

Reasons to step out in Toronto

► **SHOES**
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following in the well-shod footsteps of newly minted fashion icon Meghan Markle.

Downtown Toronto has scads of hotels, but we purposely chose a neighborhood called the Annex — set between Bloor-Yorkville and Koreatown — as our base. Near the University of Toronto, the Annex is where Markle lived while she was filming the TV show “Suits.” (Her house was at 10 Yarmouth Road, in case you’re wondering.) The new Kimpton Saint George Hotel — formerly a sad-sack Holiday Inn but brought back to shiny life with a modern makeover by Kimpton — is in the Annex, and convenient to the St. George subway station. Even better, the Bata Shoe Museum is right across the street.

For the shoe-obsessed, the Bata Shoe Museum (a.k.a. BSM; www.batashoemuseum.ca) is mecca. With the passing of founder Sonja Bata (just a woman who loved shoes like the rest of us) in February, the shoe museum has been in the news. Not to mention, the BSM is the only North American stop for “Blahnik: The Art of Shoes,” featuring the work of footwear icon Manolo Blahnik, made famous in “Sex and the City,” and known for his gorgeously sculptural footwear. The show, in its final appearance, closes on Jan. 6.

“Are shoes really that interesting?” said a guest at the hotel when we told him we were headed to a shoe museum. Absolutely. Based on the premise that every shoe has a story, the BSM steps into the social, cultural, and fashion history of footwear. Its collection includes 13,000-plus pairs of shoes, encompassing 4,500 years of footwear history. Six hundred to 1,000 pairs are on exhibit daily. The section devoted to polar footwear from the Arctic was especially intriguing, and anyone who can appreciate bling will go a little gaga for the embellished footwear in “The Gold Standard,” featuring glittering footwear from around the globe. The exhibit includes everything from sequined shoes dating to the last Burmese dynasty (1752 to 1885) to the gold-winged Jeremy Scott x Adidas sneakers that evoke the ancient Greek messenger god, Hermes. Save Manolo until the end.

Even if you’re strictly Crocs-and-Birks when it comes to footwear, you’ll appreciate the artistry and exuberance of Blahnik’s creations. More than 200 shoes are on display here. Born in the Canary Islands in 1942, the award-winning master shoemaker (whose shoes are handmade, with about



PHOTOS BY DIANE BAIR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



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with their whimsy and intricacy. Our favorite: his botany-inspired shoes, with straps that look like vines climbing up the ankle. And those thigh-high pink satin boots!

“Does everyone leave this place planning to go shoe shopping?” we asked the gal at the desk. “You know it!” she said. So be aware that the \$14 museum admission ticket could end up costing you a lot more. The price tag for Manolos can tower, stiletto-high, upward of \$1,000. Even in Canadian dollars, that’s a wad of cash.

Still, it couldn’t hurt to look.

Wishing we’d worn our most chic footwear, we hotfooted it over to David’s (www.davidsfootwear.com) on Bloor Street, just a few blocks away. The Bloor-Yorkville neighborhood is home to high-end designer boutiques. Prada, Gucci, and the gang are chockablock. We’d heard that David’s was a shoe-lover’s paradise, and they did stock plenty of coveted brands, including Manolos. Shoes are displayed in cases like fine jewelry. It didn’t seem like the place to ask, “Got any Valentino Rockstud pumps on sale?”

We did find some sale merch at Holt Renfrew (www.holtrenfrew.com), the go-to Canadian department store for designer brands like Paul Smith, Pink Tartan, and Etro. We even found a blazer by Smythe, one of Markle’s favorite brands, discounted by 60 percent. But we couldn’t get distracted — there were shoes to be

100 pairs produced each day) has become an international arbiter of style. He was a fashion disrupter in the 1970s, making slender strappy shoes when everyone else was doing chunky platforms. Decades later, “Sex and the City” made him a household name. The exhibit features hand-painted sketches of his shoe designs and an eye-popping array of shoes and boots that dazzle



Versatile shoes for traveling light — in style and comfort

By **Karen Campbell**
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Let’s face it — with airlines increasing restrictions and jacking up baggage fees, it pays to travel light. However, that often presents a troubling conundrum — what shoes should you take? For women, no single pair is going to see you comfortably and stylishly through all activities, from a hike in the Andes through a night at the opera. But wouldn’t it be nice to have one or two pairs of really versatile kicks that can handle at least the basics of a short getaway — the quick off and on for airport security, the mad dash between gates, a couple hours of hoofing it around town, and dinner at a nice restaurant — with at least a modicum of comfort and style? How about shoes you can spend all day in — lighter, more flexible than stiff-soled clogs, classier than sneakers, and keeping a budget in mind, of, say, less than \$150?

Depending on your destination and personal style, these recommendations in five categories just might do the trick in the cooler months of travel. All are relatively flat or low-heeled, lightweight, closed-toe, flexible, supportive, and slip on without laces or zippers. Your feet will thank you.

CASUAL

Of the multitudes of lightweight sneaker-style slip-ons, my new go-to is Allbirds’ Tree Lounger (\$95, www.allbirds.com). It wears with the softness and ease of a slipper, and the sustainability of the company’s products (breathable tree fiber upper and soft merino wool insole) is a plus. Allbirds have that trendy unisex style that makes them versatile with a range of clothing options. Similarly styled, Ilse Jacobsen’s washable Tulip has a stretchy nubuck-like perforated upper that can handle water — just rinse well if you venture into the ocean. For a durable sneaker-soled shoe in superb leather, Ecco’s Danish designed Gillian comes in gorgeous colors and features a sophisticated toe-box and moldable anatomical last. For ankle support, Walking Cradles’ new Osmond (like its popular low-cut Orleans) has a removable, pillowy insole and gorgeous detailing. In a clever marriage of comfort and technology, Traq by Alegria’s



From top: the Abeo Nevis, Aravon Beaumont Fisherman, Ugg Bonham II, and Clarks Ayla Low.

Quitie puts Alegria’s renowned supportive footbed in a cute, lightweight Mary Jane with a built-in chip that easily connects to a step count app.

DRESSY

Sometimes you can’t get away without a dressy shoe, and if you’ve foresworn heels and squishy toe boxes in favor of comfort, a ballet-style flat can be a great option for all-day wear. Top choice for a slim skimmer is Clarks’s beautifully sleek Ayla Low with the cushiony Cloudstepper insole (\$85, www.clarkssusa.com). Skecher’s Gem has a wider toe box and bouncier feel, but the logo makes it more casual. Jambu’s gorgeous, sophisticated Rumson Too puts a satiny elastic ankle strap on a svelte pointy-toed ballet flat comfortable enough for all-day wear, as is Arcopedico’s adorable Vegas, a soft leather with cross straps and dynamite support. For a lighter ballet slipper feel, Arcopedico’s stretchy L14 is flexible, washable, breathable, and vegan, with the brand’s trademark supportive insole. For a substantial leather flat, Abeo’s Etta is elegantly styled and features the brand’s customizable orthotic support. Ecco’s,



and flexible Skyler adds a chic low wedge to the strap style; Rieker’s Mirjam 11 puts a modest heel on comfort for a sleek feminine silhouette and an easy, if less supportive, fit.

DRESSY CASUAL

Super comfy stylish shoes that bridge dressy and casual can be worth their weight in gold. Naturally, style is a matter of taste, but if you keep it basic black, Arcopedico’s Queen as well as Born’s flexible leather Sebra can transition nicely from trekking around in pants to dinner out in a little black dress. My favorite is Aravon’s Beamont Fisherman (\$120, [port.com\), the most comfortable, sleek T-strap style I’ve found with sophisticated detailing, a cushy memory foam footbed, and availability in extended sizes, a godsend for many. Aetrex’s heavier Ada offers stabilizing cross straps and excellent support. With its customized insole, Abeo’s Smart 3550 loafer style wears like a dream, and Alegria fans will find Keli Professional combines the brand’s trademark comfort and support in a slightly slimmer slip-on design. If you really need just a trace of a heel, Dansko’s Farah is classy, streamlined, and very versatile for all day. In the other direction, German-made Leguano shoes of breathable, washable fabric are delightfully close to barefoot. Two adorable styles — the Ballerina and the Lady — are light enough to fold in half and easily tuck into a backpack.](http://www.rock-</p>
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SLIDE/MULE

When you really want to slip shoes on and off, a backless but supportive slide or lightweight clog can’t be beaten. There’s a reason health and food service professionals flock to Klogs, which are relatively lightweight with flexible soles, a springy, removable insole with great arch support, and a deep heel cup facilitating custom-

ized orthotic inserts, a hard feature to find in slides. The adorable soft leather Klogs Carolina (\$120, www.klogsfootwear.com), with cross straps and cut-outs, puts a feminine stamp on a comfort clog. Similarly, Alegria’s classic leather clog, which comes in fun colors and fanciful designs, features great arch support, with a slight rocker outsole. Ariat’s boot style leather Sport Mule adds an op-

admired! Hanging out with the Roger Viviers, Jimmy Choos, and St. Laurents was the perfect-for-the-holidays pair of Manolo Blahniks: black satin mules with crystal embellishment, for \$1,565 Canadian. We didn’t bother converting that hefty sum to US dollars. But they sure were pretty.

We’d heard about a shop called Gravity Pope (www.gravitypoppe.com) in West Queen West, a quick subway ride from Bloor-Yorkville, and home to a more cutting-edge array of shops and galleries. Ah, that leather-y aroma! And So. Many. Shoes! We saw some brands you don’t see everywhere, like Repetto (ballet flats in a bazillion colors), Camper, and Fiorentini + Baker, plus their house brand, and more common labels like Blundstone and Frye. We fell hard for the tiny Camper hiking boots for tots.

At this point, shoe fatigue was starting to set in. We saw a line of folks outside Mabel’s Bakery (“Fresher than you”) and joined them for a pastry and a coffee. Wandering around the West Queen West neighborhood, we realized why Vogue named it the second-coolest neighborhood in the world in 2014: There’s a fun, funky mix of shopping and dining here, including some intriguingly mysterious spots like Death and Taxes Free House and a wildly-muraled storefront called, simply, Brooklyn. Here and there, the scent of marijuana wafted from a doorway. On a sunny, chilly Saturday afternoon, everyone was out and about, so West Queen West and Parkdale (down the street, and slightly grittier) were abustle.

Besides baked goods and peameal bacon sandwiches (a Toronto specialty), this neighborhood offers another treasure: vintage clothing stores! We found gently worn leopard print Manolo Blahnik pumps at our very first stop: Garb (www.garb.ca). Alas, they weren’t in our size, but a lucky shopper could grab these for a fraction of what they’d cost new. Later, we popped into Consign Toronto (www.shopconsigntoronto.com) and struck out on shoes, but were wowed by their selection of deeply discounted designer leather jackets. “These look even better when they’ve got some wear to them,” our shopping buddy said, trying on a leather jacket by Canadian label Mackage. (Markle wore a burgundy Mackage leather jacket at the Invictus Games in Toronto, dontcha know.)

We were on a roll. The following day, we’d hit Courage My Love (14 Kensington Ave.), in Kensington Market, Toronto’s ultimate vintage store. Stock ranges from tie-dyed cashmere to luchador masks. The bargains (including a \$5 rack) spill out the front door. Fun and fabulous, it’s quite a scene. And we confess — a pair of delightfully broken-in turquoise cowgirl boots came home with us.

The right pair of shoes can change your life. Just ask Cinderella.

Diane Bair and Pamela Wright can be reached at bairwright@gmail.com.



Karen Campbell can be reached at karencampbell4@rcn.com.