

Inside the outlets

Outlet villages trumpet big savings on branded clothing and homeware. We put their claims to the test to see whether they're worth visiting

Welcome to the world of guilt-free shopping! screams the sign above the entrance to the Swindon Designer Outlet – one of a number of so-called outlet villages across the country. These lure consumers through their doors with promises of big discounts on goods from designers, like Ralph Lauren and Fred Perry, and well-known high-street brands, such as Gap and Marks & Spencer.

To find out whether outlet villages really can provide big savings, we compared the cost of 18 items (see 'Our research', below right), ranging from Calvin Klein boxer shorts to a Le Creuset casserole dish. The result? We found an average discount in outlet stores of around 30 per cent compared with the lowest prices in the respective brands' own stores (for example, Levi's Store and Niketown) and in department stores, including Which? members' favourite, John Lewis.

Special savings

One bargain deserving a special mention was a pure cashmere Pringle crew-neck jumper, found in a variety of colours and sizes at Bicester Village for just £99. This is a 56 per cent discount on the price of a similar design on the high street and online. Also at Bicester we spotted bath and shower gel from luxury toiletries brand Molton Brown for £10.50 – that's 30 per cent cheaper than at John Lewis on London's

Oxford Street. Our visit to the Swindon Designer Outlet, meanwhile, yielded a Karrimor Lynx 65-litre rucksack at £52.50 – a 30 per cent discount on a comparable model on sale at the high-street store Millets.

Overall, shopping at an outlet village was cheaper than shopping online, but some items we checked were cheaper or not significantly more expensive online – even including postage and packing. But where clothes and shoes are concerned, unless you're absolutely sure about the size, fit and feel of items, you may be disappointed with what arrives on your doorstep – see our 'Checklist', p15, for more about your rights when shopping online.

What to buy

You may not find exactly the same items at outlet villages as you would on the high street. Some retailers, including Marks & Spencer, have 'outlet exclusive' lines that

OUR RESEARCH

In August 2007, we visited the Swindon Designer Outlet and Bicester Village, near Oxford, and compared prices of selected items with the prices of identical or near-identical items on sale in high-street shops in central London. We identified the cheapest online prices using comparison websites www.pricerunner.co.uk and www.google.co.uk/products

In July and August 2007, 1,878 Which? online panel members also completed a survey on outlet shopping villages. Thanks to all who took part.



MARKS & SPENCER TAILORING 100% COTTON SHIRT

High street £19.50
Online £23
Outlet £13

LEVI'S 501 JEANS

High street £55
Online £40
Outlet £40

CALVIN KLEIN BUTTON FLY BOXER SHORTS

High street £18
Online £13
Outlet £14

SAMSONITE CRUSAIR 400 SUITCASE

High street £119
Online £105
Outlet £73.50

you won't find in their regular shops. Items sold in Gap Outlet stores are produced for the outlet shops in the US, so the designs may differ from those found on the UK high street. Gap Outlet clothes also have a different label – look for three small squares under the usual Gap logo.

Other shops sell seconds (these are often items that have cosmetic damage or defects and can't be sold in regular stores) or end-of-line merchandise.

In our survey (see 'Our research', left) you told us that the main reason you visit outlet villages is to buy designer and branded goods more cheaply than on the high street, although a fifth of you think outlet villages also offer an enjoyable day out. Adult clothes top the list of the things you said you buy – two thirds of you mainly buy these at outlet villages. Shoes, sportswear, children's clothes, luggage and home and kitchenware are other popular purchases.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATT FOWLER, ROB UNDERDOWN

**RALPH LAUREN
SLIM-FIT POLO SHIRT**

High street	£55
Online	£22
Outlet	£40

KARRIMOR LYNX 65-LITRE RUCKSACK^a

High street	£75
Online	£58.45
Outlet	£52.50

^a Similar model pictured for illustration only

TOTAL COST OF 18 ITEMS

High street	£1,148.98
Online (inc p&p)	£956.71^a
Outlet village	£761.98

^a Two of our 18 items couldn't be bought online

Most outlet villages are dominated by clothing and footwear. As you're unlikely to find the most up-to-the-minute fashions, it's best to stock up on things in neutral colours that barely change from season to season, such as shoes and clothes for work and classic items, like Fred Perry or Ralph Lauren polo shirts, Clarks shoes and Levi's 501 jeans. Clothes for babies and infants, who grow quickly and don't really care about cutting-edge fashion, are another good buy.

Also consider sportswear, and clothes and equipment for outdoor pursuits. These are usually items with functional designs that change little – after all, does it really matter if you're not wearing the very latest colours when you're sweating it out in the gym or keeping warm up on a cold mountain? Finally, homeware and luggage, from brands like Le Creuset and Samsonite, can be worth seeking out, too.

Should you go to an outlet?

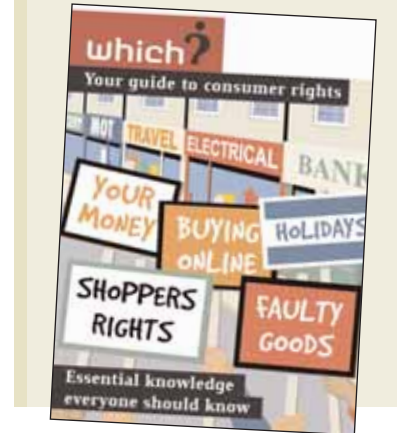
In our survey of Which? members (see 'Our research', opposite), around a quarter of you visit an outlet village once or twice a year; 9 per cent more than once every six months; and a shopaholic 2 per cent of you go at least once a month. As for everyone else, if you enjoy shopping, have an eye for a bargain and don't mind not owning the very latest fashions in clothes or homeware, an outlet village could help you save money.

Just like the high street, outlet villages are busier at weekends, so try to visit during the

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Get your free guide to consumer rights

Make sure that you and your family don't get ripped off when buying goods and services by going to www.which.co.uk/onlineguides and downloading our free consumer rights guide.



week for a more relaxing shop and better choice of goods. If you're after a particular item, phone ahead to check stock levels. Sales at outlet villages tend to happen at the same time as traditional high-street sales, such as the new year and over summer.

You can use our map on p15 to find the village nearest to you, and follow the tips in our 'Checklist', p15, to help you make the most of your trip.

THE OUTLET ENTHUSIAST

Anluse Hamilton Bruce 62, retired

'I've made a 200-mile round trip before to get to a good outlet village,' says Anluse, from Cumbria, who's been shopping at outlet villages all over the country for almost 15 years.

In fact, Anluse was working for Clarks when it turned its shoe factory in Street into an outlet village (see 'Where the bargains are', p15, for more information).

'I find shopping at outlet villages so relaxing compared with the high street,' Anluse told us. 'They're always well planned, with plenty of places to sit down and rest or get something to eat. I go to them mainly for clothes – usually wardrobe basics that don't date – and homeware. They often sell discontinued lines so they're great for replacing items – a broken plate, for

example – that you can't get on the high street any more.

'If there is a disadvantage, it's that outlet villages are often in out-of-town locations and difficult to get to without a car. But this isn't always a bad thing, as it means they attract slightly older shoppers than the high street, who don't need to be bombarded with loud music every time they walk into a shop.'



Why people shop at outlet villages

We visited the Swindon Designer Outlet to find out what shoppers think about outlet villages



'It's my first time at an outlet village today. Having all the designer shops under one roof is really good – I think I'll buy a pair of Nike trainers, and something from Gap for my son, Malaki.'

Zizzi Gumede, Taunton



'I always come here when visiting my granddad. It's cheaper than the high street and I've bought handbags here and lots of things for the home, particularly from Denby and Le Creuset.'

Natalie Wallace, Surrey



'We come every couple of months and usually spend more than £100 – we've already put some things in the car and come back for more! I've bought my son two pairs of trainers and some football boots for around £50. I've also bought myself two pairs of shoes, and on a previous visit I bought a dress for my sister's wedding and paid only £20 when it was worth £60.'

Linda Parker, Reading



'I'd come more often if I lived nearby. It's a nice relaxed atmosphere here with no hustle and bustle, but you have to expect that what you find might not always be the height of fashion.'

Lorraine Keeble, Surrey



'It's nice having all the shops in one place and the prices can be good. I always check prices before coming here as things are sometimes cheaper elsewhere, particularly on the internet.'

Ian Smith, Andover



'I think it's worth travelling the 40 or so minutes to get here, and we've been many times. If you're looking for something in particular, you're probably better off going to the high street. But if you want a bit of a day out and a nice potter around the shops, then it's pretty good.'

Valerie Lombardi, Stroud

'We were here last week and spent over £200. We bought a suit and a complete head-to-toe wedding outfit for our daughter. It's more convenient and easier to walk around than the town centre in Swindon, and we usually go home with something or other.'

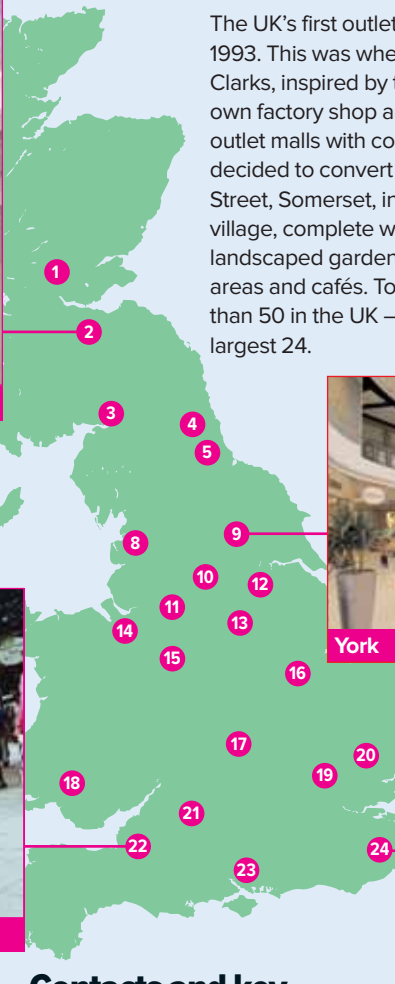
Stan & Val Garner, Swindon



Where the bargains are Use our guide to locate your nearest outlet village



Livingston



The UK's first outlet village opened in 1993. This was when shoe-manufacturer Clarks, inspired by the success of its own factory shop and the popularity of outlet malls with consumers in the USA, decided to convert its old shoe factory in Street, Somerset, into a 90-store outlet village, complete with paved walkways, landscaped gardens, children's play areas and cafés. Today there are more than 50 in the UK – our map shows the largest 24.



York



Clarks Village



Ashford

Contacts and key

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|---|--|
| <p>1 Sterling Mills 01259 752100
www.sterlingmills.com</p> <p>2 Livingston 01506 423600
www.livingstondesigneroutlet.com</p> <p>3 Gretna Gateway 01461 339100
www.gretnagateway.com</p> <p>4 Royal Quays 0191 296 3743
www.royalquays.outletcentre.co.uk</p> <p>5 Dalton Park 0191 526 6157
www.dalton-park.co.uk</p> <p>6 Junction One 028 9442 9111
www.junctionone.co.uk</p> <p>7 The Outlet (Bridgewater Park)
028 4062 5151; www.the-outlet.co.uk</p> <p>8 Freeport Fleetwood 01253 877377
www.freeport-fleetwood.com</p> <p>9 York 01904 682700
www.yorkdesigneroutlet.com</p> <p>10 Junction 32 01977 520153
www.junction32.com</p> <p>11 The Lowry Designer Outlet 0161 848 1850
www.lowryoutletmall.com</p> <p>12 Lakeside Village 01302 366444
www.lakeside-village.co.uk</p> | <p>13 East Midlands Designer Outlet 01773 545000
www.eastmidlandsdesigneroutlet.com</p> <p>14 Cheshire Oaks 0151 348 5600
www.cheshireoaksdesigneroutlet.com</p> <p>15 Freeport Talke 01782 774113
www.freeport-talke.com</p> <p>16 Springfields 01775 760909
www.springfieldsshopping.co.uk</p> <p>17 Bicester Village 01869 323200
www.bicester-village.com</p> <p>18 Bridgend 01656 665700
www.bridgenddesigneroutlet.com</p> <p>19 Hatfield Galleria 01707 256860
www.thegalleria.co.uk</p> <p>20 Freeport Braintree 01376 348867
www.freeport-braintree.com</p> <p>21 Swindon Designer Outlet 01793 507600
www.swindondesigneroutlet.com</p> <p>22 Clarks Village 01458 840064
www.clarksvillage.co.uk</p> <p>23 Whiteley Village 01489 886886
www.whiteleyvillage.com</p> <p>24 Ashford 01233 895900
www.ashforddesigneroutlet.com</p> |
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Checklist

Make the most of outlet villages with our essential tips

■ **Seconds** Inspect seconds to ensure there are no significant defects, and don't be afraid to ask for a further discount. Under the Sale of Goods Act, you can't return seconds if you were aware of the fault at the time of purchase – but you can return them if you find a different fault.

■ **Your rights** You have the same legal rights when buying at an outlet village as you would on the high street or anywhere else. The Sale of Goods Act says that goods must be of satisfactory quality, fit for purpose and as described. If they are not, you may be entitled to a full refund, a repair, a replacement or compensation.

■ **Returning goods** Check return policies. In addition to your statutory rights, many retailers will happily exchange or refund unsuitable items, but usually only at their outlet stores. If you bought an item on a special day trip, this could mean a long journey back.

■ **Getting there** If you can't get to an outlet village by car or local public transport, check with coach operators in your area to see whether they're running any trips. Your local tourist information office may also be able to help.

■ **By car** To cut down on any petrol and parking costs, drive to an outlet village with a group of friends.

■ **Insider info** Nike trainers have a label inside showing the date (in month/day/year format) that they were manufactured – useful for working out how current the style is.

■ **Online rights** In addition to your statutory rights, under the Distance Selling Regulations online retailers are obliged to take unwanted items back within seven working days – starting the day after you receive the goods. You may have to pay postage, depending on the site's terms and conditions, and the seller doesn't have to take back unwanted perishable goods, like food or flowers.