

600 Minutes of Last-Minute Shopping - before the tills fall silent – *For two whole days!*

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According to the Independent online on “Super Saturday” it was estimated that 14.9 million shoppers spent a whopping £16.9bn on their final Christmas purchases. If, however you weren’t one of those 14.9 million shoppers the article offers advice as to where you can shop, online or in store, to save you from the embarrassment of the last-minute dash to the petrol station before the big day.

In spite of all the news bulletins proclaiming the death of the UK high street, and yes, in recent years the UK high street has seen the demise of some very familiar household names. Names such as B.H.S. in 2016, and the American toy giant Toys R Us in 2018. Also, in 2018 with falling sales, forced the closure of three and possibly four House of Fraser stores, one of which is based in Nottingham’s Victoria Centre, after its new owner Sports Direct tycoon Mike Ashley failed to agree terms with their landlords. However, once Christmas appears on the horizon town centre shops with names such as Marks and Spencer and Debenhams, who have both struggled this past year, to me, somehow buck the trend of the demise, as more and more people are drawn into them in the run up to the festive season.

Also, into the mix you have the big four. In this I am talking about Sainsbury’s, Tesco, Asda, and Morrisons. The everything under one roof supermarket, where you shop not just for food but for household goods as well. They are all part of high street and yes, they too have faced stiff competition from the discount retail stores such as Aldi and Lidl.

Of course, when it comes to Christmas, apart from the presents we buy, the thought comes to what and how we will celebrate Christmas and with what! How we celebrate Christmas as often as not involves what we will be eating and drinking. As regards to what it will all cost preparing for Christmas, it is worth noting that British families at Christmas time spend on average £821.25 on gifts, food and drink and decorations.

At this time of the year, and for whatever reason large sections of the UK populace succumb to a sort of “seasonal siege mentality.” By that I mean, when food shopping we’ll say either to ourselves or our partners: ‘Let’s have that or one of those.’ Or even: ‘No, let’s have two of that and perhaps three of those’...why? We all do it because it’s Christmas, and we do it because we are all aware that the shops will be closed for two whole days, or in some cases just one!

So, it is with this in mind I took my position in the queue on the very last day of shopping before the big day just so that I could watch my fellow human beings succumb to the seasonal siege mentality as they waited outside to begin their last-minute food shopping. Incidentally this is one of the stores that opened for a whole 10 hours, which equates to 600 minutes of last-minute shopping before the tills fall silent!

Arriving at 07.40 just as dawn was breaking on, some may say, a seasonal frosty morning, there were already seven people armed with trollies and bags in pole position waiting outside for zero hour of 8am to arrive and the doors to open.

In the twenty-minute wait for zero hour, and the queue of last-minute growing, I did hear a few voices of dissent. They were complaining mainly because, as someone explained to me: ‘It said on the stores website that the store will be open at 07.30 for browsing! A clever ruse on behalf of the store I thought! Nothing like keeping the customers waiting outside, it all adds to the growing expectation of the doors opening!

With just five minutes to go and trolleys tightly gripped the tension amongst the shoppers beginning to rise, my mind's eye cast an image of customers flexing their wrists on the trolley handle as if twisting an imaginary motorbike throttle, revving an imaginary engine in readiness for a lightning take off as soon as the traffic lights turn to green, or in this case the doors to open!

The tension felt by customers rose considerably as one of the store's assistants came out to check the entrance, only to lock himself out, and having to use his mobile phone to call one of his colleagues to let him back in again!

All of this happened as zero hour fell upon the waiting customers, as a consequence the door to let the customers in had to be opened manually. Once opened, had the staff member who had to prize the doors open not made his escape quickly enough, I am sure he would have been run over by the trolley pushing hords in haste to do their last-minute shopping.

Once zero hour had approached, and having watched the customers pour into the store I decided to enter myself. I particularly noticed how well stocked all the shelves were, and how the store was all geared up to receive the rush of last-minute shoppers.

Being a loyal customer myself, I could not leave the store without purchasing something. When it came to paying for my goods, at the time there was only one till serving customers. However, as the queue for that one checkout got longer it wasn't long before I heard the familiar recorded voice telling the 'dear customers, we are opening till No. 3 for you, please proceed to unload your shopping.' After joining in the charge to till No. 3 and paying for my purchases I eventually took my leave – for now!

Once outside I noticed, looking through the stores window that another checkout had been opened, obviously to cope with the rising tide of customers waiting to pay for their goods. Just as the first customers were leaving, more customers, in ever greater numbers were arriving to take their place!

Returning at 11.30, which equates to just 390 minutes left to do any last-minute shopping I noticed all the checkouts were now fully operational with queues of customers all waiting in line to pay for their goods.

Queuing at a supermarket checkout in some ways resembles the evening rush hour. In the case of the evening rush hour, and judging by the behaviour of some people behind the wheel - the insatiable desire to try to get home before anyone else on the road does. The same also applies to a queue at a supermarket checkout, everyone wants to be served first!

The saying goes patience is a virtue. It is funny how that virtueness, if such a word exists, dissipates especially when there is a holdup at the checkout.

We have all been in that situation. There is a hold up at the checkout; people are kept waiting; as a consequence, you can feel the tension rising; those in the queue start looking at their watches; impatiently shuffling their feet and looking around; questions begin to be asked. Questions like: 'What's the holdup, I haven't got all day to stand here waiting?'

In some ways, a hold up at a supermarket checkout is comparable to waiting for the traffic lights to change to green. We've all been in that situation. You've been waiting for some time; patience wears thin, as a consequence, and out of frustration you start shouting at the lights to turn green!

Likewise, you can't shout at the poor checkout assistant and run the risk of being thrown out by the store's security, so to vent your frustrations you start fulminating inside. As a consequence, by the time you are actually being served all civility has been drained out of you, and all you can do is grunt at the hapless assistant who, through no fault of their own, has kept you waiting!

I can't help but have some sympathy for those operating on the checkout, because of the amount of goods they are required to checkout, and the speed they are required to work at, especially on days like Christmas Eve.

Women, because of their speed and dexterity, have been referred to as 'Turbo Tina's'. The same also applies to their male counterparts who also have the same abilities of speed and dexterity and until now haven't been given a title. Therefore, in this age of equality and equal rights, all male checkout operators, I feel, should be referred to as 'Turbo Timothy's'!

So, with all the Turbo Tina's and Timothy's working at full stretch on the checkout, I would ask you the customer, like me, to have some sympathy for them especially as they are required to check every single item you have presented for payment, and especially at a time like Christmas Eve when you brought enough food to last you way beyond News Years Day, or enough to feed an army!

On entering the store at the earlier time of 8am I noticed how well stocked the shelves were, especially the shelves for the fresh produce like vegetables, as by my second entry at 11.30 stocks of vegetables had been seriously depleted.

Is it me or is it the time of year or has the nation taken on some seasonal health kick? At this seasonal time of the year it appears, as a nation, that we eat more fresh vegetables than at any other time of the year. Is it because it is traditional to eat more vegetables on Christmas day, or is it because fresh vegetables should only be consumed with a turkey? I ask this implausible question because for most of the year, for some, it is mostly convenience foods, pizza's and takeaways that are eaten.... Some food for thought!

However, on entering the store during the time of the last hour of trading before the checkouts fell silent, apart from a few last-minute shoppers, especially those who had just finished work as Christmas Eve, depending on when it falls, is considered a normal working day. The shelves by now, apart from a few last remaining lettuce's and cucumbers together with fresh fruit, were almost bare.

During those last dying minutes of trading, apart from the shelves almost bereft of fresh produce I noticed, apart from kitchen rolls, that the stocks of toilet rolls had been seriously depleted as well.... why?

I can understand the need for kitchen rolls to mop up any spillages, but how is it that for just one day families can get through so many loo rolls? Is it something to do with what's eaten on Christmas Day, or is it because stomach's, after eating takeaways for the best part of a year, are not used to freshly cooked food? As a consequence, of having eaten a Christmas dinner together with all the other festive delicacies like mince pies, Christmas pudding etc., which you normally wouldn't eat at other times of the year, together with large quantities of alcohol, is there is a sudden need for a dash to the loo? Or, does the festive food you eat contain some secret ingredient, which after consuming means within half-an-hour you'll need the loo?

Many is the time I have heard the so-called domestic goddess on the television extolling the virtues of how to prepare for the perfect Christmas dinner. Apart from telling us how to prepare the turkey by plucking the flesh and smothering it in coronary inducing butter, and how to cook the perfect Brussel Sprouts they always finish their sermon by saying: 'Make sure you have plenty of loo rolls!'

I can see why there's a need for plenty of loo rolls. If you follow the advice given by the goddesses of virtuous living, you'd need plenty of loo rolls. A defibrillator wouldn't be a bad idea to have on hand as well, especially having eaten all that rich butter encrusted turkey. It's enough to give you a coronary just thinking about it!

As 6pm approached, and in the few dying moments of trading as one by one checkouts began to fall silent, walking around the rows of shelves and I noticed unwanted items discarded by customers in the wrong aisle. For example, a jar of cranberry sauce placed on the shelf next to the cuddly toys! Or a two-litre bottle of milk placed in a freezer. Apart from tut tutting at the thought of some customer too idle to put what was not wanted back in the right place, I noticed, just as I was leaving one of the store's staff members checking out all unsold perishable food items and throwing it into a huge skip.

Being a naturally curious person, I enquired. As the staff member who replied to my enquiry said: 'Nothing gets wasted. All these unsold items will get recycled and turned into bio-fuel.' With that, apart from wishing the staff member a Merry Christmas, I felt pleased that something positive was being done to prevent unsold food items being thrown on to a landfill site, plus bio-fuel is less harmful to the environment.

P.S. Well that is it for another year. As I write I think of all that food that was purchased by all those last-minute shoppers. Unlike the store that sends all unsold perishable food to be recycled, I bet quite a lot of food will be wasted and end up in the rubbish bin and then on to some landfill site. I would also like to bet there are thousands of people up and down the country all saying: 'I'm not doing that again next year.' My answer to that is - you will!

Finally, there are just 365 shopping days left to next Christmas, which equates to 8,760 hours or 525,600 last minutes until the tills, once again fall silent on Christmas Eve.... **Happy New Year!**

For the research I carried out, I would like to thank the management and staff of the Aldi Store Woodborough Road, Mapperley, Nottingham for allowing me to make a few notes, both mental and written, of what I observed both inside and outside the store on Christmas Eve and to wish you all a Happy New Year.... **Thank You.**