

Don't be a sucker at the sales: From £500 shoes that never get worn to a £200 dress that was far too small, how bargains can go horribly wrong...

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Elbows at the ready girls! We may be in the middle of an economic crisis but somehow we always manage to find money for the Boxing Day sales.

And this year, because we've all been cutting back on spending before Christmas, the bargains are set to be better than ever. A massive 28 million of us are set to hit the shops this week and a staggering £367.8 million will be spent online — almost double 2010's total — says retail body IMRG.

But do the sales really save us money or do we end up getting over-excited and splurging on things we'd never normally buy, and never actually wear, just because they're half price? Here, three avid Boxing Day sales shoppers confess to their disasters — and the lessons they've learned.



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Melissa Scarlett, 27, works in events management, is single and lives in Fulham, West London. She says:

Last year, I was on such a mission to buy a cut-price Issa dress that I crawled out of bed at 6am on Boxing Day to hit the online sales. I'd fallen in love with the gorgeous blue one Kate Middleton had worn for her engagement a few weeks before, but it sold out within hours, so I was determined to get something similar as they're so flattering.

I had butterflies as I logged on to the website, knowing there would be thousands of other eager shoppers competing with me for the same handful of bargains. Within minutes, I'd snapped up a black patterned Issa dress for £180, reduced from £450.

I was convinced that I'd got a great bargain — even though I'd had to buy it in a size eight instead of a ten because they'd sold out of my size. I was shaking with excitement when it arrived at my front door a few days later. I immediately tried it on, hoping it would instantly give me Kate's girl-next-door allure. It didn't — it was far too tight.



Regrets: Melissa in her tiny skirt (left) and in her patterned Issa dress which was reduced from £450 to £180

Even so, instead of sending it back, I decided to keep it and go on a diet, although the diet never happened. Consequently, I've only worn the dress once, for an interview — and despite hiding it under a jacket, I felt uncomfortable all day because it was too tight and made me feel frumpy. Thankfully, I got the job but I'm now trying to sell the dress online to try to make some of my money back.

On reflection, I just wanted that coveted Issa label in my wardrobe, which is ridiculous. But that's what happens to a woman's psyche during the sales. It feels like you're saving money even though you're spending it. There's a buzz about sales shopping; whether you're in a store or online you feel you have to snap up a bargain in case someone else comes along and bags it first.

BARGAIN HUNT

Consumers are on average spending £17,540 every second during the Christmas sales, according to Barclays

Sadly, that dress wasn't my only mistake last Boxing Day. I also blew £140 on a pair of pale grey, fur-trimmed ankle boots from Reiss. They were only reduced by £35 but they were so beautiful I felt compelled to buy them, convinced they'd sell out fast. But they turned out to be completely impractical and I've worn them only twice as they get dirty really easily and the thin heels are a problem when you're dashing round London, on and off the Tube. Even more annoying is that six months later they were still on sale in Reiss, so I needn't have rushed my decision.

Another buy I regret is a black and yellow dress in Hobbs, knocked down from £95 to £40. While the shape is nice, the pattern is horrible. On the two occasions I wore it I felt dowdy and after its second outing I decided never to wear it again. Instead, I'm going to give it to my mother, who looks stylish in everything.

In the same shop, I also paid £60 for a cream and purple silk skirt that had been £110. But it's so tight I can't even walk in it. I'm a bridesmaid next summer and am intent on dieting — so I hope the skirt will fit me after that. In last year's sales I spent £800, around half of which was wasted on clothes I've never worn. I could kick myself when I think how that money could have been spent on a weekend away or put towards a holiday.

MONEY WASTED LAST YEAR: £420

LESSONS LEARNED: This year I've scoured the shops ahead of the sales and made a list of what I'd like to buy, being honest with myself about whether something fits and looks great. The theory is that it may curtail the urge for impulsive buying. I've got my eye on a slate-coloured coat in Reiss, and a pair of black knee-high riding boots in Hobbs. I'm hoping both will be reduced in my sizes in the sales. If they're not, I've sworn I won't buy smaller — I'm not making that mistake again!

Octavia Coates, 33, is director of a brand consultancy, lives in Sussex and is single. She says:

Half my wardrobe is made up of sales disasters and I have at least a dozen items that are unworn with the tags still attached. They are mistakes that have cost me thousands of pounds. The trouble is, I love pretty things and when I go sales shopping on Boxing Day, I'm still in frivolous, festive mode, so common sense goes out the window.

The other problem is that over the years the Boxing Day sales have become something of a shopping game for my friends and me. Before Christmas, four of us sit down to dinner and each make a list of five items we really want to get in the sales. I never budget, I just go for it.



Octavia says that half of her wardrobe is made up of sales disasters she owns lots of items that are unworn

We hit the shops on Bond Street and the King's Road in London at 9am, or as soon as they open. I like to make sure we're there first to get the best bargains. The atmosphere is hysterical, with queue everywhere and plenty of jostling, but because I've planned ahead, I'm poised and quick. My friends and I also work together — if we see something from one another's lists, we'll text or phone them to tip them off and buy it for them if they want us to.

But by the afternoon, our carefully laid plans usually fall apart because we get caught up in the frenzy — and that's when I make mistakes. In All Saints, I bought a Victorian-looking cream and navy pinstripe skirt that was half price at £80, but which I've never had the guts to wear out because it's quite voluminous and felt like an airbag the only time I tried it on.

I also bought a sequinned dress from there that was around £100 in the sale, and a size six, whereas I'm a size eight. I didn't look at it but it's so tight around the thighs it makes me look like a snake shedding its skin, so I can't wear it. I love trying it on before I bought it. I rarely do in the sales because it's such a chaotic experience, you just don't have time. You want to get to the next shop as quickly as possible.

It was only when I put it on for the first time that I realised it made me look like a buxom barmaid. I won't ever wear it.

That's also why I bought a Gucci jumper without knowing what it looked like on. It was half price at £250 and was beautiful on the hanger. It was only when I put it on for the first time that I realised it made me look like a buxom barmaid. I won't ever wear it. At least I've worn the stunning, backless ball gown with Swarovski crystal embellishment that I picked up for £400, reduced from £600, at a department store — even if it was just the once, when I dressed up as Morticia from the Addams Family at a Halloween party.

Thankfully, a purple dress with a sparkly fish print by online retailer Asos was a less expensive mistake at only £5, reduced from £40. But don't mention the black Louboutin peep-toe platforms that cost £500 — a tiny saving on the original price of around £550 — even though they were a size too small. They've never been worn, although I have found a use for them. They have pride of place on my dressing table, displayed just like I would a beautiful vase.

My best decision was splashing out £500 on a Vivienne Westwood corset dress with ruffle layers, which was originally around £700. It's a total departure from my usual style of classic cuts and subtle colours but I've actually worn it a lot. I just wish all my purchases had been as savvy.

MONEY WASTED LAST YEAR: £1,000

LESSONS LEARNED: I've realised I have a propensity to buy things without thinking them through, so I need to keep a more sensible head when I'm shopping to stop me wasting so much money.

As I'm moving to the countryside next month, I need to buy clothes in the sale that are more practical, such as low heeled boots and cashmere jumpers and socks. But I can't deny I love the frantic and impulsive nature of sales shopping and the aftermath of trying to make things work when I get them home, even if they end up as unlikely ornaments.

Sarah Cross, 33, is founder and CEO of Uber-UK, a customer loyalty and retention marketing consultancy. She lives with her boyfriend in Manchester. She says:

Even though I can't stand the chaos of the sales, I go because I'm seduced by the idea of bagging a bargain. Typically, I walk into Selfridges in Manchester, have a quick glance round, scoop up half a dozen items, pay for them without trying them on and leave. Even though I'm an intelligent, professional woman and ordinarily hate wasting money, I frequently find myself picking something up in the sales and thinking: 'I'll have that because it's cheap' only for it to be a false economy.



Sarah has got lots of wear out of her soft grey blazer which was less than half price, at £45 from Zara (left) but was less impressed with her purple shift dress from Phase Eight

There were numerous notable examples in last year's post-Christmas sales. In Phase Eight I bought a purple shift dress with ruffles on the front that was a size too small and doesn't suit my body shape. But that didn't seem to matter when I was caught up in sales fever and it was reduced from £89 to £49. Then there's the black satin cocktail dress with ruffles round the hem that had been reduced to £90 from £165 in a boutique in Didsbury. The sales assistant told me I looked amazing in it and I believed her — even though I know the women in those sorts of shops always say that. However, coupled with a discount, that sort of flattery is compelling so I bought it. Not that I've ever worn it — it doesn't fit properly on my shoulders.

In the Selfridges sale, I bought a black Armani Exchange maxi-dress, which seemed like a snip with two-thirds off at £40, but it's so low-cut, I've never worn it. Then there's the short, navy, beaded dress from French Connection that was £70 down from £130. Even as I bought it I knew it was too short. I wore it once on holiday. Finally, in Zara, I paid £20 instead of around £40 for a black and white see-through top with an ornate pattern, which is as disgusting as it sounds. I have never worn it. Thankfully, I also purchased a beautiful soft grey blazer for less than half price, at £45. I've had a lot of use out of it, teaming it with shorts and skinny jeans.

MONEY WASTED LAST YEAR: £269

LESSONS LEARNED: Having totted up the amount I've wasted, I realised I needed expert help, so I asked a personal stylist for advice. Nicola Cupples (www.mystylecompanion.com) has cleared three bin liners of clothes out of my wardrobe — many of them bought in the sales — and advised me what to buy this year. She's told me I have to focus and just buy some investment pieces, such as straight or skinny indigo jeans to wear with a smart blouse for meetings, or glammed up with platforms for a Friday night. She also suggests a black jumper to layer over a T-shirt and a jacket or blazer to smarten up jeans and dresses for work.

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