

When Great Bookstores Make Great Destinations

By Aneesa Alphonsus

I love books. No kidding. Me in a super duper bookshop am like the proverbial child in a toy or candy store. During my monthly trips to the bigger bookstores I usually commit one of the seven deadly sins – Envy.

Like greed, envy is characterized by an insatiable desire; they differ, however, for two main reasons. First, greed is largely associated with material goods, whereas envy may apply more generally. Second, those who commit the sin of envy resent that another person has something they perceive themselves as lacking, and wish the other person to be deprived of it.

Dante defined this as "love of one's own good perverted to a desire to deprive other men of theirs." In Dante's Purgatory, the punishment for the envious is to have their eyes sewn shut with wire, because they have gained sinful pleasure from seeing others brought low. Aquinas described envy as "sorrow for another's good".

While I do have an insatiable desire for books, I do not want anyone else to be deprived of it and therefore will not have both eyes sewn shut with wire...maybe one – with normal thread.

Recently, I've been looking at bookstores in a different light. It can become a great travel destination –and I don't mean hanging out at the travel section in case you're wondering. I've been truly fortunate to have travelled widely – but more so because I've been able to visit some of the best bookstores around.

Great bookstores, filled with the curious wonders and time-killing material, readers and speakers, are terrific destinations. So when is a bookstore worth your time? When it's more than just a place to buy books.

Some bookstores offer literary touchstones, like the wooden chairs signed by writers who've visited That Bookstore in Blytheville, an Arkansas institution frequented by native son John Grisham. City Lights in San Francisco, once a hangout for Beat writers like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, draws tourists from around the world.

And don't overlook the shopping potential. Most independent bookstores take pride in showcasing regional literature. Quirky handwritten signs with staff recommendations may direct you to writers you've never heard of. The tote bags at the Strand bookstore in Manhattan, which come in more than 30 designs, were voted the No. 1 souvenir to bring home to Japan by New York readers of Nikkei, a Japanese financial newspaper.

Any list of destination bookstores is bound to leave off some favorites. Here are a two of mine which I know I'll visit again someday and hope that you'll be able to make your travel destination as well.

City Lights Books – San Francisco USA

<http://www.citylights.com>

This store, a city landmark, was co-founded in 1953 by poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who also started City Lights Publishers and was arrested on obscenity charges for publishing Ginsberg's famous poem "Howl." The store continues to serve as a center for counterculture activities and politics. You can also stop by the bar next door, Vesuvio, to have a drink where Kerouac once bellied up.

The Strand - Manhattan, New York USA

<http://www.strandbooks.com>

Founded in 1927 by the Bass family, which still owns it, The Strand is a New York legend, offering "18 miles of books," including used books for a buck, new best sellers, rare books and collectibles in every price range, and an entire floor of art books. It's as much a scene as it is a bookstore; customers range from Japanese tourists and East Village hipsters to New York University students and crusty intellectuals who quiz the staff on their literary knowledge. Their stock changes constantly and you might find book at 2pm and find it gone at 3pm. You never know what you might find.