



BARGAINS\$ OVER THE BORDER

Market researcher Ellen McNally heard so many harrowing stories about shopping in Shenzhen she compiled a user-friendly guide. **Yasmin Ghahremani** reports

ELLEN McNALLY IS not a natural-born shopper. Compared to the typical Hong Kong devotee for whom the mall is a temple and the cash register an altar where weekly sacrifices are made, she is downright sacrilegious. "I have always hated shopping," she says. "I love a good deal but I hate the process."

McNally's attitude is surprising, considering she has written what is sure to become the bible of cross-border buying: *Shop In Shenzhen, An Insider's Guide* (Roundtree Publications, \$95). But then again, who better to advise Shenzhen shopping initiates on how to avoid the myriad frustrations that come with the territory? McNally knows our pain. She has been there, in that lost and confused consumer haze. And yet she has emerged victorious,

with bargain-rate shoes, bags, gifts, clothes and even a portrait to show for it.

A 15-year Hong Kong resident, McNally was first inspired to write the book several years ago when the Shenzhen shopping craze hit its stride. Friends would come back from trips across the border with tales of both delight and horror. "They loved it but they hated it," she recalls. "No one knew where to go or how to tackle it. They would stumble from shop to shop and they kept hoping someone would show them where to go, what the best deals were, who the dressmakers to go to were, where to get services."

McNally saw a challenge. Armed with a background in market research and an intermediate knowledge of Cantonese, she set out to answer those questions. Three

years, more than 100 trips across the border and untold sums of money later ("I'm afraid of getting in trouble with my husband if I say how much," she confesses), she has produced a pocket-sized guide that does just that and lots more. About half of the book is devoted to Lowu Commercial City (LCC), the giant five-storey mall just beyond the Lowu-Shenzhen border checkpoint. The centre is a maze of 1,500 shops identified only by number, not name.

"For the most part, language is not an issue - it's finding your way around," McNally explains. She says even the mall's guards were often at a loss when asked where specific shops were located. But she patiently constructed floor plans for the entire facility, which are printed in the book. She then organised the establishments into more than 100 categories of goods and services - everything from curtains, to kites, to coffee bars - and came up with recommendations of where to go for each one.

McNally ventured outside the mall too. Her book gives an overview of shopping opportunities in the city's Dongmen and Hua Qiang Bei Lu areas. It also lists furniture outlets, which even avid shoppers may not realise exist in abundance in



Photo: David Wong

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Shenzhen. Instructions on how to get to each place by bus or taxi are supplied, along with directions written in Chinese.

For the hard-core bargain-seeker, McNally has included a section on the wholesale fashion and shoe outlets in Humen, a town about an hour outside Shenzhen. She says prices there make Shenzhen look expensive. “If Shenzhen is the town that Hong Kong shoppers go to, Humen is the town that Shenzhen shoppers go to,” McNally says.

To research the book, McNally tapped some seasoned Shenzhen shopaholics. They introduced her to off-the-beaten-track markets and other hidden finds. But the author did most of the legwork on her own – a task that came with no shortage of headaches. At one point, she was collared by suspicious LCC security guards who escorted her to the management office after seeing her taking notes. Upon hearing about her project, however, the mall’s management was more than happy to help her out. Another time she was nearly pick-pocketed in the train station (she caught the man in the act). And throughout the whole process, she got lost. A lot.

She picked up some valuable lessons along the way, however, such as how to bargain. She can now haggle shopkeepers down to as low as one-third of their original asking price. She says the trick is to keep a smile on your face and, above all, to persevere.

McNally also learned something about fashion design. She found custom-made clothes to be the best deals in Shenzhen but also the trickiest purchases. Of the 30 outfits she had made, about half hang unworn in her closet. That’s because she, like many other shoppers, chose fabrics or colours that weren’t right for the garments. “You have to keep it very, very simple,” she says, “and stick with a style and a colour you know for sure suits you.”

McNally even discovered cultural elements to the shopping frenzy, including tea shops in the LCC. “Shopkeepers are invariably calm, low-key and soft-spoken, as though inside a temple dispensing spiritual favours,” she writes in the book. Her favourite shopkeeper proudly showed photos of her family’s tea farm in the Wu Yi Mountains in Fujian province, and recommended teas for

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various health problems. McNally says she was also impressed with the artisans she found scattered throughout the mall. Craftsmen from ethnic groups around China, many dressed in their native garb, work at stalls where they sell their wares. Shoppers can watch them make intricate paper cuttings, chisel portraits out of black marble slabs or sculpt clay figurines and busts. "Where else could you find a place that has 20 artists placed here and there, all doing folk arts that have been handed down over thousands of years," muses McNally.

Although *Shop In Shenzhen* is now on store shelves, McNally's job is far from over. She sees this as an ongoing project in which her biggest challenge is keeping the information she's gathered current. So she's set up a Web site (www.shopinshenzhen.com), where she'll post monthly updates and gather tips from other shoppers. The site notes some valuable information for this month about holiday shop closings and winter-fabric selections. McNally envisions publishing a new edition of the book every year. In the meantime, she will have to keep shopping. But these days she's finding that assignment a whole lot easier.

Tips for your trip by Ellen McNally

- \$ Some of the best tailors at Lowu Commercial City (LCC) are at the back of the fabric market on the fifth floor. Ask fabric sellers for Wandan, Tony or Judy.
- \$ When you find something you like in a shop, ask for its business card or you'll probably never find the store again.
- \$ Go for a massage or a pedicure at the Jian Fu Mei Massage Centre on the fourth floor next to the King Elephant restaurant.
- \$ In the city of Shenzhen, go to Hua Qiang Bei Lu Street and browse around the women's market. There are hundreds of shops and deals in this building alone.
- \$ If you're in the market for furniture, surprise yourself by visiting Yifeng Famed, a large contemporary furniture store on Honghu Road next to the large Walmart. Prices are great and they deliver anywhere.
- \$ Shopping for children? There are loads of shops in LCC and particularly at Children's World (five floors of shops) in the Hua Qiang Bei Lu area.
- \$ Really crazy about shopping? Take the bus to Tai Ping and get off at Humen, the city where Shenzhen locals look for bargains. It's rougher and messier but a true shopping adventure.
- \$ Don't go to Shenzhen at Lunar New Year. Many shops close for a three-week break from Sunday.

