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Saturday October 23, 2004

Trendy Melbourne

It's the gold rush all over again. But this time, Melbourne is luring a new breed of treasure-hunter; one with an unerring eye for cutting edge style, undiluted fashion flair and a taste for something different. But not so violently unusual that you would be barred from board-room and banned from work. World-class shopper KEE HUA CHEE ferrets out Melbourne's specialist shops in a game of boutique hide-and-seek.

AS Australia's long-suffering second city, Melbourne marginally lacks behind Sydney but not when it comes to culture, style and shopping. Melbournians are fairly dressy and enjoy cafe life considering there is an eatery every corner, usually sandwiched in between shops, boutiques and specialty stores. Life can be a lotta latte!

As the self-proclaimed Style Capital of Oz, Melbourne's shops are a treasury of delicious discoveries. Problem is, some of the city's best-kept shopping secrets are tucked in small arcades, sidewalks and what they call "laneways" (I would have thought lanes is sufficient as "laneways" sounds repetitive, yes?). Quite a few shops, like Smitten Kitten, MDFI, Christine and Retrostar are impossible to find unless you are led by the hand. Of course my manicured fingers were gently led by those belonging to Fiona Sweetman. Fiona owns Hidden Secrets Shopping Tour and will tailor-make a tour to suit your taste and requirements.

Just tell her what your grasping heart desires and she will do the rest. "Take me to the hip and happening shops filled with hard to find goodies. I want individualistic, owner-operated shops unique to Melbourne. No *Louis Vuitton* or *Dior* as I get them at Starhill in KL." I ordered.

Honours lists



Though these damsels work at Spellbox, one shouldn't call them witches lest they cast a spell on you.

Here are the places where I thrashed my plastic.

COOL MENSWEAR

Chiodo

Chiodo outfits feature unconventional touches. Rivets, zips and discreet prints pop up where you least expect. Quirky, compelling but still suitable for boardroom battles. Chiodo clothes are Melbourne designed and manufactured. Manvious " size="2" color="RedManvious

Some would prefer Manvious remain a state secret but Melbourne needs Kaming Ng's unique brand of menswear. Diagonal buttoning, layered collars and sexy darts. Think English gentleman's club meets Hong Kong Tsim Sha Tsui tailor. Also ties, belts and antique cufflinks.

EMPORIUMS OF STYLE

MDFI or Melbourne Design and Fashion Incubator

MDFI is a gigantic, creative outlet of 25 up and coming designers. Everything from athletic gear, ballgowns, casuals, lampshades and jewellery. Most designers work right here so this is happy hunting ground for emerging talents.

Crumpler

In our throwaway society, not much is built to last. But come Armageddon, the

only things left will be cockroaches and *Crumpler* bags, or so the staff tell me. Super tough construction makes them perfect for precious cargo, be it laptop, camera or iPod. They also do sixties bean bags for when you can't lug yourself around anymore. World domination is expected.



All the goodies are displayed in curving shelves, arranged haphazardly in Urban Attitude, so you have to check each item.

Urban Attitude

Dissatisfied with city life? Maybe you need an Urban Attitude adjustment. Meander round their curvaceous shelves for novelties, high-concept home wares and children's stuff. After a while, the line between adult and kids becomes very blurry. Everything is hands-on. Get ready to touch, tinker and play. Mad colours and zany designs make life worth living again.

FOR THE LOVE OF YOUR LIFE

Smitten Kitten

You will be both smitten and besotted by the adorable lingerie and underwear. These boudoir delights are the sort women love to wear and men live to remove. Slowly and inch by tantalising inch. The kind of knickers Kylie Minogue would love to cavort in if she didn't already have her own collection. Smitten Kitten also sells accessories to heighten your powers of persuasion. *Agent Provocateur* perfume is perfect when you feel like wearing next to nothing.

Christine

There isn't an outfit known to woman that can't be accessorised by Christine Barro, owner of Christine. Constantly seeking sublime bits and pieces from every timezone, her clothes, shoes, bags and accessories range from the inspirational to affordable. Her decor is worth a trip alone. Scarves, hatpins, jewels, belts, brooches and what have you. Much of her stock is impossible to find unless you have the time and inclination to jetset across the globe.

VINTAGE CONCOCTIONS

Retrostar Vintage Clothing

Retrostar Vintage is the largest temple of recycled chic in Melbourne. Everything from casual sports to gowns for a homecoming queen. From original airline totebags to prints loud and proud. Everything arranged by the decade, from, 1940 to 1980. For the oldies, it's a trip down memory lane. For youngsters, it's a time machine.

Shag

A walk-in wardrobe of decades past. More upscale than Retrostar, Shag carries the occasional *Moschino*, *D&G* and *Dior* masterpiece. Second-hand goods? God forbid the word. "We prefer the term pre-loved," explains the boss. Anyway, there is a selection of new clothing and accessories to confuse you further. Your *Gucci* suit is crying out for that vintage belt or tie wide enough for a plane to land?

NEARLY MAGIC?

Spellbox

Anytime is the witching hour at Spellbox. You don't need to be a Harry Potter to enjoy the fun. "Spells are just another form of focused meditation," says Julia. Sold in pre-packed kits, Spellbox's incantations come with all you need to channel positive energy into your existence. Choose spells that power up your career, creativity, mental genius, study, home, office or whatever. If your love life is in the doldrums, they have spells to restore your mojo. Just tell them what you need. But they only do white magic, not black; so forget about casting curses on your enemies.

WORKS OF ART

Outre Gallery

Why plaster your office with cheap posters and prints when for a little more, you can flaunt the original? Outre can get you started from RM300. Any corporate suite can do with one or two pop and counter-culture pieces, from the groovy world of beatniks to post-third millennium merchandise.

Counter

Counter is the retail outlet for Craft Victoria, with 90% of the items made in Victoria and the rest from Australia. Promising artisans offer sculptures, vases, porcelain, glass, ceramics and jewellery. Gifts and homewares in limited edition and without the ho-hum.

Gallery Funaki

Regulars at Mari Funaki's gallery have a very personal connection with the artwork – mostly because they wear it everyday. Some of the contemporary jewellery, accessories and limited edition pieces have entire manifestos to explain their concept. Materials range from precious metal to paper and plastic, transforming them into items to enjoy briefly or a lifetime.

FOODIES

Max Brenner

You don't have a sweet tooth but a whole mouthful of them? Max Brenner exists to satisfy your cravings. His chocolates are blended with everything, from cognac to cardamom and orchid oil to result in unprecedented epicurean sensations. Hardcore chocoholics swear by their famous Suckao Cups. A candle heats the cup above containing milk and pure cacao beans. As the chocolate melts, you slurp the gooey fondue with the spoon cum straw. As delicious and potent as an intravenous drip of the stuff!

At around RM 14 per cup, have several.

Reserve Restaurant

Since you WILL end up at Federation Square sooner or later, might as well have lunch or dinner at one of Melbourne's most highly rated restaurants. The kitchen is called The Lab, which explains the innovative concoctions. Indecisive diners should opt for the RM 195 Journey Fare. Choose your main course and chef George Calombaris will prepare three surprise savoury dishes from the ingredients of the day.

Fiona Sweetman's Hidden Secret Shopping Tours (00613-9329 9665) or www.shoppingsecrets.com Rates are RM180 per person for a personalised 3-hour shopping tour, ending with a glass of wine.

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