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Cyber Chic: Finding High Fashion Online

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Shoppers have long found success on the Internet with established chains like J. Crew or Banana Republic. But increasingly, the Web is also a resource for cutting-edge style, as the anonymity of the Internet democratizes even high-end fashion.

Now shoppers anywhere can easily buy brands once found mainly in tiny boutiques in fashion capitals like New York. The wider choices make it easier to uncover bargains. For the many who feel intimidated by snooty sales staff, the best part of online boutique shopping may be that no one will know if you are buying a \$1,000 purse while wearing last season's bubble skirt.

But with the burgeoning number of clothing retailers on the Web, the choices can be truly befuddling. Here's a guide to how the fashion-forward navigate the online shopping landscape.

Open Secrets

A handful of trendy Los Angeles boutiques have recently gone online. Milk (now at Shopatmilk.com¹) sells a handpicked mix of brands like Oscar de la Renta and emerging, hip labels like Thailand's Sretsis. Madison, which has four boutiques that are popular with stylists and celebrities, recently launched Madisonlosangeles.com².

These sites join a roster of fashionable retailers now online that are known for not only discovering new brands, but also brokering deals with labels to create exclusives for their stores. Such deals ensure that, say, your new Rachel Pally dress won't be the same Rachel Pally dress available at dozens of other retailers across the country. Scoopnyc.com³, Shopbop.com⁴ and Intermixonline.com⁵ are among the most popular of these.



Bluefly.com helps gauge size by showing how a handbag looks on a 5'6" woman.

Kirnazabete.com⁶, a chic store in New York's SoHo neighborhood that sells some hard-to-find brands like luxury handbag-maker B. Romanek, sells online, too, but still has only a small selection of items on its site. There's also Bigdropnyc.com⁷, a trendy New York boutique chain that relaunched its site last month with a handy "Shop by Look" section that allows customers to buy stylist-selected outfits with such themes as "Hamptons Social" and "Upper East Side."

Other noteworthy sites: Rebeccaanddrew.com⁸ sells dress shirts and shirt-dresses designed to combat a common problem women have with such pieces -- that unless you get them custom-made, they often don't fit perfectly, especially around the chest. The label's shirts are sold according to bust size. For those who love Italian labels -- Florence-based Forzieri.com⁹ has a large selection of handbags, jewelry and small-leather goods by Italian brands that aren't widely found here.

One store, Caravan in Manhattan, is expanding its reach in an unusual way: At Shopcaravan.com¹⁰, which launched in November, customers in New York City can contact a stylist to arrange for a Winnebago that's essentially a boutique on wheels to come to them. The customer can specify what she is looking for and the stylist will pull together suggested pieces for the shopper.

Caravan says the service has been popular with events such as bachelorette parties. It is planning to roll out the mobile store and stylist service in Los Angeles and Atlanta in the next six months.

In the same instant-gratification vein, Net-a-porter.com¹¹ recently started offering same-day delivery service to several New York neighborhoods.

Chic Bargains

On the Internet, no one will give you a look if you proffer a coupon. That's why sites like Toutie.com¹² are popular with style-conscious shoppers. The site's main page is crammed with discount codes for dozens of online boutique retailers. Most are lesser known, such as the Indianapolis-based Shopfrankeys.com¹³, or Shopemilygrace.com¹⁴ based in Rockville, Md. But these stores sell many of the same brands and styles as much larger retailers. The Toutie.com discounts range from 10% to 25%.

Bluefly.com¹⁵ remains a popular place to get deals. The site started out selling discount fashions a season or two behind, but has been trying to post items closer to when they are in stores. There are about 150 new items each day. It may still be hard to find the must-have item of the moment there, but Bluefly is a good place to buy pieces such as jeans, which (unless they have a very distinct cut or embellishment) never go out of style. The site currently is selling Earnest Sewn's "Viceroy" style trouser jeans for \$76.99, for example, while Revolveclothing.com¹⁶ lists it at \$149.

Getting It Right

Bergdorfgoodman.com¹⁷ doesn't just show the latest Theory skirts and pants. It now has a "Ways to Wear Theory" page that shows, for instance, how a new \$355 organza cropped jacket works with three different outfits: a bubble dress, pants and skinny jeans.


Neimanmarcus.com¹⁸ is banking on customers' desire to mix and match ensembles as they please -- the retailer recently partnered with In Style magazine to create an "Instant Style" section in which shoppers can put together ensembles paper-doll style, swapping in earrings, purses or blouses as they wish and buying the entire ensemble at the end.

Web sites ranging from Sears to Land's End have long offered fit tools to help shoppers avoid disappointment when they open their shipping boxes. Now even tiny boutiques are offering guides to choosing costly, sophisticated fashions when you can't try them on.

Where Those in the Know Go

Here are some of the favorite sites of two busy stylists:

Stylist	Site	Comment
Alison Deyette Manhattan-based cofounder of Stylebakery.com, a fashion advice Web site	eLuxury.com (home goods, beauty and fashion)	Great for handbags. eLuxury.com shows several photos of each bag, with close-ups of details such as zippers and the texture of leather. "When I buy a bag, I want to know everything about it—I want to know how the pockets open, what the inside looks like," Ms. Deyette says.
	Nordstrom.com (department store)	When it comes to shoes, Ms. Deyette says Nordstrom is easy to navigate, and "the shoe choices are extraordinary," with established brands including Salvatore Ferragamo, as well as trendy labels like Tory Burch.
	Shopbop.com (online fashion-and-accessories boutique)	This site offers an impressive roster from high-end designers such as Helmut Lang to budding brands like Grey Ant and Ya-Ya. It's also known for customer service—reps will try on outfits to let you know how they fit.
Gili Rashal Personal shopper in Sherman Oaks, Calif., who dresses working women and celebrities	Gypsytrunk.com (online sample sale)	Ms. Rashal says she can get trendy brands like Ella Moss and Joe's Jeans at lower prices without scouring eBay.com or trudging to sample sales herself. The site has a limited selection so far.
	Maxandchloe.com (accessories and some men's grooming products)	Ms. Rashal likes this site's mix of brands and its large selection of Kenneth Jay Lane jewelry. It's a good place to buy eye-catching pieces from budding, buzzy designers such as Rachel Leigh and CC Skye.
	Satineboutique.com (site for Los Angeles boutique Satine)	Online, the store offers many of the same trendy and sometimes hard-to-find brands that it's known for in L.A.—Magda and Japanese designer Tsumori Chisato, for example.



ALTERNATE VIEWS

Some of the details available for this L.A.M.B. satchel on eLuxury.com

Recently, Oliveandbettes.com¹⁹ created a "Dressing Room" in which it shows how pieces look on different body types, using its sales associates as models. A Leigh Bantivoglio camisole, for example, is shown on three figure types: a "Petite" size 0, an "Athletic" size 6 and a "Pregnant: size 4 and growing." The largest model is a "Curvy" size 12. Similarly, Lisa Kline, owner of Lisakline.com, has started using herself as a model in a section in which she highlights her picks of what's currently in her stores.

Most sites offer zoom functions or multiple pictures from different angles, but some do a better job than others. Chicago-based Shopjake.com²⁰, for example, has such detailed, well-lit shots of a cream \$735 Alexander Wang silk dress that shoppers can see its intricate "snake-print texture." And Bluefly.com just added a feature that helps shoppers gauge proportions -- it now offers a sketch that allows customers to see how big its 1,300 bags look on a 5'6" woman.

Activeendeavors.com²¹, which sells a long list of trendy denim brands, has a "Denim fit guide" with detailed -- and seemingly frank -- notes on several brands and styles. One page, for example, notes that a pair of Gold Sign "Misfit" jeans has one flaw: "The only questionable area of this jean is the waist: it's lower in the front ... It hits right at the hipbones which made it rather uncomfortable."

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- Hyperlinks in this Article:
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 - (2) <http://madisonlosangeles.com/Scripts/default.asp>
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 - (5) <http://Intermixonline.com>
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