

Freddy at Brian's Hi-Fi can even be encouraged to dance for you!

Gizmos a go-go

Tottenham Court Road is still the best place to go for a wide range of low-price electronic gadgets, from DVDs to hi-fis to computers. But which shops deliver the best service? Guide **Daniel Fryer** Photography **Liam Duke**

Not long ago, recommended retail prices were abolished for electrical goods, ostensibly to promote competition and prevent price-fixing. Here in London, we've always been able to take advantage of this kind of fierce competition, thanks mostly to one strip of tarmac: Tottenham Court Road. It may be so traffic-filled that it's hard to cross, but it's certainly the best place to go for anything with an electrical pulse. Every form of music reproduction equipment (from turntables to MP3), DVD players and even digital video-recorders are all to be found somewhere. But if you're worried about the sharks out there waiting to devour your cash or wolves ready to pull the wool over your eyes, take refuge in our guide to the shops that matter, on Tottenham Court Road and beyond...

Tottenham Court Road

Mecca, money-maker, electronic empire extraordinaire: Tottenham Court Road is all these things, as well as an assault on the senses and a dose of footache, if you don't know where to look or what to look for.

For beginners

Shops where you won't feel intimidated if you don't know your hard disk from your RAM.

A&M Electronics

A good shop: staff are friendly, approachable and knowledgable. We talked TVs at length, and they didn't seem to be bluffing. The shop specialises in TVs, videos, music systems, Walkmans and Discmans, and has a DJ equipment section. In-store concessions deal in pre-recorded video cassettes and digital organisers, and an accessories department sells headphones, leads and other similar 'smalls'.

A&M Electronics, 4/5 Tottenham Court Rd, W1 (0171 580 1577) Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Wed, Fri, Sat 9am-6pm, Thur 9am-7pm.

Computer Exchange

This is a ramshackle store for second-hand electronics from computer systems to peripherals, electronic organisers to DVD films. There's a huge range of pre-owned computer software, both serious and fun. Because most of it is second-hand, the prices are keen, but stock is unpredictable. We found a 21" NEC colour monitor for £445. There's a three-month warranty on monitors, 12 months on systems, plus the staff are helpful.

Computer Exchange, 70 Tottenham Court Rd, W1 (0171 916 3110) Goodge St or Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open daily 10am-7pm.

Hi-Fi Experience

You'll find high-end quality audio and home cinema equipment from the likes of TAG McLaren, Denon, Bang & Olufsen and Naim and Loewe at this, the only BADA (British Audio Dealers' Association) member on Tottenham Court Road. It boasts a magnificent 5,000 sq ft basement, with eight relaxing demo rooms. The staff are top-notch and there are no hassle as there's no need: the fact that you're here and interested means you're likely to spend a fortune. It's just a case of working out which piece of kit is for you. Mind you, bargains can be had: Panasonic's A310 DVD player had a sale price of £459 when we visited.

Hi-Fi Experience, 227 Tottenham Court Rd, W1 (0171 580 3535) Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Fri 10am-7pm, Sat 9am-6pm.

For the more advanced

For when you do have a clue, but need some good advice anyway.

Brian's Hi-Fi

Fancy naming a shop Brian... Still, the staff were very helpful, and patient, especially to the large shopping-laden woman who stomped round the smallish store, glaring belligerently at all the micro systems and demanding 'How cheap is this?', before settling on a very classy Technics SCEH500 on special at £279.90. The assistant talked her through the various features, prised off the speaker covers to show off the workings and offered to sort out a cab if she decided to buy now. Which she didn't.

Brian's Hi-Fi, 19 Tottenham Court Rd, W1 (0171 631 1109) Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Wed, Fri, Sat 9am-6pm, Thur 9am-7pm.

Ultimate Centre

Ultimate in Panasonic and Technics downstairs, quite big in accessories at ground level. This store is owned by the same guy who owns the next-door-but-one Unique (see below) – our first salesman denied any affiliation, a second confirmed; go figure! – and these guys know their TVs. We got totally immersed in the pros and cons of the Panasonic Tau TV range and it wasn't until we left that we realised we hadn't been pressurised into making a sale, force-fed a particular model, bombarded with prices or promised a deal. How Heineken.

Ultimate Centre, 231 Tottenham Court Rd, W1 (0171 637 8911) Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Sat 9am-6pm.



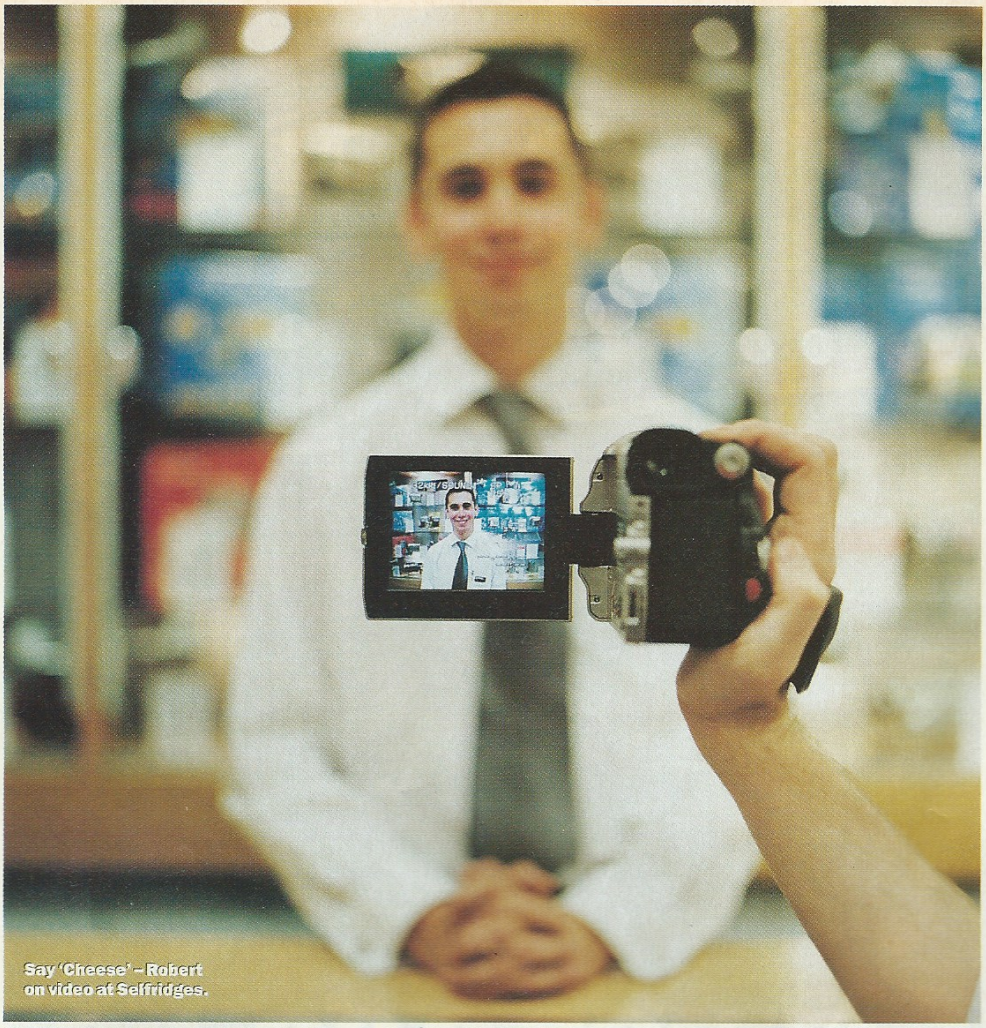
I'm on TV! Mizan at the Ultimate Centre.



Seeking advice from Kaschief, one of Micro Anvika's knowledgable staff.



From household to audiovisual, Tempo has it all – just ask Ogun.



Say 'Cheese' – Robert on video at Selfridges.

For when you have a clue...
And feel brave enough to browse.

Harp Electronics/ProCom
A bit confusing this, but basically ProCom looks after the few computers on offer while Harp shepherd the TV and audio. Staff attention was pretty much immediate. We talked DVDs and the assistant took us straight to the cheapest option available here (Hitachi DV-P250, £299). Of course, to fully appreciate DVD you need a TV and sound system that is bigger, louder and faster, which is why we were directed very quickly to £1,299 worth of widescreen fun. Ouch.
Harp Electronics/ProCom, 237-238 Tottenham Court Rd, W1 (0171 636 4611) Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Sat 9.30am-6pm, Thur until 6.30pm.

Shasonic
Shasonic is superstore-large and on two floors. Upstairs is TV, DVD and video heaven, downstairs is all hi-fi and computers. The downside of this is that you may have to wait some time to be served. The TV staff were amiable enough and happy to let me wander from set to set, firing questions. The guy I collared at the laptops, however, after listening to my needs (a machine that would balance speed, portability and cost) quickly showed me the Sony Vaio F290, suggesting it was a snip at £2,818.82. Not the snip I had in mind. When I asked him what edge it had over its rivals, he said they sold loads.
Shasonic, 42 Tottenham Court Rd, W1 (0171 323 0333) Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Sat 9am-6pm, Thur until 7pm.

For when you know exactly what you want...
So does this little crop.

Micro Anvika
An excellent store: big, airy, clean and with room to spare. All products are clearly labelled with prices before and after VAT, together with systems information, software and so on. Added extras or freebies are also displayed. So you know exactly what you are getting. The staff here are helpful, without being overly eager, know their stuff and actually listen to what you want. It could all be clever salesmanship, but you actually feel like you're getting what you need, not what they want you to buy. So it's a shame they only do PCs, laptops and Apple Macs. There are two more branches along this road, but this is the best one.
Micro Anvika, 245 Tottenham Court Rd, W1 (0171 636 2547) Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Fri 9.30am-6pm, Sat 9am-6pm, Sun 11am-5pm. See phone book for branches.

Unique (Sony Store)
A surprisingly small temple to Sony, and one that contains a smattering of micro systems, Super Trinitron and WEGA TVs, hi-fi that's heavy on the woofers for that extra bass and a few camcorders and personal systems. Staff were thin on the ground and we waited so long for attention that we gave up and snooped on a guy out to buy a micro system. After extensive questioning of not one but two shop assistants – who were patient above and beyond the call of duty – he eventually walked out a happy man, clasping a Sony CMT-ED1 A that, at £229.99, was £50 less than the same thing in some esteemed high street stores.
Unique, 233 Tottenham Court Rd, W1 (0171 636 3001) Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Fri 9am-6pm, Thur until 7pm.

Alternatives

Tottenham Court Road may have a stranglehold on cut-price electronic consumables, but that doesn't mean it's the only place in London to go.

Barkers of Kensington
This west London department store contains a small but well stocked TV and audio department in the basement offering the likes of Bose, Marantz, Panasonic, Pioneer, Sony and Technics. Considering how expensive Kensington can be, prices here were fair-to-middling: for example, Sony's SD1 MT set-up was £650. Although our assistant looked about 15 and didn't know much about MiniDisc players and micro systems, he was willing to nip off and find out.
Barkers of Kensington, 63 Kensington High St, W8 (0171 937 0910) High St Kensington tube. Open Mon-Fri 10am-7pm, Thur 10am-8pm, Sat 9.30am-7pm, Sun 12noon-6pm.

Comet
When it comes to prices and content, electronic superstores are pretty much the same everywhere. The prices are fairly standard too, though they can drop significantly during sales. The staff at this branch were rather scarce and of the speak-when-spoken-to variety. However, when knowledge was needed, the guys were more than happy to demonstrate gear or let you tinker and were quick to point out cheaper equivalents. Should you want to involve yourself in a mad, price-comparing dash, there are also branches of Currys and Tempo in the same retail park.
Comet, Unit 2, Tottenham Hale Retail Park, Tottenham Hale, N15 (0181 365 1300) Tottenham Hale tube. Open Mon-Fri 9am-8pm, Sat 9am-6pm, Sun 11am-5pm. See phone book for branches.

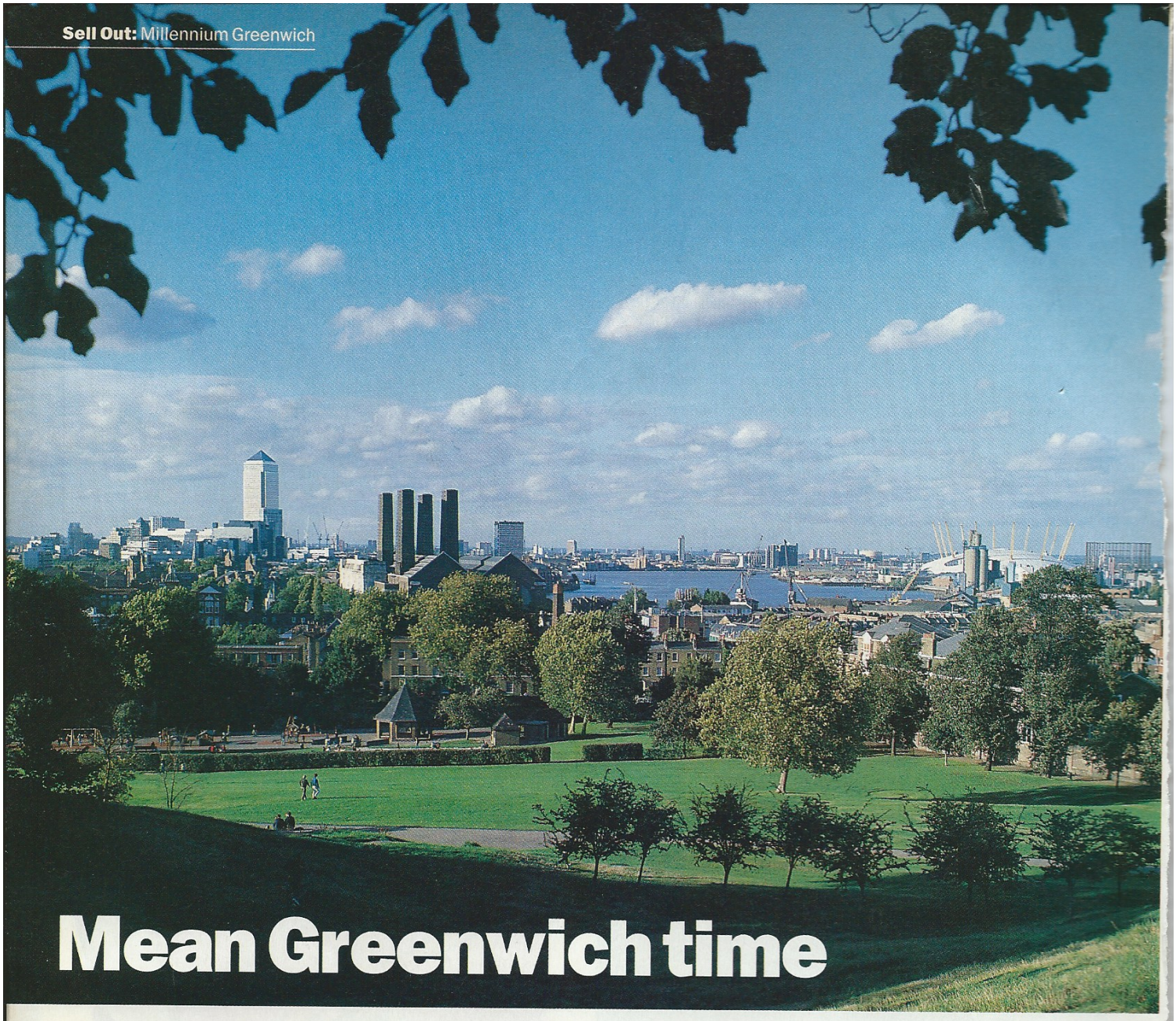
Currys
Currys (especially the superstores like this one) is home to a vast array of electronica, from household appliances through to home entertainment and computers. The only things they don't seem to hold are laptops. Prices are reasonable, though you will find cheaper if you trudge Tottenham Court Road. The only let-down was the staff, who seemed nigh-on impossible to attract. We were left free to browse undisturbed for an eternity before running out of patience and asking for assistance. Of the half-dozen staff sitting pretty in-store, only two had the necessary knowledge to be of any help.
Currys, Unit One, Humphrey St, Old Kent Rd, SE1 (0171 232 2253) Elephant & Castle tube/BR or 53 bus. Open Mon, Wed-Fri 9am-8pm, Tue 10am-8pm, Sat 9am-6pm, Sun 11am-5pm. See phone book for branches.

Dixons
Dixons is a lesson in extremes: infuriatingly overcrowded and woefully understaffed, whatever the time of day. It took us ages to attract an assistant's attention. Surprisingly, however, having outlined our laptop requirements, we received an extensive, patient and well informed rundown of what was on offer. Anything our man couldn't answer straight away was sorted out via an expedient phone call. Dixons contains all the high-street staples at so-so to low-low prices.
Dixons, 88 Oxford St, W1 (0171 636 8511) Oxford Circus or Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Fri 10am-7pm, Sat 10am-6.30pm, Sun 11am-5pm. See phone book for branches.

John Lewis
A strange one, this. It has a small but perfectly formed electronics department with everything from audio and TV to computers, cameras and telephones. The various free guarantees are clearly displayed, but you have to queue for an assistant to see you. We waited just over ten minutes and got a guy who, although he knew his bits from his bytes, was more interested in talking about a dazzling yet superfluous array of preloaded software than our laptop requirements. Still, prices are fair, clearly displayed and – what's more – all the major goods had price cards you could take away with you.
John Lewis, 278-306 Oxford St, W1 (0171 629 7711) Oxford Circus tube. Open Mon-Wed, Fri 9.30am-6pm, Thur 10am-8pm, Sat 9am-6pm.

Selfridges
This department store has a well kept electronics section that stocks a variety of brands, from the basic all the way up to the way gorgeous and mightily priced Bang & Olufsen, though the selection of PCs and laptops isn't huge. The assistants were particularly well informed and happy to talk at length about anything from cabinet finishes to guarantees (television) and pixels to battery life (digital cameras). The latter section, especially, gains extra brownie points for having a PC at the ready, running a program to help select the best digital camera for you.
Selfridges, 400 Oxford St, W1 (0171 629 1234) Bond St tube. Open Mon-Wed, Sat 10am-7pm, Thur, Fri 10am-8pm, Sun 12noon-6pm.

Tempo
Branches of Tempo vary in size considerably. Some deal with the whole range of audiovisual and household items; others, like the one we visited, specialise in computers only. The staff know their way around PCs, especially at this branch.
Tempo, 114-116 New Oxford St, W1 (0171 304 4113) Tottenham Court Rd tube. Open Mon-Fri 9am-7pm, Sat 9am-6pm. See phone book for branches.



Mean Greenwich time

Greenwich has become a thriving hub of activity for both tourists and locals. Whether it's museums and parks you're after or twinky markets for a weekend's loafing, there are more reasons to visit Greenwich than just to gape across the Thames at the possibly-quite-good Dome, where we begin our millennial adventure...

Introduction **Fiona Morrow** Guide **Daniel Fryer** Photography **Michael Franke**

Teeny, tiny people are dangling from ropes way, way above our heads. As they twist and tumble precariously from the Dome's famous skin, I finally feel the vastness of this structure. We may all know how many pints of beer (3.8 billion), double-decker buses (18,000) and Eiffel Towers (one, prostrate) it would take to fill the Dome, but it isn't until you see the amount of industry currently crammed under this elaborate awning that you get a real impression of how enormous it is. It may not look very elegant – for that view you should take a river trip from Greenwich Pier to the Thames Flood Barrier – but you can't deny its energy.

Strange, then, that the one completed zone, 'Living Island' ('only you and the *FT* have seen this so far'), is so resolutely low-tech. A pastiche of an ice cream-coloured British seaside resort, 'Living Island' contains hundreds of slogans and interesting facts about the environment and what happens when we don't dispose of our waste with care. It's fine – even funny in bits – but it's not exactly mind-blowing, and it's definitely not what I expected. I couldn't help thinking how quickly the kids would tire of reading it all. Of course, it could be that this zone is finished precisely because it is the most straightforward – a bit of quiet relief for Granny and Gramps before being twirled into yet another exciting space-time continuum – and isn't at all representative. (The gigantic, Buddha-like 'Body Zone', for one, is impressive enough even in its foetal beginnings.)

As a Dome fan in principle – yes, I'm out of the closet – hailing from south-east London, my trip to the Greenwich Peninsula (!) was full of anticipation. Determined to shake off the crowing cynicism my fellow journalists insist on heaping in great bucketfuls, I searched for the positive in every corner... erm, arc. So, good things included: the acrobatics; the viewing gallery overlooking the Thames; the view of Canary Wharf from the ship-like funnels of the ventilation shaft; the impressive tube station; facilities for the disabled; the number of toilets (and the recycled rain water which will flush them); and getting to wear a hard hat and wellies all afternoon. And bad things: you have to file past the biggest McDonald's in Western Europe to enter the Dome; the extremely expensive Teflon skin looks just like a grubby circus tent; and if it's good, it might prove expensive – it'll take more than one visit to do it justice.

The attention the Dome has focused on Greenwich and its surroundings is no bad thing for the area – the new transport links alone make an SE8 postcode less of an albatross – yet come Millennium Eve, the barricades will go up with a clang. Only those invited will be allowed anywhere near the Dome itself: tickets will be checked at tube entrances and only those properly authorised will be able to travel. (There's also no point in travelling to the north side of the Thames opposite the Dome, as there will be nothing to see.) The Meridian may have its home in the Royal Park at Greenwich, but don't expect to party like it's nearly 2000 anywhere near it. An exclusion zone is being organised which will



include cutting back on the traffic entering (or even circling) Greenwich, limitations on some tube stations' opening times, and ticketing schemes for local bars and pubs to keep outsiders at bay. If you're still determined to spend midnight nearby, you can shell out £50 for an organised event being held at the National Maritime Museum which will include live bands, street entertainment and a funfair, or head over to Blackheath Concert Halls in the company of Jools Holland, who appears to be spending the night nipping to and from the Dome. (This last, however, will set you back £195 – including alcohol – and might not be the bargain of the century.)

In fact, despite anecdotal rumours in pubs in and around the area that residents are being offered serious money to rent their properties over the New Year, one large Greenwich letting agency claims it has yet to receive a single enquiry, and many local hotels are not yet full. So while there's plenty to see and do in the area – check out our guide for details – unless you already live there, Greenwich is definitely *not* the place to be this Hogmanay. ●

Things to do

Cutty Sark

Most people already know that the Cutty Sark is Britain's last remaining clipper – a class of ship famous for its amazing speed – and that it's in dry dock, down by the Greenwich riverside. Few know its name is Scottish slang for a chemise and means short shift. The ship's entrance is on the 'Tween Deck level, where you'll find her history, along with models, displays and a gift shop. The Lower Hold houses the colourful Long John Silver Figurehead Collection while the best bit is the Upper Deck, despite the unrealistic fake chickens and pigs, where you get to hang off ropes, pose by the wheel and visit the cabins – be careful now, people were short then, and ceilings were low. Arrive early to avoid tourists dragging around their bored-yet-hyperactive offspring. The 54-foot Gypsy IV – the ketch in which Sir Francis Chichester made the first solo round-the-world voyage – is also in dry dock here. You can look, but it's not open to the public.
Cutty Sark, Cutty Sark Gardens, King William Walk, SE10 (0181 858 3445) Greenwich BR/Island Gardens DLR. Open daily 10am-5pm. Adm adults £3.50, concs £2.50.

The Fan Museum

A strange and strangely alluring place, this: two Georgian mansions which, until 1985, were derelict. Since then they have been converted and redecorated to period style, and now house a unique collection of fans from the late seventeenth century up to a specially commissioned fan for the millennium. The staff are elderly and charming, if somewhat baffled by the intricacies of the personal stereo used to play your inclusive tour-guide tape. Upstairs holds regular exhibitions and there's a well kept garden, with ornamental pond and period-style Orangery, serving full tea, including cake and scones, for £4.50. Fan-related paraphernalia can be purchased from the gift shop. Odd, unexpected and enchanting, especially if you like fans.
The Fan Museum, 12 Crooms Hill, SE10 (0181 305 1441) Greenwich BR. Open Tue-Sat 11am-5pm, Sun 12noon-5pm. Adm adults £3.50, concs £2.50.

Millennium Experience Visitors Centre

Lurking aft of the Cutty Sark, this gaudy yellow, turquoise and blue office is a taste of things to come for those of you who cannot wait for the Dome to go public. You can access the www.dome2000.co.uk website from one of six workstations, buy gifts and mementos, interact with display screens or gawp at models and suchlike. Really just a trumpet-blow for the hit, miss or maybe Millennium Dome, but the staff are truly helpful and remarkably well informed. Invaluable if you want to know exactly where to go, what to do and how to pay when the big day arrives.
Millennium Experience Visitors Centre, Royal Naval College, SE10 (0181 305 3456) Greenwich BR/Island Gardens DLR. Open Mon-Fri 11am-7pm, Sat, Sun 10am-6pm.

Mudchute Park & Farm

Okay, so Mudchute isn't strictly in Greenwich, but it is in that bit of Docklands close enough to the foot tunnel to make it as good as. And the city park and farm – 13 hectares of once derelict land – is well worth a visit. Where else are you going to see pigs, sheep, goats, cows, horses and, um, a couple of llamas called Simon and Delilah, graze against the backdrop of Canary Wharf? You can picnic in the parkland and the farm also contains a pets corner for the kiddies, full of chickens, budgerigars, rabbits, guinea pigs and polecats. For the more equestrian among you, the farm contains a BHS-approved riding school and there's a National Curriculum-linked education centre.
Mudchute Park & Farm, Pier St, E14 (0171 515 5901) Crossharbour or Mudchute DLR. Open daily 10am-4pm. Adm free.

National Maritime Museum

Recently reopened, after a £20 million facelift, the National Maritime Museum is now bigger, brighter, more modern and much more fun to visit. Twenty galleries, spread over three sprawling levels, house over 2 million items that tell the story of Britain and its relationship with the sea. Explore everything from the mysteries of the past to the possibilities of the future, including things such as the figurehead from The Implacable, which fought at Trafalgar, through to the latest in deep-sea diving suits. The fully interactive All Hands gallery is a must for kids and regressing adults alike – where else do you get to fire a ship's cannon? The museum is clearly labelled, easy to navigate, plus you get a free floorplan with your ticket.
National Maritime Museum, Romney Rd, SE10 (0181 858 4422) Greenwich BR/Island Gardens DLR. Open daily 10am-5pm. Adm adults £7.50, concs £6.

Old Royal Naval College

The Old Royal Naval College occupies the site of the Royal Palace, where Henry VIII and his daughters were born. Although renovation work to all the main historic buildings is going on, you can still visit the Painted Hall, the Naval Chapel and the Undercroft, which is currently home to the Crown Jewels of the Millennium Exhibition. The opulent wall and ceiling paintings in the Painted Hall, heavy on the cherubs, were executed between 1707 and 1726. It's a sumptuous dining hall and one that is available for hire. The equally awe-inspiring Chapel, too elaborate for words, is perfect for some rococo-trimmed private contemplation. The huge Benjamin West painting of St Paul at the far end measures 25 feet by 14 feet.
Old Royal Naval College, King William Walk, SE10 (0181 269 4747) Greenwich BR/Island Gardens DLR. Open Mon-Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 12.30-5pm. Adm Mon, Tue Painted Hall and Chapel free, Crown Jewels of the Millennium Exhibition adults £5, concs £3; Wed-Sun adults £5, concs £3 for all three.

Queen's House

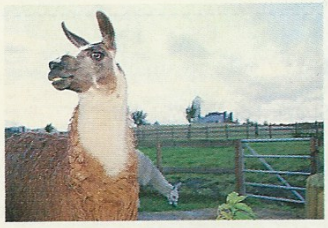
This museum was a house originally commissioned by Queen Anne of Denmark and completed for Henrietta Maria, the wife of Charles I, in 1638. Closed for refurbishment, it should reopen on December 1 1999, and the whole house will be given over to a new exhibition: 'The Story of Time', displaying over 350 artefacts from 150 institutions around the world. With themes such as the creation, measurement, depiction and end of time, the exhibition will include works by Titian, Poussin and Dali, together with a caesium fountain atomic clock.
Queen's House, Romney Rd, SE10 (0181 858 4442) Greenwich BR. Open from Dec 1.

Ranger's House

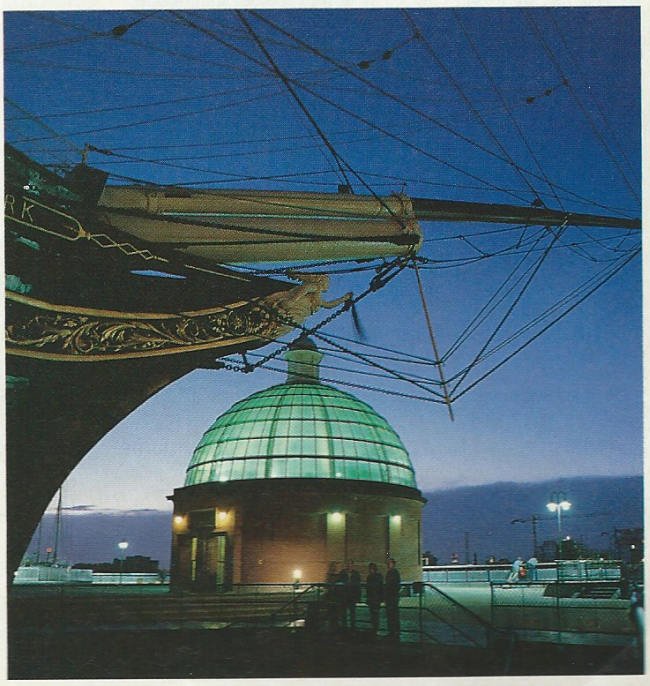
A walk up Crooms Hill brings you to the edges of Blackheath and to the Ranger's House, so-called because it was once the grace-and-favour residence of whomsoever happened to be Greenwich Park ranger at the time. Now it's home to the Suffolk Collection of paintings, including a series of full-length Jacobean portraits. There's stunning detail on these works, though the larger-than-life black-clad Grand Duchess of Tuscany – painted around 1621 – could give you a nasty turn. The house itself is gorgeous, with such luxuries as the maroon dining room, with crimson silk-festooned curtains and the green silk Damask parlour. The upstairs rooms are devoted to regular exhibitions.
Ranger's House, Chesterfield Walk, Blackheath, SE10 (0181 853 0035)

Sell Out

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE **Clockwise from right: get stars in your eyes at the Royal Observatory; Greenwich Mean Time on your hands; and animal magic with friendly neighbourhood llamas Simon and Delilah at Mudchute Farm.**













THE OLDE AND THE NEW Clockwise from left: Greenwich in traditional mode; Essential Music, crammed with cut-price CDs; back to basics at the Central Market; and right-on retail at Sainsbury's Eco-Store.

► *Blackheath or Greenwich BR/53 bus. Open Oct 1-31 Mon-Fri 10am-5pm, Nov 1-Mar 31 Wed-Sun 10am-4pm. Adm adults £2.50, concs £1.90, children £1.30.*

Royal Observatory

Time may start in Greenwich, but it is closely scrutinised by the Royal Observatory. Home to the Prime Meridian at zero degrees longitude, the observatory was originally built in 1675 to study the moon and stars, and to perfect the art of navigation. Now a GMT clock in the foyer tells the time for the world, radio-controlled to the pulse of 80 caesium atoms from around Europe. There's also a Millennium Countdown clock and, if you straddle the Prime Meridian (a line in the courtyard), you'll find yourself in two hemispheres at once. Sadly, you won't feel a thing. The observatory museum is a cornucopia of time-telling and navigational instruments that go way back to Egyptian times and there's even a camera obscura – a darkened chamber, where a pin-hole in the ceiling projects a picture of the world outside on to a table below. An engrossing, timeless place.

Royal Observatory, The Avenue, Greenwich Park, SE10 (0181 858 4422) Greenwich BR. Open daily 10am-5pm. Adm adults £6, concs £4.80.

Spectacular views

There are many awesome viewpoints in Greenwich, though most of them are either of or from the Thames. The first is right down by the riverside, from Cutty Sark Gardens. Actually 'gardens' is a bit of a misnomer as it is, in fact, a concrete area surrounding the Greenwich exit of the foot tunnel, Cutty Sark and Gypsy Moth. Still, it's new, clean, contains plenty of seating and offers not only wide views of the river, but a concise history of Greenwich, hung from convenient boards. From the top of the large hill in Greenwich Park, just outside the Royal Observatory, you can take in a wide-ranging vista of the Thames, from Poplar to Tower Bridge, including the Dome, Canary Wharf and St Paul's. There's also a similar view from Ranger's House where, if you look across Blackheath, you can see the Crystal Palace transmitter.

Thames Barrier

An awesome piece of architecture, this, and one that lies just east of Greenwich, a little further on from the Dome. The Barrier's role is to save London from flooding, should the tides rise that little bit too high. It was winched into action in February and closed within ten minutes, saving us all from having to paddle to work. You can take a leisurely and much closer look at both Dome and Barrier by taking a Thames Barrier cruise from Greenwich. It takes half an hour each way, passes the Dome and drives through the middle of the gates. If you want to, you can stop off at the Thames Barrier Visitor Centre (0181 305 4188) and take a later boat back to Greenwich.

Thames Barrier Cruise with Campion Launches, Greenwich Pier, Cutty Sark Gardens, King William Walk, SE10 (0181 305 0300) Greenwich BR/Island Gardens DLR. Open daily 11.15am-3.30pm. Adm adults £4.74, OAPs £4.25, children £2.75.

Thames Path

This path runs from behind Greenwich Pier, past the Old Royal Naval College and has you at the Millennium Dome within about 25 minutes. Add another 15, and you'll be at the Thames Barrier. The path itself is lined with benches, but beware, you'll be getting your feet wet come high tide.

Up the Creek

A fun comedy club that's been around since 1989. Acts have included the likes of Jo Brand, Lee Hurst, Harry Hill and, more recently, Paul Tonkinson, better known for co-hosting BBC2's now-defunct 'The Sunday Show'. The comedy normally winds up around 11pm, after which there's a '70s, '80s and '90s disco on Friday and Saturday nights, allowing you to party on until the wee hours.

Up the Creek, 302 Creek Rd, SE10 (0181 858 4581) Greenwich BR. Open Fri 8pm-2am, Sat 7pm-2am, Sun 8pm-12midnight. Adm £6-£14.

Market forces

Stall stories from deepest Greenwich...

Guide **Mary Ann Percy**

The Cheeseboard

After 14 years it's still drawing in local punters who are prepared to pay a little extra for top-notch quality. Mass production is shunned in favour of 'farmhouse' cheeses lovingly made by independent producers from farms throughout Europe. Unusual varieties like the French Beaufort (matured for up to 18-24 months instead of the usual nine) are stocked, as are sheep's and goats' cheeses along with the traditional English Cheddars and Stilton. Ask for a sample if you are unsure of what to buy, and be sure to try the winning combo of Membrillo quince jam (£1.75/117g) coupled with a slice of Manchego (£2.53/117g). Olive wood chopping boards from Tuscany (from £10) are some of the nicest ones available in London.

The Cheeseboard, 26 Royal Hill, SE10 (0181 305 0401) Greenwich BR. Open Mon-Wed, Sat 9am-5pm, Thur 9am-1pm, Fri 9am-5.30pm.

Essential Music

A clearance store packed with new, cheap CDs. The stock is set up on display racks, making it easy to browse around. Prices hover around the £7.49 mark – Pulp's 'This Is Hardcore' album is £6.99, while the bargain bin had Remy Zero for a paltry 99p. A good mix of old classics and current hits, anything from '70s glam to Ibiza anthems.

Essential Music, 334 Creek St, SE10 (0181 293 4982) Greenwich BR. Open daily 10am-6pm.

Flying Duck Enterprises

It's well worth veering off the main street to visit this glowing shrine of a shop, specialising in the kitschest paraphernalia from the '50s, '60s and '70s. Larger pieces of furniture are placed outside the shop: partly to draw in the punters, but also because there is not a spare inch inside – don't attempt to browse in here with a large backpack. Highlights are the Elvis display selling rings, necklaces and sunglasses fit for the King, nudey swizzle sticks, original washable wallpaper, polka-dot plastic beakers and unusually familiar paintings of a gorgeous dark-haired maiden. Despite the undeniably groovy light fittings and homewares, it's the novelties that steal the show – not least the Parking Space Goddess (£3), who, when stuck to the dashboard, is guaranteed to find you an empty park every time. Bliss.

Flying Duck Enterprises, 320-322 Creek Rd, SE10 (0181 858 1964) Greenwich BR. Open Tue-Fri 12noon-6pm, Sat, Sun 10.30am-6pm.

Greenwich Market

Of the market's three sections, the most interesting is the Central Market. Dotted around a central second-hand bookshop are clothing stalls selling anything from '70s kitsch to warm woolly jackets, as well as tables of household accessories. An outdoor café sells piping hot Thai dishes to chilly punters and, on Saturdays, organic food stalls selling fresh produce are set up on the left-hand side near the entrance. It's much quieter and more civilised than Camden Market – the downside is that the prices are not as cheap as you might expect. Further down the road, inside a covered square is the truly tedious Crafts Market. There are a few worthwhile shops surrounding the square – board game specialist Compendium, Toot with retro furniture and florist Rococo – but the rest is largely mass-produced tat: tie-dyed scarves, candle holders, waxy fudge – that sort of thing. The antiques market is mainly furniture spanning the last century.

Greenwich Antiques Market, Greenwich High Rd; Central Market, off Stockwell St, opposite Hotel Ibis; Crafts Market, College Approach, SE10. All Greenwich BR. Open Sat, Sun 9am-5pm.

The Observatory

Without the distinctive smell of second-hand clothing, you'd think it was a high-street chain thanks to the savvy selection of garments. They even have music pumping out. Bargain cashmere cast-offs are a hot ticket and, in keeping with this autumn's folksy chic, there are ponchos, suede skirts and winter coats with sheepskin collars in the chicest shades of cream, as well as crocheted shawls and puffa jackets. A must.

The Observatory, 20 Greenwich Church St, SE10 (0181 305 1998) Greenwich BR. Open daily 10am-6pm.

Sainsbury's Eco Store

Although smaller than many of the other local supermarkets, this eco-friendly newcomer just can't help but grab the limelight. From the windmills and solar panels that power the exterior signs, to the natural light flooding in from the roof windows, this is as right-on as supermarkets get. There are recycled plastic bottles decorating the lavatories and the refrigeration units are cooled by water from two boreholes. It feels like a designer Conran super-supermarket, all low-lit with tasteful displays. Coffee smells waft over from the in-store Starbuck's and the magazine section is second to none. But wouldn't it be a lot more eco-friendly if it was easily accessible by foot? At the moment it is a healthy five- to 10-minute walk up the hill from the closest rail station – so much easier in a fumey old car.

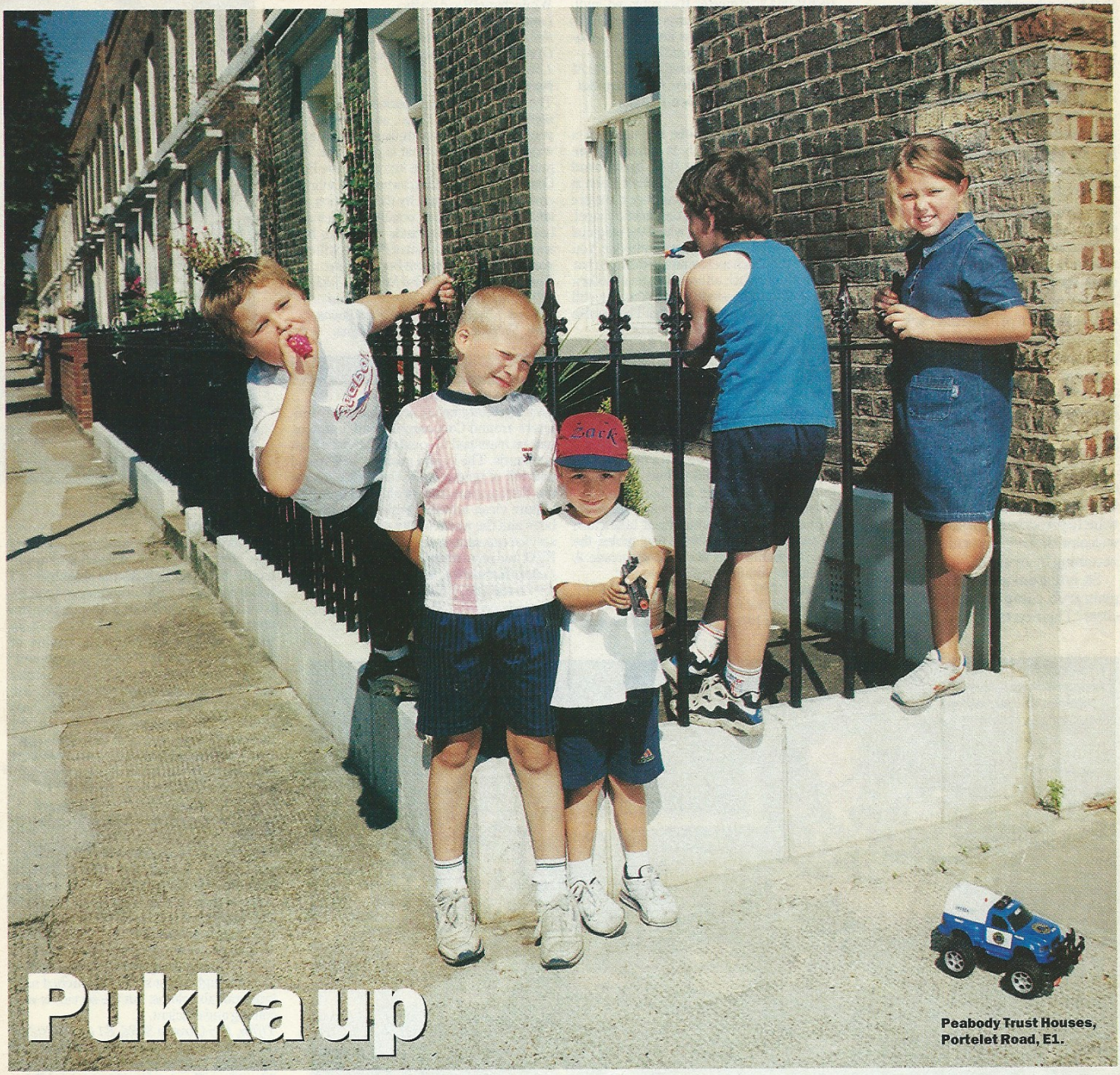
Sainsbury's Eco Store, 55 Bugsby's Way, SE10 (0181 305 2519) Westcombe BR. Open Mon-Thur 8am-10pm, Fri 8am through to Sat 10pm, Sun 11am-5pm. ►



SellOut

Consumer news and reviews

London Fashion Week preview **p38**
Shoptalk Top consumer tips **p40**
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Pukka up

Peabody Trust Houses, Portelet Road, E1.

The East End's grim reputation is facing its final curtain. With highly individual shops and eateries to rival any in the capital, alongside the traditional caffs and markets, there's ample reason to abandon any preconceptions about this much-maligned area.

Guide **Daniel Fryer** Eating out **Guy Dimond** Markets **Mary Ann Percy** Photography **Barry J Holmes**

What do you think of when someone mentions the East End? Inner-city deprivation, perhaps? Row upon row of pound-per-item stores and pie 'n' mash shops, or is it the much stereotyped 'Would you Adam 'n' Eve it?' cockney charm?

If these are the images your mind conjures up, you would be wrong. More or less. Yes, certain areas of London's East End are deprived, but recent cash boosts and major renovation projects are changing that, and while caffs and crap shops are commonplace, interesting and exclusive stores and restaurants are blooming in the bleakest of places. And as for cockney charm… well, you got us on that one. A recent housing regeneration study found that Albert Square patterns of behaviour – especially 'the friendliness and good humour of local people' – are for real. So some impressions can ring true.

What is also true is the high desirability level of living in the East End, and here we mean Bethnal Green, Hackney, Mile End and Whitechapel. Yes, there's more to the East End than ▶

that: Brick Lane and Spitalfields; trendy, bohemian, painfully des res and much covered by *Time Out* already. Apologies, also, to residents of places such as Bow, Stepney, Plaistow and the Hams, both East and West; we could write a book, you know.

People are moving to all these areas in droves, in particular to E1, E2 and E8. Although housing here is still relatively cheap, between 1995 and 1998 prices rose by a whopping 83 per cent in Whitechapel and by 64 per cent in Hackney and Bethnal Green. But, housing aside, what is the attraction?

'There are a number of reasons,' says Zak Adesina, the communications co-ordinator for Renaisi, a private organisation which manages Hackney's regeneration projects. 'There are all the regeneration initiatives, plus the proximity to the city and trendy areas like Islington. There's a lot on offer.' And there's more on the way.

Hackney Wick is to receive a £20 million boost and Haggerston £35m, while much cash – including £12.3m of Lottery money – has been sunk into the redevelopment of Mile End Park. Hackney is getting a major music production venue, a library-cum-leisure centre and a sprawling internet café, while Bethnal Green – although it still has housing issues – is to receive money from numerous sources, including the Government's Social Exclusion Unit.

'Bethnal Green and Mile End are changing fast,' says Michael Keith, leader of Tower Hamlets Council. 'We want to preserve the best of the old and welcome the new. After all, the area's becoming fashionable.'

So, is there more to the East End that plain grub, cheap housing and cockney cheer? There certainly is...

Mile End/ Whitechapel

Pubs & bars

Blind Beggar
The infamous boozer where Ronnie Kray shot George Cornell dead – for allegedly calling him a 'fat poof'. At the turn of the century, it was home to violent pickpockets, the Blind Beggar Gang. Nowadays, thankfully, things tend to be a little quieter. It's a ruby-red, inviting kind of place with large leather chairs and sofas. There's also a heated conservatory and a pleasant vine-clad beer garden.
Blind Beggar, 337 Whitechapel Rd, E1 (0171 247 6195) Whitechapel tube. Open Mon-Sat 12noon-11pm, Sun 12noon-10.30pm.

Half Moon
Most Wetherspoon's pubs are much of a muchness and only truly favoured by non-smokers and those who shun background music in public. That said, the Half Moon is an outstanding place. It was once a theatre and, before that, a Welsh Calvinistic chapel. It's a huge venue and one where the religious décor echoes the pub's history with style. You can see the old chapel as was in the main bar while the back bar, although given a modern neo-Gothic, techno-industrial makeover, still captures that ecclesiastical vibe. There's also an amazingly large and airy courtyard.
Half Moon, 213-233 Mile End Rd, E1 (0171 790 6810) Stepney Green tube. Open Mon-Sat 11am-11pm, Sun 12noon-10.30pm

Hayfield
Part of the Bass-owned 'It's a Scream' chain, complete with Edvard Munch's most famous work as pub sign, the Hayfield is aimed at a young and trendy crowd. It's a funky affair, all greens, purples and yellows, with such icons as Darth Vader and Lara Croft air-brushed on to the walls. DJs feature at weekends and, for further amusement, take a turn on one of the two red-baize pool tables, the table football or 'Star Wars' trilogy arcade. A late licence should take effect soon.
Hayfield, 156-158 Mile End Rd, E1 (0171 780 0011) Stepney Green tube. Open Mon-Sat 12noon-11pm, Sun 12noon-10.30pm.

London Hospital Tavern
A lovely pub, replete with cosy wooden alcoves, chunky furniture, scuffed wooden floorboards and antique paintings. Due to its location next to the hospital, medical types tend to dominate the clientele. When the weather's fine, you can sit outside, where a row of huge trees hide most of the Whitechapel Road traffic.
London Hospital Tavern, 176 Whitechapel Rd, E1 (0171 247 8978) Whitechapel tube. Open Mon-Sat 12noon-11pm, Sun 12noon-10.30pm.

New Globe
The New Globe stands beside the East End section of Regent's Canal, so you can take your drinks out in plastic glasses and sit upon waterside benches, if that is your want. The pub, owned by the little known Active Beer Company, tends to attract a youthful, vibrant crowd drawn, perhaps, by the attraction of a late licence. The décor outside is a rich and hearty brown, while inside it's a dark blue and maroon affair. A pint of Flowers will cost you £1.90, as will a pint of Boddingtons.
New Globe, 359 Mile End Rd (0181 981 4383) Mile End tube. Open Mon-Wed 12noon-12midnight, Thur, Fri 12noon-2am, Sat 6pm-2am, Sun 6-10.30pm.

Eating out

Lahore Kebab House
This legendary kebab house has many imitators around Commercial Road, but none has yet managed to equal the Lahore's high standards. The karahi gosht is well spiced and full of tender lamb; the seekh kebabs are flavoursome and freshly herbed. The culture clash between tables of bluff City boys and the waiters may explain why the service can sometimes appear a tad surly. BYO, and pay around £12 per head.
Lahore Kebab House, 2 Umberston St, E1 (0171 488 2551) Aldgate East or Whitechapel tube/Shadwell DLR. Open daily 12noon-12midnight.



New Tayyab
This former pub is the latest (and plushest) arm of the small but expanding Tayyab empire that also includes the sheekh kebab house and sweet outlet at numbers 85 and 89. It successfully combines authentic Punjabi specialities such as a meat biryani (£3.50) that looks like the Pakistani version of Desperate Dan's cow pie, with aggressively but expertly spiced karahi dishes, kebabs and samosas. Although non-Muslims are welcomed, New Tayyab's core business comes from devotees from the nearby mosque and so alcohol is tolerated rather than encouraged and bottles are best kept out of sight. Pay around a tenner per head.
New Tayyab, 83 Fieldgate St, E1 (0171 247 9543) Aldgate East or Whitechapel tube. Open daily 5pm-12midnight daily.

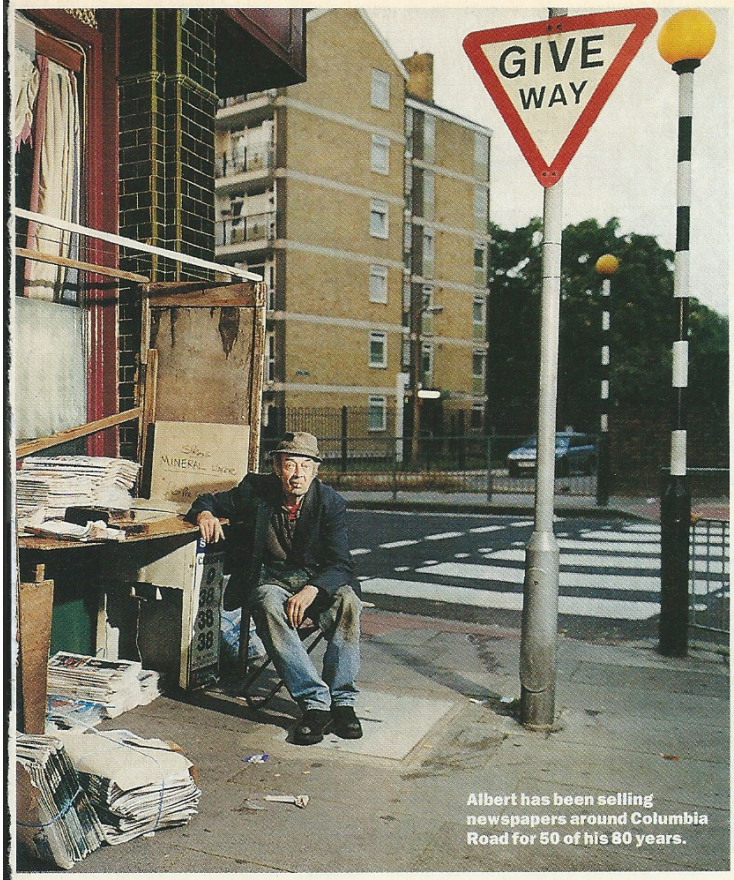
Tiffin
The Tiffin is an unexpected find in a busy side street behind the Royal London Hospital. The adventurous menu features such delights as 'Some Like It Hot' (tandoori chicken cooked in spices and olive oil, £9.95 with rice) and vegetable thali (£10.95). The own-made chutneys are almost worth a visit in themselves. Décor is in a smart, modern, high-street style; all starched napkins and tablecloths, but the service is welcoming and efficient.
Tiffin, 165 Cannon St Rd, E1 (0171 702 3832) Whitechapel tube/Shadwell DLR. Open daily 12noon-3pm; dinner served Mon-Thur, Sun 5.30pm-12midnight, Fri, Sat 5.30pm-12.30am.



Yutaka and Toru park up their 1965 Ford Cortina to enjoy a bagel on Brick Lane.

Shopping

Bicycle Magic
A small bicycle shop with a trendy blue frontage and a cheery yellow interior. Although the range of bikes is small: Muddy Fox from £199.99, Silverfox from £129 and and Daewoo from £139, the staff are both knowledgeable and helpful. A fair range of accessories is available and the shop also undertakes repairs.
Bicycle Magic, 187 Whitechapel Rd, E1 (0171 375 2993) Whitechapel tube. Open Mon-Fri 9am-6pm, Sat 10am-5pm.



Albert has been selling newspapers around Columbia Road for 50 of his 80 years.

Bethnal Green

Pubs & bars

The Approach Tavern
Both a traditional pub and an art gallery of work by young British talent, The Approach caters to a mix of East End locals, middle-aged art types and their younger, combat-clad counterparts. The décor leans heavily towards wood – floors, tables and pews – with arty photos lining the walls. The fine selection of beers includes London Pride at £2 a pint and Ruddles at £1.90, plus an above-average food menu. It's a friendly enough crowd but, for the conversation-wary, board games are available.
The Approach Tavern, 47 Approach Rd, E2 (0181 980 2321) Bethnal Green tube. Open Mon-Sat 12noon-11pm, Sun 12noon-10.30pm.

Cavalier
A backstreet bar with a curious and eclectic mix of furnishings and knick-knacks. There's a red telephone box, with attendant mannequin, plus everything from model planes, framed newspaper headlines, stuffed animals, US car plates, rifle racks and road signs adorning the walls, ceiling and bar. While it may, initially, seem a tad gaudy, the overall effect is quite cheery; kind of like being in a theatre props department, only with beer. A pint of John Smith's Extra Mild comes in at £1.50.
Cavalier, 89 Dunbridge St, E2 (0171 729 6048) Bethnal Green tube. Open Mon-Sat 11am-11pm, Sun 12noon-10.30pm.

The Cock & Comfort
Fair-sized cheery gay bar with an equally cheery blue and yellow décor. The staff are friendly, the pub has a late licence for weekends and there's regular cabaret, ie drag. Although the name of the pub may or may not be an intentional pun, the names on the toilet doors – Cocks and Hens – surely are.
Cock & Comfort, 359 Bethnal Green Rd, E2 (0171 729 1090) Bethnal Green tube. Open Mon-Thur 4-11pm, Fri 2pm-2am, Sat 1pm-2am, Sun 12noon-12midnight.

Royal Oak
A small and unashamedly shabby bar that caters mainly to the local gay community, the Royal Oak truly blossoms when the Columbia Road Flower Market is in full swing on Sundays. Then opening times are dead early and the regulars are joined by market traders, tourists, the post-club crowd and OAPs. At these times, the Oak serves hot drinks and breakfasts. The well worn bar is surrounded by mismatched wooden tables, chairs, stools and upholstered bench-sofas. The convivial atmosphere is increased by the upstairs Crazy Maracas Tex-Mex café-bar.
73 Columbia Rd, E2 (0171 739 8204) Bus 26, 48, 55. Open Mon-Sat 11am-2am, Sun 8am-10.30pm.

Eating out

Blue Orange
Climb up the old stairs leading from a cobbled courtyard for this bit of east London bohemia. Space is at a premium on Sundays, because of the flower market, but it's worth battling through for shots of espresso, cappuccinos and creamy hot chocolate. Croissants and cakes – including lemon, carrot and Portuguese pasteis de nata – are displayed at the counter. A few sandwiches, such as ciabatta with mozzarella and tomato, are the extent of the savouries.
Blue Orange, 65 Columbia Rd, E2 (0171 366 9272) Bus 26, 48, 55. Open Sat 9am-4pm, Sun 7.30am-4pm.

E Pellicci
The grand wood inlay walls of Pellicci's make the place look like the dining room of a 1920s transatlantic liner. But that's where the similarities stop. The friendly Pellicci family serve sandwiches, fry-ups and some rough 'n' ready lunch options. A set breakfast costs £3.80. Pellicci's is practically an institution, and one that attracts local wide-boys, the morning-after brigade and punters from far and wide with its unique ▶


Kitty Nelson has lived in Carlton Square for 61 years.

Co-op Welcome
A new venture for the Co-Op this: one of a small but growing chain of 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week convenience stores that stock more than enough fruit, vegetables and groceries for your last-minute needs, together with an above-average selection of wines and beers.
Co-op Welcome, 193-197 Mile End Rd, E1 (0171 790 2371) Stepney Green tube. Open 24 hours.

Freedom Press Bookshop
This place lurks at the bottom of a small mural-clad alley and looks like a porn shop. Enter to discover its true nature: publisher and distributor of anarchist and alternative social and political literature. A friendly and fascinating place, titles include 'Culture and Anarchism' at £6.95, 'People Without Government' at £7.95, and 'The Heretic's Handbook of Quotations', a must-have for any subversive wordsmith at £11.95.
Freedom Press Bookshop, Angel Alley, 84B Whitechapel High St, E1 (0171 247 9249) Aldgate East tube. Open Mon-Fri 10.30am-6pm, Sat 11am-5pm.

J Rogg Delicatessen
Customers travel from all over for the 'superior home-style' Jewish food provided by this deli. Choose fried gefilte fish for £1 each, or vegetable and potato latkes from 90p. There's also a plentiful supply of cheesecakes, pickles, bagels, borscht and matzos.
J Rogg Delicatessen, 137 Cannon St, E1 (0171 488 3368) Aldgate East or Whitechapel tube. Open Mon-Fri 9am-5.30pm, Sun 7am-2.30pm.

Neils Sports Trophies
A cornucopia of tankards, plaques, shields, lead crystal bowls, medals and statuettes. You don't just have to order trophies for your club or society, however, as Neils will also engrave orders for anniversaries and birthdays. Prices range from a diminutive £2.75 for a small plaque, up to a massive £350 for a large-scale silver plate trophy cup. Engraving costs extra.
Neils Sports Trophies, 59 Mile End Rd, E1 (0171 702 8200) Whitechapel or Stepney Green tube. Open Mon-Wed, Fri 9.30am-5pm, Thur 9.30am-4pm, Sat 9.30am-1pm.

Things to do

Genesis Mile End
A relative newcomer to the East End entertainment circuit – it opened at the beginning of May – the Genesis Mile End is a small but colourful five-screen cinema that shows all the usual major releases, together with a small selection of Asian films.
Genesis Mile End, 93-95 Mile End Rd, E1 (0171 780 2000) Stepney Green or Whitechapel tube. Adm adults Mon-Thur £3.20 before 6pm, £4 after, Fri-Sun £4.50, concs £3.20, students £3.

Whitechapel Art Gallery
A fine two-level gallery that has undergone some recent renovations, the Whitechapel continues to display challenging and interesting shows. It also organises lectures and workshops and has a café and bookshop.
Whitechapel Art Gallery, 80-82 Whitechapel High St, E1 (0171 522 7878) Aldgate East tube. Open Tue, Thur-Sun 11am-5pm, Wed 11am-8pm.

Whitechapel Bell Foundry
Established in 1570, this foundry has cast some pretty famous bells in its time: Bow Bells, The Liberty Bell and Big Ben among them. A piece of the latter can be found hanging over the inside entrance. Although you can easily view the many photos that plaster the reception walls, a Saturdays-only visit to the foundry itself can be made by appointment, but be prepared for a long wait as it's currently taking bookings for 2001.
Whitechapel Bell Foundry, 32-34 Whitechapel tube. Open Mon-Fri 8am-5.30pm, Sat tour starts 10am, finishes approx 11.30am, cost £7.

Whitechapel Sports Centre
Fairly new fitness centre that contains a fully equipped gym, multipurpose sports hall, floodlit AstroTurf pitch, sauna and sunbeds. It also offers the full gamut of aerobic classes, as well as boxercise for £4.40 and yoga at £4.25. There's even a small café on-site, should all this rampant exercise leave you feeling a little peckish.
Whitechapel Sports Centre, Durward St, E1 (0171 247 7538) Whitechapel tube. Open Mon-Fri 7am-9pm, Sat, Sun 8am-6pm.



interior, good food and free-flowing banter; and all at caff prices.
E Pellici, 332 Bethnal Green Rd, E2 (0171 739 4873) Bethnal Green tube/D6, 8 bus. Open Mon-Sat 6.30am-5pm.

Jones Dairy
This tiny café lies just behind the Jones Dairy shop. Its popularity and the virtually non-existent seating mean that, on dry Sundays, customers cluster outside on the pavement. In the winter they stand around the wood-burning stove. Mugs of hot chocolate, tea or coffee are accompanied by generously filled bagels, cakes and pastries. The equally petite shop sells international teas, coffees, bread, real cheese and a few quality larder staples.
Jones Dairy, 23 Ezra St, off Columbia Rd, E2 (0171 739 5372) Bus 26, 48, 55. Open Thur-Sat 9am-3pm, Sun 8am-2pm.

Pearl of Siam
This restaurant's gloomy interior is just aching for a cheery lift. That aside, it's unusual for a Thai restaurant to list 130 items on the menu and do most of them well. Chicken wings, pead gai yad sai, had been deftly deboned and stuffed with crab, prawn and minced chicken, served with a hot, sweet chilli dip, did well as a crunchy starter. Pla jian, a Thai classic of deep-fried fish in a sauce of ginger, yellow bean sauce, chillies, ginger and onions, rang a change with tropical tilapia fish instead of boring cod. Nice food, even if the place is a little grubby.
Pearl of Siam, 107 Roman Rd, E2 (0181 980 1676) Bethnal Green tube/8 bus. Open Mon-Fri 12noon-3pm, 6-11pm; Sat, Sun 6-11pm.

Thai Garden
The English proprietor and his Thai chef wife have honed their menu to a superb level of meatless Thai cooking, right from the starters. Kratong tong, little pastry shells filled with finely diced curried potatoes, carrots and sweetcorn, were cupfuls of spicy, crunchy flavour. The chef had seafood cooking down to a tee – pla gung, jumbo butterfly prawns in a dryish sauce with vegetable achar (a chutney) reached the parts other prawn dishes don't. Pla prio wan is deep-fried pomfret bathed in a hot, sweet and sour sauce that oozed with heady, herby nuances. Pay £20 or more per head with drink.
Thai Garden, 249 Globe Rd, E2 (0181 981 5748) Bethnal Green tube/8 bus. Open Mon-Fri 12noon-2.45pm, 6-10.45pm; Sat, Sun 6-10.45pm.

Shopping

AP Kirby
This soft furnishings and bedding suppliers is housed in one of the oldest buildings in the area (about 400 years old) and sits on the edge of the Boundary Estate, which is, likewise, one of London's oldest estates. Here you can buy duvets from £20, large floor cushions from £14, scatter cushions from £1.20 and all manner of lounge suites, bedspreads, pillows and foams and foam stuffing.
AP Kirby, 74 Swanfield St, E2 (0171 739 1915) Bethnal Green tube/8 bus. Open Mon-Fri 9am-5pm.

Balls Brothers
Headquarters for the wine merchants that supply wine bars and restaurants in London's Square Mile and beyond. Although most customers are trade or wholesale, Balls Brothers do cater to the public. There's a direct mail facility, but you can order in the morning and pick up later the same day, and receive a 5 per cent discount for on-the-spot collection. Minimum order is one mixed case.
Balls Brothers, 309-317 Cambridge Heath Rd, E2 (0171 739 6466) Bethnal Green tube. Open Mon-Fri 9am-6pm.

The Bric-a-Brac Shop
Come here for old clothes, academic tomes, classic novels and art books, as well as next-to-nothing records. All proceeds go to the London Buddhist Centre upstairs. And that's not all that's affiliated to this transcendental outpost. There's vegetarian restaurant The Cherry Orchard (0181 980 6678), New Age knick-knacks shop Evolution (0181 981 7219), the Jambala Bookshop (0181 981 4037), acupuncture-tastic alternative health centre Bodywise (0181 981 6938) and the healthy Friends Foods (0181 980 1843).
The Bric-a-Brac Shop, 51 Roman Rd, E2 (0181 981 1225) Bethnal Green tube. Open Mon, Fri 12noon-6pm, Tue-Thur 11am-6pm, Sat 12noon-5.30pm.



Playing pool at Cavalier.

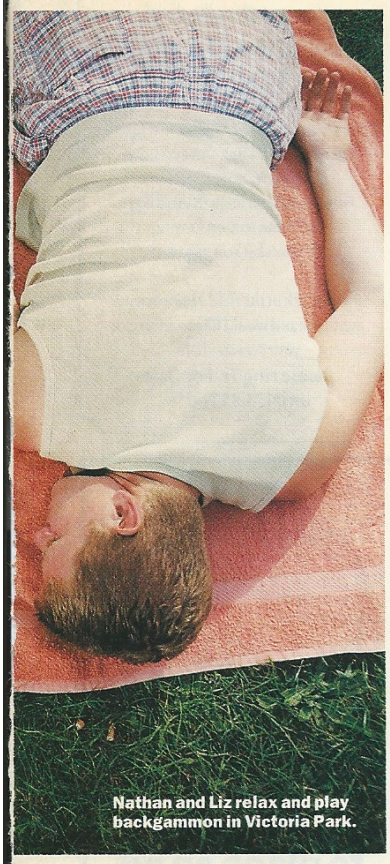
Columbia Glassworks
Glass workshop founded by Nick Blackmore and Ed Nevill that specialises in graceful multicoloured bottles, gorgeous vases and spherical lamps covered in coloured antennae. Their work has garnered commissions from the likes of Alexander McQueen and is stocked by Purves & Purves, Harrods, Liberty and Eccentrics, while other ranges are available direct from the workshop.
Columbia Glassworks, 15 Sunbury Workshops, Swanfield St, E2 (0171 613 5155) Bethnal Green tube/8 bus. Open by appointment only

The Herbalists
The Herbalists describes itself as 'a traditional European herbal apothecary'. It not only sells herbal medicines, but also contains a clinic to treat patients with same. It's a strange place, all bright pine and minimalist décor, with row upon row of bottles bearing strange names such as Maitaka and *Berberis aquifolium*. The shop also produce essential oils, soaps, bath oils, massage gels and face creams and provide a mail order service.
The Herbalists, 140 Columbia Rd, E2 (0171 729 9266/mail order enquiries 0171 739 9344) Bus 26, 48, 55. Open Tue-Sat 9am-5pm, Sun 8am-4pm.

Things to do

Backyard Comedy Club
Local-boy comedian Lee Hurst's purpose-built venue opened in a former dress factory just over a year ago. There's no air conditioning, so things can get a little sweaty for performers and punters alike. Hurst's comedy clout and industry nous ensure a fine line-up, with the man himself compering on occasion, there's a basic food menu to soak up the booze, and a disco after the shows.
Backyard Comedy Club, 231-237 Cambridge Heath Rd, E2 (0171 739 3122) Bethnal Green tube. Starts 8.30pm, doors open 7.30pm, disco and bar to 2am. Adm £10, concs £7.

Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood
With its huge collection of dolls, doll houses, teddy bears, toy soldiers, spinning tops and more, together with a modest display of 'Star Wars' merchandise, this is more of a must-see



Nathan and Liz relax and play backgammon in Victoria Park.

Hackney

Pubs & bars

291
The ruins of the former St Augustine's neo-gothic church have been transformed into a stunning multi-purpose venue made up of huge art gallery (in what was the nave) and small but impressive restaurant serving modern European food such as roasted saddle of lamb, with tabbouleh, kumeriac and zhug for £14. The narrow bar is quiet most weeknights, but hots up at weekends, when there's DJs and bands.
291, 291 Hackney Rd, E2 (0171 613 5676) Bethnal Green tube/22, 48, 55 bus. Open Tue-Thur 12noon-12midnight, Fri, Sat 12noon-2am, Sun 10am-5pm. Adm after 10pm Thur-Sat £3-£6.

Dove Freehouse
A cosy environment where pot plants and other leafy things tend to dominate every available window ledge. Furniture is a mish-mash of round and square tables, ceramic-topped, wooden or otherwise and chairs, stools, pews and benches. More than a hundred Belgian beers are available – including the deadly Delirium Tremens at 9 per cent ABV. Downstairs is an eatery, with a menu of warming stews and hotpots, with some vegetarian dishes. Most meals cost around £7.
Dove Freehouse, 24-26 Broadway Market, E8 (0171 275 7617) Bethnal Green tube/London Fields BR. Open Mon-Thur 12noon-11pm, Fri, Sat 12noon-11pm (12midnight for diners), Sun 12noon-10.30pm.

Pub on the Park
A convivial, open-plan place, with bare floorboards and pot plants. The fairweather favourite is the large wooden verandah overlooking London Fields, where you can view Blur's parklife in all its football-playing, frisbee-throwing, dog-walking splendour.
Pub on the Park, 19 Martello St, E8 (0171 275 9586) London Fields BR/38, 242, 253, 277 bus. Open Mon-Thur 11am-11pm, Fri, Sat 11am-12midnight, Sun 12noon-10.30pm.

Samuel Pepys
This unashamedly shabby venue is as unpretentious as they come. It's a theatre bar – with the board-treading going on upstairs. Downstairs there's a small stage that hosts jazz and folk, plus occasional comedy nights. Both the staff and the music lean towards the crusty, but patrons can be anyone from office worker to traveller to theatre-goer.
Samuel Pepys, 289 Mare St, E8 (0181 533 7709) Hackney Central BR. Open Mon 12noon-3pm, 5pm-12midnight; Tue-Thur 12noon-3pm, 5pm-12.30am; Fri 12noon-3pm, 5pm-1am; Sat 7pm-1am, Sun 7-10.30pm.

Eating out

Café Alba
Large helpings at low prices ensure the loyalty of this BYO caff's many fans. This is a studenty kind of place, with unmatched tables, art on the walls and a list of dishes displayed on a whiteboard. There are Indian-inspired meals (chick-pea and mushroom curry), but most punters order the filling meat-and-two-veg options, such as lamb in mustard cream sauce or the hearty and generously portioned steak bourguignon. Those with gargantuan appetites can enjoy the likes of apple and berry crumble or banoffi pie.
Café Alba, 183 Mare St, E8 (0181 985 8349) Hackney Central BR/26, 48, 55, 106, 236, 253, D6 bus. Open Mon-Fri 11am-11pm, Sat 10am-11pm.

Hai-Ha
This is as superior an oriental caff as you'll find, with a number of the special Vietnamese dishes on the 130-plus item menu not available for takeaway as they are deemed 'best served in-house'. Chinese and Vietnamese dishes are jumbled up together, but all are fresh and stuffed with ingredients of a quality to put much of Chinatown to shame. Soups with own-made ho fun are recommended, as are such rarely found dishes as the laboriously named bun thit de xao lan xa ot – slices of goat fried with lemongrass and chilli, served with rice vermicelli and Vietnamese herbs. It'll cost under a tenner per head.
Hai-Ha, 206 Mare St, E8 (0181 985 5388) Hackney Central BR/26, 48, 55 bus. Open Mon-Thur, Sun 12noon-11.30pm, Fri, Sat 12noon-12midnight.

Indochine
Surrounded by grim office blocks, Indochine provides a welcome injection of sleek design and classy cooking into an area not renowned for either. Owner Sean La was born in Vietnam (into an ethnic Chinese family) but has been living in the UK for over 20 years. The word 'ambitious' scarcely does justice to his menu, which takes in not just the cuisines of China and Vietnam but Malaysia and Thailand too. Pay under £15 per head.
Indochine, 121-123 Mare St, E8 (0181 986 0031) Cambridge Heath or London Fields BR/26, 48, 55, 106, 277 bus. Open Mon-Fri 12noon-2.30pm, 5.30-11.30pm; Sat, Sun 5.30-11.30pm.

Little Georgia
Pub conversion serving food from Georgia – as in the former Soviet republic. We tried the lunchtime 'meze' menu: dishes are great value at £1.50 each, particularly as flavours are fresh, focused and captivating. Pre-meze we downed a creamy, refreshing akroshka soup (yoghurt, peas, dill, potatoes, spring onion and cucumber). Mushroom blini combined well-seasoned rice and mushrooms, while potato and dill prizohki had a classic crisp, light surface and a gently peppery potato and dill stuffing bearing creamy cheese flavours. Ajabsandali (peppers and aubergine in a walnut sauce) offered a gorgeous depth of roasted flavours, while a generous walnut and garlic tang enlivened the spinach pkhali. Friendly service and a delightful atmosphere rounded off the experience. Pay under £20 per head.
Little Georgia, 2 Broadway Market, E8 (0171 275 0208) Bethnal Green tube/London Fields BR/26, 48, 55, 106, 236 bus. Open Tue-Sat 6.30-10.30pm, Sun 1-4pm. ▶

for adults who haven't grown up yet, so it's a shame that so many kids are allowed to run riot around its two-level confines. Still, there's a nice garden to provide welcome respite should the toddler tantrums get too much.
Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood, Cambridge Heath Rd, E2 (0181 983 3204/recorded info 0181 980 2415) Bethnal Green tube. Adm free. Open Mon-Thur, Sat 10am-5.50pm, Sun 2.30-5.50pm.

Camerawork
Well established photographic centre with some excellent facilities, including a darkroom and multimedia studio for the disabled and graded fees, depending on whether you're waged, unwaged of part-waged. There's also a very good range of Apple Macs for still and video digital work.
Camerawork, 121 Roman Rd, E2 (0181 980 6256) Bethnal Green tube. Open Tue 2-10pm, Wed 10am-6pm, Thur 12noon-8pm, Fri, Sat 10am-6pm.

Geffrye Museum
Walk through 400 years of of English interiors at these eighteenth-century almshouses and a modern extension. A series of rooms reconstructed in period style make for an atmospheric journey through the ages. The '70s are a hoot. During December, exhibits are dressed appropriately and in the summer free jazz and world music concerts are given on the front lawns. There's also a reading room, shop, restaurant and gallery, together with a walled herb garden open from April to October.
Geffrye Museum, Kingsland Rd, E2 (0171 739 9893) Old St tube/BR then 243 bus/Liverpool St tube/BR then 22a, 22b, 149 bus. Adm free. Open Tue-Sat 10am-5pm, Sun, bank holiday Mon 2-5pm.

Oxford House
Founded in 1884, this community centre offers up a real mixed bag. There's a café-cum-gallery that specialises in Somali food and houses exhibitions by local artists, a gym, plus sports from keep fit to dancing, kung fu to kick boxing, as well as pensioners groups and play schemes for children.
Oxford House, Derbyshire St, E2 (0171 739 9001) Bethnal Green tube. Open Mon-Fri 9.30am-7pm, Sat 10am-1pm, Sun 10am-2pm.



Mrs Smith and Jean Sully walk their dogs in Victoria Park.

Shopping

Hackney Angling Centre
This tackle and bait specialist claims to probably hold East London's largest under-one-roof selection and stocks equipment by the likes of Drennan, Browning, Ryobi, Sundridge, Silstar, JRC, Leeda, Richworth, Fox Mitchell, Steadfast, Carp Co, Dam and Middy. It also deals in second-hand goods and offers finance on Browning Poles. There's even membership to a fishing club, with match outings every other Sunday. Dedicated enthusiasts shouldn't let this one get away.
Hackney Angling Centre, 28 Broadway Market, E8 (0171 275 0059) Bethnal Green tube/London Fields BR. Open Mon-Thur 9am-5pm, Fri, Sat 9am-6pm.

H&D Fireplaces
Forced to vacate its Essex Rd premises due to greedy Islington Council's rising business rates and frankly draconian parking regulations, H&D decided to relocate to a set of railway arches in Hackney. With between 200 and 300 antique fire surrounds in marble, metal and wood (£875-£1,850 exc VAT), you can also choose from a range of hearths, stone and ironwork, gas coal effect fires and antique furniture.
H&D Fireplaces, arches 381, 382, 385 Mentmore Terrace, E8 (0181 533 7799) London Fields BR. Open Mon-Sat 10am-5pm.

Litvinoff & Fawcett
Top tip when looking for a well-constructed bed: grab one corner and shake with all your might. If it wobbles alarmingly, or the panic-stricken staff come running over, excuses pouring from their mouths, then run away. If it fails to budge and you feel yourself getting dizzy, you've found yourself a winner. Needless to say, the slatted pine beds made here budge not a jot and come with a lifetime structural guarantee. They also make mattresses and headboards, but the furniture available is imported from elsewhere.
Litvinoff & Fawcett, 281 Hackney Rd, E2 (0171 739 3480) Bethnal Green tube/22, 48, 55 bus. Open Mon-Fri 10am-6pm, Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 10.30am-2.30pm.

McQueens
Cult florists that have now expanded out from their original Clerkenwell store, McQueens specialise in dramatic, yet deceptively simple arrangements. This new store has only been open a couple of months and is a large and airy affair. Plants and arrangements can cost as little as a couple of pounds and rise up to a couple of hundred, as can the various vases and bowls. For those wishing to take their interest in plants further, McQueens also offer forestry and floristry classes, with a one-day course at £150 and a four-week course for £2,000 (both excluding VAT).
McQueens, 130 Lauriston Rd, E9 (0181 510 0123) 277 bus. Open Mon-Fri 9am-6pm, Sat 10am-6pm.

Nautilus
Dive deep and dive well with the aid of stock such as ScubaPro, Mares and Aqualung. There's dry suits from £500, wet suits from £200 and shorties from £60. As well as kit and accessories, Nautilus also sells, tests and refills tanks for customers.
Nautilus, 197-199 Mare St, E8 (0181 985 9970) Bethnal Green tube. Open Mon-Fri 9am-6pm, Sat 9am-5pm.



The Lighthouse Theatre Company presents 'Perambulators' at London Fields.

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Things to do

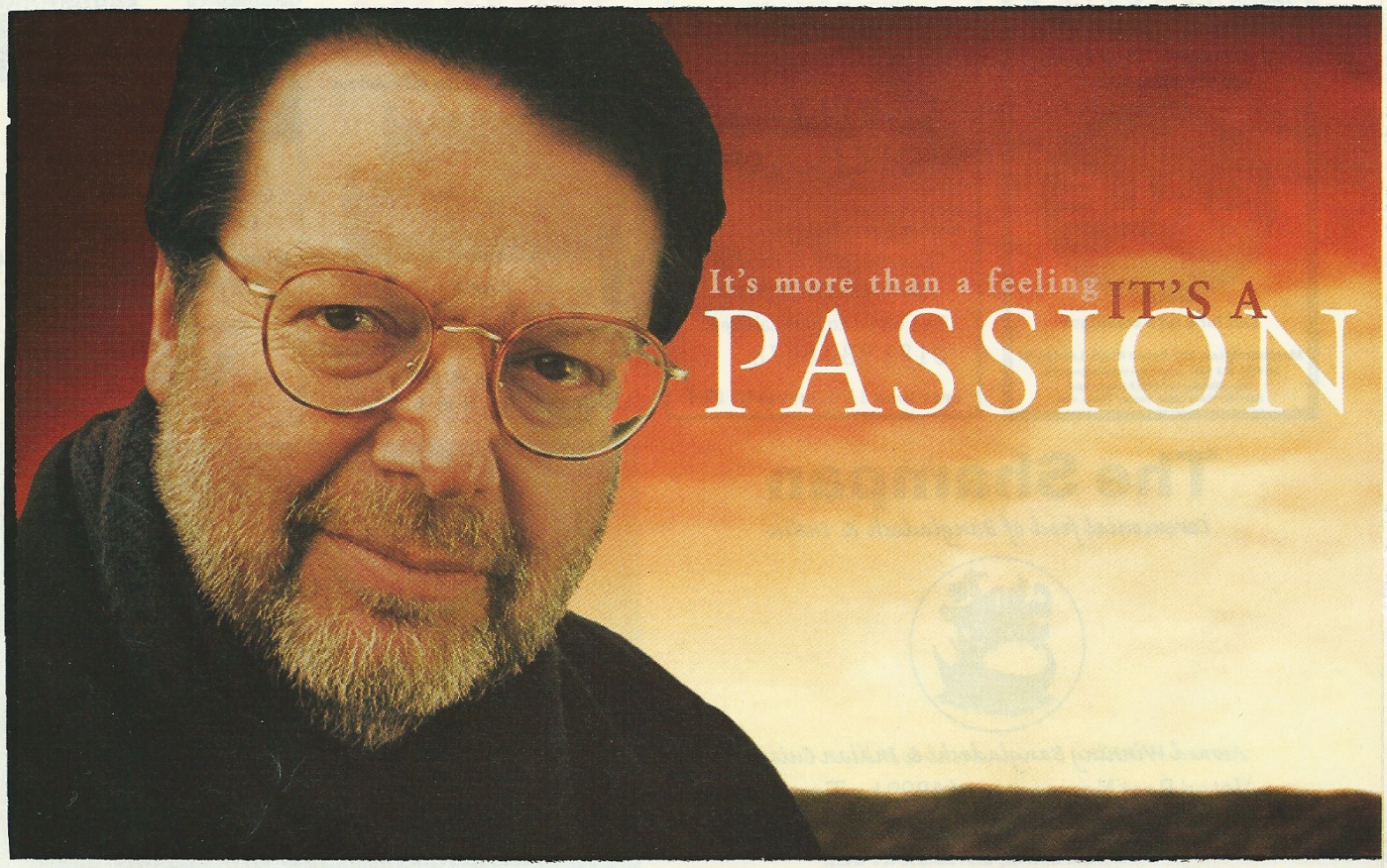
Hackney City Farm
A registered charity, established in 1984, that aims to bring the countryside to urban folk. It's a delightful place, full of hens, geese, ducks, one enormous turkey, pigs, rabbits, guinea pigs and sheep. Animal sponsorship (from £10 for a hen up to £350 for a pig), allows you to visit, feed, pet and exercise your chosen animal; there's a small café and shop, a large garden and regular events and activities. A great inner-city escape.
Hackney City Farm, 1A Goldsmiths Row, E2 (0171 729 6381) Bethnal Green tube/ 22, 48, 55 bus. Open Tue-Sun 10am-4.30pm. Adm free, donations welcome.

Hackney Empire
A Grand Dame that always teeters on the brink of oblivion, only to prove the original comeback kid, the Empire is a Grade II listed building, modelled on the great Italian opera houses. Once one of London's best music halls, it is still a popular theatre that regularly features comic talent, musicals and bands.
Hackney Empire, 291 Mare St, E8 (0181 985 2424) Hackney Central BR/30, 38, 242, 277 bus. Adm £8.50-£18.50. Box-office open Mon-Sat 12noon-6pm.

Hackney Museum
Currently without a home – its previous abode, Central Hall, is being converted into a major new music venue called Ocean – the Hackney Museum won't be moving into new premises until at least Autumn 2000. Until then a sporadic programme of touring exhibitions, exploring Hackney's culture and heritage, is in place in various Hackney venues.
Further information on 0181 986 6914.



The Allali family enjoy a half-time rest after playing football in Victoria Park.



Ecco Shop, 445 Oxford Street (opposite Selfridges). For more information on

Shop making sense

Switched on consumers have turned the world's biggest shopping mall – the internet – into a multi-billion-pound business. As the industry readies itself for the revolution to go mainstream, we tell you why you'd be mad to buy-pass it. Report **Nick Barlay** Illustration **Stephen Parkes**

The sound of a toilet flushing in the restroom of www.intermall-america.com says much about on-line shopping. This is not a comment on quality but on the jokey downloadable reference to the off-line world, which some of us still insist on calling 'the real world'. With 25 per cent of Londoners now connected to the internet and the UK's 1999 on-line shopping worth up to an estimated £3 billion, Intermallamerica's flushing toilet is no more than a memento of how things used to be in a quaint past where you actually had to 'go' shopping and 'use' a toilet.

In other words, gold rush fever is taking hold. Within a year of the discovery of gold in California in 1848, some 50,000 prospectors were digging and sifting. Within a year of a standing start, Freeserve has created a 32 million-strong on-line nation. In his recent speech on e-commerce, Tony Blair emphasised that 'if you don't see the internet as an opportunity it will be a threat'. His expectation that the net will be as 'commonplace as the telephone' is his way of waving the national flag in the general direction of the gold: an anticipated £10b e-commerce revenue next year. Unfortunately, now, as then, nobody quite understands the big rush or remembers what they've gone shopping for. But something is happening.

According to Datamonitor's pioneering research into European attitudes towards new technologies, 'on-line ordering in the UK is on the verge of going mainstream'. And London's 3 million on-liners are shopping their way to what many in the e-commerce industry refer to as 'internet fulfilment': you point, you click, you receive. Yesterday's 'go west' is today's 'go on-line' and the Prime Minister's message, aimed at companies and consumers alike, is: just get there and see.

Many reading this will, of course, already have been there. Datamonitor says that 39 per cent of UK on-line shoppers have spent over £250 on internet products in the last year and 5 per cent bank on-line. Tales of Amazon's 24-hour cut-price books and Audiostreet's cut-price CDs have filtered through to even the most hardened of technophobes. Some athletic types fail to see the irony of ordering all-terrain sports sandals on-line from www.innovations.co.uk; others are seduced by Chantelle's Opaline underwire bra with guipure embroidery from www.brasdirect.co.uk; and souvenir hunters will kill for a $5 personalised toe-tag key chain from the LA County Coroner's Office gift shop at www.lacoroner.com

Early fears that the internet would simply be a pornographer's licence have not so much been allayed as outgrown. The internet has come a long way since the frenzied 3 million hits that reportedly melted the system when *Penthouse* went on-line in 1995. And American satirical magazine the *Onion* once dubbed the internet the 'masturbation superhighway'. For some, it may well be. For the rest of us, it's strictly bras and books, not to mention facial disguises such as the El Macho moustache from www.spybase.com, a new car through www.buycar.co.uk, fireworks from www.kellfire.com, condoms from Prophylactic Pete, the self-styled 'condom cowboy' at www.condoms.com, groceries from www.tescodirect.com, or power tools, wine, hair trimmers, computers, jeans, flowers, furniture…

'With encryption technology improving, fears about security are less of an obstacle to internet fulfilment than cost and efficiency.'

Just as the high street gave way to the mall, so the mall is giving way to the net. As James Kennedy, of internet research and consultancy company NetPoll, points out: 'The mall concept doesn't really mean anything on-line.' After all, if you're in a large mall far from a toilet and suffering from product overkill, you can't simply point, click and trade in the companies themselves as you can at www.etrade.co.uk where real-time trading means 'bye bye broker's percentage'. Or point, click and bid at www.QXL.com, Europe's leading on-line auction house. And how many malls throw free software at you, such as search engines at www.copernic.com? And how many tell you where you can get free stuff as at the often priceless www.net4nowt.com?

If you want it, the chances are you can buy it on-line. Kennedy tells of the man who successfully searched the net for a ferret. The Alibi Agency offers tailor-made alibis to help you fool your partner. Mistress Brandi offers her personal bottled Golden Nectar champagne and a used, unwashed, vacuum-sealed vibrator. And recently, on-line shoppers bid £3.5 million for a 'fully functional' human kidney before auction house eBay blocked the sale.

The kidney fiasco highlights the growing pains of the electronic market. While consumers expect vast choice, easy access and low cost, it does not mean that everything for sale is legal. Nor does it mean that everything legal is a bargain or that every bargain is con-free. The Consumers' Association at www.which.net and the Office of Fair Trading at www.oft.gov.uk give advice on how to shop safely on-line, although they recommend simply to avoid anything dodgy. 'The internet is not a legal vacuum,' were the words used to launch the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) three years ago. Today, Matthew Hare of the Internet Service Providers Association (ISPA), which represents 90 per cent of the UK dial-up market and works closely with IWF, says that the easiest way to get ripped off is 'to give your card number to someone who is selling something that is illegal in the UK'.

While Datamonitor identified consumers' main concern about on-line shopping as credit card security, the truth is that Hare 'can't think of a single instance in [ISPA's] three and a half years' where credit card details entered on-line were used fraudulently. With encryption technology improving, fears about security are less of an obstacle to internet fulfilment than cost and efficiency. Research by Consumers International, intended to be 'a snapshot of consumers' experience of internet shopping', suggests that one in ten orders don't arrive, credit cards are occasionally debited before receipt of goods, and refunds could take months.

A year from now, when the pioneering rush is over, security paranoia has subsided and on-line fulfilment is simply to 'point, click, receive', then we really won't need a virtual mall to remind us of that gritty, sweaty and all too often unrewarding experience called shopping. ●



Sites for sure buys

Click here for a mixed bag of internet shopping from condoms to curries and Harrods hampers to… dancing hamsters?

Guide **Daniel Fryer**

Most people know that you can shop for books on-line at www.amazon.co.uk and that supermarkets such as Sainsbury's and Tesco have had internet shopping for some time. The more style-conscious among you are no doubt anticipating the arrival of sports and streetwear site www.boo.com – delayed until October/November due to technical problems – but here's a selection of places that you may or may not have heard of. Some are obvious, some not so and a few are downright strange. Unless stated, all the sites listed here are based in the UK.

www.beersdirect.com
Delivers beer direct to your door anywhere in the UK, excepting Ireland and the Scottish Highlands or islands. All purchases are by credit card only and you can choose from an extensive range that includes premium beers and lagers (20 bottles of Budvar, £29.99)



www.beersdirect.com



and rare beers (12 bottles of Delirium Tremens, £31.70). All prices include delivery.

www.blackstar.co.uk
An impressively extensive on-line video store that also delivers DVD – worldwide, at low prices. 'A Bug's Life' costs £14.99 (RRP £17.99) and it accepts payments by credit card, cheque or postal order, money transfer and cash. Most orders are dispatched within 24 hours and p&p is currently free. For an extra £2 you can have your purchase gift-wrapped, with a hand-written message included. There's also a hunt service to seek out deleted UK releases.



www.flowersdirect.com

www.condoms4u.com
A fun site and welcome by anyone with an aversion to chemists, Comdomania is one of Europe's largest suppliers of condoms and lubricants. Costs are fairly low (a Mates variety pack of 12 costs £7.50) and your order is dispatched within four days of receipt. The range is extensive: ribbed, flared, flavoured, studded and so on. Should you find yourself spoilt for choice, there's an on-line helper, called Clever Dick, to help you make your selection.

www.currysauce.com
The Curry Sauce Company produces fresh, authentic sauces for restaurants, pubs and private punters alike. There are



six varieties available, from a medium balti up to a hot Madras and each 475g pot goes for £2.99. The minimum order is for six tubs (for the special price of £23.10 including p&p) and an order of 12 gets you a free packet of naan bread (steady!). Delivery is by overnight courier and the site even features recipes.

www.devon.directory.co.uk/siwac/indexsw.html
A very English site called 'Say It with a Cake', whereby a Ms Rosemary Brown of Devonshire can dispatch 'a round 4" diameter rich fruit cake, iced, decorated and attractively packed for that special someone or that special occasion'. You choose the design and the cake is posted first class within the UK for £10 and by air mail to Europe for £11. Credit card orders are not accepted.

www.flowersdirect.com
Promising 'more flower for your money', Flowers Directs usually make up their arrangements in their own workshops and only use relay-florists for same-day delivery. This ensures that, mostly, what you see is what you get. There's seven options for roses alone, ranging from £12.99 to £75, while bouquets start from £22.50. Prices include free next-day delivery. Orders must be placed before 3pm for this service and before noon for same-day delivery. There's an e-mail reminder service and you can even send chocolates too.

www.hamsterdance.com
Okay, so this isn't a UK website and its stock is, um, specialised to say the least, but they do ship overseas for an additional $9.50. If you don't go there for the hampster dance stickers (the misspelling is explained) for $4.95, the mugs for $7.95, or the assorted posters, key chains, fridge magnets, cuddly toys etc, then please just go there for the rows of cartoon hamsters, gyrating wildly to some diddly-dum-de-di-do hick melody. Hysterical and very, very odd.





www.travelocity.co.uk
From desk chair to deck chair at the click of a mouse, this particularly user-friendly site lets you book flights, hire cars, reserve hotels, book the whole package caboodle, trawl through the latest weekend deals on offer and dream of faraway places with the help of its destination guide. The reservations are processed through SABRE, the same system used by many high-street travel agents. You can receive tickets through the post, pick them up at your local travel agent or get them by e-ticket – just bring some photo ID (ie your passport) with you when you check in at the airport.

www.unbeatable.co.uk
A no-frills site that contains hundreds of consumer electronics and accessories – from videos and video tape to cameras and film – at unbeatable prices. Offers include a 28" widescreen Samsung TV for £399, which is, frankly, mad.

www.veganvillage.co.uk/ethical wares
A Dorset-based company, run by vegans, that seeks to trade in a non-exploitative way. Pick things like desert boots at £54.95, sapphire blue mules at £36.95, or from a range of jackets, hats, fleeces, rucksacks, belts and T-shirts. All prices include p&p.

Safety in numbers

Fear over credit card fraud on the net is largely unfounded. Follow our steps to security.

Are you happy sending your credit card details into cyberspace? According to the Consumers' Association, around 76 per cent of the population believes it's unsafe to divulge personal information over the internet.

However, most shopping sites use Secure Socket Layer (SSL) encryption systems, which protect data transmissions, including your all-importants, across the net – a safeguard not present in credit card transactions in shops.

'Visa has yet to come across a single case of a number being stolen from cyberspace.'

Despite a lot of scaremongering, instances of credit card fraud are quite rare. According to figures that Visa collected last year from 15 banks across the EU, while only 1 per cent of Visa transactions were internet-related, those transactions accounted for 47 per cent of all complaints. However, 25 per cent of those were attributable to things such as the wrong item ordered or customer confusion over the Visa bill statement entry. Of the remaining 22 per cent of complaints, Visa says they were more likely related to someone physically stealing credit card numbers and then using them over the net. The company says it has yet to come across a single case of a number being stolen from cyberspace.

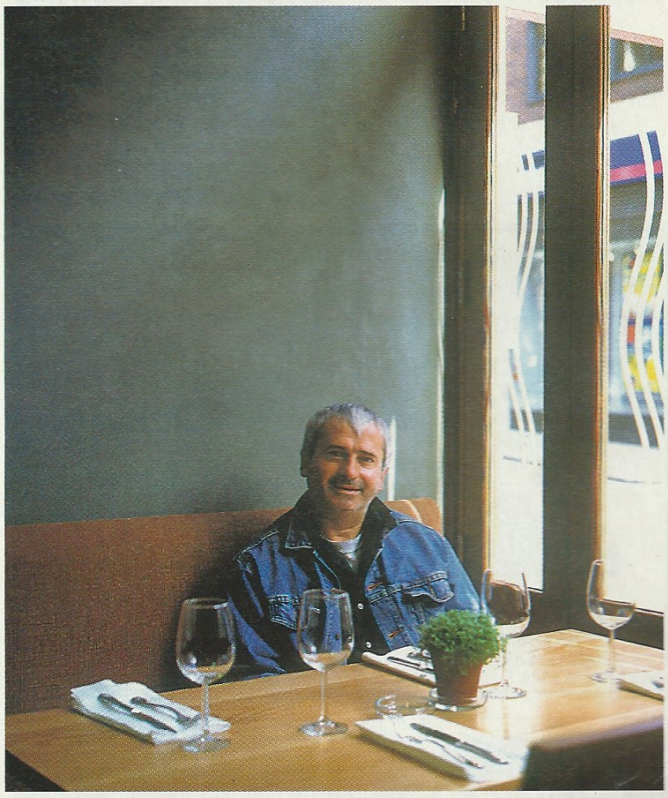
The main problem with on-line shopping, according to a recent study by Consumers International, a report funded by the EU, is that it's a hit and miss affair. The study of 12 countries, including the UK, revealed that, of 150 orders placed, one in ten items failed to turn up, eight took over a month to arrive and that, in two cases, refunds on orders took over five months to come through.

More worrying still is that only 65 per cent of the sites used in the report provided confirmation of the order and only 13 per cent bothered to tell customers their order had been dispatched.

Many shopping sites have hidden extras, such as possible Customs & Excise duties, or neglect to mention important details, such as postage and packaging costs.

However, there are things that you can do to help safeguard your purchases:

- Always read the small print and keep copies of everything including the web site itself, the offer, your order and prices quoted (including p&p) as these may later change.
- Keep copies of any e-mail correspondence entered into. All this information can be easily printed off your computer.
- Be cautious when ordering goods from overseas as it will be much more difficult to pursue a claim.
- Protect all your personal details by only purchasing from sites that use an encryption system for their orders. Sites that use this facility will inform you.
- Try to purchase goods from only those sites that display the Which? Web Trader logo, as these companies will have agreed to abide by a code of practice designed to safeguard your interests.
- For more advice, visit the Office of Fair Trading's website at www.oft.gov.uk *Daniel Fryer*



Al Duca

St James' Italian from Claudio Pulze

Cuisine's Collection may sound like a limited edition crockery set advertised in a Sunday colour supplement, but it's the name of the small team currently producing some of London's best restaurants. Run by Claudio Pulze (pictured above) and Raj Sharma, Cuisine's Collection also run Zaika (one of London's best and most chi-chi modern Indian restaurants) and Frith Street (a good, equally chi-chi modern European restaurant).

Al Duca is also chi-chi, but it's a thoroughbred Italian – despite being curiously titled after the nob whose main claim to fame was that 'he had 10,000 men' (surely a cocky boast). Al Duca's décor is reminiscent of the Parker Knoll era of interior design (circa 1976), but you don't come here for the soft furnishings; it's the food, the prices and the service that will draw you back.

'We adored Michele Franzolin's cooking, especially the pasta.'

Michele Franzolin is the chef, previously of Zafferano, Spiga and the Red Pepper group. We adored his cooking, especially the pasta. It's freshly made every morning from the finest quality durum wheat, served al dente and clearly not pre-cooked. In particular, we could eat the linguine with fresh clams every night; the only adornments are some chopped parsley and chillies which are tangy, but not hot. A simple classic, but perfectly executed.

Starters included thinly sliced smoked swordfish, cured and cut like Parma ham; and pan-fried, butterflied prawns in an unusual saffron vinaigrette. Another pasta dish of reginette (like a thick tagliatelle) was served with a bright green, creamy sauce tasting of fresh peas. A main course of duck leg confit was more French in style, with crisp skin concealing the moist pink meat.

Al Duca is an awesome restaurant on a few counts. The pricing is very fair; low, even, with two courses costing £16 at dinner, three courses for £19, four for £22 (lunches are £2 cheaper). Mark-ups on the well chosen, all-Italian wine are very low. A bottle of the outstanding Verdicchio Dei Castelli di Jesi Classico 1998 from Sartarelli costs £14.50, only a few quid more than retail price. The service is also friendly yet totally professional, with no detail overlooked.

Don't let the stuffiness of the St James location put you off, this grand old duke is currently one of the best Italian restaurants in London – and it's sensational value too. *Guy Dimond*

Dinner for two with a bottle of wine: around £60

Al Duca, 4-5 Duke of York St, SW1 (020 7839 3090) Green Park or Piccadilly Circus tube. Open Mon-Fri 12noon-2.30pm, 7-11pm; Sat 7-11pm.

TONY GIBSON