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# Designer outlets bring Italy's coveted style and high prices within reach

By Alexandra Hall and Kari Molvar  
Globe Correspondents / July 25, 2004

ROME -- The silk-swathed signora behind us, inky hair pulled into a simple low ponytail, was not about to wait any longer. Leather-tipped toe pointed at Hotel Mediterraneo's enormous marble concierge desk, she sighed loudly, waiting as we wrestled with our day's agenda and waffled over the city's shopping areas.

"Castel Romano," she half snapped, half purred. It seemed to be the answer to a very important question that we had missed.

"Sorry?" we asked.

"Is shops. In a castle. Best prices in Rome," she explained, and proceeded to circle it on our map. Her impatience and taut veneer were visibly thawing as she began waxing poetic about the deals to be found at Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, and La Perla. Within 10 minutes, she and our concierge had together -- between anecdotes about scored treasures -- mapped out a day of spending at Castel Romano, rented us a car, and equipped us with driving directions.

"Now," she added with not a smile, but a toothy grin, "you will shop Roman."

Rome may be all about the history of civilization, but one of its most civilized contemporary pursuits is designer outlet shopping, an undeniably more authentic undertaking here than stateside. Instead of the made-for-outlet clothing found in even upscale US outlets (essentially mediocre-quality pieces sewn with a designer label, for which you pay mass market chain-level prices), here you get the real thing: exquisitely made designer pieces, intended for upscale boutiques, but that just happen to have a button missing or a scuff on the inside pocket.

In Rome and at outlets around Milan, the names are big (add Prada to the list), new shops are accessible just outside the two cities, and the discounts are seriously steep, often up to 75 percent.

It can be a challenge, however, to get to the outlets at just the right time to get your money's worth. No tour buses go to the outlets in Rome; renting a car is advisable to beat the crowds after new stock shipments arrive. Getting to Milan's outlets requires a car, too, and also finding the places on a small and winding network of roads. Do it right, though, and you can go for a long weekend and, even after hotel and air fare costs, still save hundreds.

That very goal was foremost in our minds as we buzzed toward the Castel, map in hand in our rented mini. So foremost, indeed, that giddiness may have got the best of us.

"Is that the ancient city wall?" Maybe. "Was that the Colosseum?" Probably. But with 25 kilometers between us and upward of 95 stores, sightseeing was another day's priority. Besides, didn't we get culture points for shopping in an Imperial Roman castle? Well, yes and no. Easing into the parking lot 40 minutes later, we faced something that looked more like Copley Place Mall by way of Disney. (Opened only last year, the outlets have already seen more than 6 million shoppers.) Colorful flags fly over each of the dramatically lighted, turreted entrances and shiny, new paved-stone walkways at the huge complex.

The exterior may be false, but the heady thrill is real. We went straight to Dolce & Gabbana to sift through the horsehide bags for \$300 and buttery leather totes for \$250 (\$700 to \$900 in the States). Abutting shelves held a slew of color-splashed bikinis for \$67 (down from \$300). One customer teetered on a pair of petal-pink stilettos, then claimed them when she realized they were \$125, down from \$550. A pair of feather-tipped slides were twice that, at \$250, down from \$800.

"The best thing to do is come in the morning, and usually the middle of the week is best," said our saleswoman. "We get lots of shipments in over the week, and don't have time to put them out until the busy weekend is over."

Follow her advice and you just might find deals like we did at La Perla, where exquisite negligees that would normally ring in at \$250 were \$60. Next door, the Frette linen outlet sells duvet covers for \$75 (the same one costs \$350 in the States). A pair of bold red patent leather sandals at Fratelli Rossetti were \$85, from about \$200. At the even further upscale Versace, a pink pin-striped dress was \$150, down from \$600. And simply beautiful iridescent men's suits that would normally run \$800 were a mere \$300.

Outside the faux castle walls, other outlets have staked their own discount territory. In Milan, it was easy to resist the full-price boutiques' siren call knowing that at the nearby Serravalle outlet (founded by the same McArthurGlen group that developed the newer Castel Romano and develops designer outlets in the States) we could indulge in Prada, Roberto Cavalli, and Furla at 30 to 70 percent off. Simply pointing to the brochure prompted our hotel concierge to help us with travel arrangements.

"Take the train; you won't waste any time getting lost," she said. "More time for shopping."

The route from Milan to Serravalle is direct and efficient. The outlet is in a small town called Arquata. The 8:45 a.m. train pulled in at 10, and it was a quick taxi ride to the outlet. Our driver told us that while cabs regularly circle the train station to shuttle shop-hungry tourists, they do not linger at the outlet.

"Call me, I pick you up," he said, handing us his card. Being stranded in a designer paradise didn't sound so bad, but we took his card once we realized that the shops would close eventually (the hours are 10-8, and 10-10 at Castel Romano).

We descended on the Prada store like design-starved outsiders and discovered what the insiders knew: The store stocks only shoes, no clothing or accessories. However, the choices were delectable: funky stilettos with flower-wrapped straps for \$200 and classic black pumps for \$125 (Prada shoes in the States often start at \$400). The stock also included Helmut Lang slides for \$40 and Jil Sander flats for \$120, both of which would cost upward of \$250 in the States. As we started to grab for the boxes, we got a stern slap on the wrist.

"No, no, no," said the saleswoman. "I get your size and the box for you." Having tourists tear through boxes and dump shoes on the floor is not part of the Italian sense of customer service. The moral: Make fast friends with the sales associates.

For accessories and trendy clothing, we put our money on places like Diesel (which carries jeans, tees, skirts, and shoes for prices much less than what you will pay in the flagship stores back home), and Furla, where we found this season's must-have silver suede bags and citrus-hued clutches for \$50.

Back at the Hotel Mediterraneo, our last rest stop before departing for Boston, our friendly concierge laughed out loud as we pushed our oversized bags into the mirrored elevator.

"Yesterday you had trouble finding good shops," he said. "Today, you have trouble finding space for your packages." When we asked him if he was surprised by our luck, he laughed again.

"Of course not," he said. "Many Americans are coming for this." He leaned in to hold the elevator door for us. "And when they see all your bags, they will only come more."

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