

# travel

with Stephen McCarty

Clockwise from below: the famed Rockefeller Christmas tree; Santas on parade; Saks Fifth Avenue.





# Tinsel town

Oh come, all ye faithful, to worship at the altar of Christmas consumerism in one of the world's best shopping cities. Rachael Oakes-Ash jingles the tills of New York.

Pack your passport, your list of Yuletide gifts and your plastic. New York City is open for Christmas shopping. This department-store treasure trove has all the tinsel and tulle needed this festive season. Check out the city's renowned holiday shop windows, be dwarfed by the Rockefeller Christmas tree ... or stay in your hotel and get the butler to do your shopping.

**Barneys New York** Step out of the yellow taxi in your Jimmy Choos and shop with your nose in the air at Barneys. The clientele are up to the manic millisecond and terrified they'll hit the peak of a trend.

The store is known for its ability to inject humour into self-obsession. Look out for the "Hold the rail, hold your kids, watch your coat tails" signs above every escalator. This is the retail outlet of choice in *Sex and the City* and to celebrate Christmas 2003, windows featured Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte as fairytale goddesses.

Concierge and personal-shopping services mean you can hand over your gift list and let someone else do the leg work. Barneys' magical minions will come to your hotel with a selection to match your list and all you have to do is point at the items you desire. *Voilà!* They will appear, gift-wrapped, within moments.

Peruse racks filled with Alexander McQueen, Comme des Garçons, Marc Jacobs and their friends. And did we mention shoes? Sarah Jessica Parker has been known to go missing on levels four and seven.

**Who:** don't you know who I am?

**Where:** 660 Madison Avenue.

**Online:** www.barneys.com.

**Don't miss:** Mrs John L. Strong hand-engraved stationery – an institution for more than 70 years (level nine).

**Bergdorf Goodman** If you have to ask the price do not enter this store. This is home to puffs of society smoke with bleached hair and baubles who spend their mornings sipping champagne in couture. Don't be put off by its clientele; the service is impeccable, understated and non-judgmental, though this place is more Happy Hanukkah than Merry Christmas. Vaudeville scenes graced the Christmas windows last year, keeping tourists' faces pressed to the glass for hours.

Easiest Christmas option? A Bergdorf Goodman credit card-style gift card presented in a silver box.

**Who:** a mixture of old and new ... money, that is.

**Where:** 754 Fifth Avenue.

**Online:** www.bergdorfgoodman.com.

**Don't miss:** earmuffs at US\$150. Pure winter decadence.

**Saks Fifth Avenue** If you want service, this is your store.

It's worth moving continents for the 5th Avenue Club alone, a private enclave of comfort in which you relax while Saks elves take care of your festive shopping. If that's too hoity-toity for you, then go crazy on the fifth floor, where you'll find designer denim nirvana. If you can bear to wait, the post-Christmas sale traditionally offers double discounts on marked-down merchandise. Don't worry about excess baggage: the store offers a complimentary delivery service to nearby hotels. But save one to swing over your shoulder as you strut down Fifth Avenue.

**Who:** schlick money and Martha Stewart wannabes.

**Where:** 611 Fifth Avenue.

**Online:** www.saksfifthavenue.com.

**Don't miss:** DCC, or dynamic currency conversion, which lets you pay for your purchases in your home currency so you can keep track of spending – ouch!

**Henri Bendel** Girlie heaven and stocking fillers. Bendels is both bazaar and boudoir, with intimate salons on each of its four floors selling wares made with handcrafted beads, gold and silver, and bags, shoes and quirky women's fashion. It's retro with a flapper-girl feel, from the townhouse exterior to the brown-and-white striped shopping bags, coveted by style meisters worldwide.

Make a beeline for La Lingerie for the chocolate-box pink-and-brown décor, *chaise longues*, French muzak and the risqué toys hidden among the exquisite lingerie. This is underwear for lovers of *oh la la*.

**Who:** youthful trendsetters.

**Where:** 712 Fifth Avenue.

**Online:** www.henribendel.com.

**Don't miss:** the windows of Lalique glass.

**Macy's** Looking for Santa? Head to the eighth floor and prepare to queue. More than 300,000 pilgrims make the trek to Santaland every year. Worried he doesn't speak your language? An interpretation service is offered at the visitors' centre. While you're there, pick up your International Visitor savings card for an 11 per cent discount on all purchases.

The world's biggest department store has its own post office and is the third-most visited site in New York City. There are no pretensions here; with 30,000 visitors a day it's hard to maintain airs and graces. When you become tired, and you will, visit one of the 10 in-store food outlets. Macy's prefers you to stay where staff can see you; go out for coffee and you may never come back.

**Who:** tourists and day visitors from the suburbs.

**Where:** 151 West 34th Street.

**Online:** www.macys.com.

**Don't miss:** "consolidation convenience", which means shop on every level and have all your selections coordinated for one single payment.

**Bloomingdale's** The home of carriers printed with "big brown bag", and its medium and little siblings, making you instantly recognisable as a Bloomingdale's customer this Christmas. Covering a city block, Bloomingdale's is big, bolshy and *très* New York. So is the service. Watch out for the spoiled, yappy purebred dogs: they bite if you stand on them, which may account for why so many are carried through the store in Hermès bags. If you don't have one, borrow one; you'll blend in better.

Christmas shoppers should take advantage of the complimentary At Your Service personal shopper. He's good for carrying your bags.

**Who:** locals who call it their corner store.

**Where:** 1000 Third Avenue.

**Online:** www.bloomingdales.com.

**Don't miss:** Le Train Bleu, an in-store dining car serving American cuisine.

**Getting there:** Cathay Pacific (www.cathayair.com) flies to New York (JFK) from Hong Kong.  
**Where to stay:** Sofitel New York, near Fifth Avenue, has the largest standard rooms in the city, meaning there is plenty of space for shopping bags. Rooms cost from US\$259 a night. See www.sofitel.com. Remember to check in-store customer service desks for tax discounts for overseas visitors. Department stores are open seven days a week, but opening hours change with the seasons.