

GOLD RUSH

From Harrods to Selfridges, London's classic department stores have elevated shopping into a bona fide lifestyle choice. This sartorially inclined super city has got these high-fashion sanctuaries down to a fine art

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A PHAROAH SITS SERENELY BENEATH A GOLDEN ART

Deco ceiling, staring out over immaculate racks of designer clothing. Heritage British brands Vivienne Westwood, Mulberry and Alexander McQueen are all present and correct along with Chanel, Armani and Vera Wang. Grandiose escalators escort well-heeled guests between floors, and a bronze likeness locks the late Princess Diana and Dodi Al Fayed in an eternal dance.

Few department stores can match the celebrity of Harrods. Its green and gold logo is synonymous with luxury and it's possible to spend an entire day browsing its 330 departments. Established in 1834 as a grocery store, Harrods has since become a gourmet paradise. Popular with London's elite, the store is also loved by visitors and on a busy day, it hosts up to 100,000 people. Harrods exudes class and its clientele are no different. The store's dress code requires "respectable presentation" – revealing clothes and sports attire are not allowed.

London's retail credentials are legendary. Many of its department stores date back to the 1800s, starting out as simple drapery stores which expanded into the multi-department retail temples they are today. Seduced by curated products and personalised service, consumers became loyal to their favourites. They offered more than a shopping experience: they became a lifestyle choice, implanting department stores into modern culture.

For many great cities, department stores are a point of pride. New York has Barneys and Saks Fifth Avenue; Paris has Galeries Lafayette and Printemps. But it is the quintessentially British appeal of places like Harrods and Selfridges that make them so special. Their financial impact is significant too: together, Harrods and Selfridges, along with Fortnum & Mason, Liberty, Fenwick and

"BY SEEING
LONDON, I
HAVE SEEN
AS MUCH OF
LIFE AS THE
WORLD CAN
SHOW."

— SAMUEL
JOHNSON

House of Fraser have become a cornerstone of London's economy.

Shopping has never been such a huge component of the culture as it is now. The UK's National Survey of Culture, Leisure & Sport 2006 – 2007 reported that 75 percent of women were "more likely to shop in their free time than read, listen to music, do sport/exercise/DIY, use the internet, play games or do art & craft." In 2008, consumers spent £46 billion on clothes and shoes alone.

Designer fashion represents a huge chunk of that figure. In February 2011, The British Fashion Council Industry reported that designer fashion makes a net contribution to the UK economy of £450 million per annum. Harrods and Selfridges are gleefully riding the obsession.

These bastions of style and class have not always had it easy.

As shopping evolved, department stores faced fierce competition from new-age independent shops and online shopping sites, and were in danger of becoming outdated. Thankfully, they rose to the challenge, integrating old-time glamour with modern chic in terms of products on offer, presentation and methods of sale.

In May 2010, former owner Mohammed Al-Fayed controversially sold Harrods to Qatar Holding, an indirect subsidiary of Qatar Investment Authority, for £1.5 billion. Since then, there have been talks of a store opening in Shanghai. Harrods recently unveiled Europe's largest men's shoe department and in January 2011 reported a record £1 billion in annual sales. Selfridges has also benefited from the expertise and financial freedom of foreign ownership. Bought by Canada's Galen Weston for £598 million in 2003, it is now recognised as one of the world's best department stores by the International Association of Department Stores.

Harrods prides itself on promoting cutting-edge talent. Initiated in 2009, the Harrods Launches initiative sees them showcase one up-and-coming designer each season. Meanwhile, Selfridges organises fashion shows and special window displays focusing on "bright young things", and they've taken their stylish reputation one step further with the May 2011 launch of Project Ocean, which sees the store partner with environmental groups to support sustainable fishing practices. The project has already raised around \$96,100.

A wander through Selfridges will reveal its global appeal: a Chinese man selects shoes, a British teenager plays with the latest technological gadget, and a group of Arab girls catches up at the in-store bistro. There truly is something for everyone with a taste for the good life. ☺