

BUSINESS / RETAIL

Bicester Village Marks 30 Years With a New Campaign, and a Britpop Beat

The off-price shopping mall in Oxfordshire, England, has spent the past three decades defying the skeptics and wooing luxury shoppers from around the world.

BY SAMANTHA CONTI

LONDON — Bicester Village, which set a new standard for off-price shopping in the U.K. and continental Europe with its focus on prime locations and high-end customer service, is marking 30 years in business with a new campaign and an onsite takeover with '90s flair.

The anniversary is a big one, in many ways. Bicester opened in 1995 with the radical premise that discount, off-season shopping could be as luxurious as a stay at a five-star resort. Bicester, and its sister villagers on the Continent and subsequently in China, would later defy the critics who argued the format would not work.

Over the past 30 years, Bicester also flouted the skeptics who believed that physical retail was dead, that online, or even omnichannel, shopping was the only way forward.

"Bicester was a gamble in many ways," said Desiree Bollier, chair and global chief merchant for The Bicester Collection and its owner Value Retail Management.

Bollier, who's been with Value Retail for nearly 25 years, said in an interview that Scott Malkin, Value Retail's founder, had to get so many things



Bicester Village is turning 30 with a new campaign that has a surreal edge.

absolutely right to make Bicester a success.

Location was the priority. The village had to be near enough to a big city in order to attract high-end tourists and locals year-round, and to weather the ups and downs of the local economy.

Just as important was the design and feel of the open-air mall. Bicester needed to attract designer and luxury brands accustomed to having shops on the world's leading shopping streets while connections to the

British capital, and its airports, needed to be hassle-free.

The gamble paid off, and Bicester has become one of the most popular destinations for international tourists in England, with its own train station, high-end restaurants, and a VIP shopping service to rival those offered by the big London stores and international luxury brands.

With its gardens, beehives, public artwork and rota of pop-ups and other activations, Bicester has also become

the second most-visited location in the U.K. by Chinese tourists after Buckingham Palace.

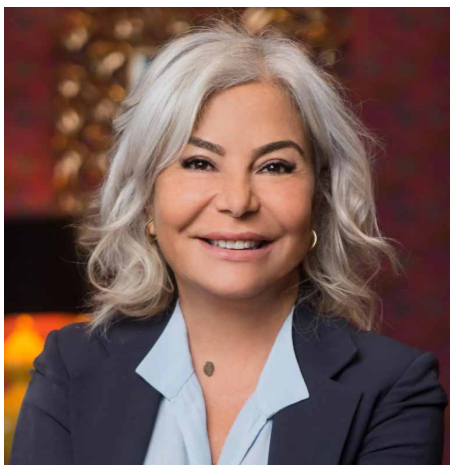
Bollier believes hospitality has also fueled Bicester's success. Bicester and its sister villages talk about "guests" rather than "customers," and a decade ago called in the team from EHL, the Lausanne, Switzerland-based hospitality business school, to train members of staff.

"People are not coming here for the bargains, but for the experience," said Bollier.

Bicester likes to keep the merchandise fresh. According to Bollier, the village is "remerchandised" every year, with up to 15 percent of the brand mix changing "to cater to our traveling luxury customer, whether she is traveling abroad or she is at home."

Bollier added that "our remerchandising philosophy and strategy is based on what will make her visit to our villages special, rewarding and memorable. This creates a sense of discovery, surprise and delight for our guests when they visit the village."

Bicester has served as a launching pad, and a template, for eight other villages in Europe, two in China and the latest one in Belmont Park, N.Y., which opened last year. The retail portfolio, with 12 open-air villages located close to major cities, is known as The Bicester Collection.



Desiree Bollier



An image from the new ad campaign "What Will You Find?" featuring a magical phone box.

Even during lockdown, when online sales were all the rage, Bicester and its sister villages stuck to in-person shopping, albeit with social distancing. It was only when retailers were forced to shut that the teams pivoted to virtual shopping, where customers were able to book appointments with personal shoppers and order from the brands directly.

Over the years, Bicester has steadily won over the luxury players. LVMH has installed brands including Dior, Celine, Fendi, Givenchy and Loro Piana.

Gucci, Armani, Manolo Blahnik, Prada, Chloé and Dunhill also have shops at the village, as does the fine jewelry brand Annoushka. The fragrance houses Creed and Penhaligon's are among the 150-plus boutiques at Bicester.

Last July, the investment fund L Catterton, which counts LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton as a passive minority shareholder, purchased Hammerson's 42 percent stake in Value Retail. The enterprise value of the business was 1.5 billion pounds.

At the time, Michael Chu, glob-

al co-chief executive officer of L Catterton, said Value Retail was "well positioned for growth and continued success, with its high-quality portfolio, reputation for luxury and commitment to delivering a distinctive experience to customers."

Industry sources said L Catterton values the villages' reliance on physical, experiential retail, its service and hospitality offer, and its international exposure.

The 30th anniversary campaign, which breaks Thursday, channels that can-do approach with a series of film shorts that feature real Bicester customers in a surreal environment. The films also showcase the village mascot, Porridge the bear; a magical phone box portal, and dresses that fly around the VIP shopping suite.

Called "What Will You Find?" the campaign was shot and directed by the London-based photographer Joyce Ng. The creative director was Matt Tsang, with styling by Clara Mary Joy.

Porridge, a sculpture by the late Michael Cooper, has been a fixture at Bicester since it opened. In the films he's been turned into a 3D animated



An image from Bicester's "What Will You Find?" 30th anniversary campaign.



An image from Bicester's 30th anniversary campaign, "What Will You Find?"

character, appearing, disappearing and inviting visitors to shop.

The anniversary celebrations, which kick off Thursday, will also see Bicester embrace the '90s with a multiphase village takeover that will run until the end of the year.

There will be a bespoke publication done in partnership with The Gentlewoman magazine titled "1995," which looks at the culture and spirit of the decade. There will also be a Village News pop-up shop stocking 1995-themed memorabilia, and a post office box where guests will be able to share their favorite 1995 moment.

In July, Alex James, bassist for the Britpop band Blur who now makes artisanal cheese at his Oxfordshire farm, will be speaking. He's also curated a list of '90s music that guests can listen to inside the village phone boxes.

Bicester's brands are joining the party, with Marc Jacobs creating a '90s grunge capsule, and fragrance brands including Creed, Issey Miyake and Jo Malone London spotlighting their top scents from the era. MAC plans to bring back its most popular '90s lip product shades for a limited period.

More events are planned for the second half.

Bollier said Bicester continues to have an enormous impact on the group's overall retail portfolio. "The crystal-clear focus on location and the highly discerning traveling luxury customer has defined Bicester's success, and has been our roadmap," she said.

That international shopper has certainly delivered for Bicester and its sister villages.

In 2024, non-EU tax-free sales were up 9 percent year-on-year with

countries such as China, the U.S., India, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa topping the list of shoppers.

Turkey was up 110 percent, Mexico 27 percent, Brazil 26 percent and Egypt 18 percent. The U.S. was up 14 percent and the number of Chinese (buying in Europe) rose 18 percent.

Last year, Value Retail signed more than 400 new brand contracts for its villages worldwide, a 15 percent increase from the previous year. Pre-COVID-19, it began working with the brands to sell current season best-sellers in their shops.

According to Value Retail, sales of current season products were up 40 percent in 2024 across the Bicester Collection retail portfolio.

The future, Bollier added, will be about enriching the customer experience.



Bicester's new 30th anniversary campaign, "What Will You Find?" stars real customers.

rience even more with additional VIP styling suites, or "apartments," in the villages, and services such as hands-free shopping, which allows customers to collect their shopping at the end of their visit.

In 2024, client service sales, which include the VIP selling suites and hands-free shopping, rose 30 percent.

Bollier said Bicester, which now

stretches for one kilometer, introduced hands-free shopping because "we'd see these customers walking with all their bags, and think 'They're going to [get tired] and give up shopping very soon.' We want the experience to be as frictionless as possible."

The team also discovered, not surprisingly, that shoppers spend more when the process is hands-free.



Scott Malkin, the founder of Value Retail, who defied critics to build luxury shopping outlets in Europe, China and, most recently, the U.S.

There is more to come on the service front. The team is trialing Henry, an AI butler and virtual concierge, in China. Henry handles valet parking, access to the shopping suites, and "whatever your heart desires," said Bollier.

Henry has been a success so far, and the plan is to roll out his services to other regions in a bid to capture market share, and keep those customers dreaming — and spending.