

Material GIRL

A gorgeous coat à la Chanel for \$100?
Made-to-measure wool pants for \$30? Yes
fashionistas, there is a heaven – and it's called
Shanghai. We find the best places to bag a bargain

BY SHARON STEPHENSON

Right: South Bund Fabric Market is a fashion junkie's mecca, with cloth of every texture, pattern and hue; here you can be fitted for a very reasonably priced tailor-made piece, or buy off the rack.
Below: Behind the towers of Shanghai's skyline lies shopping paradise.



It's 34 degrees, sweat is dribbling down my back and I'm being fondled by a Chinese man with a gammy leg. But it's not what you think; I'm in Shanghai's South Bund Fabric Market being measured for a coat by 'Johnny', one of the city's famous tailors.

Everyone from George Clooney to Kate Winslet has apparently had an encounter with Johnny's tape measure, and while I suspect he may be as good at exaggerating as he is at sewing, I'm not about to question a man whose hands are hovering around my nether region.

Shanghai's tailors are well known for their quality and so they should be – they have, after all, been at it since early last century when Europeans began setting up trading concessions on the banks of mainland China. And, although tailors are tucked into pockets all over this city of 23 million, the best can be found at South Bund Fabric Market. Here, in tiny stores spread over four floors, bolts of everything from silk and denim to wool and cashmere jostle for space with racks of readymade clothes that not only showcase the tailors' dexterity, they are also for sale. This is handy when you don't have time to wait for a made-to-measure piece.

If you have always assumed bespoke tailoring is for those heavy of wallet, think again. Barter well and you can expect to pay around NZ\$20 for a linen shirt, \$30 for wool trousers and around \$100 for a beautifully fitted, fully lined coat. Or, as my New Zealand guide put it, Savile Row quality at The Warehouse prices. >>

I'm guessing one of the reasons they can charge so little is the shabby location, which has been largely cocooned from Shanghai's turbo-charged race to construct as many outlandish skyscrapers in the shortest time possible. But it's safe and, as we have time, we wander the tangle of alleys around the market for a glimpse of the 'real' Shanghai, where washing hangs from concrete blocks and residents use the footpath for everything from fixing motorbikes to butchering chickens.

It's a little overwhelming, but nothing compared to the fabric market, where my senses are sent into overdrive by the size, the crowds and the colourful fabrics which, after too long, almost render me functionally blind. All the tailors speak good English but I've been warned that either bringing a picture or, better still, a garment to be copied will help avoid any 'lost in translation' moments.

So I arrive with a page ripped from a magazine of a three-quarter black Chanel-esque coat with white piping. While Johnny scribbles down my measurements, I try on jackets he prepared earlier. I'm not sure what the Mandarin is for 'does my bum look big in this?' but, ever the gentleman, Johnny declines to

Johnny taps \$300 into his calculator. I express shock and counter with \$100. And so it goes until we finally settle on \$110 for my coat

comment and discreetly hands me a larger size.

Twenty minutes after entering his shop, I've picked out a thick wool mix fabric, a brilliant chartreuse lining and even the type of buttons I want. And then the pantomime of bartering starts: Johnny taps NZ\$300 into his calculator, I express shock and counter with \$100. He looks as though I shot his puppy and tells me his 'best price' is \$200. And so it goes until we finally settle on \$110.

The next afternoon, just over 24 hours after Johnny whipped out his measuring tape, I return to collect my beautifully finished coat which hugs me in all the right places and skims those I'd rather forget about. As I leave, Johnny tells me that four hours after Kate Middleton walked down the aisle, he had copied her wedding dress. I don't doubt it, and if I'd hung >>

At Dongtai Lu Antiques Market you can buy everything from old records to furniture – and the occasional gem of a find.



around long enough I'm sure he would have claimed that the Duchess of Cambridge had recently visited his shop.

Look inside your clothes and it's a fair bet the label will read 'Made in China'. That's because most of the world's textiles are produced here, everything from top designer gear through to the cheapest high-street brands. It's why shopping is one of China's greatest gifts to the world, and if Shanghai is short of anything, it isn't opportunities to add to your excess baggage.

Head to the Bund, the famous strip on the banks of the Huangpu River, if you want to drop some serious cash. Here shops such as Gucci and Prada are packed with customers clearly unacquainted with the global financial crisis. China is now the second largest spender on luxury goods in the world, and is tipped to account for about 30% of the global fashion market's growth over the next five years. Which seems

What the locals know

- In malls and high-street shops, prices are fixed but there's usually scope to bargain in smaller stores and markets. Always barter good-naturedly as vendors don't respond to rude or confrontational behaviour. Play the game right and you can usually get an item for a third of the vendor's opening bid.
- Generally speaking, a neat and well-organised market stall will indicate higher prices but more assistance from the vendors. The messy ones usually have the best deals, but you may have to rummage through lots of stock to find them.
- Before purchasing, check the quality of the fabric, the stitching and design. Know your size or bring something of your own to match sizes, since few stores have places to try on items in private.
- Rather than asking "how much?" ask "how many?" Buying in bulk will give you a better starting point in bargaining, even if you only want to buy one. Also, buying a few items can result in a sizeable per-item price difference.
- Although Shanghai is generally safe, be careful you don't part with your cash until you want to – especially in the markets, where pickpockets have been known to operate. And keep that cellphone somewhere safe.

Did you know: Air New Zealand flies direct to Shanghai five times weekly. For more details and to book see www.airnewzealand.co.nz.



incredible for a country where, only a few decades ago, everyone dressed in identical Chairman Mao uniforms. It's the Shanghaiese who are leading the luxury goods charge: our guide tells us it's not uncommon for young women to spend several months' salary on a handbag – it's advertising status in a society that only recently lost traditional forms of hierarchical display. Such is the thirst for luxury goods that *Vogue China* runs 300 editorial pages each month, compared to American *Vogue's* 100 pages of editorial copy.

But for my money, which tends to be limited, shopping on the Bund is kind of missing the point; there's much more fun to be had haggling for clothes, bags and shoes at Shanghai's many markets and outlet stores. It's estimated 90% of the world's fake goods originate in China, and for those who are not averse to knock-offs, Fengshine Plaza near People's Square contains three storeys of shopping heaven.

Personally, I'm a fan of any place where bartering is an adrenaline sport, so a day later I am doing it all

Clockwise from top: You can even shop by lamplight; the Oriental Pearl Tower looms in the foreground, while on the far side of the river is the Bund area with its many historic buildings; many of the Shanghai Metro's lines cross beneath the river.



again at the Yatai Xinyang Fashion Market, which is handily located next to the Science and Technology Museum subway station. Rumour has it designer Giorgio Armani visited this market and was so impressed with the quality he bought two of his own 'designs'.

Not everything, however, is fake: many items are a result of China's famous 'grey' market where factories make a little more than was ordered and sell the over-stock out the back door. This stock, together with samples and factory seconds, finds its way to outlet stores around leafy Changle Road in the former French Concession. I'm still kicking myself for not snapping up a buttery soft, black Anna Sui leather jacket, a sample, which came at a fraction of its usual retail price. Although the sizes are generally small, hunt hard enough and you'll find clothes that cater for the average Western girth.

You can't come to Shanghai and not visit Dongtai Lu Antiques Market, three blocks of small stores where the word 'antique' is very loosely applied to anything from dusty old records and furniture to watches, posters and statues, many of them featuring Mao Zedong's image. But forage long enough and you could find a gem. I spent a grand total of NZ\$24

on a cool acupuncture mannequin which, for all I know, was one of hundreds that rolled off a modern factory line and was then scuffed to give it the appearance of age. But it doesn't matter because the mannequin, nicknamed Shanghai Sam, now has pride of place in my living room.

If your credit card still has some head room, and you want to take home something other than clothes, shoes, handbags and watches, then the super-efficient, super-clean Metro will whisk you to Tianshan Tea City where, almost literally, all the tea in China is packed into 23,000sqm. More than 150 stalls grade, sell and brew tea from around the country and although, at times, we have to resort to gesticulation and pidgin English, we sample cups of black, green and delicate white teas, as well as purchasing incredibly cheap packets for the grateful tea drinkers in our lives. I also manage to cram an authentic clay teapot into my luggage; it's so elegant I'm not quite sure whether to use it or frame it.

Back home, all my purchases prove to be a roaring success. Especially my tailored coat, which has protected me from more Wellington southerlies than I care to remember. It might just be the best coat I've ever bought. It's certainly the cheapest.... □

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