

7,000 bargains every day

In Alabama, America's lost luggage is cleaned and sorted — then sold for a song. Zoë Barnes goes shopping

It happens, as Alice Cooper will tell you, to the best of us. You arrive for your flight (as he did at Heathrow earlier this month), check in your luggage (in his case, filled with 300 obscure horror movies) and forget all about it. Then, at the other end, it doesn't turn up.

If you're an ageing rocker, the solution is simple — you offer a reward of two backstage passes for your latest tour and the case turns up within 48 hours. But for us mortals whose bags are in the 2% that, having gone astray, are never returned, there's a 30-day wait until it's officially classed as lost. Then the fun and games begin with the insurers.

The bags don't just disappear, of course — more often, they've lost any identifying feature that could reunite them with their owners (remember: always label your case, both inside and out). Over here, orphaned cases go to auction, where they are bid for,

unopened. They do things differently in America, though. Why waste time sifting through a battered case full of unwashed and out-of-season clothes to find the perfect pair of jeans when you could pick them straight off the rail after they've been washed, ironed and filed by type, colour and size?

For the past 39 years, the Unclaimed Baggage Center in Scottsboro, Alabama (pop:15,000), has been bulk-buying lost luggage from American carriers, then unpacking it, cleaning it and selling it at a discount of up to 80%. More than 7,000 items of lost luggage a day, in fact, from Persian rugs (\$1,000) to Y-fronts (99¢), bought by more than 1m people every year.

Vogue has praised its designer clothes at Primark prices; even Oprah sent a team down to inspect the goods. The centre has transformed Scottsboro, a nondescript town at the foot of



Hats, bags, clothes and... paintings: it's amazing what people put in their luggage. And you can buy it all in Alabama

the Appalachian Mountains, into one of Alabama's leading tourist attractions.

Halfway through my five-hour drive from Memphis, I'm pulled over by a state trooper for speeding. I plead excessive bargain-hunting-induced eagerness and am promptly let off with a "There's some good stuff there".

He's right, too. Inside the shop (a 40,000 sq ft, Stars and Stripes-flanked concrete hangar taking up an entire block) there's rail upon rail of clothes, the designer threads muddled in with the cheap stuff (in Scottsboro, it seems, all fashion is created equal). It sells gadgets (they shift 70 iPods a day), DVDs, suitcases (naturally) and jewellery. There are also five straight shelves of Bibles in the books section. Welcome to America.

In fact, the sociological aspect beats any bargain-hunting buzz. The lost-luggage gremlins don't target a particular demographic (apart, perhaps, from the surprisingly large breed of men whose removal of their wedding rings keeps five trays permanently stocked with gold). What's on offer here is a cross section of a nation in all its XXL glory.

Not everything makes it to the shop floor. "Intimate" items are chucked away at first sight, while things like spectacles and neck pillows are so numerous that they donate the excess to charity. Drug stashes are handed to the police — though one customer returned a bottle of fabric softener after finding a bag of white powder inside.

Then there's the hidden money — if the centre doesn't

spot it, then the buyer gets to keep it. A stash of \$500 once found by a customer in a Barbie doll means that they're perennial sellers, and just the other week, one of the centre's regulars found \$1,500 in a suitcase that she'd bought for \$50.

I have a good look but can't spy any wads of dollars, so I settle for an NFL buckle, an Elvis penknife and some T-shirts, for \$42. Walking out, I meet Gary Morris, a construction worker sporting head-to-toe denim, who comes in here every day after work. "If I don't, I think about what I could have missed," he tells me. What is he looking for? "Something I can't live without," he replies.

Unlike Gary, I've had no epiphany; given that I could live without the red cordless phone

he's clutching, we may just have different standards. Still, a new dawn will bring new possibilities. Seven thousand of them, to be precise.

Travel details: the Unclaimed Baggage Center (00 1 256 259 1525, unclaimedbaggage.com) is at 509 West Willow Street, in Scottsboro, Alabama. It's open 9am-6pm from Monday to Friday, and 8am-6pm on Saturday. The centre is between Chattanooga, Tennessee and Birmingham, Alabama, with the nearest gateway airport being Atlanta, a three-hour drive away.

Fly there from Heathrow with British Airways (ba.com), or from Manchester, Heathrow or Dublin with Delta Air Lines (www.delta.com). Return fares start at €354.

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