

You must have a buying strategy.. and stick to

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America, be they skyscrapers who do what it says on the box, that colossal cupcake, an iceberg of an ice cream or supersized shopping mall. America's love affair with shopping, seen as a pleasure, a social event and a recreation rather than a chore, draws in tens of millions of shopping tourists, domestic and foreign, irresistibly drawn to the ultimate in shopping convenience and choice, the Mega Mall.

The King of Prussia's size is staggering. I only manage to cover a tiny portion of its 2.7 million square feet of territory boasting over 40 restaurants, more than 400 shops including seven department stores, and luxury retailers like Tiffany, Hermes, Louis Vuitton Gucci and Versace. Such top end names are grouped well away from the likes of H & M and Irish retailer Primark both doing great business I notice during my recent visit.

You may think the King of Prussia – its vital statistics stretch far into the horizon with enormous parking lots well capable of displacing your car for eternity – is already corpulent enough. Not so. The mall, receiving about 20 million visitors annually has just had eight major expansions. Any day now a further 12 restaurants and umpteen new high-end shops will be added.

Unlike some of its mega mall competitors, entering the theme world scenario and replete with multi cinemas, bowling alleys etc., the King of Prussia eschews all the entertainment spin-off. Shopping is the hook and nothing except eating on site distracts from that.

The nation's largest shopping palace gargantuan Mall of America in Bloomington Minnesota on the other hand has just added 27 theme park rides to draw in compulsive thrill seekers with the compulsive shoppers.

Just imagine... shop till you drop and your loved ones waving down from the longest indoor zip line in the country after checking out an aquarium, featuring thousands of sea creatures. Only in America folks!

Dan Weckerly of Valley Forge Tourism & Convention Board (www.countrysidePHL.com) is in a minority – he's a man who actually likes shopping and whose blogs about The King of Prussia read like a labour of love. Dan is my ideal shopping companion except I lost him long before my foray into Victoria's Secret.

Later we drive over the hilly terrain of Valley Forge National Historical Park. It was here that General George Washington forged his continental army into a 20,000 strong fighting force helped by Baron Friedrich von Steuben (The King of Prussia) a brilliant warfare strategist who certainly knew everything about delivering the goods.

PAST this interesting history lesson with side trips earlier through beautiful Chester County's Brandywine Valley District, including some interesting wine tasting at Chaddsford Winery and lunch at the glorious nationally renowned Gardens it is just a shopaholic's jump and a skip over to Philadelphia Premium Outlets, long renowned for deep discounts on top brands.

Zero sales tax on clothing and footwear in Pennsylvania already guarantees lots of bargains apart from daily markdowns and though I am a bit of a sceptic it is indeed true.

At the Tommy Hilfiger outlet a top quality man's polo shirt in the season's favourite shade was marked down from \$65 to \$32, jeans for myself were a snip at \$20 because they were 'oh so last season' while a pair of current favourite Van plimsolls were a virtual giveaway for \$35 at the brand outlet store.

To be successful in outlet shopping you have to have a buying strategy and stick to it, Dan advises. On Black Friday (late November after Thanksgiving) US retail goes sale crazy, he adds, so it's a great time to visit.

Back in Philadelphia, before venturing



Philadelphia: The city (main picture) and, below, Liberty Bell, Isabel with 'Benjamin Franklin', Valley Forge and a statue of General Anthony Wayne



underground into an old-fashioned Speakeasy (under Vespers an Irish owned terrific supper club (www.vesperphilly.com) I have time to check out more tax-free shopping around delightful Rittenhouse Row, home to exclusive boutiques and big brand name stores.

By now, as a precaution, I have left the credit cards locked away. But the sight of Nordstrom Rack is enough to inspire an Olympic like spurt through the splendid landmark City Hall walkway to retrieve them at my Loews hotel.

Don't think that Philadelphia and the easily accessed tranquil and leafy countryside on her doorstep is just a shopping opportunity.

American history comes alive in this first capital city of America, home to the National Constitution, Liberty Bell and iconic names from Ben Franklin to Betsy Ross (seamstress to the first flag) Philly is friendly, easy to navigate on foot or by hop on hop off bus (see www.discoverPHL.com/tours) crammed with cultural stuff and thriving inner city food and nightlife highlights.

THE PHILADELPHIA SHOPPING STORY

How to get there: Direct flights daily from Dublin to Philadelphia with American Airlines. (www.americanairlines.com). We found a sample price from €671 return. Isabel travelled courtesy of Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau (www.discoverPHL.com) and the Countryside of Philadelphia Brandywine Valley & Valley Forge www.countrysidePHL.com
Stay: Philadelphia The Loews 1200 Market Street (www.loewshotels.com/philadelphia-hotel) from \$209 a night (€109) Recommended: top breakfast menu at award-winning High Street on Market (308 Market Street www.highstreetonmarket.com)
Eat: lunch at City Tavern (www.citytavern.com) in the historic quarter dating from 1773. You may meet TV celeb chef owner Walter Staib, Top atmosphere and the odd ghost! For one of the city's best (calorific bombshell) cheesesteaks try Cleavers at 108, 18th street. For ice cream Gran Caffe L'Aquila on 1716 Chestnut Street (www.grancaffelaquila.com) is double wow! See www.discoverPHL.com and www.countrysidePHL.com.



Irish Daily Mail **weekend**

TRAVEL

Four-hundred shops, 40 restaurants and, yippee, I've only got here early before the madness of America's big retail day, Black Friday

Wondermall!



A monument to spending: The King of Prussia shopping mall, Pennsylvania

THE King of Prussia has the upper hand so I surrender gracefully. With no husband around to march me assertively out of danger and an extra visa card in my handbag for ransom there is no going back.

Like a bewildered rabbit caught in the headlights I have valiantly (well, maybe not that courageously) broken cover, only to

BY ISABEL CONWAY

find myself in fresh danger, scurrying around 'Victoria's Secret' assaulting her aisles and rummaging her rails, mesmerised by those huge Sale signs and up to 70% mark downs inside.

Too late, I come to my senses back out on the sleek and shiny marbled indoor boulevards after snapping up armfuls of 'cheap as chips' candy-coloured undies of indetermi-

nate size and a handkerchief posing as a nightie that may just fit after three months of starvation.

Yet it could have been worse. Shopaholics, so stuffed with shopping chromosomes that their DNA must come in designer carrier bags, are everywhere bowed down under the weight of their purchases on the King of Prussia's retail battle grounds.

Here in the verdant Pennsylvania countryside, a short drive out of Philadelphia and a stone's throw from 'Valley Forge' – a historic

spot dating back to the late 1700s where a royal pretender from Europe turned the tide towards American independence, transforming an undisciplined ragbag of revolutionaries into the winning side – stands an unlikely namesake.

The King of Prussia (www.kingofprussia.com) near a small town of the same name in the greater Philadelphia region of Pennsylvania just happens to be the second largest shopping mall in the US. Size matters in

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