corner of MacDonald Road, a food emporium packed to the ceiling with catering size boxes of turmeric, garam masala, cumin and chilli, its shelves weighted with packets of wheat, rice and potato flour, while in the vegetable section, turia, tindola, karela, valone, dudhi, and mooli, lie cheek by jowl with the more familiar baby aubergines, ochra and baby cucumbers. Outside, huge leafy bunches of fresh coriander, fenugreek and spinach invite you to 'pick your own'.

Across the road, down steps from street level, is the TK Cash and Carry, a heavily- perfumed Tardis of a shop, which opens up to reveal a mix of items never found in our well-regulated shopping precincts. There is no adequate consumer description of this melee of Bollywood videos and Bhangra music CDs, cooking utensils, electrical goods, drums and tambourines, statues of Shiva and elephants, copies of 'Learn Punjabi in 10 days', oil burners, incense, hair oil, bindhis, greetings cards, wall plaques and Moulinex blenders. Department store isn't quite the right word. Here are no departments, just irrationally-appointed

places on shelves. It's a blindingly colourful mix of red, gold, stainless steel and more red and gold. Just now it's Raksha Bandhan, a festival in which sisters give Rakhies to their brothers, blessing bangles of coloured rope and gilt, so counters are covered in boxes of these gifts and there are crowds around them, noisily comparing value with art, choice against choice.

TK's and Shiva Shakti service the thriving Asian community which has settled in this area since the 1970s when Asians were first expelled from Uganda and Kenya. Many of them, predominately Hindu, but also Muslim and Sikh, had settled in Africa only for a generation or two, had successful businesses and careers, but were forced to leave with little or none of their wealth. Undeterred, they arrived in Leicester, started from scratch, and worked yet again to ensure a future. Doctors, teachers, solicitors, IT specialists and factory workers poured into a city which had only a small immigrant population, was fairly set in its ways, and which at first resented the influx of strangers. But Leicester responded to the challenge by setting up one of the first race relations units in the country, and after a brief incursion by the National Front in the early 1970s, the suspicions melted away, to be replaced by an appreciation of the variety and vitality which the immigration offered.

Now held up as an example to cities with racial discontent, Leicester is regularly visited by deputations from other city councils to see how comfortable racial integration can be. The inner city promises to be the first in the country in which

the immigrant population could possibly outnumber whites within the next few years. Hindu temples, Sikh Gurdwaras and gold-domes mosques stand side by side with Leicester's churches, and there is the rare ornate Jain temple, too, the only one in the western world, its interior carvings attracting visitors from all over the world. At weekends, many public buildings like the De Montfort Hall, the concert venue, are taken over by huge parties of wedding guests in rainbow-coloured silk saris and Punjabi suits to celebrate traditional Asian marriages.

These Asians are the party-givers as much as party-goers. They invite the rest of the world each year to their very own Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, celebrated in October or November, which is the largest Diwali celebration outside India, attracting 25,000 British Asians to Leicester. As lights and lamps are lit in all houses, and illuminations stretched across Belgrave Road, the gold glitters more invitingly than ever.

Almost every other shop in this street is a goldsmith, and all the shops are busy, at any hour of the day or evening, every day. On display in every window is the traditional wedding set – necklace, bracelet with long sinuous attachments to a ring, elaborate earrings and nose decorations. The delicate filigree work on this bright yellow gold, often interlaced with silver or white gold and decorated with gems, is the work of master craftsmen, and much of that on sale has been imported from India. The traditional nature of this jewellery, though, should not blind anyone to the fact that India is itself a part of the modern world and more

than capable of providing the cleaner cut minimalism preferred by those Asians who buy Armani.

Sona, one of the goldsmith's shops here, specialises in the modern, as well as the traditional. In the spacious understatedly chic surroundings of this elegant shop, with its black and grey décor, are not only the top-of-the-range filigree gold bracelets at £1,000, but also mattified and streamlined designer jewellery for the loft-living age, exquisitely crafted, a true modernist alternative to Tiffany or Asprey's for those whose demonstration of wealth is restrained but equally and perhaps more stylishly effective.

The clothes' shops follow a similar trend. You could spend days in each sari shop, spoilt for choice, trying to decide between the fuschia silk with its embroidered gold borders, or the simple cotton, hand printed and hand-dyed. Saris, ranging in price from £10 to you don't really want to know, do you?, have been on sale in Belgrave Road since the 1960s at Saree Mandir, when its owner, Saraj Khandelwal arrived from Delhi, and realised that Asian women had no retail therapy in the UK. Asked, once, by Prince Charles what he did for a living, years later, he said simply, 'I decorate women.' And so he does. Now many other upmarket clothes shops, specialising in the ornate wedding outfits for Asian men and women, as well as party clothes and everyday wear, have their Belgrave Road outlets.

Step into Damani's, for instance, and you are instantly in designer heaven. This cool, in every sense, shop, is on three levels, the top floor devoted to men's wear, of the Imran Khan variety, the ground floor to wedding gowns, and the basement to special occasion outfits. The space is terrazzo-tiled in grey, with borders of Caledonian pebbles, with full-length slim windows, airy and almost whisperingly minimalist, the Asian equivalent of Prada. And the clothes.....!

Here wedding outfits are in three pieces, a long skirt, a short top, and a stole. All are hand embroidered, usually in gold, skimming the silk georgette, velvet or organza, like cobweb. The traditional 'lenga' outfits are red velvet with gold, but there are some in azure and viridian, and some in shades of stone from sand to marble, granite to beach pebble. Each one is breathtakingly beautiful, too invitingly tactile to touch, except apologetically.

Then, in the basement, are salwaar kameez – the traditional Punjabi suit of long tunic with trousers and scarf, which Princess Diana wore so well. This, the manageress explains, is not only the preferred outfit of the younger British Asian, but is also bought by European women too, as party wear. Styles are simple, fabrics sumptuous, embroidery impeccable. The salwaar – a tapered close-fitting trouser - has been updated by Damani's own designers into the preferred 'parallels' of the trend-setters. My next investment, I think.

Exhausted by the opulence on show, visitors can find refreshment in any of the street's award-winning restaurants or café's. Across the road from Damani's is Bobby's, one of the first vegetarian restaurants in Britain. It has been on the same site in Belgrave Road since 1976, with its take-away trade and its restaurants. The menu is impressively lengthy, specialising in Gujarati meals, and snacks, almost an Indian tapas bar. The Thali which is typically Gujarat offers a stainless steel compartmentalised plate, with spaces for curries, pickles, breads, soups and rice, and at Bobby's a set Thali with two vegetable curries, dal, plain rice, four buttered chapatis, roasted popadum and a lassi (a cooling yogurt-based drink) costs only £6.49.

Opposite Bobby's is Sharmilee, with a Sweet Mart on the ground floor offering fondant-like spiced delicacies in delicious bubble-gum colours. Above is the restaurant, this one specialising in Southern Indian cuisine, also vegetarian, but as South India is tropical and coastal, here there is rice rather than chapatis, and coconut is a staple in sauces and desserts. You can explore the exotic with a Navratan Corma, a mixed vegetable and fruit curry with a mild creamy sauce, with a side dish of Dhosa, thin crispy South Indian pancakes.

Or, if you prefer the rich meat curries of North India and the Punjab, there's Curry Fever, awarded the Curry Club Midland Restaurant of the Year in 2001. A melting taste of their Butter Chicken will show you why. This is a restaurant in which careful spicing rather than overheated sauces turns curry into a gourmet

experience to be savoured slowly. Each sauce is prepared separately for each dish rather than taken from a central pot, and the Masala-based curried fish is exceptionally subtle, brimming with unidentifiable but irresistible nuances of flavour.

South Indian, Punjabi, Gujarati, British, African – the cuisine of Belgrave Road echoes its easy cultural diversity. It's a self-assured and comfortable mix of the exotic and the modern, the sensual and the rational. It's the Golden Mile, a shining example of our own wealth of nations.