

# Beijing Silk Market

By DOMINICK A. MERLE



BEIJING---Although it's rarely mentioned in the city's official tourist guides, it's just as rare when a visitor skips Beijing's notorious Silk Street Market.

Yet it is neither a market nor does it deal exclusively in silk. In simple and blunt terms, it is probably the world's largest outlet containing both shoddy and quality imitations (knock-offs) of just about every designer product on the market.

The bustling enterprise actually started out about 25 years ago in an alley with a number of vendors specializing in silk products. More products were added, tourists began arriving and today the result is a six-story building with close to 2,000 business stalls and over 3,000 salespeople.

The stalls are often no bigger than a closet and the salespeople are mostly young

women---cute, friendly, clever and very aggressive. All of the big designer brands are here in copycat form---Rolex, Louis Vuitton, Hermes, North Face, Cartier, Prada etc.---despite legal efforts from time to time to prohibit the imitations.

Ironically, China also makes the real things for some of these labels, so one often wonders if a few get mixed in with the imitations.

More than 20,000 shoppers visit the market weekdays and upwards of 50,000 on weekends. One favorite shopping strategy is to buy a knock-off suitcase with wheels upon entering, and then fill it with your selections, just as you'd do in a supermarket.

These shoppers generally make the Silk Street Market their last stop before heading to the airport for their flights home, and can check that knock-off suitcase with the knock-off items to their destination.

If you're not good at bargaining or don't enjoy it, this is not the place for you. Asking prices are

often inflated sixfold so if you offer half, you're already a loser. There are generally four grades of imitations---poor, medium, good and best.

And if you're not satisfied with the best, there is an added wrinkle. Our guide said she could arrange for a private showing of "superior" imitations in our hotel room later that day. Several of us on tour were interested and we set up a time in one of our rooms.

At the precise hour, the doorbell rang (Avon Calling?), and in came a young man and woman with two huge suitcases on wheels. In a blurring minute or two, the beds and couches were neatly stacked with purses, watches, scarves, sunglasses and electronic goods.

Then out came the piece de resistance---a glossy catalogue containing other counterfeit items that we could order and have delivered that same evening. Think about that for a moment---a Sears & Roebuck-type catalogue featuring fakes you can rely on.

We made a few purchases and just as quickly as they had set up shop they were packed and on their way, perhaps to another room or another hotel.

The next day we returned to the Silk Street Market for a final go-around. One can spend an entire day here. In addition to the shops there are snack bars and full restaurants featuring roast duck and other Chinese specialties, multinational coffee shops, pharmacies, barber shops, massage parlors, money changers and a communications center.

Besides jewelry, electronics, watches, clothing, handbags and the like, the market now also offers Chinese handicraft, antiques and calligraphy---some good, some bad. Whatever you buy---deal or no deal---it will be an experience not soon forgotten.

The Silk Street Market operates seven days a week and is located at the intersection of Xiushui East Road and Jianguomen Wai Road. But forget those jawbreaker names.



Everyone knows where it is, even if it never makes the official guidebooks.

Former President George H. Bush was able to find it, along with former Russian President Putin and 35 other heads of state during the recent Olympics. From princes to paupers, we all like a good buy.

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