

## Dawn of a shopping empire

### A new retail centre south of Rome boasts designer goods at discounts of up to 70 per cent



As the sun shines down on the so-called impero dello shopping, a new shopping centre 25 km south of Rome between EUR and Pomezia, it seems a project blessed by the gods. Its neo-classical columns, arches and fortified walls are crowned by windswept blue skies, its streets and squares are tree-lined and dotted with wooden benches, and the shops have to be seen to be believed. Rubbing shoulders in this 20,000 sqm "city" are the likes of Dolce & Gabbana, Etro, Onyx, Diesel, Samsonite, Guess, Stefanel and Massimo Rebecchi. Seventy shops are already trading, and another 25 are due to open in the next few months. However, it's the prices that are the real attraction; the goods are last season's excess stock and therefore cost from 30-70 per cent less than they did originally.

A short foray into the grounds confirms that the prices for a fetching Gilli bag, a steel Lagostina pan, and some Bruno Magli strappy heels are indeed 50 per cent off or more. And though some stores, such as Calvin Klein and Petit Bateau, have limited their reductions to 30-40 per cent, they make up for it with the variety of goods available. Petit Bateau, for instance, carries all its lines for babies to 18-year-olds, whereas their tiny shops in Rome's centre barely cover the 0-6 age range. Furthermore, all the boutiques have been designed to reflect the brands they house, so La Perla is all neutral tones and sleek sophistication, and French kiddies' store Clayeux is a riot of colour and functional clothes racks.

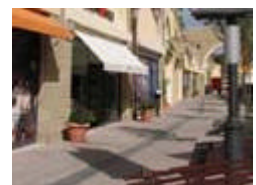
The Castel Romano Outlet, as it is known, is indeed an empire, or at least part of an empire. McArthur Glen, the British company behind the venture, boasts 13 such designer "outlets" in Europe (1,200 shops and over 600 brands) and has an ambitious expansion strategy in this country. Though Castel Romano is only the second McArthur Glen outlet in Italy after the Serravalle Scrivia centre near Genoa, two more will be ready in autumn 2004 and spring 2005, near Padua and Florence respectively. Another two are in the works near Naples and Bari. "Castel Romano is the first outlet of any kind in the centre-south," beams Luca De Ambrosis Ortigara, managing director of McArthur Glen Italia. "We expect 4-5 million visitors a year and a turnover of €100 million."

The venture appears well on track to achieve these figures; in the four weeks following its opening on 9 October, it attracted some 700,000 people.

Customer Valeria Bobbi came with her sister from Rieti and thinks the outlet represents just the sort of cash and employment injection the depressed Rome provinces need. "I hope it will be a way of diverting a lot of people away from the city centre and promoting other areas," she says. One of the staff members at Petit Bateau concurs with this sentiment, saying she is relieved to avoid the long daily commute to the centre of Rome from Casal Palocco where she lives. The boutiques and fashion houses are pleased too; outlets are a way for them to increase their points of sale and maintain control over old collections and surpluses. And they are a way of ensuring that the profits go back to the manufacturers instead of to a vast black market network.

Yet, as with all such heavily publicised and generously-backed commercial ventures, particularly one launched in such economically uncertain times, the project has its share of detractors. Inevitably the most vocal are the city centre shopkeepers who see the outlet as yet another blow in an already depressed business climate. "Obviously someone will have to pay," says De Ambrosis in his perfectly moderated PR tones, "and that's the local street markets, factory outlets and discount stores." He pauses and then says with conviction: "But above all, outlets create new markets and new consumers." However, most people visiting the Castel Romano centre said that if they could buy lots of clothes, including many designer labels, in one convenient and economical swoop, they wouldn't be rushing out to Via dei Giubbonari or Via Condotti for the current season's items.

Who makes sure that the clothes on sale at the outlet are really last season's, and are really discounted as much as they say they are? De Ambrosis says both internal teams of retail



managers and external "mystery shoppers" (who arrive unannounced and remain anonymous) will regularly check on prices, collections and levels of service.

Another potential criticism is the outlet's gaudy appearance. Even enthusiastic Bobbi says she finds the brightly-painted, newly-frescoed and heavily-turreted complex reminiscent of Las Vegas. "It doesn't remind me of the architecture of the Roman Empire at all, I find it quite garish!" she laughs. She also confesses that she finds the whole complex smaller than she imagined, too small for the crowds that will undoubtedly flock here at weekends. And, she asks, what about people who don't have a car? There are plans to operate a shuttle service from the EUR-Laurentina metro stop, say the organisers, but nothing is definite yet. However, when you can flaunt 2,000 parking spaces and 95 shops in one place, selling last season's most fashionable goods at pre-euro prices, all these problems become a bit of a detail. Market research among 18 to 45-year-olds in the Rome area found that 80 per cent of those surveyed would definitely visit the outlet, and over half said they would come at least four times a year. The new empire looks set to conquer Italy.

Castel Romano Outlet, Via Ponte di Piscina Cupa,  
tel. 065050050, [www.mcarthurglen.it](http://www.mcarthurglen.it). Mon-Sun 10.00-22.00.

From the GRA, take exit 26 and then Via Pontina (SS 148) in the direction of Pomezia; turn off at the exit marked Castel Romano.

**Appeared in Wanted in Rome in December 2003** / © Giovanna Dunmall