

Village people



e Studios

Above Original adverts from the 1990s for Bicester Village. **Below** Queues outside the Prada store. **Opposite** The hands-free shopping service



From now until the end of August, drive or take the train to the dedicated railway station on the line between Marylebone and Oxford and you can step back in time to the 1990s (Spice Girls platform trainers optional). Brands will sell, for a limited time, items that were popular in their 1990s collections.



My highlights? A Bulgari Parentesi necklace, an Etro shirt and Gucci trainers for my other half, Stephanie. And, for me, a Dunhill navy wool peacoat, Brunello Cucinelli T-shirts, Loro Piana trousers, an Eleventy suit, Brioni shirts and Zegna ... oh Zegna! After the second Covid lockdown brands had so much excess stock they were chucking it out the door. In a special one-off sale it was 80 per cent off. Zegna Italian handmade suits, cashmere, Trofeo shirts and Triple Stitch and Tiziano sneakers. I bought a wardrobe big enough to start my own boutique.



The brands get posher each year and so does the service — a private members' club opens next year

I was there when Elton John launched his limited-edition eyewear, and also when Prada offered a one-off promotion on its iconic techno-stretch suits and poplin-stretch shirts. It was only a matter of time — and pounds — before I earned the right to visit the invitation-only Apartment, a lounge where you can rest and relax after a luxury “walk out” (it’s almost a mile from one end of the Village to the other). If you are taking the train home, a free celebratory martini in the Apartment before you head off is essential.

Bicester succeeds because it works for brands and consumers. Brands have excess stock at the end of each season that they are not allowed to destroy any more and are reluctant to sell at a discount in their full-price stores because it devalues the label. But they are more than happy to sell it for a minimum of 30 per cent off in the middle of the Oxfordshire countryside. Consumers — seasoned followers of fashion and newbies — are content to travel from London, Birmingham and Manchester to grab a bargain. It helps that the stores aren’t intimidating. Sales assistants don’t size up your spending power as you walk in, as they often do on Bond Street. “We’ve democratised luxury,” Bollier boasts.

Some big-name brands were sniffy at first but most have come round, enabling Malkin and Bollier to create 11 other Villages, eight across Europe, two in China and one newly opened on Long Island, near JFK airport.

Rivals have tried to copy Bicester, but the Villages have remained “head and shoulders above competitors”, says Luca Solca, leading luxury analyst at Bernstein, because they constantly raise their game. It’s not only the brands that get posher year on year — coming soon for men is the Italian fashion

brand Kiton — so does the service. A private members’ club with 12 personal shopping suites will open next year.

Malkin believes the more the internet and AI dominate our lives, the more important it is to offer great service at bricks-and-mortar stores. “No consumer enjoys online shopping,” he says. “If you’re a fashion brand, every sale you make online commoditises and diminishes your reputation. Your brand is just another mouse-click. The emotional side of life is more important than ever.”

He will do anything to lift shoppers’ spirits. For example, to hide the utilitarian ticket hall at Bicester Village station, Malkin spent millions building an upscale Village-branded entrance and exit. Value Retail has also

opened two beachfront hotels in southern California, Mission Pacific and the Seabird, “to use as a test bed to refine how we offer hospitality to our guests at Bicester”, Malkin says. Yes, he has spent tens of millions of dollars to become a US hotelier to make Oxfordshire shoppers happier (and spendier).

It may be entering middle age but Bicester Village is still growing. Next year the western terrace will open, with 28,000 sq ft of new shops and cafés, taking the total shop-floor space to 350,000 sq ft, almost four times the 90,000 sq ft when it opened. Some of those boutiques, along with those in the existing Village, will for the first time sell a few new season items at full price, including Canada Goose, Manolo Blahnik, Ferragamo, Maison Margiela, Jil Sander, Eleventy and Zegna.

Full price? That wasn’t in Malkin’s original script. Bollier explains: “Many guests are not price sensitive. They just want to find a piece to fall in love with.” Fine — but competing with Bond Street on full-price new-season collections creates a problem. On my most recent visit to the Village last month I saw for the first time plenty of items with a four-figure price tag. Four figures seems way too much for a discount mall to me.

“We need to be vigilant, to keep complete clarity on our mission: to offer value and a superb experience,” Bollier acknowledges. She points out that brands will not be able to sell more than 10-15 per cent of items on the shop floor at full price. That will not be enough to put off “the ones who really want to shop 40, 60, 70 per cent off.”

She’s probably right. ■

Bicester Village, 50 Pingle Drive, Bicester, Oxfordshire, thebicestercollection.com



The red telephone boxes will be transformed into listening booths for the 30th anniversary celebrations