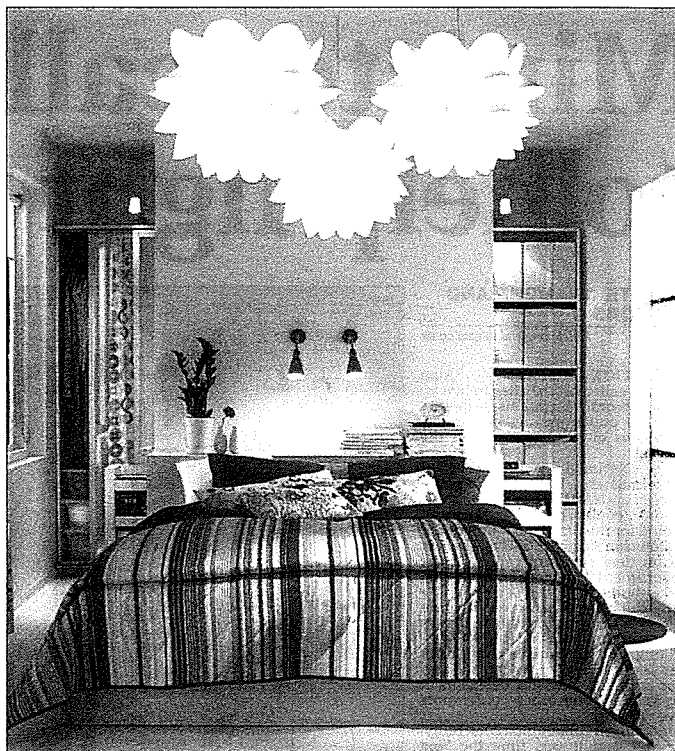


News feature

IKEA store to offer brand new shopping experience



FUNKY BEDROOM: 'be brave not beige' is the motto from IKEA

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AS AN IKEA virgin from Northern Ireland I had naively imagined the global furnishing store to be a dull warehouse full of flat-packed furniture.

How wrong I was. At the end of the year when the Swedish company opens at Belfast's Holywood Exchange, shoppers in Ulster will be delivered a whole new shopping experience. Visiting IKEA's Wembley store in London for me was like walking into a contemporary art gallery. Not only visually exciting but inspiring. No surprise really if you consider that this year IKEA has been urging the British public to "become brave not beige".

Why? Because it believes people's homes have become too safe and similar by using neutral beige tones for decoration.

Northern Ireland shoppers will be able to buy practically anything for the home in IKEA's Belfast outlet which is to span approximately 29,000 sq metres. It's a complete urban myth that the store just sells flat-packed furniture.

I, for example, found myself leaving the IKEA store in Wembley with a grey track-suit, a flip-over photo album and some body lotion which cost just £23.97 in total.

The idea behind IKEA is to have everything for your home under one roof - bathrooms and kitchens, sofas and chairs, beds and textiles, rugs and floors, lamps and plants and everything in between - all of which are sold at affordable prices.

Northern Ireland shoppers can expect to choose from 9,500 of IKEA's products.

Interestingly, one of the most popular products in IKEA's Wembley store is a 40x28cm 'Billy' bookcase which costs £20. In Poland, however, its best selling product is a watering can. Time will tell

BY KATE CHAMBRÉ

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what tickles the fancy of Ulster's shoppers.

The two-floor layout in the Belfast outlet will be identical to IKEA's 253 stores spread across 35 countries in the world.

The only thing that will differ is the style and size of its room settings on the first floor showroom.

To inspire shoppers and to give them ideas on how to manage their home spaces, IKEA displays its range in room structures using interior designs to reflect the customers complete life situation at home.

In its Belfast store, for example, we might expect to see room settings catering for terrace houses, bungalows, apartments, detached and semi-detached homes, farmhouses and water front dwellings across the Province.

When shoppers enter the store in Belfast they will be advised to pick up a luminous yellow IKEA shopping bag, a pencil, a blank shopping list and a measuring tape.

To help ward off any confusion about how to shop in the store, instructions will be clearly laid out at the entrance of the store, and numerous IKEA staff members will be on hand to help answer any questions.

Children are well catered for too, with numerous play areas both inside and outside the store to keep them amused. So what other things can customers expect to find in the store?

Once they have made their way to the showroom on the first floor of IKEA's Belfast outlet they will have the opportunity to look around at least 60 fully furnished room settings.

It's also worth noting that complete furniture room sets range from as little as £250 to as much as £5,000.

Starting off in the living room area, they'll then travel through to the

storage, work, kitchen, dining, bedroom and bathroom, and childrens areas noting down the name, colour, size, quantity, aisle, and location of any product they want to buy.

But it's only once customers have completed the tour of the showroom, and travelled around the ground floor of the Market Hall that they will go to the self-serve furniture area to pick up the items on their list.

Arrows and signs will be located around the store, just in case people get lost.

IKEA encourages the customer to do as much as possible in the store in order to cut staffing costs, which helps keep the price of each product as low as possible.

The Market Hall in IKEA Belfast will have five sections - cookshop and tableware, textiles, home organisation, lighting and home decoration.

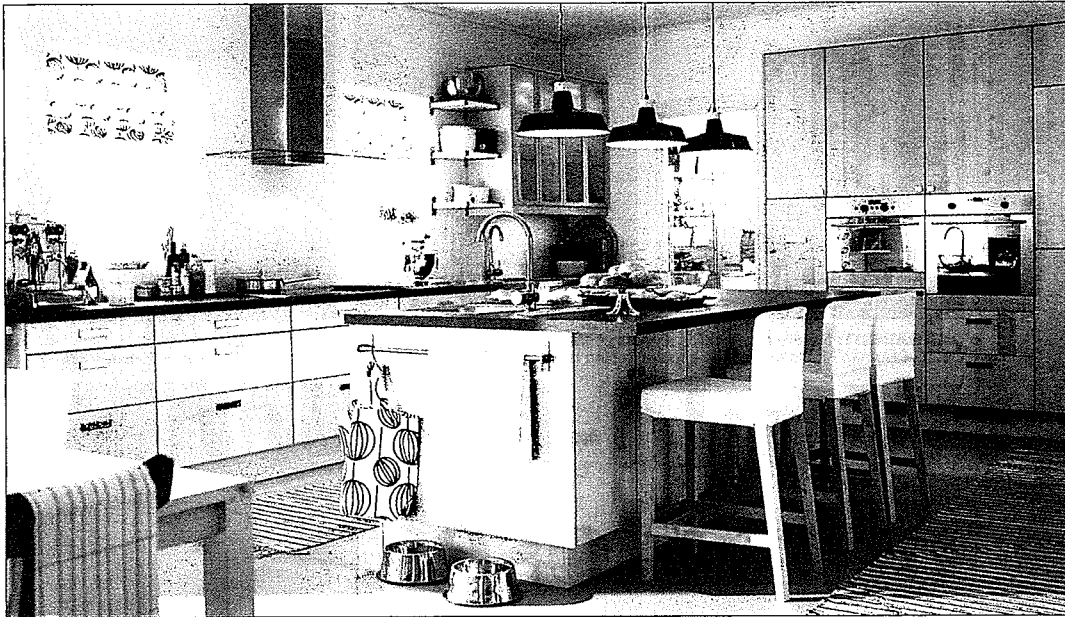
Here, shoppers can buy anything from wall art, cutlery, lights, and oriental rugs to desk accessories, dogs beds and even penguin feet warmers.

Mrs Helen Blakley, marketing manager of IKEA Belfast told the News Letter yesterday that IKEA's focus is to provide customers with low cost, high quality products.

"There is no compromise on quality - our kitchens, for example, come with a 10-year guarantee. The IKEA store in Belfast will have fully furnished showrooms including bedrooms, kitchens and bathrooms to inspire all tastes and our products are designed with functionality and practicality in mind," she said.

"IKEA places much emphasis on real living so customers can look forward to real storage solutions at affordable prices."

On the first floor of IKEA Belfast there will also be a 500-seater restaurant, which will pride itself in being Northern Ireland's biggest eatery. The family-friendly restaurant will be



STYLE: a modern kitchen from IKEA

FACTFILE

- IKEA was founded in 1943 by Ingvar Kamprad when he was just a teenager.
- The store is named after him, the farm Elmtaryd, and the village Agunnaryd where he grew up in Sweden.
- The son of a farmer, Ingvar was 17 when he registered the IKEA name and embarked on his business career selling pens, Christmas cards and packets of seeds.
- Five years later he introduced the first furniture into the range in the form of RUT armchair. Now there are 253 IKEA stores in 35 countries across the world.
- Ingvar's life's work is said to have contributed greatly to the IKEA vision which is "to create a better everyday life for the many people".
- The vision is founded on "a unique blend of humanitarianism and capitalism".
- IKEA works with UNICEF to prevent child labour in northern India. The project includes alternative learning centres (ALCs) which help tens of thousands of children to enter the ordinary school system.
- The home furnishing giant also runs development projects with organisations including WWF to contribute to the responsible management of forests around the world.
- In co-operation with UNICEF and one of its suppliers, IKEA runs a project that gives Indian women the opportunity to help support their families by embroidering cushions.
- These cushions are sold as part of the PS Grindtorp range in IKEA stores throughout the world.



IN-STORE AMUSEMENT: children are catered for while you shop

equipped with recycling facilities and will serve up everything from an Ulster Fry, fish and chips, lasagne, salads and organic food to Swedish specialities such as meatballs and dill cake. Babies and children will also be well catered for.

There will also be an in-store bistro and a Swedish food market on the ground floor near the check-out area.

"The 29,000 sq ft IKEA store in Belfast will have Northern Ireland's largest restaurant, a bistro, Swedish food not to mention thousands of products," said Helen.

The Belfast outlet is expected to open in November or December

– in time for Christmas.

"IKEA will open in Belfast at the end of this year and our customers can look forward to a very different shopping concept," confirmed Helen.

Although the exact cost of the IKEA Belfast investment hasn't yet been confirmed, at least 400 jobs are expected to be created with another 100 in out-sourcing functions such as home delivery, furniture assembly, and kitchen installation.

The home furnishing giant is also due to set up in Dublin's Ballymun Regeneration Limited next year creating hundreds more shops in the Republic of Ireland.

Situated close to the George

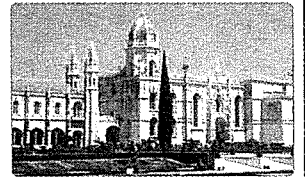
Best City Airport, the Belfast store will also have an estimated 1,500 car parking spaces and will have Sainsburys and B&Q as its neighbours.

And lastly, a word of warning to the men out there – due to IKEA's good quality and value for money, come the end of the year in Northern Ireland, your weekends (and bank balances) may never be the same again.

Expect to hear the common cry: "Please can we go to IKEA? Please."

As Helen puts it: "Spending the day at IKEA is an event for all the family. IKEA's child-friendly policy means that there is plenty to keep both children and adults occupied."

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