



Shop 'till you drop: Luxury cars are on display at a shopping mall in Kuwait.

EXPERIENCE

Million-Dollar Mall Rats

In the oil-rich Persian Gulf state of Kuwait, money and religion meet at the shopping mall. | **By REMY SCALZA**

JUST BEYOND the gleaming new subdivisions built in the desert, it rises—glorious and shimmering—in the Kuwaiti heat.

With 250 stores covering 2.5 million square feet, The Avenues is neither mosque nor desert palace but Kuwait's largest shopping mall, a temple to the cult of consumerism. I've come to be initiated.

Since its unsolicited 15 minutes of fame during the 1990-1991 Gulf War, the wealthy Arab emirate has largely faded from the international limelight. Poised on the rim of the Persian Gulf, it lacks both Iraq's turmoil and Dubai's glitz and cachet. But, like its Gulf neighbors, Kuwait sits upon a sea of black gold: ten percent of the world's known crude oil reserves.

That's enough to make Kuwaitis, per capita, some of the richest people on the planet. In and around the capital, high-end malls have multiplied to ease pressure on bulging wallets. Shopping, of course, is nothing new in this part of the Gulf, and Dubai remains the uncontested king of bling—cosmopolitan and tourist-friendly. But here in Kuwait, where democracy still bends to the demands of *sharia*, or Islamic, law, the mall experience offers a glimpse into a world where religious zeal and cold hard cash converge.

Outside The Avenues, the 125°(F) desert air is rising in waves from a sea of luxury cars in the mall parking lot—Land Rovers, Hummers, and Mercedeses, with a Ferrari or two thrown in. Inside, I'm swept along the marbled concourse by a tide of men in dark sunglasses and ankle-length white robes. Nearby are wives, sisters, and daughters, some in headscarves and designer jeans, others cloaked head-to-toe in flowing black garments, or *abayas*, and some walled behind face masks. Housemaids and nannies trail behind—domestic servants imported from the Philippines, China, and elsewhere—lugging the day's boxes and bags.

Understanding the Kuwaiti zeal for retail requires a brief civics lesson. Kuwaiti citizens—who make up only one-third of the country's expat-heavy population of three million—benefit from a lavish package of petro benefits, including plush government jobs. “People get paid for doing relatively little, or nothing at all, and they get paid

extremely well,” says Mary Ann Tetreault, a specialist in Gulf affairs. “Shopping is really the only way to distinguish oneself from one's peers.”

I stroll by a compendium of retailers that would leave even the most brand-conscious of consumers salivating. To the usual high-end suspects—Armani, Swarovski, Guess, and their ilk—are added the Custo Barcelonas, the Gerard Darel's, the Xanakas: coveted uber-luxury labels rarely found outside fashion capitals. Here, they're lined up one after the other, interspersed with shops selling opulent Muslim clothing.

But it's the familiar that stands out the most. Inside the Express store, that classic suburban mall standby, the new summer line is on display: identical distressed Daisy Duke cut-offs and body-hugging print tees you'd find in Anytown, U.S.A.

A woman, hidden in the folds of her abaya, pauses beside a mannequin attired in a low-cut purple tank top trimmed with sequins. Her hand motions, and a salesman scampers to attention. “This one, in white” is all she says, handing over a credit card to consummate the purchase.

I retreat to the food court. The escalator levels to an airy atrium. McDonald's, KFC, and the rest of fast food nation are here, their signs translated into Arabic and menus voided of pork. At counters, Kuwaiti children order supersized meal combos. The net effect is uncanny. Between

the mallrats, sodas, and grease, it feels just like home.

“**McDonald's, KFC, and the rest of fast food nation are here, their signs translated into Arabic and menus voided of pork.**”

Well, almost. Suddenly, the mall public address system cuts in. The drone of the muazzin calling the faithful to afternoon prayer seeps out. A lone, quavering voice swells, hypnotic and stirring. Queues are abandoned and meals left unfinished as shoppers stream into designated prayer rooms tucked discreetly beside The Gap and Carrefour. I make my way back outside, where I see a local man struggling to load several flat cardboard boxes into the back of an idling Cadillac Escalade. DIY bookcase? Coffee table? Whatever it is, I've probably got something similar at home. He meets my gaze. For the moment, differences in religion, culture, and geography disappear, bridged by trendy Nordic furniture sold at malls worldwide.

The Avenues is easily accessible by taxi from area hotels. There is no sales tax.

The Avenues is easily accessible by taxi from area hotels. There is no sales tax.