

Banking on five-star



CITYSCAPE: Dublin is a shopaholic's paradise

It's time to go shopping, darling

THERE are numerous wonderful shops to explore in Dublin City Centre. Here are a few pointers to get you started.

Best lifestyle store

Avoca, 11- 13 Suffolk Street, Dublin 2. Tel: 00 353 (0) 1 6726019

TAKE a right just after the Molly Malone Statue (opposite Trinity College) onto Suffolk Street where you will find the quirky lifestyle store Avoca. This Irish-owned outlet sells everything from homeware items, toys, trinkets and gadgets for all ages as well as fashion labels Anthologie and Renaissance. Don't forget to sample their selection of gourmet home-cooked cuisine either.

Best for designer labels

Brown Thomas, 88-95 Grafton Street, Dublin 2. Tel 00 353 (0) 16056666

LOCATED in the centre of Ireland's most popular shopping street, Brown Thomas is home to a very long list of leading international brands. On the ground floor, find beauty counters offering brands such as MAC, Giorgio Armani, Crème de La Mer and Jo Malone, while The Shoe Rooms on the next floor offer up firm favourites from legendary cobblers such as Christian Louboutin, Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo. Design darlings such as Diane Von Furstenberg, Lanvin and Stella McCartney hang out among their stylish peers on the womenswear floor nearby while the home furnishing and menswear departments provide gift opportunities for your nearest and dearest.

Best for high street labels

WALK to the top of Grafton Street until you meet St Stephen's Green. To your

left, is Ireland's flagship Topshop store as well as Oasis, Coast and Reiss. To your right, walk past the Gaiety Theatre and find new additions Zara, Warehouse and H&M. The St Stephen's Green Shopping Centre is also located at the top of Grafton Street with many retail offerings including Sasha, Benetton and TK Maxx.

Best for independent boutiques and everything else in-between

MAKE Clarendon Street your starting point. Locate the side street opposite Boots on Grafton Street (pass by Chanel and Louis Vuitton) and take a left at Chesneau. This is Clarendon Street where you will find the vibrant Chica boutique, Fran and Jane (glitz and glam), Dolls (vintage quirky labels) and Emma (reasonably priced and girlie!).

Westbury Mall is also located on Clarendon Street and the Powerscourt Court, just across the street, is host to French Connection, The Design Centre, housing favourites such as John Rocha and Philip Treacy, as well as numerous antiques and contemporary jewellers hiding out on the top floor. Walk down the side of the Powerscourt Centre (past All Saints) and you will find your way straight out onto Castle Market. Here you will find Costume boutique offering a wide range of clothing from designers such as Alice Temperley and Anna Sui. Directly opposite, find Irish design darling Helen McAlinden's flagship store No 9, leading boutiques Caru and Smock as well as the bohemian St George's Arcade where you will find everything from old records, vintage clothing, and art to local food producers and small independent boutiques.



MAGNIFICENT: The Banking Hall, Westin Hotel

Dublin

by Kate Chambré

LOCATION, location, location! It really is all about location when you're planning an overnight stay in Dublin to do a spot of shopping and take in the sights of the city. Frequented by the likes of Liam Neeson, Cillian Murphy, Marilyn Manson, Dita von Teese, not to mention many other famous faces, no better place to stay than Dublin's Westin Hotel. Located bang in the city centre, this luxurious five-star hotel overlooks Trinity College, has Grafton Street, Temple Bar and a whole load of other shopping and cultural hotspots on its doorstep. It's also a stone's throw from Connolly railway station and Busáras, making the trip from Northern Ireland to Dublin, relatively stress-free. But perhaps among the most enchanting things about The Westin are its friendly staff, warm ambience and the fact that the place is steeped in so much history. Before opening for business in 2001,

developers, Treasury Holdings, were tasked with restoring the hotel by merging two of the city's landmark buildings, The Allied Irish Bank and The Pearl Building, which date back to 1863.

Incorporated into this is its Banking Hall – equipped with four eye-catching crystal chandeliers – which serves as the main conference and banqueting room for up to 160 people.

Throughout the hotel, there is also a wonderful selection of artwork, lending to the sophistication of the place.

The hotel's three food and beverage facilities – The Exchange Restaurant and Cocktail Bar, The Atrium, and The Mint bar – are a big draw, not just for guests at the hotel, but passersby. In fact, while having lunch in The Atrium, I spotted a gaggle of ladies having a chit chat over drinks, surrounded by a plethora of shopping bags.

The Exchange Restaurant and Cocktail Bar, has a contemporary feel to it, and has a great selection of dishes on its menu. Executive Chef, Darrin Parrish has created "a menu of stylish simplicity using the freshest of Irish ingredients to produce an interesting blend of local, regional and international dishes". The restaurant seats 90 and has its own separate street entrance from Westmoreland Street. The Exchange Restaurant and Cocktail Bar offers a Jazz Sunday Brunch, which has also created quite a name for itself.

Uniquely, the restaurant holds food tasting evenings, where guests have dinner together blindfolded!

The Westin's Mint bar is a popular watering hole in the city centre, particularly among cocktail connoisseurs. Transformed from the original bank's vaults, the bar has been in operation since the 1860s, and is located under the Banking Hall with its own street entrance from College Street.

Interestingly, the original banking counter has been retained to form the central bar of this historic venue. Meanwhile upstairs, The Atrium is housed in the former bank building, with a magnificent glass roof that allows the natural daylight to pervade the place.

Interwoven with exotic palm trees, marble floors and intricate ironwork, it's the perfect place to have lunch, afternoon tea, or a tippie before dinner. The hotel offers 163 air-conditioned rooms and prides itself on satisfying "the needs of both international business and leisure travellers, with internet access and the ultimate comfort of its very own innovative 'Heavenly Bed'".

Billed as "a Westin original", the bed aims to provide maximum comfort and perfect relaxation with a custom designed pillow-top mattress set, a cosy down blanket, a crisp white duvet coverlet and five queen size and king size pillows.