Travel

Shopping on Main Street, Northampton

By Jane Roy Brown | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | NOVEMBER 18, 2012

Inside Northampton’s Thones Marketplace, the Cedar Chest sells crafts, jewelry, and fine bath and homegoods.

NORTHAMPTON — “The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations,” wrote the late, great urban observer Jane Jacobs. She surely would have spotted this lively choreography on Northampton’s Main Street, from its curving trajectory — it bends nearly 90 degrees — to its human-scale architecture. Vibrant city streets like this one attract with an intricately layered charm: visible history and a bit of mystery, exotic aromas and changing rhythms.
Not coincidentally, these are also the components of a retail paradise. Looking for that perfect pair of hemp slacks? The Hempeست has them. A pair of barely worn, high-heeled, fake-leopard ankle boots? Check Sid Vintage or Urban Exchange. A one-of-a-kind jacket worthy of the opera? Skera Gallery’s wearable art to the rescue. A stained-glass lamp Tiffany would have lusted for? Two superb fine-crafts galleries, Don Muller and Pinch, anchor opposite ends of the street. Leggings in colors to bedazzle a peacock? Prowl 25 Central or Monella in Thornes Marketplace, a warren of boutiques and cafes under one roof. Handmade chocolates? Browse Ben & Bill’s Chocolate Emporium and Heavenly Chocolates, in Thornes.

Every block also offers options for a lunch break or a jolt of java. On Main Street you can feast on a budget (Noodles, Asian noodle soups from $7.95) or splurge on fine cuisine (Spoleto, pasta from $16, secundi from $20). Small ethnic restaurants — Moroccan, Tibetan, Mexican, and a multitude of Asian — alternate with fashionista boutiques and piercing parlors, espresso cafes and vintage clothing stores. For coffee and dessert, choose from five independent coffee houses on Main Street alone. Only a few national chain stores have managed to muscle into this artisanal assortment. Fast-food joints have been banished to the city’s outskirts.

This ballet stretches for about a third of a mile on Routes 9 and 10 between Bridge and Elm streets. Although most of Main Street is a four-lane boulevard, frequent crosswalks cue drivers that walkers trump vehicles. (And beware those daring pedestrians.) Ample sidewalk space allows gaggles of shoppers to pass one another with barely a rustle of paper bags. (This is handy in a college town where students rove the streets in packs, juggling iPhones and coffee cups.)

The city’s layers of history, from its Puritan roots to its early-20th-century heyday as a commercial and cultural capital, show up along Main Street: dignified rows of 19th-century mercantile buildings open for mysterious winding alleys and narrow lanes, portals to a 16th-century settlement laced with cowpaths. Two former bank buildings, decked out in neoclassical regalia, now house stores. It isn’t uncommon today to see women window shopping hand-in-hand on the same block where the Congregational minister Jonathan Edwards thumped his pulpit in the 1730s. But, as Jacobs observed, it is precisely this ability to embrace both history and change that makes for another urban vital sign: “exuberant diversity.”

Jane Rou Brown can be reached at brownianerou@mail.com.