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Oo-la-la! A spree in Páree

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I don't always have the time or patience for big-ticket shopping on my schedule-packed Paris jaunts these days. But I always take my list of shopping staples from tried-and-true addresses culled from the 12 years I lived in Paris, many in the shoestring demographic.

These stores stock the beauty products I love, the high-quality basic clothing with a twist that is the DNA of French dressing, the only-in-Paris home-design items and my most-beloved grocery products - jars of green-tomato jam and bottles of wonderfully scented French detergent have both been known to burst in my suitcase. Shopping from my source list - whether for gift-giving or Parisian souvenirs - will make your credit card steam only slightly.

First, I never leave Paris without a visit to a pharmacie, which provides as much a lesson in French culture as it does in beauty quackery. Walk down any street in Paris and you will see at least one of the illuminated green crosses that signal a pharmacy. Most are elegant old shops with polished wood counters and antique glass jars holding magic tinctures. The pharmacien's quintessentially pseudo-scientificness has caused him to be lampooned by writers from Molière to Flaubert.

I swear by City Pharma (26 rue du Four) in swinging Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which has the lowest prices on both sides of the Seine. (You'll know it by the crowds lined up every morning before opening.) Granted, pharmacies were more fun before Sephora started stocking the stuff in its North American stores. But there are some products that will forever be lost in translation and must be acquired in France.

My own list of French pharmacy staples includes Green Clay (Argile Verte) - the French are convinced of this miracle powder's ability to whiten teeth, cure acid reflux, neutralize oily hair, zap zits, miraculously heal wounds, make a fabulous mud mask and soften bath water (and it costs just €3); Embryolisse, a silky face cream made, I fear, with the extract of some unidentified animal embryo, a beauty classic (about €5 a tube, and as good as any of the pricy stuff, according to countless generations of mères who have passed on the secret of Embryolisse to their daughters); Innoxa's Gouttes Bleues, a fashion photographer and stylist's favourite, eye drops that remove the red from tired eyes and make the whites whiter; and always Rogé Cavallès, a super-fatty moisturizing cleanser, either in bar or gel. City Pharma is geographically well-situated as a launching point for a day's shopping - window or otherwise.

First, to get warmed up and engage in some über-stylish people watching, I suggest a midmorning café on the terrace of the Café de la Mairie on the Place Saint-Sulpice, across from the Eglise Saint-Sulpice, which might ring a Renaissance bell with readers of The Da Vinci Code.

French women tend to leave the big labels, with their attention-grabbing runway extravaganzas, to les

touristes (although many own a buttery leather Dior bag or Hermès datebook, handed down through several generations). It is Vanessa Bruno, Isabel Marant, Barbara Bui, Gérard Darel, Zadig et Voltaire and Agnès B. that design the quietly beautiful, wearable and affordable clothes worn by Parisiennes, garments that are as cost conscious as they are fashion conscious. Branches of all these labels are within a few blocks of the Café de la Mairie.

At Vanessa Bruno (25 rue Saint-Sulpice; for other outlets, visit vanessabruno.com), simple pieces are infused with feminized touches. Her cotton tote with sequin trim has been worn as a bag of honour among the 20- to 30-somethings for the past five years. While Bruno's clothes are the epitome of boho chic, Isabel Marant (1 rue Jacob) spices her fluid, beautifully draped basics with a touch of rock.

Barbara Bui (67 rue des Saints-Pères) and Gérard Darel (174 boulevard Saint-Germain) are for the over-35 crowd. Both labels make you realize that fashionable clothing and career attire aren't contradictions in terms. At Gérard Darel, think beautifully cut masculine clothes made feminine. Barbara Bui is known for well-fitting trousers in fine wool with a bit of Lycra, cashmeres that skim the body and non-intimidating black leather jackets with quilted lining. Agnès B., meanwhile, is the spiritual godmother of these designers. Fashionistas still mob her flagship store (6 rue du Vieux Colombier) for her striped T-shirts or black leather blazers, as they have for decades.

I often stroll through the Luxembourg Gardens and exit near the Rue Vavin in Montparnasse. My destination is a branch of Petit Bateau (26 rue Vavin, for other branches, visit petitbateau.com) to stock up on the simple well-cut long- and short-sleeved cotton tees that fill the armoires of the gallically chic. Carolyn Bessette, the late Kennedy wife, is said to have lived in them when she wasn't doing the town in Yohji Yamamoto.

Rue Vavin is lined with childrens' clothing stores. The French do kids' clothes well, as you will have observed as you've crossed the Luxembourg Gardens and seen tots in short pants or pleated skirts and miniature cardigans pushing sail boats or attending marionette performances. In Paris, kids still dress like kids - not mini-mes of their ego-soaked parents. Du Pareil Au Même (15-17 rue Vavin) is the address for well-priced kids' clothes.

For browsing, I always look in on Sabbia Rosa, at the corner of Saints-Pères and rue de Grenelle, where men and their mistresses shop for haute lingerie - expensive satin bras and panties beautifully displayed in the window entice passersby, but only the boutique's VIPs (top models, government ministers) get the full Sabbia treatment, wherein the owner locks the door after you, makes a pot of Moroccan mint tea and spends hours extolling the virtues (or vices) of pieces of lingerie.

Around the corner is the rue de Grenelle, with all the big names in shoes: Christian Louboutin, Roger Vivier, Prada. Reality, however, is just around the corner on the rue de Rennes, which could be called rue de shoe, lined as it is with stores selling this year's trends at pocketbook-friendly prices. Note that the farther south you go, toward Montparnasse, the lesser the quality. Jonak and Eden Shoes are good bets. A source for bargain-priced costume jewellery (which the French excel at) is Maître Parfumerie et Gantier back on the rue de Grenelle. This old store harks back to a time when glovemakers and parfumeurs were one and the same, and you can still find quality leather gloves and unique perfumes. But the budget-conscious flock for its beautiful inexpensive costume jewellery.

The Au Bon Marché department store is a few hundred metres away (again, this is the department store that Parisians visit; the more famous Galeries Lafayette is for tourists). Au Bon Marché is great for sussing out hip young designers and It bags. And the adjacent food emporium, La Grande Epicerie, must be Alain Ducasse's fantasy of a big-box grocery store - it's a great place for easy last-minute gifts, such as beautiful glass pots of flavoured mustards and jams (look for the violet and fig jam).

Big items are hard to take home, but a trip to the flea market is always fun. The sprawling Porte de Clignancourt in the grotty farther reaches of the 19th arrondissement is the best known puce, though it's expensive, as friends inevitably remark to me. In fact, it's more a serious antiques market than a flea market, and bargains are hard to find, though you might luck out with a vintage Hermès scarf at Le Monde du Voyage at Clignancourt's Marché Serpette.

Rather, I recommend the Porte de Vanves in the 14th arrondissement (Métro Vanves). Couture fans will want to check out Eric Hebert's stall for his wondrous assortment of couture buttons from all eras. The Japanese are crazy for this stand; look for signs in Japanese leading to his stall, called He Collections.

Although it's sad and dumpy looking, I force visitors to the Right Bank department store BHV (Bazaar de l'Hotel de Ville; 52 rue de Rivoli) across from Paris's City Hall. It was mythologized by Adam Gopnick in Paris to the Moon - though he failed to mention its basement hardware or bricolage section, which houses an extraordinary number and variety of hinges, screws and doorknobs. I love the ceramic door handles and classic bistro paraphernalia.

On the Right Bank, I like to browse (their prices don't permit otherwise) several shops.

First, Colette (13 rue Saint- Honoré) where, even 10 years on, this cool concept store sells the coolest fashion, music, art books and gadgets. Owner Colette and her daughter, Sarah, the head buyer, have what the French call an "oeil" - a real eye.

I also love the more intimate Spree, in Montmartre (16 rue la Vieuville; spree.fr). The gallery-like space in the heart of Amélie territory is a style-crowd favourite, a well-curated boutique of hip fashion including labels and mid-century modern furniture.

Before she became the doyenne of Paris nightlife, Sylvie Chateigner owned a great vintage shop in the then-hip hood of Les Halles. Partying was a priority and she shuttered the store. Now she's back, with Thanx God I'm a V.I.P. (12 rue de Lancry; thanxgod.com), a spacious space in République offering all-eras vintage, including YSL, Givenchy and Lanvin (from days of yore) and Hedi Slimane for Dior Homme and Givenchy (from more recently).

And while you're on the Right Bank, don't scorn the hokey tourist shops along the rue de Rivoli. Amongst all the tat, all sell small Eiffel Tower key chains at about ≈ 1 a pop. Even my most jaded friends love receiving these as presents. In whatever form, the Eiffel Tower never fails to exert its magic.

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