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Overseas outlets

Euros go farther at top-designer discount stores



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By **Becca Hensley**

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Sunday, January 27, 2008

Once, as a teenager, I spent my last lire on a cameo ring I purchased from a vendor on the Ponte Vecchio in Florence. I went days without food, having to await an American Express transfer of cash from my parents back home — which arrived a few days later, wrapped around a castigating note about fiscal responsibility.

I guess some lessons are never learned, and these days when I shop in Europe I still pretend that the euro equals the dollar, an attitude that makes my husband red-faced with horror when he opens the post-trip credit card bills.

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But things have improved immensely since I discovered the Chic Outlet Shopping Villages of Europe, a set of nine gorgeously construed, stunningly stocked shopping villages sprinkled across the continent, in Ireland and in the United Kingdom. Offering up to 75 percent off countless global brands (as well as celebrated regional designers), they are intimate clusters of individual stores, with the staffing, livery and aesthetics of the world's most compelling shopping streets.

It was the veritable godfather of Belgian design himself, Olivier Strelli, who first told me about chic outlet shopping just an hour from Brussels. I was skeptical. Though I like a bargain as much as the next shopper, I detest the frenzied furor, the greedy grabbing, the ruthless rummaging that the word outlet evokes.

I looked around Strelli's elegant shop on Avenue Louise in Brussels. His store was everything an outlet isn't: soothing, textured — like a private club with an exclusive membership.

But that was the problem. I couldn't afford anything in it. Strelli laughed

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when I mentioned this fact. Then, he shrugged, pursed his lips into his characteristic moue and told me of an alternative.

"You will find my store at the outlet, Maasmechelen Village, exactly like this," he said. "The designs are still beautiful, just a few months old. The store is just like this, but everything costs much less. Trust me. Even some of my celebrity clients shop there."

It turned out Strelli was right. When I made the trek to Maasmechelen, a gorgeous rendition of a shopping mecca, conveniently situated almost equidistant amid Brussels, Antwerp, Maastricht and Dusseldorf, I was awed to discover a shopper's paradise so sophisticated and alluring that I forgot it was an outlet. Here were global brands (like Versace and

Villeroy & Boch) and spectacular regional designers (like Strelli and other elite from Belgium's esteemed fashion world).

Though I desperately wanted to spend my way through the hundred-some boutiques, I ended up passing most of my limited time at Strelli's avant-garde shop, where I found his innovative fashions discounted by 60 percent. Laden with shopping bags (and a much lighter pocketbook), I vowed to return sometime soon to check out the other villages.

Converted, I made a pilgrimage to three of them on my next trip to Europe. Immense, empty suitcase in hand, I traveled to Barcelona. After a day of urban sightseeing, I investigated La Roca Village, located along one of the most scenic roads of the Costa Brava.

Architecturally reminiscent of Mediterranean Spain, fitted with an eatery that mimics the best Spanish wine cellar, the village has nearly a hundred boutiques. They're spread out in a pleasing format, with shops such as Burberry and Polo, as well as hard-to-find local boutiques such as Elena Miro and El Caballo.

Delighted to find Campers, a whimsical Spanish shoe I could never resist, I bought four pairs.

Inspired, I hopped a plane to Milan, just in time for fashion week. Rather than shopping in town, I explored the Parma region, tasting its ham and viewing such sites as the lavish Teatro Magnani. Afterward, I spent the afternoon at Fidenza Village, the Italian equivalent of the village I discovered in Barcelona.

Here, I sighed over Italian global brands like Versace but spent most of my time at lesser-known Italian fashion houses like Sonia Fortuna, choosing between miniskirts and maxi ones. A slice of Italy, this village has a gelateria and a trattoria with a pumpkin ravioli so riveting I ate every bite.

With Spain and Italy conquered, I determined to check out Paris. La Vallee, located near Disneyland, just miles from the Champagne region, thrilled.

As chic as the vogueish Rue Rivoli or the tony Champs-Élysées, this is one of the biggest villages in the group. Here, besotted with the likes of Anne Fontaine, Kenzo and Givenchy, I had to buy a new suitcase to haul my purchases back to Paris.

Masterful shopping, one of life's great pleasures, revs the spirit. To do it against the backdrop of some of Europe's most scenic regions, each awash in local ambience, is nothing short of buyer's bliss.

Outlets from Dublin to Madrid

Combine the joys of travel and shopping at these nine shopping villages near some of the Old World's most compelling cities:

Bicester Village, near London,

www.bicestervillage.com

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