

Bountiful Bargains at Colombo's Duty Free Shopping Complex

D F Shopper



I had never heard that Colombo had much of a reputation for duty-free shopping; instead, Sri Lanka represented to me an ideal destination for a holiday on pristine beaches or excursions to the ruins of ancient civilizations and historical sites. So it caught me off guard to learn that in addition to the usual duty-free shops a traveller normally expects to encounter at an international airport like the one at Katunayake, Colombo affords the visitor quite a tempting choice of tax free merchandise at a special Duty Free Shopping Complex conveniently situated adjacent to the Ramada Renaissance Hotel at Sir Chittampalam Gardiner Mawatha, Colombo 2. Indeed had I not happened to speak with a guest staying at the hotel. I may never discovered this treasure trove of attractive and attractively priced goods since it doesn't receive the publicity it deserves.

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Assured by my acquaintance that the Complex was well worth a visit, one morning I set aside a few hours along with a few travellers cheques and dollar bills and set off for the easily located premises. I had been informed beforehand that the complex is their Foreign Currency Declaration Form D (the second part of the form every visitor completes when entering the country stating the amount of foreign exchange being brought in). Having been alerted to this, I had the requisite documents in hand and was then quickly and courteously directed from the outside gate to the customs gate inside where a nominal Rs. 25 entrance fee was charged after the speedy inspection of my documents. Once past that minor formality, you are on your own to wander at will throughout the three storeys of the modern and well-maintained building which houses some forty odd shops containing a staggering selection of the best in high-quality imported merchandise all under one roof. With so much bustle going on all around-crowds milling in and out of the many outlets and trollies loaded with crates being wheeled about - it was a little baffling at first to know where to start in this honeycomb of shops. I took the easy way out by entering the nearest shops on the ground floor, those of the Orient Company. In the first they had a tantalizing array of Cadbury's confectionery, imported liquor and wines (including champagne), and many international brands of cigarettes. I was also intrigued to find on nearby shelves a variety of items from cameras to kitchen appliances to electronic goods and even wristwatches with such reputable brand names as Omega. In their adjoining well-stocked shop were elegant displays of a wide range of famous brands of perfumes and cosmetics: Lancome, Elizabeth Arden, Chanel, Nina Ricci and others.

Moving on to the next shop, I was again surprised by the medley of apparently disparate product lines. Premasiri's not only had a fine selection of alcoholic beverages - especially Larson's cognac, McDonald's whisky and Oranjboom beer-but all manner of internationally known toiletries, cigarettes and kitchen and other household appliances including such diverse items as vacuum cleaners, gas cookers and microwave ovens, as well as various articles of clothing and linen. Still startled by the amazing assortment of merchandise to be found in a single shop in this complex, I chanced into Uni-Walkers to find myself confronted with seemingly every sort and size of tape decks, televisions, cassette players, washing machines, fine china and sparkling crystalware, clocks, radios, stereos...And all of the products were well-known brands with excellent reputations for reliability and quality. In particular, this outlet is the sole agent for National video equipment.

The Aysha outlet carries numerous reputed international makes of electrical and electronic products including National, Kenwood, Sony, Funai and Philips. Here you could purchase 1Vs and VCRs, portable and pocket radios, electric fans, washing machines, ready-to wear garments and a host of other household appliances. Also on display were Mellaware,

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Arcopal and Arcoroc brands of glassware and crystal.

Another shop overflowing with appliances of every description was ABANS, prominent in its corner location with an arresting signpost listing numerous well-known and reliable manufacturers. Once inside you can spend quite a bit of time looking over their large inventory of domestic labour-saving devices, crockery, ovens, fridges and many more items made by Belling, Russell Hobbs, Hoover, Mitsubishi and other internationally recognized names. Nearby is Tania and Tamara Ltd, which also has an abundance of home appliances as well as TVs and VCRs. Their merchandise-laden shelves are particularly notable for featuring Toshiba brand goods for which they are the sole distributors for many of that company's product lines.

The last store among many which I visited on the ground floor was an appliance dealer, Singhagiri. Their selection of refrigerators, clothes, washers, cassette players, TVs, fan, gas ranges, deep freezers, and more was quite impressive. They proudly pointed out that they are the sole agents for the durable and well-built Korean Samsung range of Kitchen appliances, and they were certainly doing a brisk business in these items.

I then ascended to the first floor via the swift escalator. At Pesons I took my time looking through their shelves full of textiles and garments including Levi's (they are the sole agents here) and Arrow shirts. Also of interest were their sporting goods, toys, leather goods and costume jewellery featuring such exclusive names as Gucci, Etinner Aigner and Lavin. Their line of Vestfrost and Bosch fridges for which they are the sole agents was quite extensive and they also carry many popular brands of electronic goods such as Sony, Sanyo and Toshiba. Additionally they sell these goods at their two duty free shops at the international airport.

Gomez's was another store I soon came across, being initially lured by their attractive window display of lovely china, glassware, fine crystal and elegant sterling silver pieces to grace one's table. Once inside I found a tempting range of fine perfumes: Lacoste, Lanvin, St Laurent, Joy, Anais, just about every brand I had ever seen or heard of. Plus they offer an excellent selection of quality lighters household appliances and electronic goods. And these items are also on sale at their duty-free airport outlet as well.

Remembering a friend -request for a Sony Walkman, I paid a visit to "Siedles the sole agents of the main Sony product line as well as carrying Toshiba and Casio goods such as TVs, wristwatches and radios. The staff were extremely helpful in explaining the features of the different models of the item I had come in search of and I was most impressed by their professional attitude not to mention their competitive prices and well-stocked store.

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Going one more flight up, a corner shop attracted me - Overseas Trades (Lanka) Ltd. I was especially interested in the ranges of non-stick T-Fal cookware and Ravisa Swiss watches in their window display. But inside I also found a variety of useful household goods and kitchen appliances including gas cookers, dinner sets, radios, TVs - all having reliable brand names like Russell Hobbs and National.

An apparently well frequented shop I found on the second floor was the Victory Silk Store which was quite crowded with eager shoppers looking for bargains not in silk, as the name might suggest, but in a wide range of consumer items. These included luggage, electronic goods, telephones, calculators, tape decks, wall clocks and watches, TVs and radios, video cassettes and seemingly endless pieces of diverse merchandise.

Also on the second floor I discovered Shamin's Engineering, the sole distributors for Seb pressure cookers and grinders, calor irons, table fans, and hair dryers and Tefal nonstick cookware and pressure cookers. Also on offer here were VCRs, compact disc players, microwave ovens and hi-fi stereo systems, though this list is hardly exhaustive of what you find in this well-stocked store.

Practically, next door is Saseva International Syndicate, specializing in imported electronic items. If you're in the market for a National radio cassette player, gas cookers, glassware, assorted garments, blenders, toasters, electric kettles or even a rechargeable lantern, this shop stocks them all.

I spent a sizeable amount of time at the Metropolitan Agencies Ltd. store, easy to do considering that they are the sole agents for such quality products as Canon cameras, Rowenta home appliances and Kenwood hi-fi and stereo systems. Also to be found in their shop were Yashica cameras, Parker pens, Casio watches and a well-chosen selection of alcohol and cigarette products. There were yet many more stores left to visit, but after a full morning of browsing along the cool corridors of the Complex (although one could easily spend a whole day there), I instead decided it was time to make a few inquiries about the procedures to be complied with in order to purchase certain items.

According to the regulations, customers make their purchases and collect their receipts after payment (in foreign currency) in the shops at the Complex. The goods are then delivered by the shop to the Duty Free Issue Point of the Customs Special Branch in the Colombo Harbour premises, a few minutes' drive away. Duty-free shop employees are in attendance there to facilitate the process for customers who arrive with their receipts to retrieve what they have bought. If you want to collect your purchases in the afternoon of the same day, they must be -billed that morning or else you will have to go to the Harbour area

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on the following day for pick-up. Moreover, if you are here on a tourist visa and the item you buy is a major appliance such as a TV or a stereo system, then you will need to make arrangements with the shop to transport it to Customs at the airport (not all shops will undertake to do this, and those that do will levy a transport charge) where you can collect it on your departure from the country. On the other hand, small purchases of alcohol, tobacco and fragrances which come within the standard duty-free tourist allowance (see Duty Free Facts) can be paid for and carried away with no more fuss than having your documents stamped by Customs before leaving the Complex. Although the present procedure may seem somewhat cumbersome, it is anticipated that this system will be revised and simplified in the near future so that purchases of greater value can be immediately taken possession of by the customer after payment. All prices, by the way, are quoted in US dollars, payable in any freely convertible currency at the prevailing rate of exchange by cash, travellers cheques or internationally recognized credit cards. Since some shops offer a discount for payment in travellers cheques, it is worth checking on this point before deciding on the method of payment for your purchase. Also since prices vary from shop to shop, resist the temptation to snap up what appears to be a remarkable bargain at first sight until you have checked around in other shops offering the same merchandise. Also remember that stores which are authorized agents of the better known brands of goods give manufacturer's guarantees-which vary from the standard twelve months up to five years in the case of certain items-while other shops which merely stock the same items are not in a position to do so. Come to the complex and enjoy the duty free shopping experience. Monday through Friday (except Poya Full Moon Days and Mercantile Holidays on the calendar) from 9am to 5pm.

Given the extremely varied offering of internationally known quality merchandise sold at such bargain prices by outlets of so many of Colombo's best stores and the polite, helpful salespeople to efficiently serve you, and add to these factors the comfort and convenience of finding it all in such attractive surroundings under one roof even the most jaded buyer will not be able but to agree that the Duty Free Shopping Complex is shopping at its best.

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Goods being delivered at the Duty Free Complex.

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Chocolates for those with a sweet tooth at the Duty Free Shopping Camp.