

buyer, humbug

Some people just have a knack for stocking up on meaningful gifts during their travels. A determined Sally Feldman attempts to get in touch with the Spirit of Christmas Present



Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbles Sally, lying on the rug. Her Hong Kong itinerary is in place, her passport safely stowed, her clammy-weather clothes folded neatly in her suitcase, her husband busily checking the sports channels in anticipation of a week's gloriously unfettered solitude.

Unlike Louisa May Alcott's feisty heroine, Jo, this particular little woman isn't grieving the dearth of gaily beribboned parcels to be opened by the light of a roaring fire. No, she's bemoaning the consistent challenge of finding witty little somethings on her travels that will carry her with aplomb through another season of goodwill to

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all mankind – proof that her incessant wanderings really do make a difference to the quality of her and her loved ones' lives, and confirmation that, just once, she's not had to resort to a last-minute Christmas Eve frenzy at Borders.

Travelling is easy – we all know that – apart, of course, from the getting from A to B, the queuing, other travellers, and those evil little airline milk containers that cannot be opened without loss of dignity and unsightly stains. The difficult part is the quantity and quality of spoils with which you return triumphantly – that perfect manifestation of your latest adventure, the unique handcrafted silver jewellery or exquisitely woven fabric, the genuine antique stone Buddha (with certificate of authentication) or the sow's ear made into a better-than-fake Prada silk purse. At this, I am a consummate failure, being incapable of a) haggling; b) showing any sense of taste once I step foot on foreign soil.

To add insult to penury, I am cursed with peripatetic friends who possess the enviable knack of gathering enough meaningful bounty on each trip to last them a seeming lifetime's worth of friends' and family's birthdays, engagements, weddings and, of course, Christmases, with the occasional dinner-party thank-you thrown in for good measure. Not only

that, but their spoils are inevitably authentic, dirt-cheap and have an amusing/heartwarming/crushingly insightful story to accompany them.

When I venture abroad, I just get swept up in the sheer exoticism of everything displayed before me, which is why my cupboards are overflowing with Marks & Spencer underwear, unsightly beaded ankle bracelets, shell earrings and something that I think used to be a selection of vacuum-packed laksa mixes, which I bought for the quirky packaging and is now past its use-by date.

On my first big journey overseas to Australia, I sent everyone back home in the UK those generic metal

barbecue tongs that are found in every kitchen drawer from Hobart to Darwin. I'd never seen anything like them! They were cheap! They were authentic! They worked! At last, a witty and ingenious gift!

I've never lived it down. Neither have I been forgiven for the various woven fabric samples from all corners of Southeast Asia, the recycled tin-can placemats from South Africa, or those clunky earthenware mugs from the Cotswolds. And don't get me started on the Jewish Mother chewing gum from Berlin's Jewish Museum: "Eight pieces, no less".

And now, on the eve of the big Eve, I have a final chance to redeem myself, with a week in one of the finest shopping destinations in the world. To placate the consumption gods, I have packed an extra lightweight folding bag in my suitcase and cleared my credit card. I will go bravely into the light of vast, gleaming malls, jostle through the maze of Kowloon's Jade Market, blink at the seahorses, fish bladders and birds' nests in Des Voeux Road and come out the other side with 12 postcards, four boxes of prettily packaged but inedible sweets and some duty-free vodka. And, on the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature is stirring, not even a mouse... I'll be at my local shopping centre haggling with the lady in the 2009 diary department. VE+T