

Marie Claire's Jess Lacey goes in search of the ultimate beauty shopping experience



Beauty Enquirer

BUYING BEAUTY

When it comes to shopping for make-up and skincare, there's a host of new boutique options – or you might want to stick to the classic counter approach. Jess Lacey reports

THERE WILL ALWAYS BE THOSE WHO like to be left to browse around a calm environment when they're shopping for beauty products, but there's also a contingent that wants to be guided by those deemed to be more knowledgeable. These days, there's a host of different ways to enjoy the process: from the latest in-store beauty emporiums to the classic department store make-up experience, I went on a voyage to try them all out. Here's what I discovered out there.

BEAUTYMART

WHERE? **Harvey Nichols.**
WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

It's a beauty editor's pick of the most impressive products.

Mixing the cheap with the chic and throwing in the weird for good measure, former beauty editor Anna-Marie Solowij and retail pro Millie Kendall have set up a 'living magazine' shop in Harvey Nichols. BeautyMART products are edited into stories, like a page in a magazine, and they're even launching vending machines to grab 'n' go. Anna-Marie is at the counter each week to give her lifetime's worth of advice to anyone who's unsure or plain curious.

Photograph by Diana Gomez. Still lifes by Pixeleyes

As I work my way around the space I notice there's nothing subtle about this environment. But I do trust that every cream, lipgloss and nail lacquer has earned its place there and it's the *Top Gun* of merchandise – the best of the best. Anna-Marie cherry-picks products – a cleanser from this brand and a serum from that – as not everything in a range is equally good and there are hero products for a reason. I love that the hard work has been done for me.

BEAUTY WORKSHOP

WHERE? **Selfridges, London.**
WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? **It's a free-form area where brands can be added at a moment's notice.**

The new Beauty Workshop sits neatly behind the expanse of its traditional house of brands as a polar opposite approach to beauty retail. If there's a cult collection emerging, they can be the first to house it. I'm a big fan of this eclectic approach to beauty and after I buy a cheeky little Chanel lipstick from the main hall, I head behind to Aesop for my favourite hand cream. It's a really impressive and, let's be honest, realistic way to shop because I don't know anyone who wears solely designer make-up. Just as I like teaming my precious YSL clutch with battered Topshop jeans, I think it's the savvy combining of brands that creates the best make-up bags.

YOUR BEAUTY

WHERE? **M&S nationwide.**
WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? **Niche brands from around the world.**

Just because you haven't seen it before, doesn't mean it isn't great. M&S Your Beauty is all about niche brands and losing the fear of the unknown. The products come from every corner of the planet and have been selected by industry experts. I like to think of it as standout products that you come across on holiday and can never find again. That oil they used on you during a facial in Bali, the organic hand cream you found in Tuscany; and everyone knows that all the best skin products are hidden in French pharmacies.

I wander from one product to the next, sniffing, testing and exploring – it's a beautifully tranquil way to buy



JESS'S NEW BEAUTY FAVOURITES

cosmetics. I have time to consider, knowing that I won't be pressured by staff, but they are on hand if I need them. Ideal for those who like to make an independent decision. And, in my case, even if I don't recognise the label, I know I can trust M&S enough to give it a whirl.

IN-STORE BEAUTY COUNTER

WHERE? **John Lewis.**
WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? **In-depth brand knowledge and added extras.**

I'm looking forward to this. Where others fear the beauty-counter girl, I relish the opportunity. I've even emptied out my handbag clutter to make space for the free samples. I want to sit down and offload all my concerns in a self-indulgent monologue. This is beauty therapy in its most literal sense.

Beauty-counter girls belong to the same era as the air hostess, before they became sales assistants and flight attendants. They realise the importance of a pressed pencil skirt, the unwavering line of a pillar box-red lipstick and the art of a French pleat without a single hairpin on show. I suppose it depends on whether you

place any value on this sort of heritage (I do), and for just the same reason I won't use those horrible DIY check-in machines at airports, I won't buy beauty products off a shelf.

SAY WHAT?

Here's how to get the most from beauty sales staff

1 'I'm just browsing right now but I'll ask if I have any questions.' Polite but firm and puts you in control.

2 'Why do you think that product would be good for me in particular?' Worried the advice isn't genuine? This immediately cuts to the chase.

3 'I'd like to try it, but I'm not about to commit to buying a whole bottle.' It's the perfect compromise and you get free samples. No, it's not cheeky – that's exactly what they're for.

Don't believe the myth of the pushy approach – I visit Estée Lauder, Clarins and Lancôme counters and am wowed by the levels of enthusiasm. I'm mesmerised by the girls' appearance – they can take impeccable to a new stratosphere. But polished girls don't have to be snooty; they're rather nice and all the giggling going on makes me feel as if I'm getting ready with mates.

They do suggest products but as long as you've got the wherewithal to say 'no thanks', you can just about cope. Two hours and a full face of make-up, mini facial and hand massage later, I'm off with what I came in for and two things I didn't, but am convinced I need. More to the point, I've had a great time and I totter off with a head full of beauty tips and a bag jingling with lovely free samples. ■